

SELAH AND THE BLOOD BARRENS

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## Chapter 1

Sun warmed sands hissed in their descent from my scarf as I burst from the dune, gulping in as much of the stale surface air as my lungs could take. Grateful to be breathing, but not really... My every gasp of desert air tasted of failure.

Our village wouldn't survive another annum without a new well, and I couldn't return for the third time this week empty-handed. Not when the entire community was relying on me to find some hint of water remaining in this sector.

It was my deepest dune dive yet. All the while, I hoped to meet with the resistance of cool dense sand, but even one hundred meters deep into the desert, there was nothing. No water, not even the ruins of the buried cities. It had all been picked clean by the previous scavengers.

With a leaden pit in my stomach, I looked west, to where the sands stretched endlessly. I slid another dyed stake out of my florapack like an arrow from a quiver and drove it into the sand at my feet to mark the dive. The grid of red markers from my previous runs stuck out like toothpicks against the azure backdrop.

The line where the dunes met the sky wavered with heat, and a mound of sand began to sift and bulge like a giant anthill as my partner, Kiera, clawed her way to the surface. Maybe she had better luck than me. She better have, because another no-yield run could mean the difference between the village's survival and our desiccated remains fertilizing the Blood Barrens with a fresh supply of crimson sand.

I ran to meet her. “Anything?”

Damp grains of sand matted Kiera’s ochre hairline, trying to cling desperately to her moisture. It was as if nature itself wanted to suck us dry, reclaim what we took all those years ago.

“Just junk.” She pulled dull pieces of scrap metal out of her pockets.

“That’s not nothing,” I said, trying to ignore the nagging worry in my gut. “At least we can melt it down, maybe add to the new well’s piping?”

“If we can find anywhere to put it. This has all been combed for supplies already,” Kiera sighed, shaking the sand out of her dark braids, and planting her own marker in the ground. She adjusted the stake to leave 6 inches of it sticking out. “Probably a waste of time, but I’ll take the north ridge.” She pointed to a substantial dune to our left.

I nodded, heading in the opposite direction. Maybe the water table wouldn’t be out of reach this far south of the Oasis and their hydroslaves. I trudged for a couple of minutes before I heard those dreaded words.

“Selah! Into the Dunes!” The fatalistic cry could only mean one thing and it wasn’t a drill this time.

*Drones!* We’d only have 10 seconds to get out of range of the drone’s thermal seekers. I sprinted towards the nearest mountain of sand, heart outpacing my feet.

9— Meters away from the slope, I pulled my headscarf back over my eyes and mouth. My instincts would guide me the rest of the way and I tightened the straps on my florapack.

8— Clapping both hands on my thighs released claw shovels in steam-powered bursts from the burrow bracelets curled around my wrists.

7— The claw tips —6— climbed the tracks along my fingers and—5—clamped down over the tips, just in time to begin digging.

4— My breathing was louder inside my scarf, ragged and halting. My hands swiped left and right in their practiced motions, parting the sand like the water we needed so desperately.

3— I sucked one last breath of surface air into my lungs just before my head was completely submerged.

2— Plunging into the crimson darkness, I clawed my path into the dune.

1— The sand sifted away at each stroke, making room for its brethren to envelop me in the shadowy recesses of the dry packed desert waves.

Even as the comforting pressure of warm sand blanketed my legs and feet, I couldn't stop. Holding my breath, I dug further into the dune until I was safely out of range. Our team had taken down two of the Anti-Refugee drones in our last raid. Since then, they had been coming around these parts of the Blood Barrens less frequently. I wouldn't be happy until we take down every last one of the marauding menaces.

The sand was silent. Not even a rumble, yet. We had eluded the drone so far and made it to safety: Win! In this empty place full of loss, I'll take a win anywhere I can get it. That is, if I didn't die of suffocation first.

Sliding my fingers together, the claws created a seal around my face to free some air space. During my early drills in the Blood Barrens, the sand would fill in around me anytime I moved, leaving no room for air pockets. By now I'd mastered the technique, which was lucky, because when it came down to it, you couldn't rely solely on your Florapack for air.

Managing your breath when under the sand will take up a lot of your mental space and self-restraint. It can be tempting to gulp down the fresh air that the Florapack provides immediately, but that way only leads to a sandy grave. You need to make sure your valves are properly sealed, listen for the whirring mechanisms, and count your breaths because if just one thing goes wrong, you'll be dead in a manner of minutes.

Of course, Gaea knows that anyone would prefer a quiet death under the sands to the dissonant din and sweat-soaked cries from the Oasis spas' dehydration chambers. Which is where you'll wind up if the drones catch you.

But I'll never let them catch me. I may be dirty and too thin, but I'm fast. One of the best dune divers out there, next to Kiera, that is.

Shifting slightly, I nuzzled the hose on the left strap of my pack until it slipped under my veil. Using my teeth to release the valve, I exhaled the surface air into my Florapack. Inside the plexiglass enclosure strapped to my back, I could hear the familiar whirring of the pinwheels and bellows ushering my breath through the dwindling water stores and up towards the heart of the florachamber. There, one of the last remaining plants in the world would filter my carbon waste into the fresh oxygen that I'd need while waiting for this drone to pass.

The younglings training to become dune divers sometimes complain about having to share a portion of their scant water rations with their Florapack, but it was times like this that made you grateful to have listened to your elders.

That is, while we still had them.

Gaea, shield us from the same fate our elders suffered. It was said that their bodies were returned to the Blood Barrens, with the rest of Oasis' waste. Their dried skin fractured and their sandy blood turned to dust carried on the breeze. The water in their bodies was worth far more to the Grand Ambassador than their lives.

I tried to imagine what it would be like to allow yourself to be taken, knowing you'd become one of the Grand Ambassador's hydroslaves. Knowing that in Oasis, you would be worked for weeks in Moisture Reclamation Suits until your blood turned to sand.

I tried not to think about that right now, but instead focused on the quiet calm of the dunes. The underlying growl of the drone's four powerful turbines finally reached me through the layers of sand that shielded me from the threat. I took in a slow, calculating breath. My scarf blocked any of the loose sand from reaching my lips. Just one breath for now. I know how quickly this air pocket will be gone.

Pushing my second breath into the pack would be enough to ensure that I would have some fresh air to complete the cycle. Recapping the valve on the intake tube, I turned to the right strap of my Florapack for my first breath of truly fresh, non-polluted air in days. My lungs drank it up greedily. The heady oxygen rush sent the blackened world tilting around me, though I knew my body was completely still.

For now, all I can do now is wait under the sand, cycling through my breaths and checks, thinking of Kiera doing the same somewhere further up in the dunes. When I felt certain that the drone had passed out of sight, I took one final pull from the Florapack, filling my lungs with its sweet oxygen in preparation to exit the dunes.

The first rule of Dune Diving is to keep your feet facing the world beyond so that you can find your way out. Otherwise, you might swim too deep or in the wrong direction. Even for the best divers, the darkness can be disorienting. Each stroke sent sand trembling along my body, as I turned myself and cut my hands through the sand.

I read once that people used to swim through water like this, kicking their legs and arms the way I did now. But I don't believe it. How could there have ever been enough water that people would taint it with their bodies? How much of the precious element would be lost just dripping off of you? The ancestors were foolish and wasteful.

Soon there was no resistance as my hands clawed at the sky. Pressing my fingers flat against the embankment, I dragged the rest of my body free, rolling out and onto my back with a wheeze that felt like more scarf than thick surface air. I shook my head and brushed the sand out of the creases of my scarf without taking it off. It would help my eyes transition back to the harsh desert rays.

Squinting, I turned toward where I had seen Kiera last. The spikes in my soles dug into the shifting ground, steadying my strides and kicking up the dust behind me to cover each track. Still, my world felt unstable. Kiera always surfaced before me. She was the first to see the Drone and always the first to gloat about how close it had come. Always too close...

Before I reached the peak of the dune, I listened for the drone. Nothing. Looking over the summit didn't make me feel any better. "Kiera?" I ventured to shout. The only response was my own voice echoing back mockingly from the nearby mounds. Scanning the horizon, Kiera was nowhere to be seen. Could her Florapack have malfunctioned? I looked around, but she could have gone in anywhere. I would never find her in the sandy depths. "Kiera!?" Had she taken another quick dive for supplies without letting me know? That was unlike her, but stranger things had happened.

I waited, taking another turn around myself, when I saw a dark figure running off in the distance. *Kiera?* No, too far away for that. I crouched, squinting for a better look. The figure looked over their shoulder several times. Their heels kicked up the red sand behind them, which floated in a trail like exhaust billowing from some powerful machine.

That's when I finally could make out his face. It was Ramino Wonn. He had been missing for ages, but here he was barreling over a dune clutching something tightly in both hands. His dark hair had grown out into short curls from the usual tight crop he typically reserved for his dives. Rami's face flushed from his normal teak tone to deep maroon in his exertions.

As I bolted towards him, I asked, "Where've you been?" An accusation, even though the more pressing question in my mind was, *Why hadn't Kiera surfaced yet?* I didn't dare give breath to the thought, but an impending sense of dread labored in me.

Rami didn't answer me. He kept running, his dark brows knit together with an intent focus.

"Who's chasing you?" I rushed towards him, closing the distance between us.

"No one," he breathed.

“The drone passed. We don’t need to run.” But he didn’t slow, so I ran alongside him.

“Kiera! Did you see Kiera?”

“It...” he was out of breath, “Got her.”

“What?! No! You don’t know that!” It couldn’t be true. Kiera was the fastest of all of us. There was no way she’d get caught. I tore my scarf down and whirled around to where Kiera was last.

A hand fell on my shoulder. “We’ve got to... Go,” Rami huffed. “There’ll... Be more coming.”

“Where were you? You didn’t help her?”

Rami pulled my arm to hurry me away, but I pushed him off.

“She called to warn me. If she hadn’t...” The dunes became a red blur, and I wiped a tear from my cheek. Normally, I would never shed water for another person, but Kiera was worth every bit of the sacrifice.

“You know... There’s nothing... We could have—”

“Nothing *you* could have done, you mean!” I shook him off once more. “We took two down already!”

“It’s too close to the village,” he was getting his breath back. “It would have given us away. Think of the younglings.”

“Think of Kiera!” I refused to accept that she could be gone that easily. “We have to get her back!”

“I was there. There’s no chance we cou—”

“What do you mean? Where?” I sputtered, not believing what I was hearing. “Oasis? The Spas?”

“It’s no use. There’s no hope in that place.” Rami turned on his heels and stormed away from me, heading back to the village.

“But you’ve been there?” Hope lightened my steps, as I hurried after Rami. “And you came back! How?”

With a sleight of hand, Rami secreted the small bauble he had been holding up the sleeve of his robe.

“What’s that?” I demanded.

“What’s what?”

“That!” I point at the sleeve, clearly bulging around a cylindrical object.

“It’s nothing. We’ve got to get back.” Rami pulled his hand away from me defensively, his strides stretching longer, faster, in an attempt to outpace me. He never had been able to beat me at Tag as a kid, and he wouldn’t do any better now.

Like a sand viper, I struck with such speed and force that he cried out in shock. His arm jerked back, but my grip was true, even as his Burrow Bracelet dug into my palm. I snaked my other hand up his sleeve to the object, slipping it out in a flash.

“NO!” Rami lunged at me, but I spun out of his grasp. “Give it back! This isn’t a game, Selah!”

I ran, my steps light and sure. On a good day, he couldn’t catch me, but after running for, Gaea knows how long, he didn’t stand a chance. “Tell me how to get there, and you can have it back,” I shouted back at him, feeling the smooth glass surface of the object in my palm.

“You’ll never...” Rami panted once more, “get me back there.”

“Then you’ll never get this back!” I turned toward him skipping backward, along the trail, holding the clear capsule into the light, shaking it just out of his reach. Something jangled inside, rattling against the glass as I shook it.

Swiping at the object, Rami leaned too far forward and his footing slipped. He clutched his ankle, calling to me for help. His usual gag.

“Nice try. You know that won’t work on me.” While he was down, I took a closer look at the little stone jangling in the glass enclosure. It was like a brown marble with a layer of ashy skin flaking off of it and sticking to the glass. Moisture beaded inside the glass. A stone that could generate water? This could be really valuable.

Rami launched himself at me, knocking the glass from my hand. I tried catching it, but my fingers just tapped it this way and that like a clumsy ape, until Rami pushed me out of the way and fell on it, protectively. We grunted and grappled, struggling against one another for the prize. I tried to reach under him, grabbing for the capsule, but his body was a thick wall.

I had to get that from him. How else would I save Kiera? There’s no way I could get in and out of the dehydration chambers without his help. It was impossible. No one had ever managed that before and lived to tell about it. In desperation, I slapped my palm down on my thigh releasing my claw shovels. He couldn’t win!

“You don’t understand what this IS, SELAH! Let it go!” Rami pleaded, but he was too late, I had already started weaving my hand under him in the sand. Almost there. I tapped something. Almost got my fingers around it when we both heard a crack followed by the subsequent crunch as my metal claws shattered the glass capsule in Rami’s hands.

“AH! Get OFF!” His voice squeaked at the end like a broken gear.

I jumped back, hearing the fear in Rami’s voice.

“Are you CRAZY??” I had never seen him so angry before. That’s when I saw the blood. It streamed in heavy droplets from his hands onto the sand.

The steam rushed out of the tracks on my hand and my claws retreated up into the bracelets, now stained with his blood. “Oh, I didn’t—”

“You never mean to! You never *think*, Selah! Do you have any idea what you’ve done?!” I looked down at the sand, unsure exactly where the glass vial broke. A brisk wind sent the sands skittering over the blood-stained glass, devouring it in an instant.

“Let me—”

“NO! Just Don’t!” He winced and bat me away from him. He was losing too much water, and it had been my fault. “You needling, little thorn. You can’t leave well enough alone, can you?”

“Rami, I—”

“You always take things too far.”

“Rami?” Something was happening. The sand was shifting and bulging around something. I took a step back.

“You never know when to stop. You—”

“RAY!” I pointed at a pale snake, unlike any other I’ve ever seen. It started slithering up from the ground straight towards the sky.

“No, no, no, No, NO!” Rami threw both hands to his head, blood still dripping from his palms.

A few buds appeared in a green so vibrant, they made my Florapack look like pale shadows. The leaves grew, brightened, changed hues and then fell to the sand. At the loss, more grew in their place, changing to shades of red, brown, and deep orange, and then fell once more. More and more each time. All the while, the snake thickened and stretched towards the sky, growing in size, veining out at the top, and wrapping around itself. Each new stalk grew more of the green leaves that faded and fell like a bird molting its feathers. They budded, faded, and fell over and over in a beautiful festival of colors until the pile of fallen leaves had grown thick, heavy, and began to decompose into a dark umber.

It was mesmerizing. As we stood staring at the magnificent display, the air around us cooled and freshened. I stepped into the soft shade now cast by the creature, now the shape of those fancy parasols I've heard they use in Oasis to cut the sun's harsh rays.

Rami may have vaguely warned, "*Don't*" from behind me, but I barely heard him over the rattle hush of the leaves growing and falling. The same sound of the shaken feathers in sacred ceremonies. Without thinking, I reached down and scooped up some of the dark brown substance that the crushed up leaves generated. It was cool and gritty, not at all like tiny sand particles that sift through my fingers and drift off in the wind. This dark matter squished as I pressed it. It spread in dark streaks on my fingers, clumping in my palm. Even after I dropped it, its color and scent clung to me. I tried wiping it away on my robe, but a shadow remained.

One step closer and the reddish brown leaves sprinkled down around me. An old song came to my mind from long before my time. Sage Mazaye used to sing it as she drew our lessons in the sand:

*Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall*

*Stick around to see them all*

*Leaves will grow and fade and die*

*But that's no reason we should cry*

*For every year begins again*

*Learn your seasons. Sing of them.*

And we did. We sang and chanted with her, but we never really knew what it all meant. The shape she drew in the sand had no color, no life, no breath, and the way she told it, the seasons came and went slowly across the whole annum. But this “tree”, if you could call it that, breathed its cool, sweet air upon us. With each inhale, the leaves grew. With each exhale, they fell.

I looked up to see a green fan of leaves open above me, shifting into that same magical display of rich, golden hues before drifting slowly around me. I caught one of the leaves in time to watch it shrivel, dry up, and crumble away in my palm.

Like that, the spell was finally broken, and I found my words, “*What is this?*” I turned to Ramino, who had sunk down to the sand, head in his hands.

“It was the last remaining seed from the Tree of Life,” he sniffled. “I s-stole it. It... It was going to save us all, but now...”

*Stole it? From a peddler? From the Oasis? What had he planned to do with it?* I wondered.

He wiped his face on his sleeve, streaking deep red across his dark skin. His flint-grey eyes still brimming with tears. “Now look what you’ve done. You’ve signed away our water certificates.”

He has to be exaggerating. This was a gift from Gaea! This was a wonder. It would change everything. It would bring us all life. Our very own Oasis in the Blood Barrens.

“What do you mean? It’s a miracle! It’s—”

“They’ll already be coming for us, and now you’ve set up a bright flag in the desert, less than a league from the village. You don’t think the drones will spot this in a second?”

Those words stole all of the wind from my lungs, all the light from my eyes. I turned back to the tree as the greens lit up in flaming reds, destroying itself instantly after it bloomed, only to begin the cycle again. He’s right. They’ll find us and they’ll break the treaty our elders made for our lives. Their sacrifices will be for nothing.

I thought of the village’s dome, just a few minutes away, bustling with life under the sands. We’ve doomed them all. *I’ve* doomed them all.

## Chapter 2

“We could cut it down. Bury it. No one knew it was here. They *won't* know.”

“You would defile Gaea’s own creation?” I could see the incredulity in Rami’s eyes. He knew it would be blasphemy to destroy this gift, but there’s no way the Grand Ambassador would let us keep something so magical if he found out.

Sage Mazaye’s voice resounded in my head, *Do not let what you cannot do interfere with what you can.*

“We’ll have to move. We’ll find another place,” I offered, sweat beading on my skin now that I had stepped out of the Tree’s cooling shade. There *had* to be something we could do.

“Move the whole village?” Rami scoffed. “They haven’t been trained. Think of the little ones.”

“Have you forgotten The Great Culling? We did it before with only Sage Mazaye to guide us—”

“That was during the treaty, and you know it!” He was right. The only reason we had been able to move camp without getting caught was because the elders’ water had afforded us 10 solid years of peace before the Elite Caravans came hunting for us again. Rami stood, angrily. “And we don’t have enough Florapacks!” Rami was right again. I just couldn’t bear to admit it.

“I see you’ve lost *yours!*” My accusation hit home. Grasping the straps of my own pack, I ratcheted them tighter than necessary. We had lost over 30 Florapacks in the annums since The Great Culling, and now that Kiera was taken, we only have 7 left. Fighting back the emotions that rose at the thought of Kiera, I took a breath and tried to come up with another solution, “Then we’ll prepare for their coming. We’ll have to take down the remaining drones. We can do it,” I assure him. “If the drones don’t make it back to the Oasis, they can’t collect the video feed. The Grand Ambassador will never know of this.”

“You can’t—” Rami was prepared to counter, but I cut him off.

“We have to try!” The leaves shook their approval behind me, but Rami’s head sunk into his hands once more. I crouched down before him, lowering my voice. “The drone won’t be back for another two— three days at the most.” His head tilted slightly, listening. “We have to organize, prepare.” Cupping his arm, I ran my thumb over the sleeve of his kaftan. This time he didn’t pull away. “Soon the sun will fall. There’s no time to waste. We must warn the others.”

Rami dipped his head in a curt nod and leaned to the right to push himself up. He winced as the dark debris pressed into the long slash in his palm. Rami jerked his hand up and cradled it to his body. As I reached for his broken hands, the leaves rattled once more above us.

“How bad is it? We need to clean it, before we...”

Rami silenced me with a gasp. His mocha eyes stared intently at the fingers of his right hand, turning them before his eyes. “It’s— It’s gone.”

“What’s gone?”

“The cut.” He wiped the black smear across his palm, clearing it. I held it in my own hands and examined the spot that had been leaking his life’s fluid just moments ago. Not even a scar remained. I looked down at the dark substance under the tree and grabbed a handful of the moist brown.

The cry of a screech owl tore from Rami’s lips when I squeezed his other wrist and slathered the substance into the remaining fissures in his skin.

His cries of protest quickly died down into sighs of relief that were barely heard over the fluttering leaves above us. The skin of his palms was streaked with mud, but the flesh underneath was pink, new— healed almost instantly.

“Gaea be praised!” I couldn’t keep the smile from my lips. “Now we *have* to show the others!” I marveled once more at the powers that small vial contained. How could something so small generate such beauty and wonder? Not willing to waste another moment, I snatched up a handful of the stuff and pressed it into one of the outer pockets of my Florapack. “Let’s go!”

The skin on Rami’s hands was perfect, the deep color of desert varnish and unscarred. Taking one of them, we ran down the dune, our feet kicking up trails of red sand behind us all the way.

In my excitement, I soon dropped out of Rami’s grip and outpaced him. Just before I stepped over the other side of the dune, I took another look over my shoulder, wondering if I may have dreamed it all. Maybe I was sun sick. Delusional. But when I turned, there it was; its bare grey trunk rising up into the sky like a mushroom cloud in stark contrast with the red world around it. The fireworks of leaves burst out and cascaded down to the ground.

It took my breath away, but my blood ran cold when I realized it had become: an organic beacon, flashing bright golds for all the drones to see. That was all the push I needed to stay the course.

Rami was able to catch up when I paused at our usual spot. The rusting mechanical beast stuck one damaged wing into the sky. We clambered into its hollow metallic rib cage, nimbly stepping over the worn fabric tombstones, submerged halfway in sand. Crouching, I made my way to one of the broken windows.

As the evening pressed in on us, the world was fading into a red blur of sand and sky, making the dome of our village almost indistinguishable from the other sloping dunes around it, save for the soft, grey puffs of smoke issuing from the vents across the sand. These rising clouds signaled that it was safe to approach. If there were any Elite Caravan sightings or drones still in the area, the vents would be sealed shut, and we would need to wait it out here.

I recalled one of the brutally cold nights I spent in this ancient airliner, listening to nothing but the sounds of my own chattering teeth and the wind grating across the sand. It was hard to bear, but all of the dune divers had to suffer through at least one night out here to qualify for training. I had done it twice, once in training and again when the Elite caravan was roving a few leagues away, not two months ago. As harrowing as the experience had been, I knew it was a breeze in comparison to the cataclysm that would result from breaking the laws of our people.

It was a capital offense to approach the village when the vents were closed. The last time it happened, I was just a youngling of 4 years and 6 months. Some imbecilic scrunt led the Elite Caravan right to us and led to what our village now refers to as The Great Culling: when our elders were taken away to the Dehydration Chambers.

After that, Sage Mazaye was the only elder left behind to mind the younglings, and she was the only one I needed to see right now. The only one who would know what to do.

There was no more time to waste. With Rami close on my heels, I counted my steps away from the grounded leviathan and towards our village.

87, 88, 89... Timing it just right, I activated my Burrow Bracelets. There was a slight pang of guilt seeing Rami's dried blood on one of the glittering claws.

93, 94... I started digging into the sand, held my breath, and in no time, I hit our village's metal hatch door. Feeling around for the latch, I had to claw my way a little lower until each of my fingertip shovels found their way into the secure key slots. The soft beep let me know it was time to twist my wrist. The bolt clanked. Almost instantly, the hatch started to slide inward, ushering Rami and me into the entryway along with a wave of deep red sand.

Not missing a step, I slipped into the dimly lit entryway with the tide and began brushing myself off and shaking out my cloak. It felt so wrong to see Rami trip in behind me, instead of Kiera. The sand filtered through the large grates we were standing on and into the funnel system below. Each grain that hissed down into the vent was a second of Kiera's life draining away. By now they would be processing her at the Oasis, fitting her with a collar and a Moisture Reclamation Suit.

I couldn't think of that right now, not when the whole village was in danger. It took a painfully long minute for the sand to stop flowing from outside, allowing us to reseal the hatch door and latch it shut. I flicked the switch to my right and the copper pipes on either side of the metal-framed cavern shook with activity as the sand was sucked up towards the top cabins and released along the side of the dome, covering our village's entrance once more.

As I watched the hatch door and resealing mechanism operate, I realized just how many advancements our dome had undergone in the 12 years and 9 months since The Great Culling. Though I hated to admit it, Rami was right— how could we possibly move all of *this* through the Barrens without being seen? It would be impossible. Feelings of shame swelled heavy in my core, but there had to be something we could do.

The warm blast of the exhaust fans blew the remaining sands from the creases of my robe and scarf into the grate below. The fans did their job of clearing my skin, save for the dark streak left from by the tree and the usual dusky, orange film that coated my skin after every dive.

I listened for the sounds of the air to surge up the pipes instead of the grating scratch of the sand when clanging footfalls sounded behind us.

“Rami??” Signa, the Sentry on duty, turned to me, astonishment etched in her round amber eyes, “Selah, how did you find him? Wait, where’s Kiera?”

“She...”

I didn’t need to finish my thought; Signa wrapped me up in her arms. My face brushed against the soft peach fuzz of her side-shaved asymmetrical haircut. “I’m so sorry, Selah, and Gaea knows, sorry for us all. Kiera was a good runner.”

“Was?” I push out of her hard, skeletal arms. “She’s not dead. She’s just—” I heard the rush clatter of the sand vacuum shut down at Rami’s touch.

“But—”

“She’s not dead. We’re going to get her back.” Somehow I thought that if I demanded it, then maybe it would be true. I stormed away from Signa, not caring that she called after me for my Florapack. I didn’t have time for her job or her pity. Every moment I wasted put us in more danger.

I navigated the winding tunnels leading to the main chamber, barely noticing that Rami wasn't following me anymore. It's fine. I could explain everything to Sage Mazaye by myself. If he wouldn't help, I would just have to dune dive under the exterior wall of The Oasis to breach their defenses without him. Getting in would be no problem. It's getting out that would be more challenging, but I'll worry about that when I get there.

The marketplace bustled with life, children wove between people and shop stands in their games of tag— totally oblivious of the dangers to come. A young mother of perhaps 17 years, give or take a few months, held a sweet cake out to the babe on her hip for a taste. The months mattered. Every month on this plain was an accomplishment. I darted past aisles of goods and foods with barter suggestions on display. Children hawked at me from their stalls, but I ignored them all.

Aside from Sage Mazaye, the oldest persons in our clan ranged from having 22 years and 8-10 months, many with younglings of their own now. As the Grand Ambassador expected, the population had bloomed in the annums that past The Great Culling, proving the treaty did its job for The Oasis. *It freed up resources and strengthened his herd*, I thought bitterly. Now it was only a matter of time before the Elite Caravan arrived to take us all to the butcher.

I wondered if the agreement would still stand. Would they leave the ones 10 years and under this time? Would they leave a Mother or Father to guide them through the tears and the heartache? To help them remember and rebuild?

Now, more than ever, I knew the future doesn't come with a guarantee.

Without thinking, I took my usual path past the Jerboa racing platforms. A race was already in progress. The trainers standing on the raised platforms above the maze, shouted directions to their Jerboas, who were navigating the makeshift labyrinth below. The tiny rodents tittered enthusiastically, using their dextrous front paws to grab onto the tokens. Their oversized legs and strong tails helped them vault as high as 5ft in the mesh enclosure to bring all of their team's tokens to their trainer's goal post before any of the other Jerboa collected each of their items. As I passed, someone shouted my name. "Selah, you racing tonight?"

Without looking, I shouted "No" over my shoulder, when a boulder of a man stepped in my path.

"Hey, Selah! Where do you think you're going?" Bentar pressed in his gruff bass tones. "You owe me for last night's loss."

"Later, Bentar! I don't have time."

"Make time!" Bentar shoved me back with one massive paw and grimaced. He was only two annum older than me, at nineteen years, but he stood a good foot and a half taller than me. His meaty hands lingered on my body a moment longer than necessary.

Twisting away from him, I tried slipping under his arm, but since I hadn't taken off my Florapack yet, I was bulkier than usual. He pinned me easily against a fire roasted lizard stand. The vendor shrank away as Bentar growled in my face, "You better pay up, Selah."

His breath warmed my cheeks and turned my stomach. If it had been another day, I may have backed down. This was not another day.

You'd think the steam-powered hissing noise would have tipped him off, but Bentar hadn't even gotten past level one Dune Diver training, so he wasn't thinking there could be other uses for my burrow claws than digging in the sand.

I pressed the claws of my left hand into the tender flesh of his inner thigh just enough to pinch but not to break the skin. “You better Back Off,” I warned. He winced and sucked in air through his teeth. I glared up at him, holding my ground and digging in until he backed up. “I told you I’d pay you. And I will. Just. Not. Now.” I hissed.

“Y-you can’t use those in here. You should have deposited them with the watch— Ach! Oh-oh!” Bentar squirmed at my tightening grip. His eyes usually fluctuated between a vacant look and flashes of anger, so I reveled in the fear that glanced upon them now. I took a step closer, pushing *him* back against a kaftan stand this time.

“Selahh.” No one else emphasized the “H” in my name quite like Sage Mazaye. I withdrew my hand in a flash, pulling it behind me as I faced her.

“M-mother, she assaulted me!” Bentar used the affectionate pet name all the younglings who grew up under Sage Mazaye’s watchful eyes used with her, even though he was too old to use it. He just wanted to play innocent— the dirty scrunt. Well, two can play at that game...

“Selah, you know better than to take your Florapack and bracelets from the antechamber. And it should go without saying that they should *never* be used as a weapon.” I felt myself shrink under the Sage’s stern reproach. “Signa called on me, child.” Her voice softened as did the wrinkles in her brow, “She told me of Kiera’s taking. We must not let this destroy us. Where one bud is plucked another must grow in its place.”

I never really understood that phrase until now after seeing the great tree, blooming and dying, only to have another leaf grow in its stead. But that couldn’t happen with Kiera. “With all respect given, Mother— Kiera *cannot* be replaced! We’ve got to go after her! We’ve got to—”

“Calm yourself, my child.” The Sage lifted her wrinkled hands and lowered them slowly, the copper rings lining her forearms jangled their meditative chimes at me. Her voice was soft with the wisdom of ages, “Remember, a hot head...”

“Boils one’s plans to vapor.” I continued the phrase dutifully, but my jaw was tight as the words pushed their way through my lips. This saying was a pearl the Sage had often found occasion to remind me of, and the smug expression on Bentar’s face showed he knew it, too.

“Now, you know the protocol. Bring your Florapack to the nursery at once.”

“But I need to speak with you.”

“And I, you,” Sage Mazaye responded coolly.

“It is urgent,” I say lowering my voice and stepping forward, not wanting Bentar to hear. “A matter of grave importance.”

“I understand, but I won’t ask you again.” Her tone was kind but unflinching. “I’ll expect you in my chambers when you have deposited and fed that Flora.”

“Thank you, Mother.” I gave the expected response, but my face twitched with frustration. “May I be excused?”

“You may.”

I turned and roughly pushed my way through Bentar, shooting him a warning glance as I passed.

“There’s no need for that, Selah!” The Sage warned; the sharp edge in her voice could have cut me if I was any closer.

I managed to hold my growl of irritation and anger until I wove my way out of earshot. There are far more important things at stake, and here I was, getting scolded like a fledgling.

Grumbling with vexation, tents and people zipped past without notice.

My footfalls echoed heavily in the empty stairwell to the nursery.

I banged on the nursery door, one of the few doors in our village with a lock on it. Within a few seconds, Sunny, nicknamed for his occupation as much as his pleasant disposition, opened the door.

“Oh!” He looked surprised to see me, “Selah, I was expecting Signa to bring your pack, but it’s always,” I brushed past him as he spoke, “...a pleasure to see you?”

I ignored him and shrugged off my pack, distracted. I had to hurry back to Sage Mazaye. Every second mattered.

“Is, uh, everything alright?” hesitation hung heavy in his voice. Air hissed out as I unscrewed and removed the plexiglass florachamber from the pack. Condensation speckled the inside of its enclosure.

“Not really.”

“Oh,” Sunny visibly wilted. “Anything I can do?”

“No, I just—” I started, before realizing that Sunny might know something about this. Sunny had begun his training a few annums before The Great Culling. And he had a real aptitude for the few Flora still left. Maybe he would know something useful after all. “What do you know of the Tree of Life?”

v

## Chapter 3

“The Tree of Life?” Sunny’s face lit up in a mixture of curiosity and surprise. Chuckling a little, he stepped towards me as he said, “If you believe the myth, it was Gaea’s firstborn. The sapling she birthed grew with roots stretching the far reaches of the world.” His arms stretched expansively, the way Sage Mazaye’s had when she told the story. “It was the source from which all life sprang.” Sunny reached down for my florachamber. “Hey little one, good to have you back,” he breathed into the florachamber and cradled it protectively in his arms, almost gliding to the processing table.

“Yes, I know all that, but does it exist? The Tree of Life?” I pressed on, impatiently.

Sunny paused, hand halfway into one of his lab gloves, looking perplexed. “You never struck me as one to believe in the old religious tales, Selah.”

Agitation was a growing rash in my stomach, an itching electricity, “Please, I’m in a hurry. The Sage is waiting for me. Do you know anything else about the tree?”

“I always thought it was more of a metaphor,” Sunny started, but changed course when I let out a huff of air and crossed my arms. “If it ever existed, man destroyed it ages ago. It was said the tree of life was linked to man. In destroying the tree, we destroyed ourselves.” As he spoke, Sunny used both hands to carefully lift my Flora from its chamber, and deposit it with its sisters under the grow lights. He made sure to tuck its roots gently under a layer of brackish silt compound.

It was always here that I noticed how scrawny my own Flora was in comparison to its siblings. Its small stem drooped to one side, and the few leaves it had were wilted and sickly looking in comparison to its light green kindred.

I shifted nervously, knowing that our village couldn’t afford to lose another one, and its growth was likely stunted by my own neglect. While other dune divers checked in on their Flora both on and off the clock, I was usually preoccupied with training my jerboa, Chintelli, for the nightly races. Unlike Flora, my jerboa doesn’t need my water. She gets all she needs from the bugs she catches.

*Maybe if my Flora could win me some extra food rations, I would be more likely to care for it, I thought.*

I pulled my meager water stores from my pack. When I passed the vial to him, he held it to the light somewhat disapprovingly before tipping the contents over my Flora’s roots.

“This little one’s going to need a bit more than this if you want to keep making runs. I’m serious, Selah. She’ll need an extended break if her color doesn’t return soon.”

“Yeah, I know,” I conceded, looking down at my fingers. I picked the black out from under my nails. Thinking back to the vibrant greens and gold of the desert tree, all other Flora looked puny and pathetic in comparison, but I would need every bit of oxygen that my Flora could give me if I were going to dive under the defensive wall of The Oasis. Who even knew how deep it was? Maybe Rami...

“So when you say the tree was ‘linked to man,’ what exactly does that mean?”

Sunny glanced up at me once more, perhaps surprised I was still there. He knows I’m not usually one for making small talk. Then he looked back down at the Flora beds. “Well, take these for example. Consider how they support your dives. They breathe in what you breathe out. You breathe in what they breathe out. The Flora and people— We fit together as counterparts to a perfect whole, one not surviving without the other.” The pace and rhythm of Sunny’s words picked up in his enthusiasm for the subject. “Did you know it was said that the Tree of Life could drink its own water from the air and draw more from deep in the earth to be used topside by lesser Flora and creatures?”

“I thought there was fire deep in the earth. Wasn’t all the water topside back then?” I asked skeptically.

“In many places, yes, the water was topside, but more lay just under the surface.” I listened with more interest as he went on, “People used to say that The Tree’s fruits had special powers, but they only grew and fell once every 50 years. Wars were fought. Whole races wiped off the planet, fighting for ownership of what was never theirs. When the tree burned, the world burned. The inferno spread through the roots, sending toxic fumes through fissures in the ground. The oceans boiled. Molten flame burst from crests of mountains. Storms caused fire to rain on the land.”

Even though Sunny rattled off the descriptions we had heard a thousand times with little regard, I tried to imagine the terror of our world in flames. Lives reduced to cinder, to dust, to sand. Only a few regions were spared, but soon they too fell in the subsequent Water Wars.

“I thought those were just stories...”

“Maybe so... but stories are all we have now.” Sunny’s face had become solemn as he leaned over another Flora. “The Grand Ambassador made sure of that,” he sighed resignedly.

By then I had slung the empty pack over my shoulder, and backed towards the door, “Is that all?”

“Yes, yes. Sorry to keep you, Selah. It was nice—”

I didn’t hear the rest of what he said because the door closed between us and I bolted down the metal stairs. Each stolid footfall clanged noisily and shook the rails as I went. Jumping the last three steps, I sprinted past the Pox Tent and towards the Sage’s hut.

“Wait,” Aaimea, Sage Mazaye’s personal votaress and guard, set her bowstaff on the ground between the tent and I when I tried to hurry in. Having been carved from the remnants of an ancient branch recovered from the wastes, Aaimea flaunted the smooth olivewood weapon before me as a sign of her status in the community.

“The sage is expecting me,” I tried pushing around it, when a sharp warning cracked the front of my shoulder. She had spun the bottom of the staff up to block my entrance.

“The Sage is busy. You’ll have to wait.”

I narrowed my eyes, returning her judgemental stare. I was sick of how she always thought she was better than everyone else, because she worked directly under Sage Mazaye. I didn’t even bother to check my tone or volume, “I have permission to enter. You have no right to keep me--”

“Come in, Selah,” Sage Mazaye’s voice rose up from inside the tent.

I couldn’t keep the smug smile from my lips as Aaimea bitterly gave me the once over, stepped aside and lifted the tent flap for me. Bending into the opening, I didn’t bother to thank her. Instead, I made sure to give her staff a small shove as I passed.

The smell of incense wafting out brought me back to my earlier meetings with the Sage. It was a scent she carried with her, like an aura floating all about, but here, the aroma of jasmine and juniper berries wrapped around me. Calming me.

I tried to regain my breath and straighten my clothes, as I slipped out of my sandals. Sage Mazaye’s bracelets jangled reassuringly in her prayer. *She’ll know what to do.*

I knew better than to interrupt her meditations any further, so I waited, breathing in the holy fragrance, and breathing out just a few of my worries. When I stepped around the sheer curtain that separated the altar from the entrance, I was surprised to see Rami sitting cross-legged on one of the many pillows adorning the floor. I wondered how much he had told her already.

He didn’t open his eyes, too deep in the trance to notice me when I entered. His hands twitched and danced in the air before him.

Sage Mazaye held the prayerstick nimbly in one of her copper hands and the other curled around a bundle of incense. The feathers at the end of the prayer stick cut through the grey threads of smoke that rose from the incense. Like a blade, the feathers parted the silvery sinews, sending half of the mists at Rami and the other half as an offering to the heavens. All the while, the metal rings lining the Sage’s arms sang their songs in time with her otherworldly entreaties.

Finding my place on a pillow across from them, I waited for the ceremony to reach its conclusion. From under Rami’s lids, the bulges of his pupils darted this way and that.

*What visions swam behind those lids?* Anyone who experienced great loss was capable of communing with the ancestors, but it could be deadly without the proper guidance. Candlelight emphasized the strong lines of Rami's face and slight hook to his nose. His nostrils flared, taking in the rich scents, but otherwise, his face was immobile. Unreadable.

The flickering whites of his eyes peeked out from beneath his lowered lashes, like a sliver of light breaking through a lowered shade. The light beyond, too blinding to be seen in its entirety by us bottom dwellers.

Then his lids shot open, but something was wrong. In the shadows, it looked his eyes had been removed from his sockets and only darkness remained. *Where were his eyes?* As disturbed as I felt by the chilling sight, I couldn't disturb this sacred and private ceremony. I also couldn't look away. I found myself leaning closer to see the crimson blackness filling in as a crude mockery of eyes.

Lifting my cushion, I inched it even closer. The darkness took shape, it was the living proof of the ancestral bloodsands. The grains scattered and redispersed as if crowding over one another in a stampede of ancients. The ancestors had come to him in the sands. This is how the visions come upon you? No wonder the ceremony was usually carried out in secret. It was alarming to see him in this state.

The Sage's prayer picked up in speed and volume and Rami's chest rose and fell more quickly. His full lips relaxed open, momentarily. A shadow of a smile played on them before his mouth pressed back down into a hard line. A knot formed in his taut jaw.

The music of Mazaye's bracelets grew louder, as had her words. Their sound was his only tether to the living world now. He would need to hear them in order to find his way back to us. If he spent too long in the ancestral plain, he would lose himself there, as others had before him.

The fingers on his right hand tightened into a fist. By now, beads of sweat speckled above his lip and at his temples. The bones just under the skin of his left hand stood out in the shadows cast by the candlelight. His strong fingers flexed and quivered.

Impassioned, the Sage's words spit fire into the night. Her bracelets chimed continuously as the feathers of her prayerstick shook, cut, scooped the air towards him and to the sky, towards him and to the sky.

In my small way, I too prayed. Maybe he would see the truth. Maybe he would find a way we could get out of this, but it seemed as if he was fighting against something.

Rami's hands pressed in on themselves, shaking as if some force was keeping them apart. His skin slick, muscles straining and flexing in the darkness. His face reddened. Just before his hands could meet, Rami's mouth stretched open in wordless horror. The chords on his throat pulled taut in a mute scream. His hands and wrists began twisting into unnatural angles, as his body seized and quaked.

*What is happening?* I wanted to call out to him, but I knew better than to move. Even as Rami's sightless eyes widened in terror, I couldn't intervene. The spirits must have a hold on him, and nothing I did now could force them to let go. If I stepped in, I might break his mental grip on the Sage's bracelets and he might never make it back to us.

Only a fragment of Rami's dark pupil could be seen scurrying, like some frightened beetle trying fruitlessly to bore up into his skull until the crimson sands swallowed them up.

Sage Mazaye's chanting bled into itself. The words poured out of her in rich torrents.

Suddenly, a bright spark lit up from the smoldering embers on the incense. With the flash of light, Mazaye froze. We were swallowed by a muffled silence as deafening as any I'd experienced under the dunes. With it, Rami's body collapsed backward. Spent, but whole.

The Sage slowly lowered her incense and prayer stick to the altar. Her wrists only made the slightest jingling sounds, as they settled in her lap.

I ventured to break the silence, "Is he alright?"

Sage Mazaye's mouth quirked up in a facsimile of a smile, but her eyes looked more aged and tired than ever before, "He has seen too much. He must rest."

Picking up a sponge, she pressed it to his dark brow and lip, before wringing his collected water into a nearby urn for safe keeping.

"Sage... What did he tell you?"

"Everything, I imagine."

"The seed? The Tree?"

Sage Mazaye nodded along with my words. I wondered if he told her how it was all my fault. I didn't ask. My cheeks flushed, and I felt like I would be sick. "Mother, what can we do? They'll be coming soon, and we need to—"

"They have always been coming and they will always be coming," Sage Mazaye began, "There is no right time or wrong time for it to happen. All there can be is the certainty of knowing it will."

It sometimes frustrated me when she spoke this way, but there was something about what she said that eased my guilt.

“You’ve been chosen. Both of you.” Sage Mazaye spoke with slow, soft confidence.  
“Handpicked by Gaea to begin the cycle of renewal.”

“What? What do you mean? It was an accident.”

“There are no accidents, my child. Why else would She heal Rami?”

When I remembered the clean baby new skin of his hands rubbed brown with the tree’s magic, I had no words. None existed to explain what had happened. So I sat dumbly and listened.

“If Gaea frowned upon what you’ve done, She would have punished Rami with infection. Yet, She’s cleansed and healed him.”

*Healed him?* I looked over at Rami, doubtfully. Just a moment ago he looked as if he were dying. Now his face was relaxed, almost peaceful. There was something so intimate about seeing another person sleep. A trust and knowledge of them passes between you and stays.

“It is Gaea’s will.” Sage Mazaye’s eyes fell heavily on us both, “I have known for some time...” She must have seen the questioning look on my face, because Mazaye said, “It is a wise bird that sings only in the sunlight.” She reached out a hand to cup my cheek, “but wiser, still, are the ones who call the sun to awaken. For they shall bring about a new dawn.” Something in me stirred at her words, though I didn’t fully understand them. “With the guidance of the ancestors, you could put an end to the Grand Ambassador and his atrocities.”

It was the Grand Ambassador who killed our people, my parents.

“You have a long journey ahead, Selah.”

“But I don’t know what to do.”

“You will...” Sage Mazaye looked patiently at me, taking my hand in her own. “It will come with time... But first,” the Sage placed my hands, one over the other in my lap, “we must listen to the wind before you can fly.”

Slowly lifting a new stick of incense from the altar, she snapped her fingers together. Her two ceremonial rings struck up a flickering spark.

Anyone who has experienced an intense personal tragedy has the ability to commune with the spirits, but not many people know how. Sage Mazaye would be my guide. I knew what dangers could await me in the ancestral plain, but I needed to know what Rami had seen. He looked to be in so much pain, but now there wasn't a trace of the discomfort from earlier... I determined if he could handle it, I could.

After a second snap, the incense was lit and the renewed smell of juniper berries filled my nostrils once more. The grey smoke snaked upward just like the tree had when it first began to grow. Grasping the feathered prayer stick in her other hand, it was time to begin. "Close your eyes, my child."

I did.

Her words started slowly, as sure as the war drums pumping their message across the sands. They reached across the veils of time, across the rivers of the dead and deep into the hearts of our ancestors:

*"Whispering ones who've passed,  
You now dwell in the cleansing waters of time.  
Find for us the truth that, for us is yet to come  
But for you is, was, and will be again.  
Help Selah, our child  
Strengthen her resolve  
Give her the sight that is right,  
And guide us all to the light*

*In Gaea's name."*

Sage Mazaye's bracelets chimed their soft melody as she repeated her prayer. Her words made their way around me a third time, and I felt my hands slowly lift from my lap as if something were gently guiding them up. I knew I shouldn't open my eyes, but I had to see who or what was holding my hands. When my eyes opened to the true sight, I saw only shimmery darkness ahead of me. Though I could still feel the cushion under me and smell the incense all around, the tent and candles were gone. Sage Mazaye was missing, too, though I vaguely heard her chanting. The rhythmic chiming of her bracelets echoed to me as if through a distant tunnel.

Images rose out of the darkness in blurs all around. To my left was a light green blur next to a blue and pink. Instinctively, I extended my hands towards the brightest one and pulled it towards me. Through a glossy haze, I had called forth the image of a little girl of nearly three years and two months. Her skin was so white it almost glowed, reflecting the light cast by the strangely luminescent wall. The girl wore a long, shiny dress with a hue so bright and pink, it made her tongue look grey. The tufts and ruffles of her dress ballooned out around her as she spun in a circle. The laughter bubbled out of the little girl like the tinkling of Mazaye's chimes. A picture of pure happiness.

I brushed the vision aside. It was nothing to me. Too far distant to be of significance.

I reached for another. A vibrant emerald dune flowed in the breeze. Pulling it closer, I saw it was made of separate green fibers that looked like hair. A four-legged creature bent down to pull up clumps with its teeth. I had never seen the creature in my life, so I passed the image aside to find another. Yet another image of expansive woods so dense it looked like a single organism with protective green spines was followed by destructive fires filling my vision. But what really froze my hands was the endless bluish grey current that stretched on and on, roiling with life.

Water. It was truly unimaginable.

So the stories were true, and I was there. If, but for a moment. Younglings were being tossed about in the waves. They splashed and played alongside elders who held their hands. They were together, looking at each other with affection and something much stronger.

The vision lingered on the edge, where the sand met the sea, but even that was foreign. This light tan substance was dense, with not even a touch of the blood that stained our sands red.

The water rushed towards me in a cold, foamy spray. My heart leaped at the tingling sensation that thrilled over me as the icy water grazed my skin. I was drawn deeper into the sand with each press and pull of the waves, my feet sticking.

But Mazaye's chimes called me back. I needed to be smart about how much time I spent with each moment. I pulled and passed, pulled and passed, looking for something familiar.

Then I saw it. The Tree. This vision was not like the others. It came in flashes and gasps like a promise that might be broken. It was desperately clawing its way to life.

Villagers crowded around the darkened tree. We were huddling under something. Before I could see what it was, the image faded to darkness like the receding tides. The muffled roar of the drones got louder. Suddenly, Rami's face was before me, and then it wasn't. Blood drained from his chest and then flowed back into him like the ocean calling the water back to the sea. Each vision came and went in the same way. I felt them rush over me, one after another. The wall of the Oasis loomed before me one moment, then it faded to darkness the next. A stone sculpture rose before me pointing to an enormous glass orb with something inside. Was it a person? I couldn't tell. Then the darkness returned.

The embroidered image of a sand viper rose and fell in my vision before Kiera's voice called to me from the darkness. I tried to reach for her, hold onto her. When the images appeared, I held her in my arms, but her eyes were glassy, her cheeks sunken. The vision was trying to pull away from me, but I wouldn't let it go this time. I couldn't let her go.

Fractures like broken porcelain veined and split across her cheek.

"No, Kiera!" Dusty red flecks appeared in the creases of her crackling flesh. I tried to brush them off, but her skin tore and flaked away like dried parchment. The dusty blood slid out of the breaks in dried particles like sand through an hourglass. It poured over my arms. I tried to catch it, pull it back like Rami's, but as I jostled her petite frame, more fissures sent the blood sands pouring from her crumbling body. The breeze picked some of it up and sent it floating down the dunes.

I was sinking in deeper. My legs now submerged in blood sands, but I refused to let her go. The sands had risen to my waist, reaching what was left of Kiera. As I lifted her away from the sands, her bones tore through the tight chalky fabric of her body. Still, I clung to them, crying her name.

Bones clacked and clanked together like wind chimes until the clinking became the insistent intonations of Sage Mazaye's metal bracelets.

With the sands at my throat, I tried to focus only on the Sage's music and chanting, but I couldn't extract myself from the quicksand. The ancestral plain had opened up to swallow me.

I could do nothing but give myself up to the darkness.