



Sophiatown

‘Faro, *wait!*’

Kayla Karakka thundered along the narrow street in pursuit of her pangron, her leather boots smacking hard against the cobbles. Ahead of her, Faro was approaching the end of the street, where market sellers were setting up for the evening’s celebrations. He was too big to squeeze comfortably between the stone wall and the stalls, but he showed no sign of decelerating.

‘Slow down!’ Kayla shouted. ‘Faro, stop! You’ll break something!’

But she was too late. As he turned the corner, Faro lost his balance, instinctively opening his wings to steady himself. His right wingtip clipped a large pot of

spices, sending it crashing to the ground. Yellow powder cascaded over the cobbles.

The spice merchant shook his fist in the air. ‘Whose pangron is that?’ he shouted. ‘You should have that beast under control!’

‘Disgraceful,’ agreed another. ‘All pangrons should be safely locked away in the Academy.’

Kayla grimaced. She knew the rules. Pangrons were meant to be kept under close supervision, not running wild through the city. But Faro needed to stretch his legs and wings.

‘He’s mine,’ she called. ‘He didn’t mean any harm. I’ll pay you for the damage.’ She pulled a money pouch from her belt and jogged up to the stall, handing the seller her two largest coins.

‘A cadet,’ he grumbled. ‘Could’ve guessed it. You need to learn to keep your pangron in check. They’re dangerous beasts – someone could get killed.’

Kayla bit her tongue and her hand went immediately to her necklace, a shard of the eggshell Faro had hatched from a year earlier strung on a length of brown leather. It wouldn’t help to tell the merchant Faro was the gentlest, most loving creature she had ever known. The other citizens of Sophiatown only tolerated pangrons because they kept the city safe. They were weapons, not companions. Kayla did her best to pretend she felt the same way, but it was hard when Faro was the single most important thing in her life.

‘Give her a break,’ a nearby cloth seller chimed in.

‘If we come under attack, you’ll be glad to have our Sky Riders to protect you.’

‘With discipline like that they’ll be no good to anyone,’ replied the spice merchant. He wagged a finger at Kayla. ‘If I see your pangron loose again, I’ll be telling your wing commander.’

Kayla hung her head. She knew he was right. She loved Faro’s clumsiness and boundless enthusiasm, but if she was to improve her standing at the Sky Academy she would have to learn to control him in public. Being the daughter of a criminal was not an easy reputation to shake off. If news of this encounter got back to the Academy, Kayla would be in serious trouble. Wing Commander Barash already used any excuse to criticise Kayla and Faro, but a flagrant rule-breaking episode like this risked getting Kayla suspended, and that would mean losing Faro, which was simply not an option.

‘Sorry,’ Kayla mumbled. ‘You’re right. I’ll send him back to the stables. It won’t happen again.’

The merchant returned to his spices, shaking his head, and Kayla glanced around. Faro was out of sight now, but he had left a trail of yellow pawprints for her to follow. She raced past the rest of the market stalls, lungs burning with the exertion. She could hardly blame Faro for being excited. He had just spent three days locked in an underwater cave in the centre of the city. It contained a secret lake where the pangrons laid new eggs for Academy hopefuls. Earlier in the afternoon this year’s prospective cadets had each been let into the cave to swim

down and claim an egg of their own. Kayla had only been inside the cave once herself, during her own initiation this time last year. She remembered it to be a dark and mysterious place – for an animal used to flying every day, being shut down there for so long must have been torture. It hadn't been much fun for Kayla either; while her fellow cadets had sat around the watchtower playing cards and chatting, ignoring Kayla, she had taken to pacing the city walls, counting the minutes until Faro's return.

The pawprints led her through a tall archway into the city's walled gardens. On the grass, Faro was standing on all fours with his wings, which doubled as front legs, folded neatly by his sides. Kayla watched as he shook himself, releasing a cloud of dust from his shaggy red coat. He could do with a dip in the ocean to clean himself properly, but since the quarantine rules had come into effect, no one had been allowed to leave the city – even when flying.

As he swung his lean body vigorously from side to side, Faro's jowls flapped wildly, and a string of slobber flew in Kayla's direction, making her duck and squeal. At the sound of her voice, Faro looked over. His head was large and wide, covered in the same red fur as his body. When he saw Kayla, he reared up onto his powerful hind legs and unfolded his wide leathery wings. He looked enormous when he stretched himself like that. Usually Kayla's head reached just below his shoulder, but when he stood up he suddenly seemed about four times larger. Unlike the rest of his body, Faro's wings were totally hairless, the soft skin stretched so tightly over his bones

you could see the pulsing of the veins beneath.

The merchant's worries hadn't been baseless; pangrons had the potential to be deadly predators. But Kayla didn't see Faro like that. She was far more interested in the soft dark fur of his belly, which she loved to rub after a long day of archery drills, the vibrations that rumbled through his deep chest as he purred by the fire and the weight of his head as he snored on her lap. Of course, Faro had a powerful arsenal of weaponry at his disposal – sharp teeth and powerful jaws, a whip-like tail and razor-sharp talons – but those things did not define him any more than Kayla's knucklebow defined her.

'You have to stop running off like that,' she said, pushing her right hand into the thick fur of his neck and giving him a scratch. 'We'll get into serious trouble.'

Faro turned to look at her, his golden eyes sparkling mischievously. He lowered his head, as if asking her to stroke between his ears, but when she leaned in he gently headbutted her in the stomach, knocking her onto her bottom.

'Faro!' she protested, swatting him away. He pushed back, leaning over her and giving out a loud snort of hot, stinky air. 'Eugh, fish breath.' She grimaced as he ran his huge bristly tongue over her face, covering her in pangron drool. 'You could have at least cleaned your teeth.'

She didn't really mind, of course. She had spent the first twelve years of her life desperate to have a pangron of her own. Perhaps because of the tales her mother had whispered to her by candlelight when she was young, of

incredible sky beasts, freely roaming the skies, or maybe it was simply the desire to have someone she could rely on. Whatever the motivation, now that she had Faro, she wasn't going to take a second of it for granted.

He gave a deep, rumbling purr.

'I missed you too.' She rubbed his cheek roughly with her fingertips. Faro was Kayla's best – and only – friend. She couldn't imagine what her life would be like if she hadn't passed her initiation last year. Getting here hadn't been an easy journey. Considering who Kayla's mother was, nobody had wanted Kayla to succeed. But despite the obstacles the Academy had put in her way, last year Kayla had been one of the fastest hopefuls to retrieve a pangron egg from the Great Lake, and so she was enrolled as a Sky Cadet in Sophiatown's prestigious Sky Academy. Two moons later, Faro had hatched, and now he and Kayla were inseparable. Attitudes to Kayla within the Academy were still frosty, but she was determined to prove she and Faro deserved their places there as much as any other pair.

Kayla pushed Faro off and leaped to her feet. She had promised to take him back to the stables – and she would – but she felt sure they had time for a quick flight first. They wouldn't be long. The Initiation Day celebrations would be starting soon – and wouldn't let up until the end of Vanquish Day tomorrow.

'Are you ready?' she asked. Stupid question. Faro had been ready the moment she had picked him up from the cave.

He took a step backwards and dipped his head, inviting his rider to climb aboard. Kayla ran her hand gently along the mottled chestnut fur of his neck, leaned her weight into his body and swung her right leg deftly over his shoulder. As she tucked her heels under Faro's wings and grabbed his scruff, Kayla felt her body instantly relax. This was so familiar, so comfortable. While she was riding Faro she didn't need to worry about making friends or being expelled from the Academy. She could simply exist.

Faro took a few short paces, then Kayla shifted her weight forward and his gait changed once more. With a couple of bounds he was in the sky, his huge wings spread wide, cutting easily through the crisp air. As they rose, the Viridian Sea came into sight – wide and green. If only they were allowed to fly beyond the city walls.

Buzzzzzz.

A small winged hexapod zipped past them, dazzling sapphire wings glinting in the fading sun. It brushed by Kayla's ear then darted in front of her. Kayla pressed her heels gently into Faro's sides, nudging him to chase it. He understood immediately and shot upwards in pursuit.

The hexapod changed direction, darting suddenly to the right, but Faro didn't miss a beat. Kayla leaned into the turn, watching the gap between her pangron and the hexapod grow smaller and smaller. It was almost too easy. There was no creature in all the Realms that could fly like a pangron.

She wondered briefly if the phae-gras of legend would

have given them some competition. Presumably not, considering it was the Sky Riders who had wiped the phaegras out in the first place. At the Academy, Kayla had learned how the first Sky Riders had captured pangrons and domesticated them, before using them to fly up to the phaegras' treetop nests and destroy them. Thanks to the valiant efforts of those early Sky Riders, Sophiatown and the rest of the realms were now safe from all beasts.

Faro closed in on the hexapod and Kayla imagined herself as one of those original riders, tearing through the sky in pursuit of a phaegra. She reached out a hand to snatch the hexapod from the air. Not quite close enough. She urged Faro on, stretching her arm as far as she could reach. Her fingertips brushed the fly's buzzing wings. It was almost within her grasp –

‘Sky Cadet Karakka, descend immediately!’

The shout from below broke Kayla's attention. *Don't look down*, she thought to herself. Wing Major Flynn, her flying instructor, was forever reminding Kayla to ‘look forward, stay focused, align with your pangron’. But it was too late. Her automatic reaction to turn towards the source of the sound had made Faro slow down, unable to read her instructions. The hexapod zipped away out of sight and Kayla cursed under her breath.

She leaned forward, peeking through the gap between Faro's wing and his head, to see a woman in uniform, with a grey-furred pangron at her side, waiting in the walled garden below. Wing Commander Barash. Kayla

gave an inward groan and shifted her weight, signalling to Faro to descend. He flapped his wings and turned a loose, lazy circle as he returned to the ground.

Commander Barash's hands were on her hips and she was tapping her foot impatiently. She wore the traditional Sky Rider uniform of leather riding trousers and purple jacket. Her hair was pulled into an immaculate bun. When Kayla graduated from the Academy she would be granted her own purple jacket, but for now she wore the yellow of the cadets. Kayla pulled awkwardly at her jacket's tails, wishing she had pressed it that morning. She didn't want her wing commander to have *another* reason to criticise her.

As Faro landed neatly on the grass, Kayla slipped off his back and stood to attention, raising two fingers to her temple in salute. 'Ma'am.'

'No flying today,' Commander Barash said sternly.

'Why?' Kayla protested. 'The initiation ceremony finished hours ago!'

'I gave you an order,' snapped the woman. 'Back to your quarters immediately. There's a citywide curfew.' She glanced at Faro. 'And stable your pangron until further instruction.'

Citywide curfew? Kayla had never known that to happen before.

'But when will we –'

'So many questions,' Commander Barash interrupted. 'Just like your mother.'

Kayla felt her face flush. She was *nothing* like her

mother. She gritted her teeth and stared defiantly back.

Commander Barash narrowed her eyes. ‘To the stables,’ she repeated. ‘Now.’

Kayla saluted and responded with a polite ‘yes, ma’am’, but it took all her self-control to do so. She marched back down the cobbled path towards the Academy, Faro padding quietly behind her, until they were back at the marketplace, where he headbutted her in the bottom.

‘Thanks for that, fluff brain,’ Kayla said. Faro rubbed himself along her side, purring noisily. He knew she wasn’t happy. ‘It’s just not fair.’ She scratched his cheek. ‘We haven’t been flying for days. And why can’t Commander Barash see that I’m nothing like my mother? I’m not trying to change anything about the Academy, or the way we use our pangrons. I’m just trying to fit in! It’s like she’s constantly waiting for me to slip up.’

She leaned into his body and sighed, taking comfort from his purrs, which rumbled right through her. As they stood there together, Kayla realised that the marketplace was unusually – eerily – quiet. When she had been here earlier it had been bustling with people, but now there was nobody. Candles flickered in the evening breeze, casting shadows over the empty stalls. Where had everyone gone? Was this to do with the curfew?

In the distance a bell tolled. Kayla’s heart pounded. That was the emergency signal for Sky Riders to patrol the city, all cadets knew that, but outside of practice drills, Kayla had never heard it ring. Had something happened? Was that why she wasn’t allowed to go flying?

Maybe one of the other realms was attacking!

She led Faro quickly through the deserted marketplace, passing the now-unattended spice stand, its grumpy merchant nowhere to be seen. Yellow footsteps crisscrossed the cobbles, suggesting the sellers had left the square in a hurry. They headed down a narrow alley, Kayla now keen to get back to the safety of the Academy, until a gust of wind whistled by, carrying voices. Faro's ears flicked up, swivelling in search of the sound. They stopped as whispered words swirled around them.

‘... can't be true ...’

‘... on Initiation Day of all days ...’

Then words that struck fear into Kayla's heart: ‘... a pangron ... missing.’

Her blood ran cold. How could a pangron be missing? They'd all been underground for three days and had only been released an hour ago.

More whispers drifted down the alley.

‘I heard it was stolen ...’

Stolen? Surely not. Sophiatown was the most fiercely guarded city in all the Realms. There were no greater warriors than its Sky Riders. Besides, it didn't seem possible that a pangron could be taken against its will. Something didn't add up.

‘You're not sleeping in the stables tonight,’ Kayla whispered as she turned back to Faro. ‘Come with me.’ She darted down another alley, glancing nervously around to check they hadn't been spotted.

The Academy handbook was clear that pangrons

should spend every night in the Academy stables, but Faro almost never did. And if there was a chance the pangrons were in danger, there was no way Kayla was letting him out of her sight.

At the end of the alley they approached a huge heap of barrels piled next to a basement door. The distillery – a building Kayla knew all too well, even better than the Academy watchtower where she now lived with the other cadets. After her mum had been imprisoned when Kayla was nine, she'd needed a place to live and a way to earn her keep, somewhere that would give her the best chance of getting into the Academy. Luckily, Padrig Shion, the city's Master Distiller, had given Kayla a job. He had worked her hard but treated her fairly and paid her enough to survive until she had passed the Initiation. She'd spent many an evening hauling barrels through this very door, her eyes always lingering on the towering spires of the Academy over the road.

They were so close – if they could make it across the street without being caught they would be safely back at home.

But suddenly Faro lurched forward, grabbing the tails of Kayla's flying jacket and yanking her into the shadows.

Moments later, a voice rang out. 'I'm just going to check down here. I thought I heard something.'

Kayla turned desperately to Faro, worried he would be seen, but he had already melted into the evening shadows. Kayla pushed herself back against the barrels, hardly daring to breathe. She watched as a city guard

took a few steps down the alley then retreated, calling out to his squadron, ‘Must have been a mudrat. There’s nothing there.’

‘Thanks, boy,’ Kayla whispered. If they had been caught, the guards would have forced Faro to go back to the stables. ‘Wait here.’ She gestured that he should stay. ‘I’ll check the coast is clear. Listen for my signal.’

She scurried past the barrels and poked her head out into the street. A group of guards lingered by the corner, deep in conversation.

‘It’s the prince’s pangron, you know?’ one of them said.

Kayla’s eyes almost popped out of her head. Prince Ethun was in her year at the Academy. His slender tawny pangron, Ezra, was guarded by the palace’s own personal security.

‘It never returned from the cave.’

‘Some people are saying it contracted the Scourge and the palace is trying to cover it up.’

Rumours about the Scourge, a sickness said to have been spreading through the other realms, had been bouncing around for a while now. Sophiatown had quarantined immediately and there hadn’t been a single case inside its walls as a result. Kayla’s city had always been selective about who was allowed in and out, but for the last year not a soul had passed through its gates. Even fully fledged Sky Riders had been forbidden from landing outside the walls so they wouldn’t catch the Scourge and bring it into Sophiatown.

‘I heard the pangron was taken from *inside the city*,’ said another. ‘That’s why they’ve imposed a curfew. They think the thief is still on the loose.’

Kayla fought to remain calm. A thief in the city? She urgently needed to get Faro into the watchtower, but how in the Realms was she meant to do that with a bunch of guards stood right outside? She hurried back to Faro.

‘Bad news,’ she said quietly. ‘There’s no chance we’re getting you home that way. We’ll have to think of something else.’

Her pangron looked at her with his big golden eyes, and Kayla felt a pang in her chest. Sometimes it was actually painful to love something as much as she loved Faro. How could the other cadets have left their pangrons in the stables? After three days of separation, Kayla didn’t want to spend another second apart from him.

She tore her eyes away from her pangron and once again noticed the wooden barrels stacked up outside the distillery. A thought took shape and her skin prickled with excitement. ‘I have an idea. Come on!’



Ataria

Alethea Bashoa sat cross-legged on a mat in the Blue District's House of Healing. As she carefully ground rockwood leaves, a young girl watched, slipping into her father's shadow whenever Alethea looked in her direction. The girl and her father had walked for almost an hour to reach Alethea, across rough volcanic terrain peppered with bubbling lava lakes and towering rock columns. It was a long way to travel, but the girl was injured and Alethea was the only healer in the district.

'Lay your head here,' Alethea said to the girl, patting a blue cushion on her lap. 'I'm going to take out your plaits so I can get a better look at the wound.'

'But the webspinners . . .' Panic flitted across the girl's

face and she looked anxiously at her dad. ‘Without the cloth I’ll have nothing to keep them away.’

The man took his daughter’s hand and encouraged her to do as she was told. Alethea gave him an approving nod.

‘It’s OK,’ she said, stroking the girl’s hair. ‘The webspinners hate the smell of this –’ she held up the bowl containing the rockweed paste – ‘just as much as they hate the lava mud.’

Like all Atarians, Alethea, the girl and her father had brightly coloured cloths braided into their hair. Alethea gently untied the girl’s intricate plait and pulled out a frayed piece of blue cloth. It smelled of fire and rotten vulcanwing eggs, like the lava lakes the city was built around. It was said that the volcanic minerals of the lakes were protective, and for as long as people had lived in Ataria they had dyed cloths in the waters to use for everything from cushions and bedding to clothing and braids. Most recently they had been promised that the smell of the minerals would ward off the obsidian webspinners, whose terrible bite was said to spread the Scourge.

Alethea had never seen an obsidian webspinner in the city – in fact she’d never seen one anywhere. The enormous webspinners lived in the Turquoise Jungle on the slopes of Mount Ataria, out in the Beastlands, and had long been feared by the Atarian citizens. But recently, with so many dying of the Scourge, that fear had intensified. People were not taking any chances and had started covering every inch of their houses and bodies in dyed cloth.

In the Blue District, so named for the colour of its bright lakes, everyone wore dazzling azure clothes and braids, but other districts had different colours; their immediate neighbours in the Pink District wore cloth as pink as ashflowers, those that lived by the croplands wore green, the sacred silver of the holy lakes was worn by the city's leaders, the Ash Bishops, and of course the Scorched Ataris' clothes and braids were bright red.

Alethea cast the cloth from the girl's braid aside. She tried to remember when she had last changed the cloth in her own braids, or those of any of her family. It had been a long time. Perhaps she could do it next week. That said, she wasn't entirely sure how much difference the cloths actually made, or if the webspinners ever truly ventured into the city, so she wouldn't lose sleep over it. It would be nice to spend some time with her siblings though. Since the Scourge had arrived she had been so busy in the House of Healing she hardly saw them.

She uncovered the girl's wound. It was large but not deep. A burn from a fissure eruption – one of the perils of living in a dormant volcano. Luckily the lava was less active on the outskirts of the city, so burns weren't frequent in the Blue District. Unfortunately, though, the bardflies preferred the cooler lava here and liked to buzz around, laying their eggs in the blue lakes. The flies were about the only things in the city that showed a preference for the blue zone– as far as everyone else was concerned, it was the dirtiest, poorest, most undesirable district, and the people who lived there weren't much better.

To Alethea, who had come to know people from across the entire district, this label was grossly unfair. But such was the way of life in Ataria: blue at the bottom.

The girl's wound was superficial and would soon heal as long as it didn't get infected. Alethea made a poultice of rockweed paste, just as her da had shown her. The girl gave a little squeal as the herbs seeped into the wound. Good, that meant they were doing their job. Alethea's fingers moved quickly to secure the poultice with a bandage, well practised from the thousands of dressings she had tied over years working as Da's assistant.

'Come back tomorrow,' she said as she helped the girl up. 'I'll change the dressing and check how it's healing.'

'Tomorrow?' said the girl. 'But tomorrow's Vanquish Day! I want to watch the Scorching.'

Alethea looked into the girl's hopeful eyes. She was probably only a few years younger than Alethea herself, but there seemed a chasm between them. Personally, Alethea couldn't understand the fuss around the Scorching, but she knew that for many the ceremony to initiate new warriors into the Atarian army was the highlight of their year.

'In that case, why don't you come by and see me after it's finished?' Alethea said with a kind smile.

'After? But we'll be at the feast,' said the girl's father. 'Can't we come the next day?'

Da used to say, 'As a healer, it's my job to tell patients what they *need* to hear, not what they *want* to hear.' Alethea knew this meant healers must sometimes be strict

with their patients in order to help them. But was this one of those times? She still had so much to learn, and Da wasn't here to help her with those decisions now. She pondered it for a second. The girl's wound wasn't deep or infected and an extra day would probably have little effect on the progress of its healing.

'All right,' Alethea said, thinking of how excited her own siblings were for the celebrations. 'But come here first thing the following morning.'

She hoped she had made the right call.

'Thank you!' The little girl jumped to her feet, already looking brighter than when she'd arrived. 'We love the feast, don't we, Daddy?'

'That we do, sunshine. That we do.' He stroked her head gently and turned to Alethea. 'Thank you for everything, Miss Bashoa,' he said. 'Your da would be very proud.'

Tears sprang to the corners of Alethea's eyes.

'I knew him,' the girl's father continued. 'He was a good man.'

Alethea swallowed. She was still getting used to 'was' instead of 'is'. She rose and ushered them to the door. The man lingered on the threshold, opening a pouch on his belt to remove a handful of something he pressed into Alethea's hand.

'These are for you,' he said, and she felt something dribble down her wrist. She lifted her hand to see a trail of purple juice disappearing up her sleeve. Lavaberries.

'Where did you get these?' Alethea whispered, looking

around nervously as she emptied them into a pouch of her own. With so many people sick from the Scourge, most of their crops had failed earlier in the year, and fresh fruit was hard to come by. Atarians were assigned rations at the end of every week, but that was still four days away and they rarely got anything as extravagant as lavaberries.

‘Don’t worry about that,’ the man said with a wink. ‘It’s the very least I can do. You keep up the good work. The district relies on you now.’

Until her father’s death Alethea had just been an extra pair of hands, but now he was gone she had taken over as primary healer. Despite the lessons he had taught her, she still felt totally out of her depth most of the time. But if Blues didn’t look out for one another, who would take care of them? It wasn’t like the Ash Bishops cared what was happening in the Blue District. Despite their claims to be fair and just rulers, as long as the Reds and Silvers were fed and cared for, the people in charge were perfectly content to overlook the misfortune of the other districts.

‘Thank you.’

Alethea imagined her siblings’ faces on seeing the delicious purple fruits. Little Digby had never even tasted lavaberries before. And Ma . . . Well, maybe this would be the thing to finally put a smile on her face.

After saying goodbye to the man and his daughter, Alethea retired to the herb larder, which doubled as her office, where she set about tidying the baskets of plants she used for her work. Even in good times there had only been

enough space in the croplands to grow a limited number of non-food plants, but with this year's poor crop, her larder was barer than ever. She noticed with a sigh that the firewort was beginning to wilt.

'Blast it,' she said.

Firewort was a rare plant in the tassellaggia family. Its strong stems were used to make weapons and cooking utensils. Its flowers had round orange bladders with long tendrilous petals, and it was very difficult to grow. Like many Atarian plants, this year's firewort crop had almost entirely failed. Usually Alethea wouldn't be too worried – firewort wasn't a plant she and Da had often used in their healing – but last week Alethea had had something of a breakthrough.

For over a year now, the citizens of Ataria had been plagued by the Scourge. It started small – a puncture wound surrounded by itchy concentric rings on the skin – but soon progressed to fever, vomiting and ultimately death. The exact time it took to run its course varied, but the final outcome was always the same. Da had survived almost three weeks before finally succumbing to the illness, but many other Atarians only lasted days. Before his death six moons ago Da had been desperate to find a cure, and Alethea had carried on that work ever since. She had tried countless salves, tinctures and balms, but to no avail.

Until last week, when a young boy named Tommo had come to her with a fresh Scourge wound and she had decided to apply the liquid from the bladder of a firewort flower. As well as sloughing away the damaged skin, it

seemed to have neutralised the toxin. Days later, Tommo showed no symptoms at all. Alethea had been delighted by the success but had soon realised it was limited, because when she tried using the same technique on a patient whose wound was more advanced, the woman had not been saved. Alethea suspected the Scourge had already travelled too far into her body. Firewort clearly wasn't a cure for all cases, but it was the most progress Alethea had made so far, and she was keen to experiment with the plant further.

Turning back to her desk, Alethea glanced at her botany textbook: *A Healer's Guide to the Flora of Ramoa*. It was growing late, she should go home, but she hadn't had a chance to read at all today. How could she expect to find a cure for the Scourge if she didn't keep searching? *Just a couple of pages*, she told herself. *For Da*.

She would start with the entry on firewort. She had read it before, but maybe there was something important she had missed.

Firewort

Member of the tassellaggia family

Tall herb growing to several strides in height. Has a single stem, scythe-shaped thorns and narrow paired leaves. Grows in volcanic soils, particularly where lava and ash have recently fallen. Begins to bloom in late summer and has bell-shaped

orange flowers that may last for many moons. Round bladders directly below the flowers attract hexapods, which, once caught, are digested by the liquid inside.

Leaves: Blood thinner when taken orally.

Stems: Hard and woody. Can be dried and used in building.

Roots: No known medicinal benefit.

Bladders: Contain rich digestive fluid with a strong spicy scent. Useful in removing necrotic or infected tissue. Do not apply to healthy skin.

Only one other plant was listed in the tassellaggia family: frostwort.

Frostwort

Member of the tassellaggia family

Native to cold alpine areas, usually at high altitude. Blooms only at temperatures below freezing. Has a single stem, scythe-shaped thorns and paired lance-shaped leaves. Spiky white flower heads with rings of white petals are highly attractive to flying hexapods. Round bladders

directly below the flowers contain a liquid that is used to digest small beasts trapped inside.

Leaves: Muscle relaxant and antidote to hypnos snake venom.

Stems: No known medicinal benefit.

Roots: Diuretic with a potent effect on cardiac muscle, causing the heart to beat more strongly.

Bladders: Contain rich digestive fluid with a sweet and spicy scent. Do not apply to healthy skin.

Despite living in vastly different habitats, the similarities between firewort and frostwort were obvious. Alethea wondered if frostwort would work on the Scourge in the same way as firewort. Or perhaps – her stomach gave a little flutter – it would be able to do what the firewort had not been able to: cure all cases, no matter what stage the disease. Not that it really mattered. Frostwort only survived in cold temperatures, so it wouldn't grow anywhere near Ataria. When her firewort ran out, Alethea would have to find another way to treat the Scourge.

She closed the book and rose to her throbbing feet. She had been working since sunrise and really wanted to see her little brothers and sisters before she fell into bed.

As she made her way out of her office, she ran a finger along one of the cracks that criss-crossed the stone wall. The people of her district were too busy trying to protect

themselves from the Scourge and feed their families to think about caring for the public buildings, but Alethea was concerned. Where would she treat her patients if the House of Healing collapsed? In the morning she would send another message to the Ash Bishops about the cracks. Not that she expected any reply.

She was still staring at the wall when a voice from behind caused her to jump in alarm.

‘Alethea Bashoa?’

Alethea turned, and gasped as she saw who had spoken. The brilliant sheen of the woman’s silvery clothes made everything around her look dirty in comparison. An Ash Bishop. Alethea’s hand went automatically to the pouch on her belt, where she had hidden the berries. She shoved the pouch nervously into her dungaree pocket.

‘You *are* Alethea Bashoa?’ the Ash Bishop repeated.

‘Sorry,’ said Alethea quickly. ‘Yes, I am. How can I help you?’

‘Can we sit down?’ the woman said, inclining her head towards the herb larder. Two plaits interwoven with silver cascaded over her shoulders.

‘Of course.’ Alethea held the door open for her to enter. What was going on? Alethea had never seen an Ash Bishop in this part of the city before. Something serious must have happened. It couldn’t be about the lavaberries, could it? She’d only just been given them. And surely a handful of stolen berries wasn’t that serious a crime. She took a steadying breath, then followed the Ash Bishop inside as confidently as she could.

‘Will we be disturbed?’ the woman asked. Alethea shook her head. ‘Very good.’ She indicated that Alethea should sit, so she did.

‘I’ve been watching you for a while,’ the Ash Bishop said. ‘You’re a competent healer. Last week you cured a boy of the Scourge, did you not?’

Alethea swallowed. It was true that Tommo had survived, but to call it a cure was a bit of a stretch. After all, it hadn’t worked when she’d tried it again. ‘Not exactly,’ she said.

‘Then my sources are wrong and the patient died?’

Alethea fought to stop her brain from drifting into memories of Da lying in this very room, covered in leaves and poultices. ‘No,’ she said, ‘he’s alive. But he was in the very earliest stages when I –’

‘Alethea,’ the Ash Bishop interrupted, ‘let me be clear. We don’t have much time. The Scourge is ravaging our troops. Our army is dwindling and we are in desperate need of a solution. We have consulted seven healers from across the districts and your patient is the first person in the whole of Ataria bitten by an obsidian webspinner to live to tell the tale. We need to know how it happened.’

Alethea’s heart raced. She had often wondered how the other districts had been coping with the outbreak. She’d thought perhaps the Silvers had already found a cure, as she hadn’t heard of any of them dying.

‘It was a very specific case,’ Alethea said. ‘The wound was fresh, the rash had barely spread –’

‘What did you use?’ the Ash Bishop interrupted.

‘Firewort,’ said Alethea. ‘A salve of firewort applied directly to the wound.’

‘Do you have more?’

‘A little,’ said Alethea, indicating the dwindling pile behind her. ‘Though it’s starting to wilt.’

‘Excellent. I’ll take it,’ said the Ash Bishop, moving towards the plant.

‘Take it?’ Alethea rose from her seat in shock. ‘All of it? But it belongs to the Blue District. I need it for my patients.’

‘Our need is greater,’ said the Ash Bishop curtly. ‘The Scorched Ataris must protect us from the webspinners, otherwise the whole city will fall to the Scourge. They must be treated first.’

Alethea stared open-mouthed as the woman gathered up the firewort greedily. Once she’d tied it all in a bundle, she turned back to Alethea. ‘Your city thanks you, Alethea Bashoa. You have done a great service to its people today.’

What about my people? Alethea thought. *The people of the Blue District.*

But she didn’t dare defy an Ash Bishop, so she simply watched as the woman made her way out the door with her entire supply of firewort. As soon as she was gone, Alethea realised she had never even asked her about the cracks.

Sadly Alethea closed up the House of Healing, wondering what Da would have done in her situation. He would have been angry, sure, but not defeated. One of his

favourite sayings had been: 'We cannot choose how the ash falls, only what we build with it.' But what could Alethea possibly build now, with all her firewort gone?

Across Ataria, the evening prayer bells started to toll. The Ash Bishops would soon lead the central districts in evening worship. Together they would pray to the Ash Gods who had created their city. But to Alethea the sound signalled something else: her siblings would now be fast asleep.

As she made her way home, Alethea edged around a gurgling blue lake where a cloud of steam belched from the water, sending a spatter of blue mud across the path. Next to it, on the uneven lavastone, she spotted a single orange flower. Firewort! The Ash Bishop must have dropped it in her hurry. Alethea stooped to pick it up. The bladder was empty.

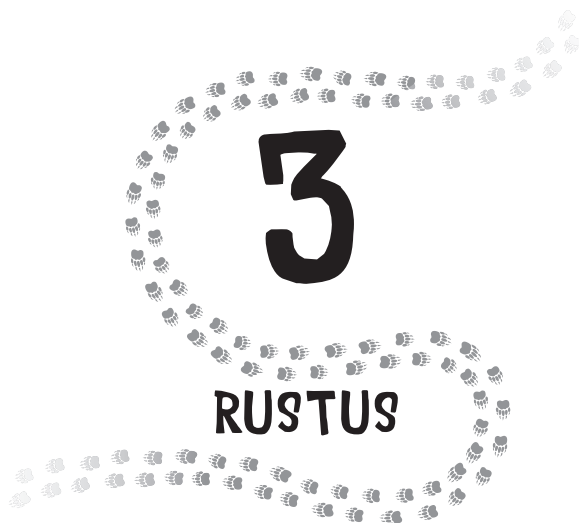
Her emotions swelled as she looked across the surface of the lava, which was a haze of sulphurous smoke. She thought of the suka-moss nose plugs jammed up her nostrils, blocking the worst of the smell. The plugs were one of Da's ideas, and lots of people in their district made use of them. He'd always had a botanical solution for every problem. If he were still here, she had no doubt he would have found one for the Scourge too. If only he'd had more time . . .

But Da wasn't here now, Alethea reminded herself, and nor was the firewort, there was no point dwelling on it. Blues were still dying of the Scourge and if anyone was going to help them it sure as Ash wouldn't be the

leaders of the city, so it was down to Alethea to find another solution.

She picked herself up and forged on to her cave house. When she finally made it to her front door, a fire gecko on the door frame caught her eye. As she approached it scuttled up the rock column and out of sight. Above the door a banner fluttered. In the wonky handwriting of her siblings it said: *Happee Burfday Aleethya*.

In all the strange events of the last week she had totally forgotten. Maybe her siblings would forgive her for missing the celebrations when she shared the lavaberries with them tomorrow morning. She pulled out the pouch and peered inside. More bad news. The berries had been squashed on her hurried journey and were now nothing but a congealed handful of mush.



Ataria

Rustus Furi crept through the Beastlands, spear in hand, his thoughts dominated by the Scorching. Tomorrow, he would graduate from being an Unscorched, a boy whose place in the world was unproven and uncertain, to being Scorched, an esteemed warrior of the Atarian army. Tomorrow, he would climb the tallest rock column in the city, hoping to be fast enough to avoid the streams of scorching ash and gas that spewed from its centre.

All Scorched Ataris went through the Scorching ceremony; some even chose to complete it more than once, making them Twice or Thrice Scorched. Rustus, in particular, had a lot to live up to; both of his elder brothers had scaled Kahanga Rock multiple times. Octus

had completed the Scorching five times – matching the record set by their father, Brutus. And Tactus had been the fastest of his cohort to complete the climb on each of his four ascents.

‘Don’t embarrass me,’ Rustus’s father had muttered quietly that afternoon before Rustus had left their cave house in the Red District for the Scorching Eve hunting ceremony. ‘You’re a Furi. There’s a certain expectation that comes with that.’

‘Of course not, Dad,’ Rustus had replied, but his dad hadn’t heard him. He had been too busy with his other sons, laughing jovially at some joke one of them had made. He never laughed with Rustus. None of them did. Since Mum had left the Red District a few years after Rustus’s birth, no one in his family had shown him much kindness. He was sure that would change if he was successful tomorrow though.

Thoughts of the Scorching and how he could ensure he would be the fastest to complete the climb had consumed all of Rustus’s recent thoughts. And this afternoon he had had a lot of time to think. Along with his peers, Rustus had marched the long route from the Red District, up over the rim of the caldera, through the city gates and down the slopes into the Beastlands. It was the Unscorched recruits’ first time stepping outside the city, and as Rustus took in the wilderness surrounding him, his thoughts were wrenched from the trial that lay ahead.

Rustus’s brothers had told him plenty of terrifying stories about their patrols in the Beastlands. He himself

had stared out over the untamed land countless times on lookout duty; from above it was easy to underestimate the jungle – everything looked much smaller from that perspective. But now, deep inside, it was Rustus who felt small, dwarfed by the towering turquoise trees that spread as far as the eye could see. Despite its size, the jungle closed in tight around him and he could sense that unknown beasts lurked in every shadow. It was disconcerting, but surprisingly exhilarating too. Above him, silk strands of web criss-crossed the trees, glimmering silver and pink as the sun flickered through them – a stark contrast to the bare rock of Ataria.

‘What was that?’ said Hubert, the smallest of their Unscorched band, pulling Rustus out of his thoughts. The boy slapped at something on the back of his neck, panic in his eyes. ‘Is something on me?’

Rustus moved Hubert’s long black plait to one side and checked the back of his neck for bugs or webspinners. Hubert’s plait was woven through with red cloth from the lakes of the Red District, which should theoretically ward off all unwanted beasts, but Rustus understood why Hubert was nervous. The feeling of danger was heightened out here in the wild. Back in Ataria there were few beasts and the air was still; they could see for miles around them. Here in the jungle though there was a constant aura of threat. They could not see further than an arm’s length away and they were expecting webspinners at every turn – the fact that they hadn’t yet seen any somehow made it worse.

‘Nothing there,’ Rustus said. ‘It’s all in your head.’ If he wasn’t so overcome with worry about disappointing his father, Rustus might have been just as concerned about the jungle beasts, but he had to complete this hunting expedition to be allowed to enter the Scorching tomorrow – and no beast was as terrifying as the thought of what his father would say if he failed to become a Scorched Atari.

‘It’s not in my head,’ Hubert protested. ‘There are bugs everywhere. Look!’ Hubert pointed to a nearby web, where a worm as long as Rustus’s arm wriggled pathetically against the threads that restrained it. Rustus took a step towards the creature to get a closer look, but Hubert pulled him away. ‘Stop it! Don’t go any closer. The webspinners are probably waiting to pounce. Come on – let’s catch up with the others.’

They pushed their way under a web that was half covering the path.

‘This is horrible.’ Hubert wiped sweat from his brow. The air felt different here too; in Ataria the heat was dry and dusty, but here in the jungle the air seemed to stick to you, warm and humid like a clammy blanket. ‘I hope we find these things quickly, so we can fight them and go home.’

‘We don’t have to fight them,’ said Rustus. ‘Tactus said if you just spear them through the back of the head then it’s over within seconds.’ He grimaced a little. When his brother first told him about the pre-Scorching ritual, the thought had turned his stomach. Of course he didn’t

want to kill a webspinner, but he *had* to climb that tower.

‘Easy if you’re a Furi,’ said Hubert, eyebrows furrowed. ‘I don’t think I have the strength for it.’

‘I don’t want to do it either,’ said Rustus. ‘I don’t see why we can’t just leave the webspinners alone and focus on the climb.’

‘What did you say, Furi?’

Rustus’s stomach dropped. They’d caught back up to the group and their instructor, Scorch Knight Itticus, must have overheard them. He spun towards them, plaits whirling. Each braid had two obsidian beads threaded into the bottom, one to mark each successful Scorching, and they glinted in the snatches of sunlight that broke through the canopy. ‘You don’t see the point in killing the webspinners?’

Rustus swallowed.

‘The mighty Furi here has forgotten the importance of culling the webspinners,’ Scorch Knight Itticus announced to everyone. ‘Anyone care to remind him why our job is so important?’

Aro, a lithe, strong girl who Rustus thought would probably be the first to the top tomorrow, put her hand up eagerly. ‘The Scorched Ataris are the sworn protectors of Ataria,’ she said. ‘They defend the city and its people from any threats they may face.’ Scorch Knight Itticus nodded approvingly as she went on. ‘We must remind the beasts of the island that *we* are the ones to be feared, not them.’

‘Excellent, Aro,’ said Scorch Knight Itticus.

‘It’s not like the webspinners come up into the city though,’ Rustus countered. ‘Maybe if the Scorched stopped coming into the Beastlands and disturbing them . . .’

Scorch Knight Itticus shot him a furious look.

‘Of course they come into the city,’ said Aro. ‘Otherwise how would they give everyone the Scourge?’

Rustus didn’t have an answer. He’d spent an entire year in training, doing perimeter walks and night watches, and not once had he seen an obsidian webspinner. But everyone else, even Hubert, was nodding in agreement.

‘Are you scared of killing a webspinner, Furi?’ Scorch Knight Itticus mocked.

Rustus shook his head. Scared wasn’t the right word. He didn’t fear what was ahead, he just didn’t *want* to do it. He would happily protect the people of his city, but he wished he didn’t have to kill anything in the process. Unfortunately, that was a necessary part of the ritual, and so he tried to push his thoughts to one side and concentrate on how proud his brothers and father would be when he came home and told them he had passed the first part of the Scorching.

‘Well, why don’t you prove it?’ said the instructor. ‘I think we’ve gone far enough. Everyone, have a drink and a quick break. You’re going to need it for what’s ahead.’

Rustus felt his insides clench. There was no turning back now. He strode away from the group, hoping for a moment of quiet to gather his thoughts before the hunt began.

‘Don’t go too far, Rustus,’ Scorch Knight Itticus called after him. ‘You’re going first.’ As Rustus moved further

away, he could just about hear his instructor add, ‘We’ll soon see what Furi Junior is made of.’

Rustus sank to the ground, placing his obsidian spear, forged in the sacred lava of the Silver District, by his side. He unscrewed his canteen. How did he always manage to say the wrong thing? Why couldn’t he be more like his brothers, strutting around with confidence, flexing his muscles and making everyone laugh? He looked up as Hubert approached and patted the spot next to him to indicate that his friend should sit.

‘I’m going to fail,’ Hubert said morosely, pulling a fire melon from his pack. ‘Even if I manage to kill a webspinner, I’ll never get to the top of Kahanga Rock.’

As much as Rustus wanted to put his mind at rest and assure him he had nothing to worry about, he couldn’t be entirely sure that Hubert *would* pass the initiation. Hubert was around half the size of Rustus and had all the courage of a skittery fire gecko.

‘Don’t say that,’ said Rustus. ‘He’s just trying to scare us.’

‘Well, it’s working.’ Hubert bit into the fruit, juice dribbling down his chin. ‘It’s impossible for you to understand. You’re the fastest and strongest of all of us.’

Rustus shrugged. ‘Try telling my dad that,’ he said. ‘I think he’s expecting me to fail.’

‘Not a hope,’ said Hubert, a look of wonder lighting up his face. ‘Can you imagine if you were faster than Tactus?’

‘Wouldn’t that be something!’ Rustus forced out a hollow chuckle.

‘I’m only joking,’ said Hubert, nudging him. ‘I know

you're not like them.' Understatement of the year. 'No one cares what order we get to the top in, as long as we get there.' He paused then added, 'You could definitely be first if you wanted to though – we all know that.'

Rustus closed his eyes. He wished it were true that nobody cared, but the fact was, it *did* matter. To his father, coming first was *all* that mattered. If Rustus didn't come first, he might as well not pass the Scorching at all. In fact, if he didn't come first, he might as well catch the Scourge. Rustus took a deep, calming breath and noticed the sulphurous stench of their hometown was less intense here.

'Don't you hate the smell of Ataria?' he asked.

Hubert sniffed. 'I dunno. Just smells like home to me.'

Rustus rubbed his nose. 'I can't stand it.' He closed one nostril with his finger and snorted down the other. A congealed lump of bright yellow snot splattered onto the dry earth beside him.

'Where's your handkerchief?' Aro was standing before them, arms crossed. Couldn't she leave him alone for five minutes?

'They've run out,' said Hubert. 'Haven't you heard? Cloth shortage in the Blue District because so many of them have died of the Scourge.'

'Well, the ones that are left should try working a bit harder,' she said. 'Typical Blues – they wouldn't know hard work if it slapped them in the face.'

Rustus rolled his eyes and repeated the snorting process on the other side. Aro was audibly disgusted.

‘Stop it!’ she shouted. ‘It’s just common decency.’

‘No one asked you to come over here,’ said Rustus. ‘If you’d stayed over there with your best friend, Scorch Knight Itticus, then you wouldn’t need to feel so offended. There’s no law against nose-blowing, and I hate the thought of that stuff clogging up my insides. It can’t be good for us.’ He wished he could somehow plug up his nostrils to prevent the foul stench from entering. Why didn’t anyone else seem as bothered by it as he was?

Aro shrugged. ‘Doesn’t seem to have done your brothers any harm. Not like them though, are you?’ she said with a sneer. ‘Bit more sensitive.’ She rubbed her eyes as if she were crying.

‘Nothing wrong with that,’ said Hubert. ‘Look, have you come over here for a reason or are you just –’

But Aro had already turned on her heel and stalked off.

‘She’s awful,’ Hubert said with a shudder.

Behind Rustus, the vibrant trunks of the turquoise trees rustled and creaked. He looked around, scanning the webs for signs of an obsidian webspinner. He knew they were supposed to be scary, but the truth was they hadn’t seen a single one yet despite passing hundreds of webs. The webspinners might have a deadly bite, but they didn’t exactly seem desperate to use it.

Suddenly a silvery blue hexapod flew into the web ahead of him. The more it struggled, the more entangled it became. Just as Rustus began to think about rescuing it,

a huge webspinner shot out from the depths of its web and grabbed the flying hexapod with its two front legs. Rustus leaped to his feet, his eyes going wide, and leaned towards the web, peering at the delicate markings on the webspinner's bulbous body, which was almost as long as Rustus's arm.

'Don't get so close,' hissed Hubert, tugging him back. 'Did you see how fast that thing moved?'

Rustus backed off a fraction but found he still wanted to look closer. The beast had eight smooth black legs, with two fist-sized eyes on the front of its head and six smaller ones, each around the size of a vulcanwing egg, sitting just behind them. Rustus was horrified and transfixed in equal measure.

'Isn't it beautiful?' he said.

'If by beautiful you mean deadly,' said Hubert, a trickle of sweat dribbling down his forehead, 'then yeah.'

'Look how carefully it's wrapping up its dinner.' Rustus was entranced. 'Do you think all webspinners like the taste of bugs?'

'What?' asked Hubert, dumbfounded by this line of thinking. 'I dunno. What's got into you?'

Rustus watched as the webspinner swaddled the large fly in thick grey strands of silk, twirling it expertly until the whole carcass was covered.

'Rustus, move back.' Without realising, Rustus had leaned in towards the web again. Hubert pulled him by the shoulder. 'I don't think webspinners really think about what they like or dislike. They're beasts. Pure instinct, aren't they?'

Rustus watched as the webspinner hung the parcel neatly in its web. ‘Do you think they all have the instinct to catch flies, then?’

Hubert groaned. ‘I don’t know, Rustus. And I don’t really care. Can you please move away from that thing before it turns its attention on us?’

Rustus was about to step away when movement from behind the web caught his eye. He grabbed Hubert’s arm. ‘Look!’

‘What is it?’

Rustus squinted, trying to make out what he’d seen. He could have sworn it was a person, but they didn’t have the distinctive red cloth and uniform of his fellow recruits. ‘I think it’s a webwalker.’

Unscorched recruits who failed the Scorching were cast out of Ataria to live in the Beastlands, and rumour had it many took up an unnatural residence in the jungle’s webs, hence the name. Though now Rustus wasn’t so sure – whatever he’d glimpsed before had gone.

‘Don’t say that,’ said Hubert, shivering. ‘That’s bad luck, that is, to see a webwalker on Scorching Eve.’

‘Don’t be ridiculous.’ Rustus moved closer to the web again, trying to peer through its strands.

‘Will you stop getting so close to that web!’ said Hubert, exasperated. ‘You’re practically sitting on that webspinner’s lap. Besides, you’re probably seeing things. There can’t be any webwalkers left. They’ll all have died of the Scourge by now.’

‘Feeling better after your rest, Furi?’ The voice startled

them. They spun around to see Scorch Knight Itticus standing right behind them. He was flanked by the rest of the group.

‘Yes, sir,’ Rustus replied, jumping away from the web.

‘Good, because you’re about to kill that webspinner.’ He jabbed a calloused finger at the beast they had just been watching.

‘Right,’ Rustus said, glancing back at the webspinner and remembering why he was here in the first place. How had he let himself become so distracted from the important task ahead? The webspinner was sitting still in its web now, probably thinking about the delicious meal it had wrapped up for later. Rustus remembered what his brothers had told him about the first time they had killed an obsidian webspinner.

‘Single shot to the back of the head,’ Tactus had said simply. ‘Send your spear straight through it.’

‘Wrestle it to the ground, then break off its legs one by one,’ Octus had said, rather more aggressively. ‘Show it who’s boss.’

It was hard to imagine inflicting such violence on a creature just minding its own business.

‘Hurry up!’ Scorch Knight Itticus barked. ‘We haven’t got all day.’

Rustus nodded, his throat growing tight. He didn’t need to look behind him to know that the whole group had gathered to watch. His fingers started to tingle, loosening his grip on the obsidian spear in his hand.

Keep it together, Rustus, he told himself. Do Dad proud.

He lifted the spear above his head and pulled his arm back, fighting hard to stop his body from shaking.

‘Not so clever now, are you, Furi?’ the instructor jeered.

Rustus gritted his teeth.

‘Come on, Rustus!’ shouted Hubert. ‘You can do it!’

Then, to Rustus’s surprise, all of his fellow Unscorched joined in. Although Aro’s voice was notably absent among the crowd.

‘Rustus! Rustus! Rustus!’

Buoyed by the encouragement, he threw the spear with all his might. It flew through the air promisingly, but then glanced off the webspinner’s swollen abdomen and clattered through the web behind. Though it was wounded by the blow, the webspinner was not killed and instead shot defensively from its web towards where they all stood. Hubert shrieked and stumbled to the ground in his desperation to get away from the beast.

Rustus, realising he had put the group in danger, leaped onto the webspinner and stamped on its head with one forceful blow. It stopped moving immediately.

The instructor curled his top lip. ‘All right,’ he said. ‘Not the most graceful I’ve seen, but you got the job done.’ He pushed the webspinner’s body off the path with his foot, leaving a trail of orange goo behind.

Rustus stared at the body in disbelief. Moments before it had been a living, breathing beast. He had watched it gracefully and expertly prepare its next meal – a meal it would now never get to eat. He felt sick to the pit of his stomach. His brothers talked proudly of the rush they had

felt after killing the webspinners, but Rustus felt nothing of the sort. He just felt hollow, numb.

‘Out of the way, Furi,’ said Scorch Knight Itticus, giving him a shove. ‘Who’s next?’

Rustus stumbled away from the webspinner, trying to hide his disgust at what he had done. The group looked at one another nervously, no one keen to repeat the spectacle they had just observed. Eventually Aro raised her hand and their instructor led them through more trees until he found another occupied web, this one with a much smaller webspinner, which Aro killed easily. One by one, the rest of the group completed the ritual, until only Hubert was left.

‘You can do it,’ Rustus whispered as his friend stepped forward. He wanted Hubert to pass the initiation almost as much as he wanted to pass it himself. Their mothers had been best friends and they had grown up together since they were babies. He couldn’t imagine being Scorched without Hubert by his side – and yet he was ashamed to admit that a part of him hoped another beast wouldn’t have to die. That one of the poor creatures would escape.

They were back by the spot where Rustus had killed his webspinner, and Scorch Knight Itticus had tasked Hubert with a webspinner that was almost as big, but in a much more difficult position, half buried in its thick web. Hubert blinked nervously at Rustus, then pulled his spear from the holster on his back. The group was silent, waiting to see what he would do. After a couple of

practice movements, he let the spear fly. It arced through the air until . . .

Splat.

The Unscorched erupted with cheers.

Rustus felt bile rise in his throat. ‘Well done!’ he said, forcing himself to smile and pat Hubert on the back.

Hubert beamed, and Rustus suspected he was a little bit in shock that he’d succeeded.

‘That was actually pretty fun,’ said Hubert. ‘Don’t you think?’

Rustus made a noise he hoped came across as agreement. How could he admit to Hubert that killing the webspinner had been the worst thing he had ever had to do? He was about to become a Scorched Atari. Killing webspinners would soon be his job.

It’s OK, he tried to reassure himself. Once you’re Scorched, you can just volunteer to scout the perimeter. Everyone hates that job. Just get through tomorrow, prove to Dad you have what it takes and then you can do whatever you want.

‘You’re right. That was a bit mean. He didn’t have to make you go first,’ said Hubert, misunderstanding Rustus’s response. ‘He’s just jealous that you’re a Furi and bigger and stronger than he’ll ever be.’

Rustus nodded. But what good were his strength and size if he didn’t have what it took in his heart? He needed to buck up his ideas before tomorrow. During the climb he would have the eyes of the whole city on him and he couldn’t afford to bungle it like he had today.

‘All right, we’re all done,’ yelled Scorch Knight Itticus. ‘Let’s get moving. And no more rests until we’re back in Ataria. It’s getting dark now, so watch your step.’

As they turned around, Rustus looked back at the remains of the webspinner he had killed. ‘I’m sorry,’ he mouthed. Then he pulled his eyes away and tried to push all thoughts of it from his mind.

Returning to Ataria was more difficult than leaving because it required a steep uphill climb, but the rest of the group seemed in high spirits, uplifted by their successful completion of the hunting ritual. At last, sweating and exhausted, they made it out of the jungle and back to the beginning of civilisation. A tall lava-forged fence ran around the perimeter of Ataria – an extra layer of protection from the beasts. At the gates to the city, they were greeted by Cardinal Magmatis, leader of Ataria.

‘Well done, warriors,’ he said. ‘You have passed the first stage of the Scorching. Tomorrow, you will prove your value as our bravest and strongest citizens, joining generations of Reds before you to serve and protect our fine city.’

Rustus looked around at their group. Aro and a couple of others were grinning, but not everyone looked so enthusiastic; Hubert’s euphoria had faded, and he clasped and unclasped his clammy hands.

‘If warrior fire runs through your veins then neither the climb nor the scorching gases will cause you a problem,’ the Cardinal continued. ‘But if you fail, you are not worthy

of the title “Scorched”. And we have no place in Ataria for Unscorched who do not become warriors. If you fail, you will be cast out of the city to live in the swarming Beastlands with the foul creatures you’ve just encountered.’

Rustus had always been taught that life in the Beastlands would be no life worth living. And yet . . . a small part of him wondered how it would feel to be free from the rules and laws of Ataria. How it would feel to escape the stench of the city and his family’s expectations. He shook that thought from his head and refocused on what the Cardinal was saying.

‘. . . We’ll see you at House Atari when the sun rises over the perimeter. Don’t be late.’ With that the Cardinal swept up his cloak and marched away.

‘I heard that those who succeed in the Scorching are the ones that cast out the failures,’ said Aro as they headed back to the Red District. ‘It’s their first mission. My dad had to do it. There was a girl in his year who failed, and they took her deep into the Beastlands and threw her into the webs.’

Hubert turned to Rustus, the colour drained from his face. But Rustus had his own problems to worry about.

He let the group go on ahead of him, back to their training ground, and once they were out of sight he picked his way between columns of rock and red bubbling lakes until he arrived outside the Steam House, a large round building carved into a column of stone on the edge of the Red District. It was a sacred place for warriors to reflect and worship the Ash Gods.

A billow of steam emerged as he pushed open the heavy door. Inside there was a perfectly circular pool filled with bright red mud that gurgled and murmured, burping clouds of red steam and occasionally flinging scarlet droplets at the stone walls. There was only one other person in the room, an old man with knee-length red plaits, praying in silence near the entrance.

Rustus crossed the central chamber, pausing to look at the murals on the walls. Scorched Ataris were pictured standing up to the most dangerous beasts of the land. At the far end of the Steam House, painted in purple mud, was an enormous and terrifying beast. It had four wings, two legs and an impressive silver ruff around its head: the phaeagra, a terrible flying beast the Scorched Ataris had defeated hundreds of years ago, liberating the Realms from its reign of terror. Scorched Ataris surrounded the beast, spears raised in triumph. Tomorrow, Rustus would join the ranks of those elite warriors. He had to.

He strode across to the edge of the pool, kicked off his shoes and knelt on the ground. The smell of sulphur was so strong that it burned his eyeballs. He closed his eyes, pressed both hands to his temples and bowed his head.

‘Please,’ he said softly, ‘give me the strength to complete the Scorching tomorrow.’ He paused and looked around, embarrassed to be asking for something that should come so naturally to him, just like it did to everyone else in his family. ‘And please . . .’ he whispered, almost inaudibly, ‘please let me get to the top first.’