

TORMENT™

TIDES OF NUMENERA™



FROM THE DEPTHS: GOLD

Adam Heine

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A Torment: Tides of Numenera Novella

by Adam Heine

Gate to the Abyss

Chapter 1

Luthiya twisted the synthsteel rod anxiously. The grainy metal, born of another time, felt unusually cool as it abraded her palms. Ama could not have been wrong about it; the nano knew more about the numenera than, well, anyone. If Ama said the rod was a numenera weapon, then that was what it was.

It probably wouldn't go off on its own, but Luthiya held it away from her body anyway. A weapon should be a good thing. Her people were alone in a strange land now. Who knew what kinds of monsters lurked in the bowels of these ruins? Weapons meant protection.

Except when they didn't.

She made her way out of the bone tower, her footsteps echoing throughout the vast entrance hall—the Marrow Chamber, they called it. Some long-dead civilization had carved a city out of volcanic rock and the indurate bones of an enormous beast. Not even magma had damaged the bones; it was mind-boggling that there'd been a people capable of shaping them. The Marrow Chamber was in one of the larger towers, dug out of one of the creature's splayed ribs. Friezes and scenes carved from daily life striped the walls. Slitted windows dotted the upper portion of the hall where corridors looked down onto the room. It had probably been a meeting hall or a village square once, before its creators had died.

And they had died, or maybe they'd been chased off. They'd left a lot behind.

The Marrow Chamber had become a village square for Luthiya's people too, though it was nearly empty now. Only the water collectors were there this early in the day, gathering water from the hot spring into cooling jars. Luthiya puffed a lock of hair out of her face; there were only a few hundred of her people left now. Compared to Shuenha, this place will always feel empty, she thought.

Her shoes slapped against the petrified floor as she crossed the chamber to the main exit. There was no door there, only a faint blue shimmer—one of the force walls Ama had helped them restore. It kept out the worst of the sweltering heat and the fumes. Luthiya left the tower, trembling as the force wall's energy slithered across her skin. She'd never get used to that.

A blast of heat and noise struck her in the face. Her eyes had to adjust to the dim light and perpetually darkened sky. Against any kind of sense they'd taken refuge in the fields of Ossiphagan, an unsleeping nest of volcanoes. Ama had brought them here. She wouldn't say why. It was safe, which was what they needed. And it was close to Shuenha—good for those who hoped to one day take back their home.

Good for everyone but Luthiya.

There was no day in Ossiphagan. Light came from the molten rock itself, flowing in eternal rivers to the Black Plains below. Luthiya could hardly remember the sun anymore. Her mother used to talk about the Gate of Abaddon. Luthiya had always thought it was figurative.

Why did anyone ever choose to live here? The ruins were millennia old. She'd once thought the volcanoes had erupted after the city was built, driving out the original owners, but Ama said no. She never said why she thought so. Perhaps the more worrisome question was what had driven them out.

A natural bridge stretched out from the bone tower across a glowing chasm. Khapah would be at the other end, teaching the others to fish. Luthiya squeezed the synthsteel rod again and resumed walking, reaching the other side of the chasm all too quickly. Her friend Jio was leaning over the edge, a river of magma running far below. Khapah held the back of his shirt to make sure he didn't fall. Other youths Luthiya's age crowded around to watch.

“The trick,” Khapah said, “is patience. Pull the net up slowly, else you’ll eat nothing.”

Khapah was the de facto leader of the Shue people, though he’d seen fewer than twenty–four harvests. Luthiya scowled. Most of the girls were watching Khapah more than the lesson.

Jio moved his hands slowly, like he was pantomiming pulling a string up a few fingerwidths at a time. Weird lesson, Luthiya thought, but as she drew closer something shimmered. There was a string there, so thin she could barely see it.

A glob of magma floated out of the river below. As Jio hauled up the string, the magma dripped off and cooled until all that was left were two round salamanders. They seemed to float in the air, caught in a net so fine as to be invisible.

After a few more minutes of drawing up the net, Jio’s catch hung suspended in front of him. The brown salamanders wriggled inside the fine mesh, unable to escape. “Now what?” Jio said.

Luthiya frowned. “Now you kill them.”

“It’s true.” Khapah laughed. “You missed my fishing lesson, Thiya.”

“I’ll live.”

Jio stabbed the salamanders through the head with a needle knife. Luthiya winced at each creature’s squeal. Their legs flapped for a few seconds, then the creatures were gone.

“You won’t live long if you don’t eat,” Khapah said, still smiling as he tore off one of the salamander’s seven legs. Like everything else about this place, the salamanders were strange—creatures that swam through lava, yet could be eaten raw. Khapah handed the leg to her. “I’ll give you a private lesson sometime.”

Luthiya felt her cheeks go warm, even in the heat. She took the leg and sat down.

There really was nothing else to eat in this place. The salamanders’ deaths meant the Shue could live. So why did it bother her? Back in Shuenha, her family had herded animals—pigs, burkfowl, and limmils. Killing to eat was part of life. Until the Tabaht took that life away, parents and all.

She took a bite of the salamander leg. Such a strangement: the salamander was raw—she knew it was raw—but it tasted exactly like roast burkfowl.

Khapah tore a piece off for each of the others, giving one of the circular bodies to Jio. “Best pick to the hunter. There are more nets in the bones.” He pointed toward the ruins across the bridge. “You may hunt whenever you’re hungry with two rules: catch twice as much as you eat, and don’t fall in. We need you more than the nets.”

He dismissed the others, leaving Luthiya alone with him and Jio, who still had to clean the net.

Luthiya came over to help him.

Khapah waved a hand toward her face. “You’re darker than the ash today. What’s in there, makoeh?”

She blushed again at the nickname. It meant ‘little sister,’ something most of the survivors had taken to calling her. But it sounded different coming from Khapah. “Why do you tell them that?”

“Tell them what?”

“Well.” Luthiya shifted her legs underneath her. “If the nets fall, we have no way to eat. If we fall, it’s not...”

Jio snorted. “It’s one less to feed.”

Luthiya punched him in the shoulder, though that’s exactly what she’d been thinking.

“Our people matter,” Khapah said. “We will always find ways to eat, but if the Shue die, then the Shue die.”

Luthiya thinned her lips. She lived for the Shue as much as anyone. It was all she did. If she stopped looking to others’ needs even for one moment, her own anguish came screaming back. “But are we so important?”

Khapah laughed again. He laughed often. Maybe that was how he dealt with his own loss. “So philosophical tonight.”

Jio scoffed. “You know Thiya. She’s always philo— philofossi—”

Luthiya punched him twice more in the same spot.

“Ow!” Jio rubbed his arm. “What for?”

“The first was for trying to mock me.” She smirked. “The second was for failing at it.”

Khapah threw back his head and howled in laughter. “Watch your mouth, Jio,” he said. “This one’s tough and smart.”

Luthiya ducked her head, grinning in spite of herself.

Jio huffed, massaging his bruise. “So did you ask Ama about the rod?”

Both of them looked at her expectantly, and all her worries rushed back. She put down the net, gripping the rod in both hands. “Yes.” She handed it to Khapah, glad to be rid of the too-cool synthsteel.

Jio grinned and scooted closer. “So what is it?”

Luthiya sighed. It wasn’t that she hated weapons—her father had saved her life with one—but she knew her people, and Khapah especially. She knew where this conversation would lead. Khapah had once been the kindhearted carpenter’s apprentice down the road, and he was still kind, but...

“She called it an ‘incendiary’ device.” She took some joy from the confused look on Jio’s face.

“A what?”

“It shoots fire,” Khapah explained. The mirth had left his eyes. He looked at the rod with a warrior’s intensity.

“Sort of.” Luthiya tried to remember the details of what Ama had told her. “It makes some kind of bubble at a set range, even inside another object, then causes an explosion within that bubble.”

Both of the boys’ eyes widened, becoming as round as the salamanders they’d just eaten.

Luthiya’s shoulders drooped; she knew Khapah’s next words before he spoke them.

“Thank you, makoeh. This will speed the day we return to Shuenha.”

“Why?” Luthiya couldn’t stop herself. The question burned inside her every time someone spoke of home. Many times a day. “Why do we have to return to Shuenha? What can we do there but die and die again?”

Jio gaped at her. “That’s our home. Why wouldn’t we go back?” He looked from Luthiya to Khapah and back. “Don’t you want revenge?”

Luthiya grimaced. Of course she wanted revenge. The Tabaht had taken everything, killed everyone. There were no more elders, no small children, no fighters left but Khapah and a few others. Only a few hundred survivors who had been too weak or scared to fight, but still strong enough to get away. The Tabaht had stripped their life from them.

But revenge is why the Tabaht attacked us. Her mother had warned her as a child, and she’d since seen it for herself: the Tabaht attack the Shue, so the Shue hurt the Tabaht, who take vengeance on the Shue. The Tabaht had gone too far this time. They deserved more than death, and Luthiya hungered, ached to give it to them. But it would end in more ache.

A part of her envied her parents. They, at least, had peace.

“Thiya.” Khapah squeezed her arm gently. “It is what our families, rest their spirits, left us to do. This is not the first time the Tabaht have taken Shuenha. Our ancestors spilled their blood for that land. Our parents and grandparents fought to keep it. It’s not about the land or revenge. It’s about our right to exist.”

“We exist here.”

Khapah smiled. “So. Maybe it is about revenge a little. But Shuenha is our rightful home. This place is—”

“Abaddon’s Abyss,” Jio said.

Luthiya looked down at the salamanders, one of whose tails twitched posthumously. “We’ll die if we go back.”

“If we went back today, perhaps.” Khapah nodded. “But soon, you children will grow strong, learn to fight. These

ruins are full of the numenera, like this.” He held up the rod. “If we can find enough weapons, the Tabaht will not stand a chance.”

Luthiya studied her skirt—ragged now from months of wear, with no fabric to replace it. The Tabaht had their own weapons, some even more terrible than the synthsteel rod. There was a reason the Shue had never completely thrown off their rule.

“What about Ama?” Khapah said. “Does she feel as you do?”

“Ama...” Luthiya said. The nano was an enigma to most of the Shue, as mysterious as the relics she researched. She had appeared to them a few months ago, just after the attack. She’d led them to safety, but now showed no indication that she wished to lead them beyond that. “She spends all her time in the chantry, or even deeper. I think she’s looking for something.”

“To help us?” Khapah said hopefully.

Luthiya shook her head. She spent more time with Ama than the other Shue did. The nano had taken a liking to her. And despite the fact that Ama was so aloof all the time, Luthiya had taken a liking to her as well. Ama had helped them reactivate the city’s force walls and work the salamander nets, but she didn’t seem interested in their revenge. Maybe that was what attracted Luthiya to her.

“I don’t think so,” she said.

“What kind of strangements does she keep hidden in there?” Jio scooted forward. “I bet she’s got masses of weapons like that rod.”

Luthiya glared at him. “We can’t take her things. If it weren’t for her, you wouldn’t even be talking about revenge. That’s like stealing from an Aeon Priest.”

Jio cocked his head to one side. “I thought she was an Aeon Priest.”

“You’re dumb as a field crab,” Luthiya huffed. Ama had told them time and again she had nothing to do with the Priests, but because of her knowledge of the numenera, most people had trouble thinking of her any other way.

“He’s not wrong though, Thiya. She can help us like no other.”

Luthiya gave Khapah a worried look. “What do you mean?”

“Would you do something for me?”

Luthiya could do nothing except nod.

“Keep an eye on Ama. She finds things we can’t, or things we miss in our ignorance. I don’t want you to steal from her, but if she has anything we can use, tell me about it. Maybe she’ll agree to help us willingly. Can you do that?”

He didn’t need to ask again; Luthiya had already agreed and would agree again. Khapah and her people were all she had. She would do anything he asked of her.

But she didn’t always like it.

Chapter 2

Ossiphagan's aboveground chambers were arranged in towers—the broken ribs of the monster lying on its back, half buried beneath the lava. Thin stone bridges stretched like sinew from the ribs to tunnels in the surrounding cliffs. The bridges looked natural, but they were too evenly and conveniently placed. Even Ama wasn't sure how they had been formed.

The bulk of the ruins lay beneath the surface in volcanic caves and carved-out tunnels. Engraved scenes decorated the walls like in the Marrow Chamber. Most of them were incomprehensible to the Shue. There were other tunnels like the Glass Hall, where a miniature city had been molded from crystal, then collapsed into ruins—or perhaps it had been designed that way. Still more tunnels ended in monstrous underground lavaflows, their former destinations lost forever.

The Shue spent most of their days exploring the passageways for relics at the behest of Ama, Khapah, or both. They hung spare glowglobes in the tunnels they'd been to already. Many kilometers had been lit, but the Shue still had not found an end to the city.

Luthiya made her way to the chantry, a large underground chamber in the skull of Ossiphagan's Beast. The chantry was both beautiful and disturbing. Bizarre pillars exploded from the ground on all sides, looking more molded than carved. They twisted together at the ceiling like vines. Black tendrils of stone dripped from these woven arches, speckled with dead glowglobes. A lavafall marked the far end, giving the room an abyssal tinge. Rows of low, vaguely rectangular rock formations reminded Luthiya of benches in a chapel, which was how the chantry got its name.

An array of ancient devices was laid out on the benches. Ama was out, probably on another of her expeditions deeper into the tunnels. She didn't seem concerned that the Shue might steal from her. Maybe she trusted Khapah to control his people. Or maybe she watches these artifacts through other means.

Luthiya walked down the rows between the benches, thinking of Khapah's request. He hadn't asked her to do anything wrong, but helping Khapah ultimately meant returning to Shuenha, to revenge and death. How would death heal them?

She inspected the various relics in front of her. She'd tried a few of them before. Most of them did nothing, or what they did do was useless. Like the glass orb that spun multicolored spheres of light around your head. Or the ten-centimeter-square piece of hard synth, thinner than a hair, that didn't bend or break no matter what you did to it. Ama might have a use for these oddities, but Khapah certainly didn't.

Luthiya picked up another artifact, a kind of flute. It looked like the bottom half had been eaten away, yet it still played a tune as beautiful as any svithan. Certain melodies had strange effects on living creatures—those that could hear, anyway. Ama would play a bright turn, causing salamanders to leap out of the lavafall. Even Luthiya had made the creatures do things when Ama wasn't around. She put the flute down, deciding she'd tell Khapah about it eventually.

She hesitated at the next two relics: tapered rods very similar to the one she'd given Khapah. She'd have to tell him about those, too.

A copper sphere hovered above the rock near the end of the bench. Ama called it an urlimnion. It was her obsession. Fine metal shoots stemmed out from the sphere, turning at right angles to form concentric arcs. It was beautiful, though as far as Luthiya had seen it did nothing but float.

She bit her lip. Should she tell Khapah about it anyway? She didn't really know what it was. Ama only ever hinted at its use and probably didn't know what it did either. Anyway, even if it were a weapon, Ama would never let Khapah have it. Telling him would only create tension.

“Thiya!”

Luthiya snatched her hand away from the urlinnion.

Ama marched the length of the chantry, her robe swirling about her ankles. A collection of numenera objects clacked and jangled at her side, connected by a silver chain. I wonder if one of those told her I was in here.

But Ama wasn't angry. Her face was brighter than Luthiya had ever seen it. She even did a little twirl halfway through the room.

Luthiya found herself smiling in return. "What's going on?"

Ama knelt in front of Luthiya, her robe fluttering to the ground. Luthiya was struck yet again by how beautiful this woman was, much more so than any of the Shue.

Ama took her hand, squeezing almost painfully in her excitement. "I think I know why we're here."

Luthiya gripped the ragged edge of the rock, her heart beating thrice as fast as it should've been. A wide river of magma coursed fifteen meters below them, and within it—or were they above it?—floated a dozen or so humanoid shapes. They were golden and ethereal, like wisps of flame, though there was nothing to burn. In another place and time, they might've been beautiful, but Luthiya couldn't see past the fire. Fire meant destruction. Death. The Tabah.

"What are they?" she breathed. And why is Ama excited about these...things?

"Fire wights," Ama said.

"Wights?!" Luthiya hugged herself tightly, remembering old Shue ghost stories in which the dead returned from Abaddon to feed on the living.

Ama touched Luthiya's arm. "Hush, child. I'm not ready for them to know we're here. Fire wights is a misnomer, based on how the Ossiphagans saw them. These creatures are very much alive."

"Which brings us back to the question," Luthiya said, more quietly. "What are they?"

Ama sighed, as though Luthiya should already know. "Old, of course. Probably not of this world at all. They're extremely intelligent, if somewhat difficult to communicate with. I wonder if the thermebus would be useful in..."

Ama continued talking to herself, and Luthiya ground her teeth. The nano often did this: babbling to herself as though Luthiya weren't there or couldn't understand what she was saying. Normally, Luthiya would let her run on—she'd learned a lot of useful things that way—but there were more important things right now. "Are they dangerous, Ama?"

"What?" Ama looked at her and blinked, obviously having forgotten Luthiya was there. "Oh, no, child. They are not fire any more than they are undead. They aren't even hot, though they can become so. They communicate through a form of temperature variation. One could spend another three or four lifetimes trying to under—"

"Ama," Luthiya said as politely as she could behind clamped teeth. "Why are they exciting?"

Her face lit up as she said, "I don't know."

"What?"

"There's something important about this place, Thiya. I feel it, and it has something to do with the wights." There was a spark in her eyes Luthiya had never seen before. Joy...but scarier. "I think we can help them."

"Help them?" The nano was always strange, but this was beyond that. It was one thing to spend hours staring at some metal orb that hung by its own power, but Ama seemed unusually detached from reality at the moment. "We're having enough trouble helping our—"

"Look!"

Ama pointed as some of the wights came together in a circle. Flamelike coils stretched forward from their bodies.

Arms, Luthiya thought. The wights plunged their arms into the magma, then the circle began to spin. The magma spun with them, as though the wights were stirring it.

As Luthiya watched, the magma changed color from red, to orange, to gold. The wights rose into the air and a tower of golden magma rose out of the river with them. She gasped. How is that even possible?

The magma continued to rise. Some of the wights remained at the base, coaxing more magma into the tower, while others guided it toward the cavernous ceiling. Finally they reached the roof where a smaller circle of wights had formed and was molding the magma into the ceiling itself.

Luthiya wasn't sure when it changed, but the magma became a shimmering black, a pillar of twisted glass that hadn't been there before. "Like the chantry," she said in awe.

"And the bridges," said Ama, smiling down at her. "Think what we could do with their help. We could rebuild this city."

"Why..." Luthiya shook her head, still in amazement at what the wights had created. "Why should we rebuild it?"

"Isn't that what you want? A people without a home. What if they could build you one?"

Luthiya watched as the wights built more from the magma: arches, honeycombed towers, a kind of crystal tree. They wove the obsidian together like vines and tendons. Where there had been an empty cavern, suddenly there was a webwork of bridges and barbicans. It was simultaneously awe-inspiring and mystifying.

Why do they do it? If Ama hadn't said they were intelligent, Luthiya would've assumed they were animals building a nest or a burrow.

"Did I ever tell you why I came to your people?"

Luthiya shook her head.

"My body," Ama said, "drew me to you." She ran one hand through her hair, revealing part of a tattoo on her skull.

Luthiya had seen it before, a kind of filigreed pentagon, partially covered by her hairline. It looked darker now than she remembered, though it was probably just the shadows of the cavern.

"What do you mean?"

"It's impossible to explain in a way you'd understand." The nano grimaced. "I am drawn to where there's a...a need. I felt the Shue's suffering from as far away as M'ra Jolios. I still feel your suffering, though it has lessened since we arrived here."

"Here." Luthiya huffed. "We'd suffer a lot less if you'd brought us someplace cheerier."

Ama gave her a wan smile. "I was drawn here, too. I didn't know why until now."

"The fire wights?" Luthiya looked down to the river again. The creatures had stopped building. They seemed to be wandering across the magma.

"Exactly. They suffer somehow. I can feel it. But what if we could help them, and in so doing help ourselves?"

"Really?"

"Look how easily they float across the lava. They could catch food for you, search out places you can't. Think of how much you could accomplish with their help. They may know secrets that could make this place the paradise it must have once been. Think, Thiya. You could have a home again."

A home. The ruins of Ossiphagan were hardly a home, and Luthiya wasn't convinced they could make it one, even with the help of the wights. But there was hope in Ama's words. That was something her people needed. It might even be what they needed to forget the Tabah.

"So how can we help them? What do they need?"

"That is what we must find out."

As she spoke, Ama clasped her forearm and spread the fingers of her free hand. She rotated her hand as though she were opening a jar. A ring of blue flame appeared in the air. When the circle was complete, she thrust her hand through it.

Luthiya's eyes became huge. Ama's hand had disappeared into nothing. When Ama yanked it out, she was holding a small creature covered in green fur.

"What is that?" The critter turned its flat face to look at her. Luthiya covered a smile. "It's cute."

"It's an experiment." Ama tossed the creature off the ledge.

Luthiya gasped. The animal tumbled through the super-heated air toward the fire wights. Luthiya's eyes welled up.

Then, halfway down, four webbed wings spread out from the creature's back and caught the air. It glided safely to one of the bridges the wights had created. Luthiya sighed in relief.

She turned on Ama. "What did you do that for?"

Ama shrugged. "I was curious. What would the wights do to something they'd never seen before?"

"It could have died." The creature was preening its fur now, a prehensile tail wrapped around an obsidian protrusion. Two or three of the wights turned toward it, but most ignored it.

Ama made a sound like a verbal shrug. "It'll die anyway. From starvation, if not the fumes." She put a hand under her chin and sighed deeply. "We would've learned a lot more if they'd killed it."

Saddened, Luthiya tried not to look at the creature. She watched the wights instead. Most of them congregated in groups. They might have been communicating, but without human gestures it was hard to tell. Others drifted aimlessly. The creativity they had exhibited earlier was gone.

What if they did suffer? Many of the Shue survivors had acted as they did—drifting, doing nothing—before Khapah had found tasks for them all. Some still acted that way.

One of the wights turned toward the ledge where Luthiya and Ama were crouched. Within the flames were three black holes, like eye sockets. The others in its group turned, then, as well. Luthiya cringed. She couldn't shake the feeling that the creatures were looking directly at her.

Chapter 3

As Luthiya approached to the bone tower, a blast pounded through the tunnel. She covered her ears, but it didn't stop the feeling that her skull was being shaken apart. Something had exploded in the Marrow Chamber. She ran to see what had happened.

Another shockwave thumped through the hall when she arrived, almost knocking her to the ground. She found her friend Nai among the other Shue cringing at one end of the chamber. "What's going on?" she shouted.

"I don't know," Nai yelled back. "Something in the relic pile just..."

All sound in the room ceased, and Nai's mouth slowed down mid-sentence. Then the room pounded again violently. On the opposite side of the room a handful of oddities flew out in all directions, hung in the air for two seconds, and were then yanked back to their original places by an unseen force.

In the same way, time seemed to snap back to normal. "...started going off," Nai finished.

The relic pile was where the Shue kept oddities they found in the ruins, objects with no apparent use. Most of the relics were inert or useless—a spongy black ball, or a cube of pure light—but sometimes pieces of old tech had bad reactions to each other.

"Where's Khapah?" Luthiya said.

Nai shook her head and shrugged. She froze in the middle of the movement. The air thundered again, pressing against Luthiya's skull. Luthiya ducked involuntarily, but it wasn't until the explosion subsided that she could move at normal speed.

The pulses didn't seem to be doing any actual damage, but Luthiya's heart hammered at her chest. "I'm going over there."

She didn't wait for Nai's response. Her friend would probably just try to stop her. Luthiya sprinted to the relic pile and began digging.

The next shockwave hammered through Luthiya's entire body. She shrieked and fell on her back—slowly at first, then quickly as time returned to normal. The oddities flew outward again. While they were suspended in the air, she saw it: near the back of the pile was the synthsteel rod she'd given Khapah that morning, pulsing with an orange light.

The other relics snapped back to the ground. Luthiya leapt up and snatched the rod. She thought she'd have to deactivate it or something, but as soon as she removed it from the pile, it stopped glowing. She waited. No more pulses came.

"That's a hell of a strangement." Nai's voice sounded tinny and distant to Luthiya's ringing ears. "Why do you think it did that?"

"Gods only know." Luthiya was probably shouting, but Nai didn't seem to notice. "Khapah should know better than to keep all this junk together. Where is he?"

"Haven't seen him. He's probably on lookout."

Right. He always gave himself the jobs no one wanted. If he wanted to lead, he said, he had to serve the Shue as well.

"Put this with the weapons." She handed the rod to Nai. "Away from any numenera ones, yes? I need to find some food."

Nai smirked. "You're going to see him, aren't you?"

Normally she would've reacted to the accusation, but the explosions and the wights had her rattled. "I just...have to bring him some news."

Luthiya brought food and water to the cliffs atop the western pass—the Charred Pass, they called it. It was a sheer ravine, blackened by smoke and ash. Of course, everything in Ossiphagan was blackened by smoke and ash, but the Charred Pass was darker than most.

Sure enough, Khapah was on lookout duty with Tsio. Luthiya felt a twinge of guilt for bringing the food. She brought meals for lookouts all the time, so often that most had come to expect it, but seeing Khapah made it feel almost manipulative. Like a bribe to make him see things her way.

Tsio noticed her first. He was younger than Khapah by a couple of years, but taller by a head and with an actual beard. "Makoeh! Am I glad to see you." He stared at the basket and licked his lips.

Luthiya managed a smile. "Why do you waste your time on this pass, boys? The Tabaht are that way." She pointed east, past the bone towers to where the black clouds kissed the horizon.

"I tried that," Tsio said. "Khapah says it hurts being so thorough."

Khapah grunted. "I said it doesn't hurt to be thorough. If someone comes down this pass, I want to know about it."

Tsio crossed his thick arms. "And who would ever come here?"

"The point is we don't know what's out there." Khapah pointed beyond the Charred Pass. "There could be kingdoms a hundred times worse than the Tabaht."

Or there might be a place we could call home, Luthiya thought. "I brought you some salamanders."

She set the basket a small distance away. Tsio left his post and attacked the food immediately. Khapah took one salamander and returned to the lookout perch, as Luthiya had known he would.

She followed him there. "Someone left that synthsteel rod in the relic pile."

He sneered. "Jio. I told him to put it in the armory. Why? Did something happen?"

She shook her head. "Nobody got hurt." He didn't need to hear the whole story. Anyway, that wasn't why she came here. "Ama's found something."

She said it so softly that she had to repeat herself before Khapah heard her.

"That's great! What is it?"

"Not an artifact. There are creatures living in the tunnels."

His smile fled. "Dangerous?"

"Ama doesn't think so. She says they need help." Luthiya described the creatures, what they could do, and how they seemed so aimless. "She said the fire wights can—"

Tsio jerked upright. A salamander leg dropped from his lips. "Wights?"

Luthiya winced. I guess I'm louder than I think. "They're not actually wights," she told Tsio. "Ama says they aren't even made of fire. They just look it."

Tsio grunted. "That's a strangement. So why should we help them?"

"She thinks they can help us find food or search the city. And they can do something with the lava, shape it into whatever they want. We could have them build bridges or walls." Luthiya swallowed. "Maybe even make this city a home."

Tsio snorted at that, but he didn't say anything.

Khapah, however, was pensive. "Why is Ama interested in these wights? What does she get out of it?"

"She says she's drawn to them, like she was drawn to us. She wants to help."

Khapah rubbed one ear, thinking.

"Do you trust Ama?" Tsio asked him.

"With the numenera, I do," Khapah said. "If the wights are intelligent, maybe they can help us search the ruins. Like a trade agreement."

Tsio raised an eyebrow. "Trade for what?"

"Ama said that's what we need to find out," Luthiya said.

"Good." Khapah nodded. "We'll do that. Ha! If this works, maybe we could be home by year's end."

"Home?" Luthiya furrowed her brow. "But Ama said—"

Khapah put a hand on hers. Usually that would send tingles along her skin, but now it felt cold. "Makoeh, I know how you feel about returning to Shuenha. No doubt Ama believes most of us feel that way. She speaks mostly to you, yes?"

Luthiya thinned her lips, wondering if that were true.

"This is not our home. It never will be. If anything, it belongs to these fire creatures. But if we can find some common ground with them, maybe they can give us the edge we need to take back Shuenha."

Tsio's laughter rumbled in his chest. "Think what the Tabaht would do if we brought wights back with us."

"Maybe." Khapah grinned. "Maybe."

"No!" Luthiya pulled her hand out from under Khapah's. "What does killing do but make more killing? We need to heal. We need to move on."

"And how can we heal without justice? The Tabaht deserve death—worse!—for what they did to us. We will find what the fire wights need, and hopefully they can find the things we need to take back our home."

"Khapah," Luthiya said. "You know I trust you. And I—I care about you, I mean all of us." She made fists in the ash, cursing her weakness. "But I can't—I don't think this is what Ama wants."

"If Ama is drawn to help us, as you say, then she will surely help us in this."

Luthiya grimaced. Ama probably would help them, just as Luthiya always did. But that wasn't the point. It was too hard for Luthiya to say what she really felt. The Shue were going from Abaddon's Gate to the Abyss; Khapah was guiding them.

And Luthiya was just helping them along.

Days later, she was still "just helping." She and Nai returned from their shift watching the wights. Her feet dragged; she'd lost the desire to even pick them up off the ground. It wasn't just the wights. It was her. She knew what the Shue needed, but she spent all her time doing what Khapah wanted.

Because that was what she needed.

Khapah had someone watching the wights all the time now—from a distance, of course. So far they'd learned nothing. The wights roamed without purpose: occasional spurts of miraculous creation, then nothing at all. The only sign they were even aware of the Shue was how they watched Luthiya. Never the others; always her. Chills scuttled across

her skin just thinking of it.

Luthiya and Nai arrived at the Marrow Chamber. Clean water seeped out of the hot spring—a crack Ama had made in the ground shortly after they'd arrived—creating a pool in the center of the chamber. A massive archway had been carved out of the bone tower on one side, letting in the glow from the lavafalls. The force wall shimmered across the opening, its faint blue light keeping out most of the heat.

Other Shue congregated in groups around the vast chamber. A few were working—fishers carrying bags of salamanders, water collectors putting the spring waters into jars made of shapestone—but most did nothing. It was like they wanted to be together but didn't know what to do once they were. It hurt to watch, or maybe it reminded her too much of her own pain.

Four hours watching those creepy fire wights gather in the same meaningless way didn't help any.

She had to do something. She didn't want to be like them—not the wights, nor what the Shue had become. “Let's play Tungdan,” she said suddenly.

Nai laughed. “What? Why?”

Luthiya didn't answer. She called across the chamber to two others. A dozen faces stared as her voice echoed around the hall. One of the water collectors was so surprised she knocked over a jar, spilling water out through the archway.

As two girls approached them, Nai whispered, “What's with you? Tungdan? We don't even have a ball.”

Luthiya cursed, looking around the chamber for anything that would serve. “Got it!” She ran to the relic pile and grabbed a soft black sphere that Jio had found a couple of months ago.

“What's going on?” asked one of the girls who'd answered her call.

Luthiya tossed the sphere in the air, testing it. “We're playing Tungdan.”

The tallest girl, Zaanh, laughed loudly, but said, “All right. Fine. Let's get some circles.”

The girls each made a circle in the dirt, turning on one leg while drawing a line with their other foot. Once they were in their circles, Luthiya tossed the “ball” to Zaanh, starting the game. Zaanh popped the ball into the air with her knee, then passed it to Nai with the outside of her foot.

“It feels weird,” Nai said, using her forehead to send it to the light-skinned Jieb.

Jieb brought up her knee to catch it, but the ball rolled off and into her circle.

“That's one already, Jieb.” Zaanh said with a smile. “You're out of practice.”

We all are, Luthiya thought.

Jieb bent down to pick up the ball. She squeezed it experimentally in her hand. “Is this okay? I mean, what if it's an egg or something?”

Luthiya pursed her lips. The Ninth World was full of oddities like this ball, strange but useless relics. But numenera eggs were low on her list of concerns. “It's fine. Just play.”

Jieb shrugged. She served it to Luthiya who immediately kicked it to Nai.

It didn't matter if it was an egg or a weapon or a rock. The point was to play, to forget, even for a moment. Luthiya had spent too much time searching and fishing and studying creatures that seemed to be studying her—all in the vain hope they could fight a people who outnumbered them twenty to one, who still had glaives and nanos to fight for them, who'd had months to strengthen their borders against the return of a few hundred survivors, most of them in their teens.

Jieb popped the ball with her elbow, lobbing it at Luthiya's head. With a shout, Luthiya spun and slammed the ball down into Zaanh's circle with a cloud of dust. She threw her fists up in triumph, but as soon as the ball hit the ground, it disappeared in a flash of light.

Another flash appeared just above Nai. The ball dropped on her head and rolled off. “What the...?”

Luthiya stifled a laugh with her hand. When Zaanh and Jieb started giggling, she couldn't hold it in. She laughed so hard she doubled over.

"That was... weird." Nai picked the ball off the ground with two fingers and a thumb and tossed it to Zaanh.

This was what she wanted. Escape. Joy, however false or fleeting.

Eventually, they figured out the ball would disappear when it hit something hard, randomly reappearing somewhere close by. Who knew why?

Others gathered around to watch. None asked to play. They seemed more curious than anything, as if they'd forgotten they'd used to play this game as kids. As if they'd forgotten they were kids, most of them. And who cared if they played or not? Luthiya felt better than she had in months. It lightened her heart to see Zaanh, Jieb, and Nai laughing, too. Could they make a home here? In that moment, she couldn't have cared less.

Nai spun in the air, sending a particularly vicious strike at Luthiya's head. She ducked just in time. The ball went flying off toward the archway fifteen meters away. It flashed when it struck the ground, then reappeared in the air a few steps over and plopped to the ground.

"Burn a Tabby, Nai! I didn't know you could do that." Luthiya smiled.

Nai ducked her head, embarrassed. "Sorry, I'll get it." She ran off toward the arch.

"We should play for something," Luthiya said, turning back to the others.

Zaanh smirked. "I've got a lookout shift with Khapah tomorrow."

Luthiya felt the heat rush to her cheeks.

"How about the winner—"

A shriek shattered the general silence of the chamber. Luthiya turned to the archway where Nai had fallen on her back.

Five fire wights hovered outside.

The Marrow Chamber went mad. Nobody had ever been this close to them. Water collectors dropped their jars. A middle-aged woman screamed. People shouted. Some fled down into the tunnels, while others dug through the pile of oddities hoping for anything remotely useful.

Jio and two older boys ran up the staircase to where Khapah kept the weapons.

Zaanh ran after them. "Someone find Khapah!"

Luthiya hurried to Nai, terrified of what the wights might do, but even more terrified to leave her friend alone. "Come on!" she said, grabbing Nai by the arm, forcing her to her feet.

The wights watched her from the archway. Not Nai or the others. Her. Her heart pounded as she half-dragged Nai to the oddities pile. It was as far as they could get from the archway. Most of the Shue who hadn't fled huddled there.

She breathed heavily. The wights were beyond the force wall, but that only kept out hot gasses.

They didn't move, just floated there, five tongues of human-shaped flames. Their entire bodies shimmered except for the three black holes in their heads. For one terrifying minute they simply watched the Shue. It was too far to tell, but Luthiya couldn't shake the feeling they were watching her.

Why were they here?

One of them moved forward. Luthiya and the others jumped back. The wight reached out, and jagged lines of blue energy radiated along the force wall from where the creature touched it. The wight backed away, examining the frame of the archway. Then it leaned forward, seeming to push against the wall. The lines increased in intensity and length, like a glass window breaking slowly under pressure. Nai clutched Luthiya's arm. Luthiya grabbed her wrist in return.

The wight pushed for what seemed an eternity. Eventually it backed off and the lines of energy disappeared. It

hadn't broken through. The force wall shimmered faintly, as though to reassure them it was still there. Luthiya released the breath she'd been holding.

The wight turned to look at its kin. Then suddenly all five of them attacked the archway. The force wall flashed and sparked as the creatures threw themselves against it. The Shue shouted, crowding against the back of the hall. Waves of intense heat blasted them from the archway. Nai shrieked. Others gripped what oddities they'd found tightly, as though those useless relics would protect them.

Luthiya tried to calm her friend. Tried to calm herself.

What did the wights want? The Shue? Her?

Khapah came running from the tunnels below, along with Jieb, Tsio, and two others. They stood between the wights and the cowering Shue, armed with spears and clubs. From his cloak, Khapah pulled out the synthsteel rod Luthiya had brought him the other day. "Stay back!" he shouted.

He aimed the rod at the wights and twisted the blunt end. Gold lines lit the sides, but she could tell from his face he had no idea what to do next. Ama had told them how to activate it, but they'd never seen it used.

"Khapah, don't!" He might blow up the whole tower. The wights wanted something in here. She had to figure out what, even if it was her.

Luthiya ran to Khapah's side, putting her hand on his until he lowered the weapon. "They can't get in."

Khapah looked at her with wide eyes, then to the wights hammering against the invisible wall. Finally, he swallowed and nodded. "Why are they here?"

Luthiya raised her eyebrows, surprised Khapah was asking her. She started to shake her head when something clicked. She looked back at the wall as it flared, fractured, and reformed again. "Ama put up that wall."

Khapah followed her gaze, frowning his brow.

"They've been here forever. They had access to all of this before we got here."

"So we've cut them off from something?"

Luthiya grimaced, unsure. If something in here was so important to them—some oddity, perhaps—would they have left it? Wouldn't they have been with it when the Shue had arrived?

No, that's not right. Ama said she'd been drawn here by the wights' need. If the Shue hadn't created that need, she would never have felt drawn in the first place. So what the wights wanted now was something the Shue had changed, something they had with them.

Like her.

"No." Luthiya crouched, tangling her hands in her long hair. The wights had stopped attacking the force wall for the moment. They were watching her again. "Gods about, no."

Khapah looked back and forth between Luthiya and the wights. "What, makoeh? Do you know what they want?"

She couldn't bring herself to answer. The wights watched her constantly, as though they wanted something from her. It was the only explanation she could think of for their attack.

I have no choice. If it will save my people...

One of the wights looked away from her for a second. It was such a welcome feeling, Luthiya couldn't help but notice. She turned her head to see what it was looking at. "The spring."

"What?" Khapah said.

Luthiya stood and walked to the spring. She took one of the water collectors' buckets and filled it halfway, wincing as some of the boiling water splashed her arms. She took the bucket to the archway, feeling the eyes of her people on her. Nobody tried to stop her, though.

This was crazy. Why would fire wights want water? What would she do if they didn't? It didn't matter. One way or the other, she'd find out what they wanted now.

She walked up to the force wall, feeling the weight of the wights watching her. Surprisingly, the air felt cold. She reached one arm forward with the heavy bucket, cringing at the familiar slither of the force wall over her hand. She dropped the bucket outside, splashing water onto the rocks, then snapped her arm back in. She rubbed her hand. It was cold, even freezing outside. But the air beyond the force wall should've been significantly hotter than the chamber.

Luthiya trembled. Khapah put a hand on her shoulder and she leaned into him without thinking. The wights were no longer watching her. They stared at the bucket of water, unmoving. Then all five plunged their hands into the water and—there was no other way to describe it—they drank. The water disappeared at a surprising rate. Light pulsed up their arms into their bodies. As it did the wights became more solid, more beautiful. Like humanoid stars.

“Ama was right,” Khapah said next to her. “We can help them.”

Luthiya clung to him more tightly.

Chapter 4

Cold was how the fire wights expressed gratitude. Luthiya felt it whenever they drank outside the archway (though she suspected it was even colder outside, that the force walls didn't just block temperature but somehow managed it). Khapah and the others had dug a small trench from the spring, allowing a stream of water to pour over the lip of the archway to the fire wights outside. There were always two or three out there drinking, chilling the air in thanks.

No, it couldn't be something as simplistic as "cold equals appreciation." If the creatures were as intelligent as Ama said, their language would have to be far more intricate.

Khapah tried to talk to them every day. He was there now. Some new artifact of Ama's lay at his feet, a small pyramid of stone that was perpetually wet for some reason. "Can you understand me?" Khapah said, almost comical in his enunciation.

The temperature near the archway must have changed, because Khapah shivered. A green cloud of smoke appeared at the apex of the stone pyramid. Khapah cursed at it in frustration. "Please," he said to the wights outside, "I don't understand you. If you can understand me, make the air warm so I will know."

Luthiya was too far from Khapah to feel the air, but the pyramid's smoke shifted. It took the form of yellow trees, then some six-legged animal Luthiya had never seen before.

It was the same as the other artifacts they'd tried; it converted the temperature changes to images or sounds, but nothing comprehensible. As for the wights, they weren't even looking at Khapah. They might have been chatting among themselves.

"What are you?" Khapah asked. The smoke above the pyramid became a black pillar that wavered as though it were a mirage. Khapah growled and kicked the artifact across the chamber. "Useless!"

Luthiya couldn't stifle her laugh. Khapah turned on her, but his face softened quickly. He walked over to her and sat down, shoulders slumped. "Am I so funny?"

"I'm sorry," she said. "You're trying so hard. I shouldn't laugh."

"No. It is funny. I'm pinning everyone's hopes—even our parents' and ancestors'—on creatures we know nothing about. I might as well try talking to the monster whose bones we live in." He clutched a tuft of his hair. "We give them water, but why should they understand that we want something in return?"

"You could take the water away."

Khapah rubbed his cheek. "Perhaps. But I don't want to manipulate them, or risk their anger if they don't understand."

Luthiya exhaled. She felt the same way. She'd only suggested it because... well, because it might help.

"Would you try?"

Luthiya opened her eyes wide, her mouth suddenly dry. "Me? Why?"

"You watch each other." Khapah turned his gaze back on the wights.

"What do you mean?"

"They stare at you all the time. They're doing it now."

"I know, but..." Luthiya looked at the archway. Of course, the wights were facing her. But did she really watch them as much as they did her? "You think they'd respond to me?"

Khapah shrugged. "Just an idea."

Luthiya wrapped her arms around her knees. She didn't want to talk to the wights. She was already closer to them than she'd ever wanted to be.

But if it would help my people...

Khapah stood to leave.

She grabbed his wrist. "I'm not going outside the force wall."

Khapah laughed. "I would never ask you to, makoeh. Even I'm afraid to be out there with them."

She smiled. It was one thing to watch them from a hidden ledge far away. If she had to be closer, she wanted something to protect her. Knowing Khapah held the same fear made her feel better.

Dusting herself off, she walked slowly toward the archway. The fire wights were bright from drinking water; she had to squint as she approached. They watched her. Even those who had been drinking stopped to stare.

She hugged her chest at the sudden chill in the air. She was used to temperature quirks within the force walls, but it was strange to see a river of lava not five meters away, yet feel the bite of midwinter.

She stopped a few steps from the archway. The wights hovered above her, each one taller than any of the Shue. Her teeth chattered. She'd never been this close to them before. Her heart beat a drum roll in her chest. She raised a shaky hand.

The wights looked at each other. Then to her surprise, they all raised their hands as well. She laughed and looked back at Khapah, who waved her on, encouraging.

"Um," she began. "Can you hear me?"

The wights stared at her, unmoving. The temperature remained unchanged, so they weren't replying—at least not in any way she could discern.

She moved her arm. The wights matched her movements. The air rippled in strange waves of hot and cold, and Luthiya got the distinct impression they were laughing.

"We need your help," she said.

The wights continued to imitate her movements but otherwise made no indication that they'd heard her. One of the creatures put its hands back in the water and drank some more, though it kept watching her. They always did.

"Here," Khapah said.

Luthiya jumped. She hadn't heard him approach. Oddly, the other wights jumped with her. Khapah offered her the synthsteel rod. She held it up in the air and pointed at it with her other hand.

The wights raised their arms in the same way.



“Do you know where we can find these?” she asked.

The wights held their arms in the air, all except the one who’d gone back to the water. Nothing else happened. Even the rippling temperatures had stopped. A second wight, seemingly bored with the miming game, returned to the water.

Luthiya dropped her arms and sighed. “I don’t think it’s going to work.”

“You’re right.” Khapah took the synthsteel rod back from her. The rest of the wights lowered their arms too, as though they could tell the game was over. “Will you do something else for me, then?”

Luthiya’s chest tightened. A part of her hoped Khapah would give up soon. Since the wights had shown up at the archway, people were afraid to go outside the force walls. They’d only fish for salamanders in large groups, with at least three keeping watch for the wights. Nobody would take lookout duty anymore or explore the ruins beyond the force walls. They couldn’t survive here like that.

Breathe, Thiya. Maybe Khapah wanted her help in getting people ready to leave. “What is it?”

“Talk to Ama for me. We don’t need more devices. We need her. She said she wants us to work with the fire wights, yes?”

Luthiya nodded warily.

“Then she will help us in this. Will you talk to her?”

Luthiya swallowed, but she knew her answer before he’d finished asking the question. “Of course.”

Luthiya plodded to the chantry—except for the Glass Hall, and two or three other passages outside the force walls; those she sprinted across. The fire wights had shown no indication of malice toward the Shue, not since the attack on the force wall, but they still made her uneasy.

Ama was watching the urlimnion. The floating oddity seemed brighter than before, though that might have been a trick of the light. Ama crouched next to it, her face just centimeters away. What was she looking for? The relic did nothing. Even the ball they’d used for Tungdan was more useful than it was.

Luthiya’s footsteps echoed in the chamber. Ama tapped one of the urlimnion’s metal arms, sending it spinning. She stood. Without taking her eyes off the oddity, she said, “The aenairon didn’t work either, eh?”

“It worked, but Khapah couldn’t understand the images it made any more than with the other devices.”

Ama sighed. “I doubt anything will give him the translation he wants.”

As Luthiya came closer, she noticed something behind one of the benches. It was some kind of body, but wrinkled and deflated, like a tomato left out in the sun.

She inhaled sharply. “What is that?”

Ama looked up then hurried over. “Oh, nothing.” She placed her hand on it and it disappeared in a puff of dust. “Just another animal. I’m sorry you had to see it, Thiya.”

It took a force of will for Luthiya to slow her breathing. An animal. Just an animal.

“Let me find something else for Khapah to try.”

“No.” Luthiya forced the words out. “Actually, Khapah wants you involved.”

“Me?” She seemed genuinely amused by that.

“Well...yes.” Luthiya was surprised at Ama’s reaction. She didn’t want the nano to help—failure with the wights meant they might have to leave—but Luthiya assumed Ama would. “Aren’t you drawn to help?”

“I’m drawn to where there is a need. And yes, fulfilling that need might benefit my work, but the work requires my attention more.”

Luthiya was relieved. If Ama wouldn’t help, maybe the Shue could finally put Ossiphagan and Shuenha behind them.

Ama cocked her head to one side. “You seem almost happy about that.”

“I’m sorry.” Luthiya studied her feet. “It’s just that Khapah wants the wights’ help to go back to Shuenha, to fight the Tabaht.”

The nano threw back her head in laughter. Luthiya caught a glimpse of her pentagonal tattoo again. It seemed lighter now, almost as bright as the urlimnion. “Of course he does. I should’ve seen it,” she said when she’d calmed down. She walked over to Luthiya, put a hand on her cheek. “You’re the one who wants a new home, aren’t you?”

Luthiya nodded.

“The only one?”

She shrugged.

“Well,” she said, “you need not worry. This is the fire wights’ home. I don’t think they can leave, even if they wanted to. Besides, they seem quite harmless.”

Luthiya curled her lip; she wasn’t sure about harmless, but Ama’s words were encouraging. If Khapah couldn’t get the wights to do what he wanted, he’d have to give up on his plan to return by year’s end. “But I don’t know if—”

One of Ama’s artifacts—a glass sphere with a smaller black sphere suspended inside it—began to glow. Ama rushed over to pick it up. “Someone’s entered the pass.”

“What?” Luthiya ran over, trying to see what Ama saw inside the sphere. “Who? Which pass?” Any visitors were probably a bad thing, but especially if they were from the east—only the Tabaht lived there now.

Maybe these had entered the Charred Pass. Strangers. They might even be able to help the Shue.

Ama dashed Luthiya’s hopes against the wall. “The eastern pass,” she said. “From Shuenha.”

Chapter 5

Ama said she had to prepare. She sent Luthiya on ahead. Luthiya wasted no time. If the Shue were in trouble, she would be there with them to face it.

Her heart pounded as she ran through the tunnels. Nothing good could come from Shuenha. There were no more Shue there, and the Tabaht's other enemies—the only friends the Shue could possibly have—lived far from Ossiphagan. It was unlikely anyone would have fled in their direction, even if Ossiphagan weren't an early glimpse of the afterlife.

That left only the Tabaht themselves. But why? What could they do that they hadn't done already?

They could finish what they started in Shuenha.

Luthiya ran faster. Through the tunnels. Past the Glass Hall. Up the stairs to the Marrow Chamber where dozens had crowded into the chamber, with more still arriving. The archway was empty. Maybe the wights were hiding from the intruders, as they had hidden from the Shue in all the months since they'd arrived.

The others prepared to either defend themselves or run. Everyone held a crude weapon, or a bag with their possessions, or both.

Luthiya ran toward the sinew bridge in front of the bone tower, but Tsio dropped the shaft of a large halberd in her way. "Nobody leaves, makoeh. Khapah's orders."

"Wha...?" She struggled to catch her breath. "Where...is he?"

Tsio pointed up. Of course he'd be at the top of the tower, watching.

"Who is it? Do you know?"

Tsio scowled but didn't say.

"I'm going up."

Tsio nodded and Luthiya dashed past him to the rounded doorway leading to the stairs that spiraled around the inside walls of the bone. Glowglobes flared every few steps, illuminating doorways leading to other rooms above the Marrow Chamber—rooms which had once possessed a purpose but which now were just shells.

She hurried past them, pushing hard against the last heavy door and spilling out onto the battlement, for once not even noticing the force wall as she passed through it.

The peak of the bone tower was mostly flat. Jagged edges from where the rib had snapped millennia ago now served as a parapet wall.

Khapah stood at the battlement's edge, Jio and Zaanh next to him. Each held a spyglass. Khapah and Jio watched the eastern pass while Zaanh scanned the west with somewhat less tension in her arms; Khapah was being as thorough as ever.

"What's going on?" Luthiya asked, breathless.

"Tabaht." He handed over his spyglass.

A chill stabbed her heart at the word. She took the spyglass, her hand shaking. She didn't want to see, but neither could she stay in the dark.

It took her a while to find them. They were still far off, but coming closer. Twenty men, mounted on those scaled, two-legged beasts of theirs—dragoliths, they called them. They carried halberds twice as large as the one Tsio had downstairs. Some of their weapons glowed.

Tabaht. Luthiya's teeth chattered, her body shuddering. Soon she was shaking so badly she lost sight of them in the spyglass. Khapah took the scope from her. She crouched on the ground, pressed her knees together, and squeezed her eyes shut. Her parents' screams roared in her ears. The smell of blood, burning flesh. The heat of the flames became more real to her than the rivers of Ossiphagan.

She didn't know how long it was before she realized Khapah was holding her. "It'll be all right, makoeh."

She shook her head violently. Her face and her shirt were soaked. Her jaw was sore, her throat raw. "Can't go back," she rasped. "I won't go back."

Khapah pulled her into his arms. "Nobody's going back."

Another lie. But she let herself believe it as she cried into his shirt. "But they've come for us."

"We don't know that. It's just a scouting party. If they meant to kill us, they'd have brought many more."

Zaanh said, "But when they find us..."

"They won't. These ruins are vast. We'll stay hidden. Listen, if they approach our tower, I want you three to—"

"Khapah, look!" Jio gestured excitedly, still watching the pass through his glass.

Khapah stood. Jio handed his spyglass to Luthiya. Though she didn't want to see the Tabaht again, she had to see what had gotten Jio so worked up. She nearly dropped the glass when she saw it: about fifty fire wights between them and the Tabaht, all gliding toward the pass.

"Are they going to fight?" Zaanh asked, having left her position to see what was happening.

Khapah didn't answer. His face was grim as he watched.

The Tabaht saw the creatures; their pale faces were visible even from the tower. Their commander raised a fist, calling for a halt.

The wights floated inexorably toward the soldiers. Something flickered at the edge of the spyglass, a shadow behind the wights, though when Luthiya looking closer there was nothing there.

The Tabaht's commander shouted at the creatures, but they didn't stop. One of the soldiers lobbed something into the air. It bounced and landed in the middle of the wights. A sphere of pure lightning exploded from the ground. Thunder from the blast shook even the bone tower.

The fire wights kept moving like nothing had happened.

Other weapons were thrown. Soon the wights were obscured behind a ball of fire, a wall of ice, a cloud of indigo smoke. A tense minute passed before it all dissipated. The wights were still unscathed.

The creatures pressed closer. The soldiers panicked. Their leader tried to get them to form a line, but the dragoliths were spooked. Soldiers at the front struck out with their long halberds. The weapons went right through the foremost fire wights.

Those same wights leapt at the soldiers, arms grasping. The dragoliths skittered backward. One soldier fell off his mount. Others at the rear bolted, heading back east out of Ossiphagan.

The dragoliths at the front pressed back against the others. Their riders struggled to keep them from fleeing as well. Two wights rushed at the man who had fallen. He scrambled away, another of his fellows lifting him onto the back of his mount just in time.

The Tabaht leader shouted again. This time, those with glowing weapons attacked. The blade of one man's halberd struck the head of a wight and melted there. Another soldier's was inexplicably encased in ice. He dropped the halberd, suddenly too heavy to wield.

The wights at the front pounced on the Tabaht again. Screeching, the dragoliths turned and fled, taking their riders with them. The soldiers didn't try very hard to stop them.

"Ha!" cried Jio. He couldn't have seen the details without his spyglass, but he'd obviously seen enough. "They

won't be coming back here again, right, Khapah?"

Khapah didn't respond. He was still watching the wights. As soon as the last Tabaht turned and ran, the creatures stopped moving. Why had the wights done this? They hadn't even shown themselves to the Shue for months, but they'd attacked the Tabaht immediately. Were the wights protecting the Shue? Or their water source, perhaps?

Khapah yanked his spyglass down with a frown. "Ama."

"What?" Luthiya looked again. It took her some time to see what Khapah was talking about, but she found her. Ama stood on a bridge overlooking the eastern pass, almost directly above the fire wights, with no force wall between them and her. "What's she doing there? Is she—?"

But Khapah had already gone down the stairs into the bone tower.

Luthiya ran after him. She tried to tell herself that Ama was watching the battle, like they were, that she was studying the wights or maybe even preparing to defend the Shue herself—she was a nano, after all. She searched for any reason but the obvious: that Ama had told the wights to attack.

Because if that attack was her doing, there was nothing stopping the Shue from going to war.

Chapter 6

Tsio stepped aside to let Luthiya exit the bone tower. She would've knocked him down if he hadn't. She shut her eyes as her body hissed through the force wall.

Khapah was already on the other side of the first bridge, many yards ahead. Ama was two chasms beyond that and walking toward them.

They couldn't go back to Shuenha. They just couldn't. Even if they did defeat the Tabaht, it wouldn't be the end. The Tabaht hadn't wiped out the Shue, and the Shue would never completely wipe out the Tabaht. There would always be someone who wanted revenge.

When Luthiya reached Khapah and Ama, they were deep into an argument. The wights had disappeared.

Khapah's face was twisted into an ugly scowl. ". . . never told us you could control them."

"Control them?" Ama laughed, but there was no mirth in it. "I came out here to study them. It's actually quite funny. The wights were only trying to communicate with—"

Khapah made a slashing gesture with his hand. "You're lying."

Ama's expression became stone. "You are a child and a savage. You can't possibly understand the things I do."

"I understand that you fear them as much as we do, that you won't step outside the force walls when there are wights nearby."

Ama looked down at Luthiya, who cowered. "I suppose she told you that."

Khapah sidestepped, placing himself between Luthiya and Ama. "Don't pretend she doesn't tell you everything I say as well."

"A double agent, then." Ama sniffed. Luthiya suddenly wished she hadn't come. "To say I control them gives me too much credit. I doubt there is anyone who can control them."

"But you can talk to them, tell them what you want." Khapah's face softened. "Thiya said you were drawn to help us. I've seen it in your actions. You rescued us, brought us here to safety. And you defended us just now, when the Tabaht would've rooted us out."

Ama considered that. "I'm drawn to their aid, too. The wights."

Khapah nodded. "No doubt that's why they listened to you just now. We're helping them, too, with the water. You must ask them to help us take Shuenha back from the Tabaht."

Ama threw back her head and laughed.

Luthiya blurted out, "You can't!"

Both Ama and Khapah looked at her. Ama seemed amused, but Khapah's face was worried. "We have to, makoeh. There's nothing else for us."

"Only because you won't let it go." Luthiya squeezed her eyes shut, willing the tears back and failing. "I hate the Tabaht, too. I miss my friends and my . . . my parents, but going back for vengeance won't solve anything."

Khapah cupped her cheek in his hand. "It will, though. You saw what the wights did. They're invincible. We might not have to fight at all."

"And then what?" she shouted. Khapah jumped back, a look of shock on his face. She hadn't meant to yell. She softened her tone. "Then what, Khapah? We'll never kill them all. They'll come back, just like you want to go back now. Or someone else will take their place. Or we will take their place and lord it over them. What does any of it

solve?”

Khapah opened his mouth to speak. Nothing came out.

“You needn’t worry, child,” Ama said. “I have no intention of asking the wights to fight the Tabaht.”

Khapah turned on her. “But you just—”

“An experiment,” she said. “You think of me like an Aeon Priest. Well, this is what they do.”

“The Aeon Priests help people,” Khapah said.

Ama huffed. “They also know nothing. There is more in this world than just you, child. The Tabaht have other enemies who need help. The fire wights need help. Even the Tabaht themselves need help. Why should I devote this life only to your needs?”

Khapah was taken aback. “Was Thiya wrong? Are you not drawn to aid us?”

The nano produced a deep sigh, obviously tired. “I am drawn to you. And to this place. There is something here that is worth my time.”

Ama looked at Luthiya, but Luthiya could not read what she saw in the nano’s eyes. Curiosity? Hope?

“Something here.” Ama glared at Khapah. “Not in Shuenha. I will aid you, as I have since I found you. But I will not help you wipe out another people so you can satisfy your infantile need for justice.” Ama turned on her heels. “That is the last I will speak of it.”

She stalked off. Luthiya sighed with relief. Ama had said it so plainly: the Shue’s desire for revenge wasn’t more important than the needs of other peoples. Even the wights.

Khapah put a gentle hand on Luthiya’s shoulder and squeezed. Maybe Ama had swayed him, too.

They watched in silence as the nano disappeared into a tunnel, heading toward the chantry.

“Makoeh,” Khapah said. “Thank you for speaking. I think I finally understand how you feel.”

Luthiya looked up at him, rubbing the last of her tears out of her eyes. “You do?”

He nodded. “I won’t make you go back. Not now, not ever.”

Finally, Luthiya smiled and leaned against him.

He pulled away. “But I still intend to go.”

“What?” She stepped out of his reach. “But you—”

“You should stay.” Khapah spoke fast then, his words spilling over each other, as though he was afraid he might not be able to say them at all. “You’re smart. You think like Ama. You can learn a lot, and I’ll feel better knowing you’re safe. I’d stay with you if I could, but I have a responsibility to the Shue.” He took a breath, too short for her to interrupt. “I don’t want to ask more of you, but you care about the Shue as much as I do. I need you, makoeh. Say the word, and I’ll ask nothing more, but I need...I want...I have to...”

Luthiya’s heart sank, at her own words as much as his: “What is it, Khapah?”

Khapah met her gaze, his eyes both pleading and apologetic. “Find out what she did, how she got the wights to fight the Tabaht. We need to know.”

Luthiya stared into his deep, brown eyes. He wasn’t intentionally manipulating her. He was doing what he felt was best for his people. He really was a good leader. Anyway, Luthiya didn’t need to be manipulated. She loved her people as much as Khapah did. If this was what they wanted...

“I’ll try.”

Chapter 7

Ama wouldn't see her. Every time Luthiya went to the chantry, Ama sent her away on some errand. She felt invisible. Khapah had all but turned her away, and now Ama was doing the same.

The third time it happened, Luthiya curled up in an out-of-the-way alcove and cried. What could she do? She didn't want to stay behind, but neither did she want to return to Shuenha. I couldn't stay if I wanted, she thought bitterly. Ama doesn't want me.

Of course, Ama knew she was working for Khapah. Luthiya didn't have to help Khapah, nor did she have to run Ama's made-up errands. But she always did. Why? It wasn't about pleasing everyone—Luthiya hardly ever pleased everyone.

It was about getting her mind off of herself. It was about forgetting her pain.

So it's selfish. Luthiya frowned, disappointed in herself.

She got to her feet and dried her eyes. Sitting and crying wouldn't help anyone, not even herself. She couldn't do Khapah's bidding, not if he wanted revenge. Fighting the Tabah would only cause more suffering. If Khapah and the others were set on going back to Shuenha, then Luthiya would have to help them see that they were wrong.

And if that failed, she'd make sure they couldn't go back.

Ama would support her. They wanted the same thing, though maybe for different reasons. They both wanted the Shue to survive, to have a better life.

First, though, she had to finish Ama's errand, even if it had been invented just to get her out of the chantry. She marched through the tunnels with renewed confidence. She'd finally found a way to serve her people without hurting them at the same time.

It was a long walk to the Marrow Chamber, across at least two sections that were outside the force walls. She sprinted through the first of these. An underground flow of magma was just to her right, burning her skin with its heat until the force wall hit her like a gust of cold wind. She closed her eyes as she ran through it, enjoying the feel of it. That's how she ran into Jio, knocking both of them down.

"What are you doing?" Jio asked, pushing her off with a chuckle.

"Sorry." She stood, clasping her hands in front of her. "I didn't think there'd be anyone else in these tunnels."

"Tsio found a new cache of relics," Jio said, showing her what he'd been carrying—some sort of enormous circular shield, and a wooden cube. "He asked me to help him bring it all to the bone tower."

"That's where I'm headed, too."

They walked back together. Nobody wanted to walk through the tunnels alone unless they had to. "What's Ama doing?" Jio asked after a while.

"I don't know. She's been sending me away lately."

Jio chuckled. "She's figured out how Khapah's using you."

"He's not using me." She glared at him. "I help them both."

"Right. And who do you side with when they want different things?"

"I don't take sides."

Jio gave her a look that said he didn't believe her.

"I don't." She put one hand on her hip. "As a matter of fact, I was about to—"

“Thiya, stop,” Jio hissed, blocking her with his arm.

They’d turned a bend. A fire wight stood in front of them, only a few short steps away.

Luthiya’s heart hammered. “The force walls.” They were in the Glass Hall. Topped towers of crystal lay at her feet, miniature ruins sprawling across the floor on either side of the path. They’d entered the unprotected passage without noticing.

“Walk back.” Jio looked much calmer than Luthiya felt, but his voice shook. He lifted up the shield he’d been carrying, though after what had happened to the Tabaht, he must have known it was worthless.

Luthiya took two slow steps backward. Glass ruins crunched under her feet. The nearest force wall was ahead of them where the Glass Hall ended around the next bend, but the wight was in their way. It would take a hundred slow steps to reach the force wall behind them.

The wight watched her as she went. It didn’t seem to notice Jio at all. When Luthiya had taken several steps back, the wight began to move forward.

“Jio, we have to run.”

Jio nodded. His chin trembled, but his eyes were grim. He began walking backward, too, more quickly because the wight was still ignoring him. “Go!” he said.

Luthiya turned to run. She’d taken only one step when Jio shouted. She spun around. The wight moved fast, but Jio stepped in its way. The creature glanced at him for a single heartbeat, then it tackled him to the ground.

“Jio!” she shrieked. The creature grabbed Jio’s chest, its arms going right through the shield he held. He let out a chilling scream.

Luthiya’s breaths came rapidly. Golden light pulsed through the wight’s arms, making it brighter, almost solid. Meanwhile, Jio grew weaker. His skin was already grey and stretched. “Jio!” she screamed again, tears streaming from her face. What do I do?

Jio looked at her, though the face she saw was not the friend she knew. He looked like a corpse. “Go,” he rasped. Then he fell still.

The wight stood slowly. It was larger now, as solid as the stone walls. Its feet stood firmly on the ground, and its glow hurt Luthiya’s eyes. It was nothing like the ghostly creature it had been.

It faced her.

She ran.

Her vision blurred. The creature gained on her; she could hear it. It had footsteps now, echoing through the tunnel like war drums. She turned a corner. Her toe caught in a crack. She fell.

The wight’s yellow glow illuminated the walls, growing brighter with each second. She scrambled to her feet, hardly noticing that she’d skinned her knee.

The footsteps came closer. The air grew cool, though she was still far from the force wall. It was the wight, communicating. Luthiya no longer believed cold meant gratitude.

The force wall was just ahead of her, but her legs ached and she could barely see through her tears. The light in the tunnel grew unbearable. The wight’s outstretched hand appeared in the corner of her eye, centimeters from her shoulder. She screamed, twisting away, only to stumble on a protruding rock shelf. She hit the ground hard and covered her face from the wight’s attack.

It was many heartbeats before she realized nothing had happened. She peeked through her fingers. The wight towered over her, its shoulders rising and falling as though it was breathing hard from the chase. It made no move toward her. It took Luthiya too long to figure out why: she’d made it to the force wall.

She should’ve felt relieved, but all she could think about was Jio’s desiccated face staring at her with hollow eyes.

She curled into a ball, put her hands on her head, and covered her face with her arms. She thought she was long out of tears, but they came freely, violently, her body shuddering with each gasp. Her sobs echoed down the tunnels, but there was no one there to hear.

Chapter 8

The air became warm, the tunnel dim. The wight had left, though she didn't know how long ago.

I have to go, have to warn the others. But she couldn't. The thought of moving, of going back outside the force wall, physically hurt, like a band tightening around her chest.

"Can't." Her voice shuddered. "I can't." The tunnel was empty, but she could still see the wight standing there, burning like death. She shut her eyes, and the burning became her home in Shuenha, set aflame by the Tabaht with her parents still inside.

"NO!" She stretched out her hand, not caring that the house was surrounded by mounted soldiers. But she couldn't move. Something held her back.

"Don't! You'll die with them."

"I don't care. Let me go!" She twisted and pulled, but Khapah was too strong.

He turned her to face him. His normally handsome face was darkened by soot, streaked with blood. "We have to live, makoeh." He dried her face with his sleeve. "They want you to live."

"Have to live," she breathed. "Have to." There were a couple hundred people in the upper ruins. They were in danger. They had to know what had happened, what the wights were capable of.

Luthiya took three deep, quaking breaths. She balled her fists, forced herself up. The wight was really gone; only the dim blue light from distant glowglobes lit the tunnel. She took two deep breaths, then she bolted through the force wall and into the sweltering tunnels outside.

She glanced down every branch, looking for any sign of the wights' golden glow. She took different turns, avoiding the Glass Hall. She didn't have the strength to see Jio again. She hardly had the strength to do what she was doing. The next force wall came sooner than she thought, and the cool air sent a chill up the back of her neck. She launched herself up the stairs and into the Marrow Chamber.

"Khapah!" She was frantic. People gave her strange looks, but she didn't care. "Where's Khapah?"

"Here. Thiya, what is it?"

He hustled over from the archway where two wights stood drinking. Luthiya recoiled at the sight of them.

"What?" He took a closer look at her. She must have been a mess: cuts and scrapes, clothes drenched in sweat, eyes swollen from bawling. He brushed a lock of hair that had stuck to her face. "What's wrong, makoeh? What happened?"

"Jio, he—" Her throat closed up. She couldn't say the words. She threw herself into his arms. His shirt muffled her voice as she said, "He's dead."

"What?" His grip tightened.

"The wights." Her words spilled over each other then. She told Khapah how she'd met Jio in the tunnel, how the wight had cut them off, how he... he. He saved my life.

Khapah said nothing for a long time. She pulled back to look at him. His face had gone ashen. "When was this?" he managed.

"I don't know. I—I was scared. I lost track. I..."

"It's okay, makoeh. We'll take care of it." He swallowed, then shouted for Tsio. "Get everyone inside the force walls," Khapah told him. "Travel in groups, and whatever you do, stay away from the wights."

Tsio chuckled. “We already do that.”

“It’s different now,” Khapah said, his jaw firm. “They killed Jio.”

Tsio’s smile fell away. He nodded, then left to carry out Khapah’s orders—not before grabbing a halberd, though.

For all the good it will do him, Luthiya thought.

Khapah took her hand. “Come on.”

“Where?”

“To the chantry. Ama will know what to do.”

Luthiya followed, feeling numb. Only hours ago she had made some kind of decision. What was it? Did it even matter now? No, Khapah was right. Ama would help them. Then maybe they could leave this awful place forever.

Ama’s back was to them when they entered the chantry. She was crouched over something that gave off a soft yellow glow. Luthiya clutched Khapah’s hand, convinced for one terrible moment that Ama was conversing with a wight.

Khapah squeezed her hand and kept walking. Ama didn’t turn around, but she said, “I’ve found it, Thiya! I was right.”

They came closer and saw her hunched over the urlimnion. It glowed brighter than it had ever been, oscillating back and forth around its vertical axis. “Why is it doing that?” Luthiya found herself asking.

“The wights. They’re the key to it all! They do need help. The urlimnion reacts as we aid them.”

“Aid them how, exactly?” Khapah asked.

Ama finally stood and turned around. Her mouth opened in a wide smile, her eyes wide and bright. Luthiya simmered with anger. How could Ama be so happy when they were surrounded by these murderous creatures? She had said they were harmless.

Ama’s smile disappeared when she saw Khapah and Luthiya’s faces. In controlled tones, she asked them what was wrong.

Luthiya clenched her teeth to bite back her anger. “The wights killed Jio.”

Ama’s face became grim, though her eyes retained a bit of their manic look. She nodded. “I am sorry.”

“We need your help.” Khapah stepped forward. “Either to control the wights, or else help us escape them.”

Luthiya squeezed Khapah’s hand. This was not how she would’ve had it happen, but it might happen. They could leave.

Ama pursed her lips, looking down at the urlimnion as it twisted back and forth. “I’m afraid I can’t do that.”

“Please! You persuaded the wights to attack the Tabaht. If you can’t control them, you can at least guide them away somewhere, yes? While we head up the Charred Pass to—”

“You misunderstand me.”

“I do understand. You were right before, but this isn’t about revenge or justice. We need your help to save our lives.”

Ama shut her eyes and took a deep breath. “How do I explain in a way you can fathom?” she muttered. “Do I even bother? Would such a slight have any effect on the tidal matrices...” She reached a hand up to where her tattoo lay half-hidden beneath her hair.

Khapah looked to Luthiya, who just shrugged. Ama did this sometimes, talked to herself as though Luthiya weren't there, or knowing she was but thinking she wouldn't understand. It was how Luthiya had learned to work half the relics Ama had in her possession.

"So be it." Ama opened her eyes and focused on Khapah. "You have to understand, this world is larger than you can even imagine. You—your people, your ancestors, your entire history—are an infinitesimal speck of dust, whisked away in one blink of Time's eye. Maybe I could help you survive for a few more months or years, perhaps even a generation or two, but eventually you would fade like everything else. Simply put: you are not worth the time."

Her eyes grew wide, hungry. "The fire wights, however, are ancient, intelligent, enduring. They predate the Ninth World and have the capacity to outlive it. Helping them would truly matter."

Khapah narrowed his eyes. "What does that mean? To help them?"

Ama rolled her eyes. "You've seen what they need."

"We give them water."

"Water is not enough." She pressed her temples with one hand. "You must understand. This is their home, has been for millennia. The founders of this city invaded their territory and cut off their wells. The wights cannot leave, so they were forced into hiding."

Of course, Luthiya thought. That was why the city had force walls everywhere—it wasn't just the heat; it was the wights themselves. Had the wights... "What—what happened to them? The founders?"

"Surely you are not as ignorant as all that, child."

Luthiya shut her eyes. She knew, but she didn't want to see it. The wights broke in somehow, killed them all.

"What does this have to do with us, Ama?" Khapah raised his voice, maybe hoping to intimidate Ama. It wouldn't work.

"Kulla's crest, I have to explain everything, don't I? You are intruding just as the Ossiphagans did."

"But you brought us here!"

Ama threw up her hands. "I am only following the tugs and pulls of this body. If it weren't for me, you would've been killed already—by the Tabaht, or the wights, or starvation. I gave you months you did not deserve. But what good does it do, when I can give the wights so much more?"

Luthiya clenched her fists. "You're not drawn to help. You pick and choose for your own needs, for your stupid... urlinnion." She gestured toward the spinning object behind Ama. "How can you justify helping those monsters?"

"Who is the monster?" Ama laughed. "Weren't you going to use them to slaughter the Tabaht? Even you serve your own needs, Thiya; I saw the relief on your face when you thought Jio's death meant you could manipulate your people away from this place."

Luthiya turned away, fighting back tears. She's right. Gods, I haven't even mourned him.

"Empathy for those who are like you is trivial, weak, the kind of thing you teach a toddler. True compassion is for those you do not—cannot—understand."

"This is pointless," Khapah said. "Why can't you help us both? They want the city and its wells. We want to leave."

"It's more than the wells." That manic look returned to Ama's eyes. "When the wights took Ossiphagan, they discovered something much more potent than water."

Luthiya trembled. She remembered the wight in the tunnel, how it had changed after feeding on Jio, growing brighter than the sun, taller, solid as stone. "Blood."

"Life," Ama replied. "Something you have in abundance."

Khapah had the knife out before Luthiya realized what was happening. He leapt at Ama, his face twisted in rage. Ama had already raised her metal pipe to her lips—the weathered flute Luthiya had seen among her artifacts. Luthiya

tried to warn him, but Ama played a minor five-note phrase then stepped aside as Khapah fell forward, unable to move his arms or his legs.

Luthiya ran. She covered her ears, but she wasn't fast enough. Before she could block them out, the first three notes struck her mind like arrows. Her legs betrayed her, and she tumbled across the chantry floor. She came to a stop a couple meters from the door, facing Ama. Her hands and arms were frozen, pressed against the sides of her head.

Ama looked at her flute with a smirk. Then she laid it down next to her other artifacts and picked up a blue sphere of glass. She ran one finger down the surface of the sphere as though caressing it. A light kindled inside it as she traced complicated figures across its surface. The air in the chantry grew unbearably hot.

“What are you doing? Why is it hot?”

Ama snorted, but didn't look away from her work with the sphere. “The force walls are down, stupid girl. I doubt the Shue will offer their water freely.”

The words were muffled to Luthiya's covered ears, but she understood enough to make her heart race and her breath grow shallow.

Ama set the sphere back down. She put one hand in the space between the urlimnion and the bench. When she lifted her hand, the gyrating urlimnion stayed with her, hovering two centimeters above her palm.

“Where are you going?” Luthiya asked.

Ama ignored her. With her free hand, she picked up something that looked remarkably like the shield Jio had been carrying when he died. Then she marched to the door, her feet clacking against the black stone. She passed Khapah and Luthiya without a word.

Her footsteps paused at the doorway. “I'm going to watch,” she said as she left them to die.

Chapter 9

Luthiya's fingers tingled. She tried to wiggle them.

"I'm sorry, Thiya," Khapah said. "You were right."

Luthiya huffed. "How could you have known she'd betray us like this? I didn't." Two of her fingers moved. Was the esotery wearing off? When Luthiya had done this to salamanders they hadn't moved for hours unless she'd played the melody that released them.

"No, but I relied on her for everything. I wouldn't let go of revenge."

"No one would, Khapah. I'm the strange one."

Khapah gazed at the stone floor. "Would that we were all as strange, then."

Luthiya turned her wrist. It was wearing off.

"How are you doing that? I can't feel anything beyond my face."

She kept moving, stretching more and more until she regained control of her arms. "The flute only works if you hear it. I didn't think I covered my ears in time, but I guess—"

"Can you undo it?"

She wasn't sure. No matter how much she tried, she couldn't feel anything beyond her arms. She shook her head.

Khapah's face fell.

She'd been so close. For a moment, she thought she had actually outsmarted Ama, if only a little. But she needed more than her arms to escape the wights, or to help save the others.

"Wait, the flute!" Ama had left it on the bench.

Luthiya pressed her arms into the stone floor, dragging her dead weight forward with every drop of strength she had. Finally, she reached the bench where Ama had set it down. Luthiya's arms were on fire, but she managed to wriggle the flute closer with her fingers. She brought it to her lips. After a couple of mistakes, she piped the augmented phrase that would release her. She gasped in pain as the feeling returned to her body, including her legs, which she'd scraped across the rocks to get to the bench. Thank the gods around she'd only skinned them.

"Little help?"

"Right, sorry." For some reason, the flute only worked on one target at a time, no matter who heard it. The flutist had to choose the target in her mind. She played the same phrase toward Khapah. He winced, then stretched his limbs and pushed himself up.

"We have to go," Khapah said.

She swallowed, but nodded. They had to get to the others before the wights did. If it's not too late already.

Khapah took her hand. She stuffed the flute in a pocket and they ran off into the tunnels. They took the quickest path. When they reached the Glass Hall, she froze. She tried—failed—to look away from Jio's body. His sunken eye sockets bored a hole into her chest. She still hadn't mourned him. She couldn't, even now—couldn't admit he was gone.

Khapah tugged her hand gently. "We have to keep moving."

She nodded, a single tear dripping from her cheek. He pulled her around the corner and up the steps. They were close to the Marrow Chamber now. The rest of the Shue were already there.

She knew because of the screams.

They tore at her, ripped jagged strips from her heart. Hearing the cries of her people should've spurred her on, made her want to run faster, but she was paralyzed. The razing of Shuenha played out in her mind all over again. Khapah tried to pull, but her hand slipped out of his.

"We have to hurry!" he said.

"I..." She tried to shake off her feelings. "I know, but I—"

"Listen, makoeh." He bent over, cupping her cheeks in his hands. "I know you're scared. I am too, but—"

Luthiya screamed. Four fire wights came down the stairs, one of them walking rather than hovering, all of them brighter than they should've been.

Khapah stepped in between her and the wights. All four looked directly at him. "Run, Thiya. Warn the others."

"No." It came out as barely more than a whisper. This is what happened to Jio. "No, you can't."

"Go!"

Luthiya stood frozen as the wights stalked toward Khapah. This couldn't happen. Not again. Not to Khapah. The Shue needed him. More than that...

She rushed forward and shoved Khapah to the ground. The wights turned to face her, as she hoped they would. "You go," she told Khapah. "Get them out of here."

Before he could argue, she ran. Again, she guessed right; the wights chased her immediately, ignoring Khapah as though they couldn't even see him.

She took turns at random, looking for a path to the volcanic fields above. The tunnels behind her glowed brighter with each step she took. The footsteps became louder, beating a steady, deadly rhythm. She wouldn't make it to the fields, wouldn't know what to do there if she did.

It's all right. If only one of us lives, it should be Khapah.

More screaming came from a branching tunnel ahead and to the left. The Marrow Chamber. Somehow she had come back around to another entrance.

Then she had an idea. If four followed her, why not more?

She glanced behind her. The wights were a good distance back. She'd thought they were closer, but no, they were just brighter than she'd thought. I have time. With renewed strength, she dashed down the branch and up a flight of stairs.

The screams grew louder, but she fought off her terror. If she let it get to her, they would all die. The stairs spiraled around. Small window slits opened on her left and she saw a large hall outside and below her. The spring! She was already in the bone tower somehow, above the Marrow Chamber.

Below her, scores of Shue huddled together. The wights had cut off their escape in every direction. Many lay on the floor, as unrecognizable as Jio. Like the animal I saw in the chantry. Luthiya shivered, wondering if it had ever been an animal.

The footsteps behind her grew louder. Her chest burned, and her side ached. She couldn't run much longer. Even if she could get the wights to chase her, how far could she get?

She ran through a narrow room, filled with halberds, staves, and a smattering of numenera weapons, including the synthsteel rod. It gave her an idea. She grabbed the rod on the run. A passage took her from the weapons cache down into the main chamber where glowing wights blocked her way. They had their backs to her, thankfully, and she could see over them.

The footsteps drummed behind her. The screams of her people clawed at her. But for a few heartbeats, she shut it all out. Raising the synthsteel rod, she twisted the stubbed end like Ama had told her. The tapered end glowed a cool orange. She brought it up to her eye, sighting down the length of the rod like a crossbow, aiming it at the center of the

spring. The tapered end extended and the orange glow left the rod and shone in the air between her and the spring. She extended the rod even further, until the glow hit the water and disappeared beneath the ground.

She let go.

The rod snapped back together. A sound like muffled thunder roared from under the spring. The tower shook. Luthiya fell. The stone floor beneath the pool of water cracked and crumbled. It fell in on itself, then a titanic blast of water shot upward, blasting the ceiling and showering the entire chamber.

The Shue shrieked and covered their heads, but a little scalding water was better than being sucked dry, Luthiya figured.

And she was right. As soon as the water came pouring into the room, most of the wights ignored the Shue and ran straight toward the now-massive spring. Even the wights who had been chasing her flowed past down the stairs, ignoring her in their effort to reach the water. The room sparkled as dozens of fire wights drank it in, glowing more and more brightly.

The Shue took their chance. They poured out of the entrance and the archway to the surface of the volcanic fields. Khapah stayed in the doorway, waving each one through, making sure none were left behind.

Luthiya followed. The Marrow Chamber was nearly full of boiling water, but there was still enough space for her around the rim. She bounded down the steps. A group of fire wights drank a few meters away from the bottom of the stairs, but they weren't looking at her.

Not until she stepped on the bone floor.

She froze, her hands and heart trembling in terror. Every fire wight in the room had stopped drinking and turned to watch her.

She was trapped.

Chapter 10

“Come on!” Khapah waved to Luthiya from the doorway.

He was so close, but three score of the creatures stood between them. She’d never make it. Even if she did, it would only bring the wights chasing after the rest of the Shue. They’d never get out of the fields of Ossiphagan.

Luthiya set her chin, trying to ignore Khapah’s expression as he realized what she was thinking. Before she could doubt herself, she turned on her heels and ran back up the steps. She didn’t need to tell Khapah to go without her. It would only waste time. Just don’t be stupid enough to follow me.

The fire wights splashed through the water after her, drowning out Khapah’s shouting. Luthiya sprinted up the stairs. She was already so tired; every breath seared her lungs. In the weapons cache, she hunted desperately for anything other than a halberd or a spear. There was nothing. The numenera weapons were all strangements to her.

The wights marched up the stairs, their now–solid feet hammering against the petrified bone floor. They were so bright now. Luthiya couldn’t look behind her without squinting.

She took the same route she’d entered through, toward the underground. If she could keep up her pace, she might make it to the chantry. Ama would have something there she could use. But when she reached the steps going down, she cried out. A bright light shone from below, and it was growing brighter. The wights were there, too.

Trembling, she took the only route left to her: up. She ran past doors on her right, chambers carved into the middle of the bone. Could she hide there? The wights would probably sense her through the door, and none of these doors could be barricaded. The battlement was her only chance. She took the steps two at a time, straining her leg muscles, begging them to pump faster. The tunnel grew brighter, though, no matter how fast she moved.

She fell against the battlement door, shoved it open, and stumbled outside. Then she scrambled back and heaved the door closed. It slammed into the door frame like thunder. A towering chunk of rib bone leaned against the wall. She jumped, grabbed the top of it, and tugged it down in front of the door. Then she put her back against it and dug her feet into the rough floor.

The first wight struck the door like an earthquake. Luthiya shrieked and pushed herself back up, giving herself as much leverage as she could. They hammered again and again. Her teeth cracked against each other. The massive bone fragment budged half a centimeter with each strike. I can’t do this, she thought. Please, Khapah, get everyone out before it’s too late.

“The water wasn’t enough for them, was it?”

Luthiya jumped; the voice seemed to come from the sky itself. She looked all around until she saw Ama standing on the other side of the parapet.

Luthiya gasped. “How did you get here?”

“All the water in the world wouldn’t be enough for them.” Ama held one hand out, palm up, with the urlimnion floating above it. The small orb glowed as brightly as the wights did now, almost frantic in its back–and–forth rotations. “Even your kin aren’t enough.” Ama crossed her other arm over her chest, looking down to the bottom of the tower. “They want you.”

“Why?!” It had bothered Luthiya since she’d first seen the wights. The monsters would occasionally notice the water or Khapah or Jio, but they always, always returned to watch her.

Ama rose up into the air. She was standing on the shield she’d taken from the chantry, some kind of levitation device. “I don’t know.” She glowered. “Water is for them like it is for our bodies: necessary, but insufficient for real

strength. They crave meat. Life. But why yours specifically? I cannot imagine.”

The wights continued battering at the door. The bone fragment scraped forward two more centimeters. Luthiya’s feet scabbled over the petrified floor as she tried, desperately, to push it back.

“Your people are fleeing. West, toward the Charred Pass.”

A surge of hope swelled in Luthiya’s chest. It had worked. The wights wouldn’t leave Ossiphagan. The Shue were free.

Ama’s lip curled up in a quiet snarl.

She doesn’t want us to survive. Luthiya shoved the fragment back against the door. Her legs grew weaker with each strike. It wouldn’t be long before the wights broke through. “Why do you hate us?” she asked.

“Ha! I don’t hate you. What a waste of effort that would be, like hating salamanders or a flea.”

“Then let them go! The wights will have me. That’s what they want. You said it yourself.”

“I worry it won’t be enough.” Ama sighed deeply. “I suppose I could lead some other group here, now that I know of the wights.” She touched her forehead and muttered to herself, “But would that count as betrayal? Greater good, perhaps? Gods, this tide is abstruse.”

Luthiya growled. “What’s not enough? What could be more important than saving people’s lives?”

“This,” she said, lifting the urlinnion as though it were obvious. Then she laughed. “Of course you can’t understand. Like my body, the urlinnion is tuned to acts of charity and compassion. Helping your people wasn’t enough—I suspect because the Shue are beyond help. But the moment I gave that boy to the wights, the urlinnion awoke.”

“You gave him?” A sickening pit grew in Luthiya’s stomach.

Ama murmured to herself again, “That betrayal didn’t count. Perhaps I could—”

“You gave Jio?” Luthiya shouted, rage bubbling up from the pit of her stomach.

Ama stopped, looking at Luthiya in surprise that shifted quickly into something like pity.

The tears forced their way out, then. Luthiya’s breaths became heavy, uncontrollable. The bone fragment slipped ten centimeters at once, a yellow glow spilling out of the doorway. And Luthiya realized something else: Jio was an accident. She meant to give them me.

“I think I will spare you,” Ama said. “Let’s see what effect that has.”

“No.” Luthiya shook her head. “Sparing” would only mean death for the others. “Let them take me. Leave the Shue alone.”

“Actually, I must spare you, otherwise this life will have been wasted.” She casually traced a pattern in the air with her free hand, a faint light trailing from her fingers. When she finished, the pounding behind Luthiya stopped; the glow from the door was gone. “Unless consuming all the Shue isn’t enough, of course. Then I’ll have to let them take you as well, just to be sure.” She gave Luthiya a wan smile, then turned on her floating shield and began descending toward the earth.

“No.” Luthiya scraped her nails against the bone behind her, while Ama’s head disappeared behind the parapet. “NO!”

She rushed to the edge, whipping Ama’s flute from her pocket. As soon as the nano was in sight, Luthiya played the five-note minor tune. As the first note sang through the air, Ama turned and gasped. She brought her free hand up as though to cast some esotery, but too late. The melody was finished. Ama froze in mid-air, one hand holding the urlinnion, the other upraised as though in greeting.

Luthiya’s victory was short-lived. Beneath her, the towering bones of Ossiphagan spread out in two twisting rows. The Shue ran between them, hurrying west to the Charred Pass, but scores of wights followed. A dazzling mass poured from the bottom of her tower and ran after the Shue, but whatever esotery Ama had cast had brought more of them.

Dozens, hundreds, floated up out of holes in the ground and glided down from the other bone towers.

The Shue were surrounded.

Luthiya gripped the edge of the parapet, hardened bone cutting into her fingers. “Stop them!”

Ama grinned. “Release me.”

Of course. Ama had needed her hand to cast that esotery; she probably couldn’t control the wights without it. Or she was lying. Either way, Luthiya didn’t reach for the flute. Telling her to stop the wights was foolish enough.

“There’s nothing you can do,” Ama said. “There’s very little even I could do. I don’t control them, you know. I never could.” Ama smiled in a way that twisted Luthiya’s insides. “But I can tell them where the meat is.”

Luthiya slapped the tears from her cheeks. The Shue were an experiment to Ama. Even the wights didn’t matter to her, no matter what she said. She was using them all just to activate that damn—

Something Ama had said suddenly slipped into place in Luthiya’s brain. “You don’t control them.”

Ama maintained her smirk.

She didn’t know Luthiya had figured out a way to stop the wights.

Before Luthiya could think herself out of it, she hopped onto the parapet, then launched herself at Ama. She barely had time to register the look of shock on the nano’s face before they collided. Luthiya wrapped her arms around Ama. The shield veered and plummeted, but magically stayed underneath them. Luthiya slipped, digging her fingers into the nano’s arms to stay on. They fell ten meters before the device compensated for the additional weight and Luthiya was able to get her feet securely on the shield.

“What are you doing, you stupid girl?”

“You can’t control them,” Luthiya said, fighting to keep her voice from shaking. “Maybe I can.”

She leaned to one side experimentally, her hands clamped on Ama’s waist. The shield banked and followed her movement, shifting them through the air a couple meters. Thank the gods about. I can do this. She leaned forward, pushing them through the air toward the fleeing Shue.

“This is pointless.” Ama laughed. “Idiotic. No wonder your people were wiped out so easily.”

Luthiya glowered, but she didn’t let Ama draw her in. Maybe Ama was right, but it was just as likely she was afraid of what Luthiya was about to do.

Luthiya certainly was.

“The wights don’t want you anymore. They have access to hundreds more.”

“Shut up.” Luthiya was already worried about that, but she wouldn’t admit it to her.

They came up behind the closest group of fire wights, the bright, solid ones from the Marrow Chamber. The creatures were too far below, though. None of them looked up. How do I make this thing go down?

As soon as she thought it, the shield fell. It struck the ground hard and Luthiya fell forward. But rather than fall out from under her, the shield leapt up and moved with her, scraping across the field of obsidian until she was able to right herself and stop it.

“Blasted simple numenera,” Ama mumbled.

They’d stopped only a few steps away from the solid wights, just outside their path. The monsters stopped and turned. They towered over her, much larger than any she’d seen before.

She breathed, waiting. After a moment, one of them walked past her. Another followed, and soon all had ignored her, continuing their pursuit of the Shue.

Ama yawned. “Stupid child.”

“It can’t be.” Luthiya couldn’t believe it. They’d always wanted her, ignoring the others.

Except for Khapah, back in the tunnels. Except for Jio.

Gritting her teeth, she leaned and twisted. The shield responded immediately, grinding against the ground. I need to go up a little. The shield responded as she'd hoped it would, rising half a meter off of the ground.

Ama snickered, but Luthiya ignored her. She understood the creatures now, at least some small part of them. They had faces, and something like eyes, that they used to face what interested them. But they didn't see like she did. She still didn't know exactly what they saw in her, but in Khapah, in Jio—the wights had attacked when they had risked themselves to protect her.

She maneuvered the shield around the pack of wights until she was directly in their path. Letting go of Ama, she stepped off the shield and stretched her arms out to the sides. “You can't have them,” she said, even though she was fairly certain the wights couldn't hear her. “I will make sure they escape.”

Behind her, Ama snorted.

The wights stopped again. They must have been nearly three meters tall. Trios of dark, unfeeling eyes bored into her. Her neck tingled. She glanced around and saw wights around every tower, hovering at every hole and window.

They were all watching her.

“Poor, stupid girl,” Ama said.

Gods, what am I doing? There were hundreds of them. They'd kill her in seconds, growing larger, faster, then chasing after the Shue with renewed strength. They'd catch Khapah for sure. She took a step back toward the shield.

“Now you're running?” Ama was still frozen in that ridiculous pose, but her face twisted in condescension. “All this trouble, and you just abandon your people yet again?”

“B—but the wights will get them anyway.”

Ama shot out a bitter laugh. “I'm not going to solve this absurd dilemma you've created. I offered to spare you.”

Feeling small and stupid, Luthiya took another step back toward the shield. A few of the wights stepped forward as well. I'm a joke. At least when the wights were done with Luthiya, they would take Ama too.

But then why was Ama laughing? The nano should have been encouraging her to get on the shield, to run away.

Unless she knew something Luthiya didn't.

Luthiya took two more slow, deliberate steps until she was standing on the shield next to Ama. The wights moved forward—just as slowly, but no longer pausing when she paused. They pressed forward. She looked all around her. Fire wights approached from every direction, shrinking the circle around her bit by bit. The temperature of the air changed, rippling between cold and hot. Laughter.

The large ones were only a few steps away. She wrapped an arm around Ama's waist and thought, Up now!

The shield shot straight up into the air. The wights dove at her, missing her leg by centimeters. Something burned her shin.

The shield stopped. Dozens of wights crowded underneath them, stretching their arms toward her. One of the wights thumped against the bottom of the shield, and Luthiya lost her balance. The shield slid through the air to compensate, gliding fast until it bumped against one of the bone towers. Three fire wights fell out of the tower, directly above her. She screamed, falling back and sliding away again. The wights missed, landing on the ground with the others. The creatures were a sea of fire beneath her.

One jumped two meters into the air and grabbed her arm. She shrieked, the wight's touch a heated knife slicing to her bone. It held on, dragging them closer to the ground where more wights waited with outstretched arms.

Luthiya screeched, “Up! Up!”

The shield strained against gravity. The wight's hand slipped down her arm, scouring muscles and tendons with fire as it went. Frost crystallized where the hand had been. She wrenched her arm free, and the wight dropped to the

ground. The shield leapt into the air and Luthiya's stomach fell like a stone.

When they were level with the summits of the bone towers, the shield slowed. Luthiya crouched, touched her wounded arm. It was cold. It felt like her skin had been sheared off, though her arm was intact. Intact but frozen. She could barely move it. There were frost crystals on her shin as well.

She looked up at Ama. The urlinnion in her hand shone as brightly as the solid wights below. As bright as the noonday sun in Shuenha. Ama wasn't looking at her—she couldn't turn her head because of the flute, of course, but her attention was near the horizon. "You are failing," she said.

Luthiya grabbed Ama's legs and twisted her feet beneath her. The shield turned with her. What she saw stopped her heart. Khapah and the rest of the Shue were in the distance, coming up on the Charred Pass. Most of the wights were crowded around the spot where she had landed, but she was out of reach now. The wights at the edges trickled away after the Shue.

But the worst part was the dozens of wights in front of the Shue, cascading down the cliffs into the pass.

The Shue were cut off.

"I can't." Her breath came back in heaving gasps. "I can't save them."

"It's all right, child." Ama said it gently, her tone almost motherly. "Let them find peace. You can stay with me."

No. This wasn't the peace they wanted, the peace they'd fought for. But what could she do? Yes, every wight had come for her when she'd landed, but they'd nearly killed her. She couldn't stay alive long enough to save the Shue.

If I can't, who will? The wights wanted her more than the others. Maybe she could lead them on, stay ahead of them long enough for Khapah to escape.

She had to try.

She pushed the shield forward, willing it to descend until she was just above the heads of the tallest fire wights. None of these were solid, which she took as a good sign, but they weren't paying attention to her yet.

Her arm began to go numb. It was a relief from the pain, but it worried her. No, my arm doesn't matter. Only Khapah and the others do.

She maneuvered the shield until she was between the Shue and the bulk of the wights that were pursuing them. The Shue were probably thirty meters behind her, just at the mouth of the pass. Khapah was in the rear, making sure the others escaped onto the fields before him.

Luthiya stepped off the shield as before. The wights stopped, watching her. They were all around her. The ones on the cliffs had stopped too, staring directly at her no matter how far away they were.

Khapah stopped and gawked at her. He was small and distant, staring at her like the wights did. "Makoeh!"

"I'm sorry, Khapah." She said it too quietly for him to hear. She wished she could tell him—what she planned, how she felt. But there was no time. He would argue, persuade her to go with them. She would probably agree.

She turned and bellowed at the wights. "Come on!" Her voice echoed off the towers and the cliffs. "Come and get me!"

She heard Khapah's dissent behind her, but it was too late. The wights saw her now. A hundred tongues of silent, hungry flame rushed at her. They poured down the cliffs of the Charred Pass, floating past—even through—the Shue as though they weren't there. Luthiya breathed a silent prayer of thanks, then stepped onto the shield next to Ama and waited.

"It seems idiocy is a racial trait," Ama said.

Luthiya followed her gaze. Behind them, Khapah had left the rest of the Shue and was running toward her.

"No!" she shouted, tears welling up in her eyes. "Khapah, go back!"

He shook his head. Wights skated past him on either side. Either he didn't notice or didn't care.

She willed the shield into the air, at the edge of the wights' reach. She took off toward Khapah first, so even the wights at the back could see her. Before she got too close to him, she banked to the side, flying between two short bone towers to a river of lava.

She flew until she was over the center of the wide river then paused and spun around. She had to be sure. Thank the gods, Khapah had stopped near the river's edge. Wights flowed past him as though he were part of the bones.

They wanted her.

Have to keep going. Have to lead the wights away from here. She followed the flow of lava, trying to match their speed so they wouldn't lose interest.

Ama, who was facing behind them now opened her eyes wide. "Oh no! They've got him."

Luthiya gasped and spun around. But Khapah was a tiny figure in the distance running back to the others at the pass. All the wights were in the lava flow now.

Suddenly, a golden hand scraped her thigh. Her leg blazed with pain. She shrieked and willed the shield into the air, leaning and twisting until the wight fell away.

She fell to her knees. Her leg bore the same frost as her shin and her arm. It couldn't bear her weight, so she sat on the shield.

Ama whistled. "That was a close one, wasn't it?"

"Why?! Why do this to us?"

Ama snorted. "I told you, child. There are more important things than a dozen doomed fugitives. You would ruin a lifetime of work just because—"

She was cut off when Luthiya shrieked. A wight flew through the air toward them. Luthiya pushed against Ama's legs, leaning sharply to one side. The wight missed and floated down toward the river below.

The fire wights were rising through the air somehow. Clusters of the creatures built pillars and platforms out of the lava. They worked so fast! A hundred of them formed an enormous arch where a few seconds ago there had been nothing. The more solid among the wights congregated at the foundation, driving massive amounts of magma into the structures, more than Luthiya had ever seen them use before. Others blazed a path along the top and threw themselves into the air at her. She leaned back, skimming away from them, until the shield slammed into a wall of solid rock.

More wights climbed the rock next to her. She threw herself forward, forcing the shield as fast as it would go toward empty sky. In moments, the wights were there too, a pillar of black stone rising in front of her, wights clustered around it like glowing ants.

With a thought, she sent the shield higher. The black stone rose into the air as well—pillars beneath her, arches flying toward her, and all around her more and more walls.

It was a trap. They'd surrounded her.

She made for a gap where the wall was still low, leaning left and right to avoid the structures the wights had built and the wights that leapt off of them. The creatures must have figured out what she was doing, because more of them massed around the low wall and the structure shot up into the sky.

Up! Up! Up! At the mental command, the shield rose into the air, but the wights were raising the obsidian wall faster than she could ascend. She pushed forward anyway, willing the shield to rise as fast as it could. She was a few meters from the wall when she realized she wouldn't make it, and that she was moving too fast to stop.

The wights on the wall reached out for her. Suddenly her insides fell into her feet. She fell flat against the shield as it lurched up, faster than it ever had. She and Ama soared safely over the wall, and continued to ascend, until the lava flow was a thin red line far below her.

The wights massed beneath her, golden flesh writhing on top of the twisted stone creations they had created. She

looked west, to where the last of the Shue disappeared into the Charred Pass. “I did it,” she breathed. “They’re safe.”

Ama sighed deeply. “I’ll have to stop them myself.” She waved her hand, and the shield shot forward at tremendous speed toward the Shue.

“Your hand!” The effects of the flute had worn off. Of course. That’s how they’d gotten over the wall. Ama had done it.

Ama turned her head down toward Luthiya. “You can be quiet.” Most of her body remained rigid, but her hand drew a delicate figure in the air. A fiery light illuminated her fingertips.

Luthiya pushed up on her good leg and grabbed Ama’s wrist before the esotery could finish. The shield bucked and slid underneath them, struggling to keep balance. With her wounded arm, Luthiya reached for the flute, fingering it out of her pocket. Suddenly a blaze of pain shot up her arm, into her chest. Her fingers seized up. The flute slipped through them, falling to the ground far below.

Ama struggled against Luthiya’s grip. The shield continued forward at a frightening speed. It veered left and right as the two of them fought for control.

Luthiya gripped Ama’s wrist with every drop of strength she had, but it wasn’t enough. She was weak, and Ama was growing stronger as the effects of the flute wore off. They were almost at the Charred Pass. If Ama reached the Shue, there was no telling what she’d do. She wouldn’t have to do much, just enough to give the wights time to catch them before they got out of the fields.

There was only one option left. Luthiya hooked her arms around Ama’s frozen one. Then she jumped off the shield, tugging Ama with all her weight. Unable to compensate, the shield flew out from under Ama’s feet, and they were alone in the air.

They plummeted toward the Earth. Luthiya shut her eyes, letting the super-heated air wash over her. The last thing she heard was Ama shouting, “The urlimnion!”

Then her body smashed into the ground.

Chapter 11

“Asinine, idiot girl.”

Luthiya opened her eyes. Her head swam. The air shifted around her.

She looked down. Was it down? Yes, Ama was on the ground, staring directly up at her. Fire wights were all around them, glowing, feeding on something, kicking up dust with their solid feet. They weren't feeding on Ama yet, but they would. Luthiya should've been horrified by that, but she felt at peace. Not because something terrible was about to happen to Ama, but because it didn't matter. Life came and went, didn't it? That was the way of things.

She tried to ask Ama what had happened, but nothing came out of her mouth. Instead, a barely visible shockwave radiated out from her. The wights shivered, but that was all.

“You stole it from me,” Ama said. Except it wasn't Ama. Something else spoke from within her. Something old. Something powerful, and yet alone.

“What are you?” Luthiya tried to say. It came out as streamers of light: red, teal, and gold.

Ama laid her head back down. “Stole it. I have to start all over.”

She said nothing more. The wights finally came for her, though before they touched her, a ball of blue flame fled her body. Ama—or whatever had been within her—was gone.

As the wights shifted, Luthiya saw the body they had consumed before Ama. It was a young Shue girl. It was me. Her quiet laugh came out as the scent of rain on a dirt road. It made sense now: she was dead.

No, not dead. Ama had spoken to her, even looked at her, while Ama was still alive. And where was the urlimnion? Luthiya hunted around and finally found it inside her body—not the corpse on the ground, but herself. Her chest was translucent, and the urlimnion spun within her, too fast to see the oscillations anymore. It glowed bright as the sun, though Luthiya had no problem looking directly at it.

She felt a tug within her. The urlimnion was urging her upward. She consented, floating up toward the sky.

Wights swarmed below her, scuttling over the shells that had once been Luthiya and Ama. The urlimnion was there too, dimmed and lying on the ground. She looked inside herself again to be sure. The urlimnion was there also, alive and glowing. The device on the ground was just another shell.

Khaph! She whirled to face the Charred Pass. There wasn't a single fire wight near it, nor were there any Shue. Khaph, where are you?

Whether it was her will or the urlimnion, the world shifted, and she floated above a crowd of people. Her people, or they used to be. She called out to them, and though the rocks around her changed color, none of the Shue seemed to notice.

The world shifted again so she was closer to Khaph, floating right next to him as he led the Shue out of the fields of Ossiphagan. He was sad. She reached out and touched his cheek with one translucent hand, but he didn't react.

The urlimnion tugged her upward again. She sighed, accidentally misting Khaph with rainwater. He wiped his face and looked around, confused, but he didn't see her. It didn't bother her, exactly, but there was something she wanted to say, something she wanted him to know. She couldn't think of it. Words held less and less meaning for her.

She let herself be pulled upwards. Her hand left Khaph's cheek. There was a mark on his face where her hand had been—a small black circle with fine lines shooting off at right angles. Yes. Surely that was what she had wanted to say.

The Shue grew smaller as she rose into the air. The black smoke enveloped her, and they were gone. She didn't know where the urlimnion was taking her, but she knew it was good. It was right.

Suddenly, the turmoil of the volcanoes ceased, and the sky burst into light around her. Blue and cool. Wisps of cloud hung in the air. Yellow sunlight infused her translucent body.

It was the day. She had forgotten.

About the Author



Adam Heine is a foster father of ten, a sci-fi/fantasy author, and the Design Lead for *Torment: Tides of Numenera*. His work can be found in *Beneath Ceaseless Skies*, *The Best of BCS Year Two*, and (occasionally) on his website at adamheine.com. Adam and his wife live in Thailand, where they take care of kids who have nowhere else to go.