

Excerpt from *The Sharkskin Scripts, Volume I: The Great
Trianukkan Tribes*

Dating back three thousand years, this ancient manuscript now resides in the Skybrary high in the Iceberg Forest of the Wildersea, under the care of the Skybrarian and his apprentice, a young Wilderwitch boy named Yapok.

We, the gathered Sea-Tribe captains, scratch these runes into skin with ink, tears and blood-truth.

In troubled times, dark forces rise. This is known. Long ago, the land of Trianukka was ravaged by unending war. In this dark time of blood and iron, a great evil rooted into our world. The evil grew, then spread. It bled into the minds of many, becoming a movement known as the $S \pm^ = +S$.*

We must never forget the darkness wielded by this movement. We must make sure it never befalls our world again.

This dawn, at a ceremony on the highest peak, the Kings of Sea, Sky and Land have set three Storm-Opals in a golden crown, weaving the Tribes together in peace. Each sacred stone has been instilled with a sliver of the elements: a foam of sea, a fragment of sky and a fracture of earth. The jewels are to be guarded by a king of the giants. It is foretold that if the Opals are ever separated, evil will rise once more, and the land will be torn apart.

PART 1

The Hunted Child



The Withering

*Hackles. Ancient stronghold of the Sky-Tribe of the Draggles Riders.
One full moon's turn after a Fangtooth hunted me through the
snow.*

Stark eyes glint all around me, peering from the depths of fur hoods. I sniff the air. Fear-stink. *Everywhere*. The long-hall is packed with scarred and bandaged folk. Outsiders seeking refuge in this sky-realm of thick grey walls. Their murmurs clot together and rise into the air, crowding it with questions. Some are Sea-Tribe, and looking at them makes me wonder about my ship, and the rest of my own crew.

I'm huddled on a bench, ice-bitten and swamped in a heavy cloak of goatskin, listening to storms pummel the mountain fortress with daggers of ice.

I try to stop the fright in the air from seeping through my skin. But the walls are smeared with silver streaks that tighten my belly into knots. Moonsprites are dying, cos no moonlight can pierce the frozen clouds.

'You alright, Little-Bones?' Da whispers. He's sitting next

to me, grey-skinned and pretending he's got no pain. He still ent recovered proper from being kept a prisoner of the mystiks. With food grown scarce, the flesh is slow to gather on his bones, and his jaws grip his teeth too tight. 'You don't have to be here for this, you know.'

'I ent no little 'un,' I hiss, rolling my eyes at my crew-mate Crow, who's sat on the other side of me. The former ship-wrecker boy gifts me a grin.

A door bangs and we turn to stare as Leopard – seven hundred and seventy-seventh in a great line of Protectors of the Mountain – leads five Sky Elders through the crowd. Leo looks worn to rags by exhaustion, but she's wearing her goat headdress and a cloak of gold-dipped feathers, and she's standing arrow-straight.

I straighten my own spine at the sight of her, and in the corner of my eye catch Lunda scowling at me. The pale-haired Spearsister – one of the Protector's best trained warriors – still don't like outsiders. She throws the spear of her fright even surer than her spear of iron.

The Elders are a mix of draggle-riders and Wilderwitches – enemies until one full moon's turn ago, when I freed Leo from the possession that Stag and the mystiks were wielding to control her and her territory. The Wilder-King remains our enemy, swearing fealty to Stag even though storms have been trying to throw his iceberg forest flat and Hackles would be safer for his people. But some Wilderwitches fled to Hackles and Leo welcomed them heartily.

I watch as the Elders tread behind Leo. They're draped

in flowing sky-blue robes spun from ice-worm silk and sewn with berg owl feathers. Orca teeth hang from their hems.

They carry offerings to the Sky gods – in their cupped palms sit crystal jars filled with tiny forests, dragonflies and spark-spluttering miniature storm clouds. They reach the dais and turn to face the benches.

Silence drops. The might of Hackles presses down on us – seems like even the ancient stronghold is straining to listen. Everyone says the Elders only utter a squeak when their pipes have seriousness to spill. And folks are proper desperate for them to gift words of certainty while chaos is sweeping through the world.

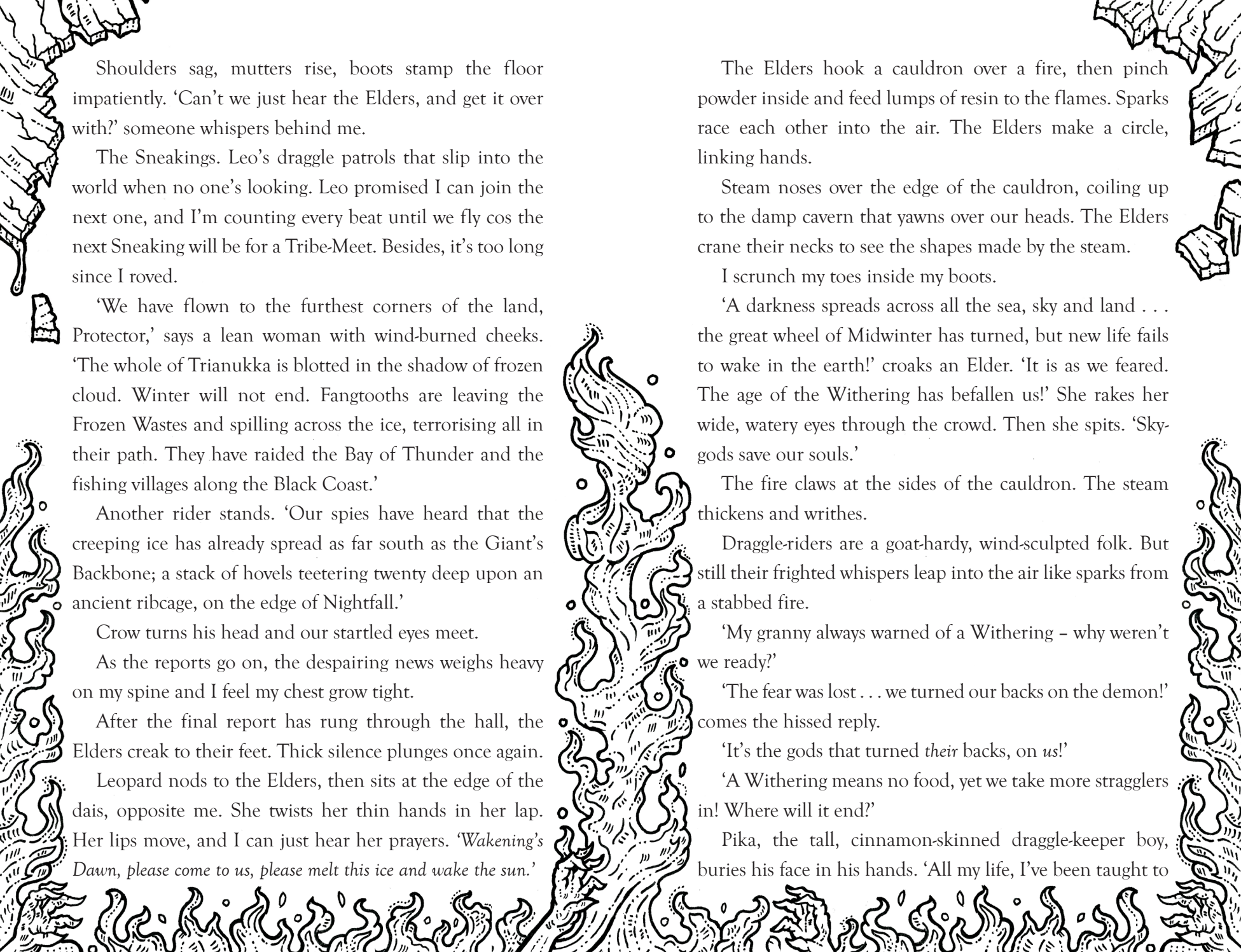
Chaos like how the trees can't summon their life-blood from the sealed earth, and winter won't thaw. Like how the land has erupted into riots, since the fires lit by Stag destroyed the Icy Marshes. Famine has seen more tribes joining Stag's side, or taking to crimes that have long been outlawed – raiding and slave-trading. Others are divided, like the Wilderwitches, and fighting amongst themselves.

Leo addresses the hall. 'Unity is our aim. Let us remember – our mountain was born from the sea, and the wind carved the rocks. *Here* is the birth of a mountain!'

'And here is the birth of an iceberg!' drone the Wilderwitches.

'May swift feathers bear your Sky-Tribe glad tidings,' I mutter along with the rest of them.

'Let us hear the latest reports from the Sneakings,' says Leo grimly.



Shoulders sag, mutters rise, boots stamp the floor impatiently. ‘Can’t we just hear the Elders, and get it over with?’ someone whispers behind me.

The Sneakings. Leo’s draggle patrols that slip into the world when no one’s looking. Leo promised I can join the next one, and I’m counting every beat until we fly cos the next Sneaking will be for a Tribe-Meet. Besides, it’s too long since I roved.

‘We have flown to the furthest corners of the land, Protector,’ says a lean woman with wind-burned cheeks. ‘The whole of Trianukka is blotted in the shadow of frozen cloud. Winter will not end. Fangtooths are leaving the Frozen Wastes and spilling across the ice, terrorising all in their path. They have raided the Bay of Thunder and the fishing villages along the Black Coast.’

Another rider stands. ‘Our spies have heard that the creeping ice has already spread as far south as the Giant’s Backbone; a stack of hovels teetering twenty deep upon an ancient ribcage, on the edge of Nightfall.’

Crow turns his head and our startled eyes meet.

As the reports go on, the despairing news weighs heavy on my spine and I feel my chest grow tight.

After the final report has rung through the hall, the Elders creak to their feet. Thick silence plunges once again.

Leopard nods to the Elders, then sits at the edge of the dais, opposite me. She twists her thin hands in her lap. Her lips move, and I can just hear her prayers. ‘*Wakening’s Dawn, please come to us, please melt this ice and wake the sun.*’

The Elders hook a cauldron over a fire, then pinch powder inside and feed lumps of resin to the flames. Sparks race each other into the air. The Elders make a circle, linking hands.

Steam noses over the edge of the cauldron, coiling up to the damp cavern that yawns over our heads. The Elders crane their necks to see the shapes made by the steam.

I scrunch my toes inside my boots.

‘A darkness spreads across all the sea, sky and land . . . the great wheel of Midwinter has turned, but new life fails to wake in the earth!’ croaks an Elder. ‘It is as we feared. The age of the Withering has befallen us!’ She rakes her wide, watery eyes through the crowd. Then she spits. ‘Sky-gods save our souls.’

The fire claws at the sides of the cauldron. The steam thickens and writhes.

Draggle-riders are a goat-hardy, wind-sculpted folk. But still their frightened whispers leap into the air like sparks from a stabbed fire.

‘My granny always warned of a Withering – why weren’t we ready?’

‘The fear was lost . . . we turned our backs on the demon!’ comes the hissed reply.

‘It’s the gods that turned *their* backs, on *us*!’

‘A Withering means no food, yet we take more stragglers in! Where will it end?’

Pika, the tall, cinnamon-skinned draggle-keeper boy, buries his face in his hands. ‘All my life, I’ve been taught to

fear the Withering,' he whispers. 'I can't believe it's here.'

'What is it?' I ask, leaning forwards to see him, sitting on the other side of Crow.

'Death of light,' he answers absently, eyes roaming the hall. 'A long, cold night of dead things. If no life stirs, there'll be a food shortage even worse than the one made by war.'

The Withering. I try to picture it in my mind's eye, but it's hard to imagine a thing so vast. Not long ago – but exactly *when*, no one can agree on – dawn failed good and proper. Now we're stuck in a grainy light, like a nightmare.

The steam from the cauldron twines and shifts, until I see grim faces with stretched eyes pulling upwards and swarming through the air.

One of the Elders throws a jug of water over the fire, smothering the flames. The steam dissolves slowly, the gaunt eyes fading into nothing. Something terrible is coming. Something worse than a Withering. Something even worse than Stag. I can feel it.

Leo stands. 'We must focus our energies on the fight ahead!' she calls. 'A destructive force is gaining power, taking full advantage of the peril of our world – a marching movement of evil, with Stag and the mystiks at its helm. They control the devastated Icy Marshes and have dug their claws into the Frozen Wastes and the city of Nightfall. We must not let them claim further territories.'

Sickening thoughts knuckle my skull. Thoughts about what Stag is to me, now there's a link that I'll never be able

to cut. He fathered me. He ent my da but my bones are threaded with his poisoned blood. How could Ma have chosen such a gruesome mate? Was he always the same, or was he different when she met him? I stub my toe against the floor. I *hate* wondering about him!

'You say they take advantage,' says a stout old rider called Coati. 'But Stag is offering shelter to those in need. He has opened Nightfall as a refuge, just as we have here.' A furious clamour rises. My fingers tighten on the bench. 'Hear me,' Coati calls gruffly. 'They say he distributes food in the territories he controls. I am yet to see how we know he intends war.' He sits down, puffing out his ruddy cheeks.

My belly squirms and fury lights my chest. I'm about to gift Coati the truth when Pike, the leader of the homeless Marsh-folk, stands and strikes the floor with his fish spear three times. 'Stag burned our home and drained our marshes. He treated us as though our lives counted for nothing!' His eyes blaze. 'And mark me, Rider. He offers shelter only to certain *breeds* of people – those he and his allies deem *elite*.'

'Aye!' I call out, thumping my chest with my fist.

Coati shrugs. 'I meant no offence,' he says. 'But I have heard the reports with my own ears. People are desperate. They say Stag offers a stability no one else can provide.'

Shouting, cursing and gesturing breaks out, with most folks telling Coati to mind his tongue. But more than a few are voices praising his words. The noise stops when the doors smash open, making every head in the hall turn.

Boots stride along the floor. A hornblower, draped in ice-matted furs, folds back his raindrop cowl. 'Protector! An urgent message, received through the ghostways.' The parchment *raps* as he unwraps the scroll. 'It is signed with the claw mark of the Wilder-King,' he announces. But then something crescent-shaped – like a small moon, or a shell – slips to the floor. The hornblower stoops to pick it up, mouth slackening. 'It's – an ear,' he stutters.

Folk gasp. Some leap to their feet, others reach for spears.

'Whose ear is that?' I ask Da. Crow leans close to listen.

Da shakes his head. 'I can't be sure, but – the Protector did send an envoy to the Wilder-King, who has not yet returned.'

Leopard stalks towards the hornblower and takes the ear in her hands, gently, as though it's a broken bird. She grips the scroll and scans it quickly. Then her eyes search me out.

Me?

The look in their depths carves a hollow in my gut. I wrap my arms over my chest.

What does that scroll say?

'This meet is dismissed,' says Leo briskly. 'Tribesman Fox, please stay behind.'



The Scarred Girl

I hurry to Leo's side as the hall begins to empty.

She looks from me to Da. 'Sorry Mouse – it's just your father I want to speak to.'

'Anything you got to say to Da, you can say to *me*,' I tell her, jabbing my thumb into my chest. 'Ent that so, Da?'

But he just looks at me like I'm five moons old. 'I think you'd better listen to Leo this time, Bones.'

'For serious?'

'Aye. Get your hide gone and I'll see you soon.'

I want to snatch the letter and gobble every rune on it, right now. I'm sure it's got something to do with me, from the look Leo shone out. But I turn on my heel and shove my way past the stragglers. 'He'll tell me as soon as he gets out of here, anyway!' I yell over my shoulder.

I wait for Da in his chamber. Beats and beats pass, until my belly growls and my nerves are bowstring-tight. When he opens the door, I leap out at him. 'What's that letter gabbing on about, then?'

Da ghosts a smile at me. 'Ah, Little-Bones! Almost stopped my heart, you did.'

'Don't even think of changing the subject. You know that don't work with me.' I lift my chin. 'Well?'

'Well what?'

I swallow a scream. 'The *letter*,' I repeat, ominous-calm.

Finally, he sighs. 'Let's just say, it wasn't anything good.' I gulp a breath but he stops my quiverful of questions with a look. 'But it's nothing we don't already know, either - this world is full perilous, no doubts. So, there's a new rule. You're not to leave Hackles.'

'Til when?'

'Until . . .' He pauses. Shrugs. 'It's safe.'

I snort a messy laugh through my nose. 'It ent never been safe, and won't never be, neither!'

'You know what I mean, Mouse,' he says wearily. 'The world's different, now. Things are - proper crooked.'

I cross my arms. 'But I'll be going to the Tribe-Meet.'

'I don't think so, Bones.'

Which means 'no' in full-grown speak. 'What? Why?'

He turns to a pouch by his bedside and rummages inside it for his pain medsins. 'Like I said - it's too dangerous.'

But I remember the way Leo looked at me. 'For everyone? Or just me?'

He busies himself with looking around for something. But I know when he's trying to dodge my gaze. 'Da!'

He stills. 'It's naught to fret about, Mouse. It's just something to keep you safe.'

But as he hobbles from the room, my chest feels bruised. I touch the dragonfly brooch on my tunic and when I close my eyes I can smell salt-traced air and see the great black shadows of the *Huntress's* sails ghosting across her wooden boards. How can Da force me not to rove when I'm so full of fight?

I've got to get my mitts on that letter.

My hand moves to an amulet hanging around my neck, and an idea tingles through me. The amulet is a slim oval of silver, gifted to me by Egret Runesmith and etched with the runes for binding, so I'm safe to dream-dance without having to draw protection runes all the time. My fingers brush my other amulet - the amber Bear gifted me.

Gods, I miss my friends.

I fling myself down on Da's bed and shut my eyes, imagining climbing out of my skin. I gather all the fright in my chest - about the Withering, and the dying moonsprites, and the way Leo looked at me in the long-hall - and use it to hook onto my spirit. I feel the familiar dragging, and push into it, until my spirit *nudges through layers of bone, muscle and skin. I tread the air above my body, blinking slow spirit-eyes. Then I dive through the door and into the corridor outside.*

I drift past Pika, who's kicking draggle dung off his boots at the entrance to the crooked corridor. As I pass, he shudders and glances up, looking through me. Then I startle a warmth-seeking goat that's got lost in the maze of passageways. I turn in the air and dart along another passageway, past a group of Wilderwitches heading for the stone baths, drying-cloaks hung over their arms.

Leo's chamber is a small, plain room at the top of a sweep of stairs, set deep in the rock above the long-hall. I slip through the wooden door and fly around the room, searching.

A small collection of books, bound in red, blue, green and gold, is stacked on her night table. A clothes chest stands at the foot of her bed. There's a set of raindrop armour hanging from a hook, a gathering of stubby candles and a portrait of her and her daughter Kestrel that she had painted before Kes left on her mission to unite the youth of the Tribes. There's no sign of the letter.

Just then, the door whines open and Leo strides in, tension tightening her face. She paces the floor, breathing fast. Then she draws a length of parchment from inside her cloak and yanks it straight. 'How dare he?' she mutters to herself.

I slither through the air and hover behind her shoulder, gulping the black runes burned into the parchment.

'Consider this your first and final warning.' My spirit startles, fracturing around the edges – I can almost hear the Wilder-King's slow purr of a voice. 'Do not imagine that your fortress protects you against the allies I have won. Allies that could be yours, also, if you heed the war cry echoing through Trianukka. The scarred girl is a hunted child. They will not allow her to further damage their cause. Surrender her, for the sake of your people. And surrender any chatters dwelling amongst you.'

I raise my hand to trace my scar with my fingers, but my spirit edges just whisper against each other. I'm a hunted child. Small wonder Da tried to keep it from me.

The memory barges close – the night just one full moon ago,

when slow, stealthy footsteps creaked through the snow behind me. I half-turned, as a salty hand wrapped around my mouth.

'Fangtooth!' boomed Da's kelp-rich voice, stronger than his weakened body. 'Release my child.' The Protector's spear-warriors surrounded us. Me and my brother were pulled from danger, but not before a blade against my neck nicked a tear in the skin.

Axe-Thrower, Stag's wretched first mate, had hunted through the shadows of the stronghold, trying to get to me and Sparrow. Now she's locked in Leopard's dungeon, a hostage claimed by no one. And as for Da – he's acting guilt-stung that he weren't better at protecting me now we're finally back together. For a while he kept saying sorry that Axe attacked me, like it was his fault.

Now I know the Fangtooth weren't acting alone. That her attack was ordered by someone else. And that the attack ent really over. I keep my eyes on the letter as I read the runes again and again. Then Leo tenses, crumpling the parchment in her fingers, and twists to stare behind her.

I must've drifted too close and touched her – I can see how the skin at the back of her neck's gone goose-pimpled. Suddenly I remember that she's a dream-dancer, too.

'Who's there?' she whispers.

I flick towards the door, squeeze through and soar down the stairs, spirit-heart weighing heavy. Most times, I can find a way to get Da on my side. But this time he's never gonna let me go with the others to the Tribe-Meet. Not in a thousand moons. I stare up at the dark stone roof of the passageway as I fly. I feel like the walls of this stronghold are closing in, and if I ent careful, I'll be buried alive.