

ZARZAR: THE HOLE STORY

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Wietske Blijenberg

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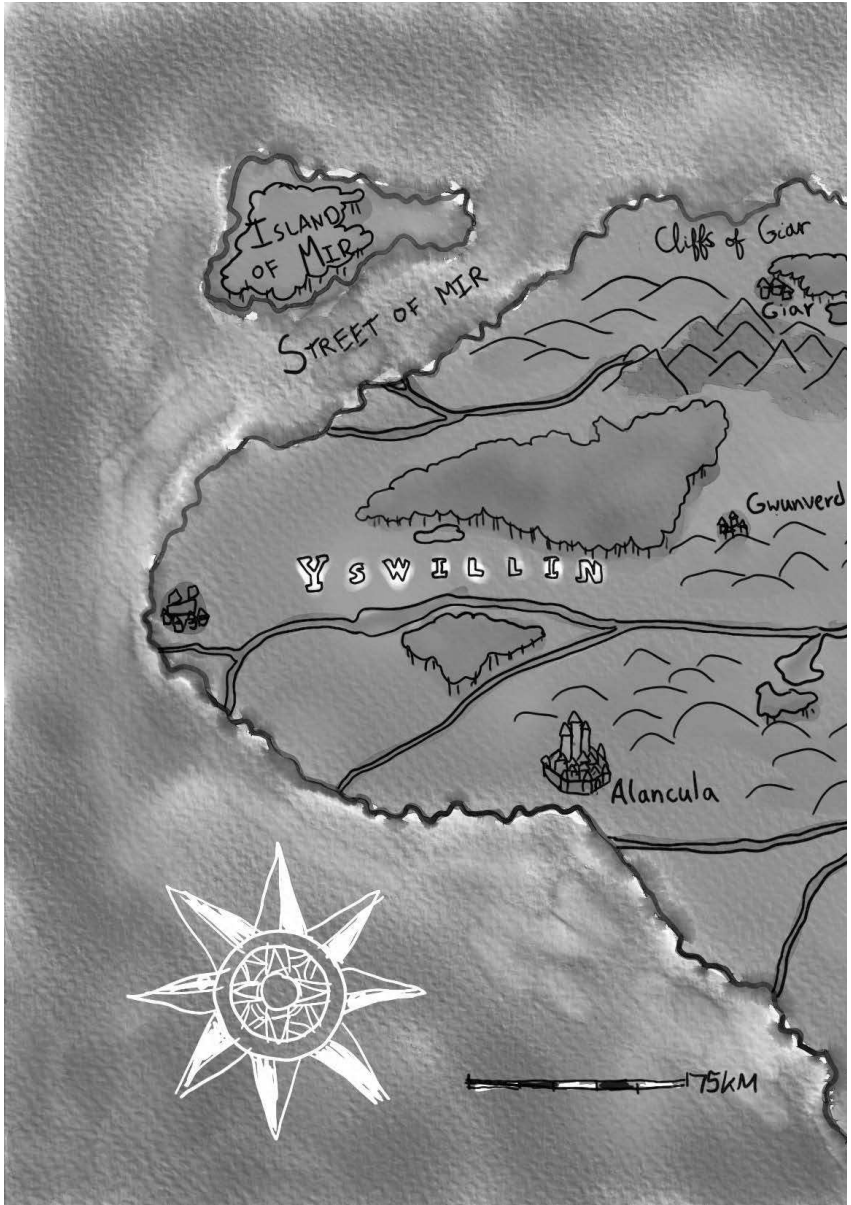
To Seth, the best writing buddy.

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Courtesy of Marki



Map of Yswillin, including places deemed important by Markí.



PRONUNCIATION OF CERTAIN WORDS AND
NAMES

People

Acheus: /ɑxœys/

Aelos: /ɑilɔs/

Alth: /ald/

Arphica: /ɑrfika/

Ascatha (*family name*): /ɑskaθa/

Asiriline (*Assie*): /ɑsi:rilɪn/

Bährin: /bɛħrɪn/

Brinthis: /brɪnθɪs/

Centric: /sɛntrɪk/

Ciursal: /kjɪrsɑl/

Daevi: /dɑivi/

Elgia: /ɛlxija/

Elion: /elijɔn/

Fira: /fira/

Giria: /giriʝa/ or /xiriʝa/

Guri: /gyri/ or /xyri/

Hanella: /hanɛla/

Hazi: /hazi/

Hest: /hɛst/

Ivah: /aɪvɑ/

Jagemir: /ʝaxəmir/

Jestiv: /dʒɛstɪv/

Kaelix: /kɑilɪks/

Kimp: /kɪmp/

Kiulo: /kijylo/ or /kjylo/

Linnith: /lɪnɪð/

Litas: /litɑs/

li-Zythir (*family name*): /li-zɪθɪr/ or /li-zɪθɪr/

Markí: /mɑrki/

Merr: /mɛr/
Miro: /miro/ or /mɑiro/
Naraska: /narɑska/
Navida: /navida/
Nín: /ni:n/
Norix (*family name*): /nɔ:rɪks/
Ovai: /ovɑi/
Phovos: /pəʊvɔs/
Queros: /kwɛərɔs/
Ralika: /ralika/
Raven: /reɪvən/
Rís: /ri:s/
Ríxill (*Thannearíxill*): /rɪksil/ (/θɑniarɪksil/
Roduna: /rodyna/
Saraxai (*Rax*): /sarɑksɑi/ (/rɑks/
Seaz (*cat*): /sejɑz/
Scilias: /skilijɑs/
Taeri: /tɑiri/
Thorán: /θorɑn/ or /θoræn/
Tirre: /tɪrə/
Torean: /toreʔɑn/
Tsuka: /tsyka/
Urix: /yrɪks/
Uscai (*family name*): /uskɑi/
Veanna: /veɑnɑ/
Wrenshilin: /wrɛnʃɪlɪn/
Wythari: /ʊɪthari/
Xaeth: /ksɑitʔ/
Xephea (*family name*): /ksefeja/
Yarana: /jarana/
Yemin: /jemɪn/
Ysca: /iska/ or /ɪska/
Yur: /jʏr/
Zarando: /zarɑndo/ or /zɑrɑndo/
Zarzar: /zɑrzɑr/

Places

Alancula: /alɑŋkylɑ/

Bal: /bɑl/

Bavinko: /bavɪŋko/

Earine: /ɪərɪn/ or /ɪəri:n/

Foh: /fɔʔ/

Giar: /dʒiɑr/ or /ɣiɑr/

Gwunverd: /gʊʏnvɛrt/

Maelinor: /ma:linɔr/ or /ma:linɔr/

Mir: /mir/

Oreen: /ori:n/ or /ɔri:n/

Sefian: /sefi:ɑn/

Tijor: /tidʒɔr/ or /tjɔr/

Uris: /yɪɪs/

Wuisthuria: /visðuria/ or /visðyria/

Yswillin: /ɪsʊɪɪn/ or /isʊɪɪn/

Words

- Aestoli** (*curse word*): /ɑistoli/
Airin (*fruit*): /ɑirɪn/
Aphrix (*month*): /apəɾɪks/
Bénrel (*warm drink*): /bɛnrɛl/ or /bɪnrɛl/
Biél (*curse word*): /biʔɛl/
Biual (*curse word*): /bjyɑl/
Bonei (*warm drink*): /bone/
Darso (*money*): /dɑrso/
Dasath (*creature*): /dasɑð/
Deithi (*creature*): /diʝɛθi/
Denni (*plant*): /dɛni/
Emorian (*dialect*): /emoriʝɑn/
Falinnih (*plant*): /falɪniʔ/
Fierin (*creature*): /fjirɪn/
Greniin (*fruit*): /grɛnɪn/
Kraith (*creature*): /kreɪð/
Ksairing (*curse word*): /kseɪɾɪŋ/
Ksaiti ruonn (*insult*): /ksɑiti ryɔn/
Ksat (*curse word*): /ksɑt/
Kyrlith (*creature*): /kirliθ/ or /kɪrlɪθ/
Loith (*curse word*): /lɔið/
Presci (*month*): /prɛski/
Raestir (*folk*): /rɑistɪr/
Rehes (*curse word*): /reʔɛs/
Saiti (*insult*): /sɑiti/
Tarmi (*plant*): /tɑrmi/
Thustal (*month*): /ðʏstɑl/
Turak (*fruit*): /tyrɑk/ or /turɑk/
Ucoti (*animal*): /ykɔti/

CHAPTER ONE



It's too wet for this

Zarando let out a long groan — the longest he could muster — as a bright light blinded his view. Not again. For the gods' sake, not a-ksairing-gain.

Not one second later, his world fell away, to be replaced by another. An older one, maybe. He didn't know, he never kept track of these things. That was Daevi's department. She knew all worlds to the finest details, knew every little thing that made them unique. Travelled them the most, too. Loith, she might be the only one he knew who travelled them voluntarily.

Mad, she was.

He blinked while his body adjusted to its new reality. Water droplets trickled down his cheeks, his chin. The sound of thunder filled his ears. Great, this world had rain. A lot of rain.

With a scowl, Zarando gazed at the sky, urging the rain to stop and the dark clouds to clear — but the weather refused to listen. He sighed and ran his hand through his hair. Useless. Now what? He couldn't just keep standing here. Well, he could, but he didn't want to, for obvious reasons. And Centric would surely lecture him if he found out he was just standing around on the job.

Rocking on his heels, Zarando glanced around. He had landed on a soggy hill, and in the distance, a few scattered houses nestled themselves against a slope. On a good day —

which it wasn't — he might even call it a village. A short distance away from him his sword lay in a sizeable puddle of mud. Sighing, he patted his belt, searching for his sheath. Because he would have to take that dirty thing with him, wouldn't he?

With a frown, he looked down at his belt. Where had his sheath gone? Was he supposed to just... drag his sword along?

For a moment, he seriously considered leaving the sword there. It was an old thing, surely nobody would miss it. Zarando probably wouldn't.

He pursed his lips as the face of Daevi appeared in his mind, staring him down disapprovingly. Well, alright then. He'd take the bloody thing with him.

After bridging the distance between him and the sword, Zarando dislodged the thing from the mud, and proceeded to stare at it apprehensively for a few seconds. Right. Sword. Lovely sword. Lovely, clean, totally amazing sword.

Finally, he put the sword away and turned his gaze to the scattered houses, squinting his eyes at the droplets of rain. Whatever Centric might say, he was not going to do his job in this weather. How was he supposed to perform up to standard when all his clothes stuck to his body? No, he better wait somewhere dry.

He descended the slippery hill and strolled towards the village. Soon he had reached one of the houses, a tiny thing that leaned to its right a bit. Zarando tilted his head to match the angle of the house. Truly a marvel of engineering. He could live here; he liked it.

With the hilt of his sword, he knocked on the dark wooden door.

Knock, knock-knock, knock-knock-knock.

It was the knock Taeri and he had always used in their youth. Sadly, Taeri wasn't here anymore, nor was his youth; but he still used the knock.

When the door didn't open immediately, he knocked again. This time he heard muffled footsteps, and a moment later the door swung open. In the opening stood a person with a striking white patch in their hair, that stuck to their forehead

as if they'd just been out in the rain as well. They took a moment to examine Zarando before frowning.

"I don't know you," they said, in a dialect that Zarando hadn't heard in a while. Emorian, perhaps? He could never quite remember which dialect was which, even after having travelled a billion of worlds. His brain apparently didn't think it was important enough. Which, to be fair, it wasn't — as long as he could understand it.

Zarando nodded at the person. They reminded him a bit of someone, but he couldn't pinpoint who.

"Apparently not, no." He extended his hand for the person to shake. "Zareldo is the name."

The person in front of him squinted. "Za... what?"

"Zaniro," Zarando smiled. "Can I come in?" He gestured to the rain. "It's pouring."

"I was actually in the middle of something." The person sniffed and wiped a raindrop from their cheek. "Can you come back another time?"

"I'm afraid I can't." In fact, he wasn't afraid at all, but it was something people used to say, wasn't it? He wouldn't know, he didn't interact much with anyone but Centric nowadays. And even that he avoided as much as he could.

He wriggled his toes, upon which a soft slurping noise came from his feet. Great. His socks were drenched. Excellent way to start the day.

Suddenly tired, he looked into the person's eyes. "Please. I only need a dry place to stay until this biual rain is gone. I'll be moving on right after that."

The person glanced at the sky, then threw a quick look over their shoulder. Finally, they shrugged.

"Alright. Come in. I'm Miro, by the way." Miro stepped aside, allowing Zarando to come in. "Inside you'll find Jagemir. He'll not want to talk to you. Don't force him to do so anyway, he'll kill you." Miro made eye contact with Zarando, their expression shockingly serious. "I'm not kidding."

Suppressing a smile, Zarando nodded earnestly. He did not for one second believe that this Jagemir could as much as

come close to killing him, but Miro didn't have to know that. After all, Zarando would probably never see them again after this rain finally stopped. Probably.

Upon entering the house, he was immediately hit by a strong, herbal aroma that he miraculously hadn't been able to scent from outside. Undoubtedly because of the rain, bial rain.

Miro closed the door behind him and led Zarando into a room he supposed was the living room. It was a cosy room, with just enough space left between the furniture to walk from one side to the other. In the centre of the room stood a small table, scattered with several belongings such as a metal ring, a flowerpot, and a tower of dirty cups. Zarando scrunched his nose. He wouldn't exactly call himself a neat person, but this was something else.

On the other side of the room, an open door led to yet another room. The herbal scent seemed to be stronger there, and Zarando curiously peeked into the room, only to nearly drop his sword when a scowling face and two piercing eyes stared back at him.

A chuckle sounded from behind Zarando. "I see you found Jagemir. Jagemir, this is Za..."

"Zanello," Zarando assisted. He smiled politely, but Jagemir didn't stop scowling.

Well, this was a warm welcome. Scowls and reluctant hospitality. This was why he didn't like world-hopping: you never knew what — or who — you were going to encounter, and the people were never as friendly as they were at home. As they used to be at home, at least — people didn't seem to like him much nowadays.

Jagemir's eyes slid from Zarando's face to the sword he was gripping, and a frown appeared on his face. "Nice sword."

Zarando looked dead at his face. "Thanks. I loathe it."

"Why?"

"It killed my friend."

That wasn't true, of course. The sword hadn't killed Taeri, the sword had never killed anyone. Zarando had. Yet he loathed the sword, because the sword served as a constant

reminder of what had happened. Because it clung to him like the guilt of what he had done. He loathed the sword so that he didn't have to loathe himself — not that he didn't do both anyway, but he liked to keep his options open. He liked to pretend that loathing the sword eased the pain a bit.

It didn't, of course. He doubted that anything could ease the pain.

Jagemir locked eyes with him, and the look in them told Zarando that Jagemir knew bial well that swords didn't kill people. He decided then that he liked Jagemir, despite the scowling.

Miro pressed themselves past Zarando into the herbal room and started rummaging through cupboards. "I was just making some bénrel when you came," they explained. They put three mugs on the table and lifted a steamy pan from a stove in the corner. "It might taste a bit odd, but that's not my fault. My garden is... a bit malfunctioning at the moment."

Zarando raised an eyebrow. "Oh?"

Miro nodded, carefully pouring the hot liquid from the pan into the mugs. "Yeah, it's driving me insane to be honest. Like, the old house on the hill, that I won't miss. The fishing lake? Worse, but we can get our fish elsewhere. But my own garden?!" They passionately lifted their arms. Zarando was glad the pan was empty by now, otherwise water would've been flying everywhere. As if he wasn't wet enough.

"The audacity to just ruin my garden! Seriously, it can't go on like this. Someone needs to put a stop to it."

Zarando glanced at Jagemir, who had conjured some kind of root from somewhere and was chewing it absentmindedly. "To what?"

Miro stomped to the door at the other side of the room and yanked it open. Immediately, rain gushed inward, and a chilly wind made Zarando shudder. "To this!"

Zarando stepped towards the door, even though the feeling in his left ear told him that he definitely did not want to see this right now. Seeing this would most likely mean that he would need to start doing his job, and he wasn't in the mood to start doing his job yet. His socks weren't even

remotely dry for the gods' sake. No, he did not want to see this – and yet he stepped closer.

As the rain hit his face and the wind chilled him to the bone, Zarando's stomach dropped. Just outside Miro's house, a mere sword length from their doorstep, was a huge, ksairing enormous, endless hole. It stretched through their entire backyard, right to the back fence, which hung pitifully above the dark gap, swaying gently in the wind. It was deeper than Centric's arsehole – and that said something – and it had a very, very distinctive flavour.

His left ear had been right. His bial job was calling.

CHAPTER TWO



No, I'm not having fun

Zarando squatted and put his hand in the hole. Rain pounded against his head; wind blew away every speck of heat that he had just started regaining. Inside the hole, however, Zarando felt nothing. No wind, no rain, and more importantly: no leftover mana traces that could tell him what had caused this ksairing thing to appear. Which was a bit of an issue – he couldn't solve the thing, solve the thing properly, if he didn't know why it was there. After all, the problem wasn't the hole itself – although it surely must be very inconvenient to have a hole in your backyard – the problem was the appearance of the hole. Centric would go off on him if he would just solve the holes, without solving whatever made them appear. And if Centric went off on him, the rest of his year would be ruined. The rest of his life maybe even.

With a sigh, he rose and stepped back indoors, closing the door behind him. Miro was watching him expectantly. “Ridiculous, isn't it?”

“Mhmm.” Zarando's mind was still mulling over possible causes of the hole. Some kind of creature? He could think of an extensive list of creatures that could, potentially, make a hole like this. But why would they? For fun?

Miro stepped back to the three mugs and pushed one in Zarando's hands. It warmed his fingers pleasantly. “I tell you, at this pace our entire village will be gone in a month.

Someone ought to do something about it.” They took a big gulp of their bénrel and stomped to the other room. Zarando followed them absentmindedly. Maybe it wasn’t a creature. Maybe the earth here had instabilities, or something like that. Maybe it was collapsing in on itself.

Miro plopped down on the couch, and Zarando took a seat across from them. He cast a careful glance at Jagemir, who was just about to sit down on the floor between the couch and the table. Then, he turned his gaze to Miro. “So, how long has... it been there?”

Miro, their cheeks still rosy from indignation, took another big gulp from their bénrel before putting the mug down on the table. “That one? Not that long. But at least a while, you know?”

Zarando suppressed a sigh. Incredibly useful information. “And you guys don’t know what caused it?” he fished. Surely the locals would know something about this thing, if only a vague local legend. How was he supposed to fix it if they didn’t?

With a shrug, Miro grabbed their cup again to take another sip. “No clue.”

They twirled their cup for a moment, as if thinking, then locked eyes with Zarando. “Assie might know. Maybe we should ask Assie.” They glanced at Jagemir. “Not a bad idea, actually.”

Zarando slurped from his bénrel – which was delicious, by the way – and looked incredulously at Miro. “Assie? Who the ksat might that be?”

Now it was Miro’s turn to look incredulous. “The God-Regnant, of course.”

“What? Which god had the balls to declare himself regnant?”

“It’s a she. And it’s the other way around, actually.”

Zarando almost choked on his drink. “That’s not how it works.”

“It is. She is very powerful, too. I’d worship her.”

Jagemir, who hadn’t bothered to join the conversation thus far, looked up. “Yeah, you better. If you don’t want to die.”

Zarando slunk back in his chair. Great, more problems in this world, just what he needed. And now he had to somehow figure out which of these problems was his job. Another thing he detested: they would never ksairng tell him, while it would be so much more efficient if he knew. He had half the mind to just leave, leave this mess to someone else.

The image of Daevi appeared in his mind again, and he swatted it away like a fly. Yeah, yeah. He wouldn't. Wouldn't want to risk getting fired, and it wasn't worth using his Refusal over. But bial, was he tempted.

"So where does this Assie live?" Honestly, it was as good a place as any to start. Even if Assie wasn't his job, there was bound to be someone close to her who knew something about these holes, assuming that this place wasn't reigned by idiocy.

Miro scratched their ear. "I'm sorry, how do you not know that? Everyone knows. A two-year-old kid might even know."

"Well." Zarando shrugged. "I'm not two." At least not according to most calendars. Surely Daevi would be able to find one in which he was two, or even younger.

"But you have been."

Zarando stared at Miro. "No." It wasn't necessarily true, but it wasn't necessarily false either. He had been two, but it hadn't been the same two as Miro's two. Deithi aged differently. But whether it was true or not, it did intimidate Miro, who averted their gaze and took another sip from their b nrel.

"Alancula," they muttered, the sound half muffled by the mug.

Zarando smiled. "Thanks."

Alancula. That didn't ring any bell at all. For a split second he wished he had Daevi's knowledge; surely she knew everything about Alancula, including how to get there.

Then he realised how full his head would be with all kinds of useless details if he had Daevi's knowledge, and the feeling passed.

He brought his cup to his mouth and downed the last of his drink before looking around the room. It was quiet; even the rain had stopped.

“So, when do we go?”

Miro glanced at the window. “You? Right now. You said you’d be moving on after the rain stopped, which is now, so thanks, and goodbye.”

Blinking, Zarando followed Miro’s movements as they gently took the mug from his hands and put it on the table. He had thought Miro would welcome his company on the trip, but apparently wrongly so. Maybe Miro wasn’t even travelling to Alancula, maybe the comment about asking Assie had just been a joke. Because who in their right mind would just leave their home and go ask some insane ruler about some holes?

“Are we not travelling together?” he asked nevertheless.

Miro shook their head. “Nope.”

Zarando groaned internally. How was he supposed to find this bial Alancula now? He didn’t even know which world he was in. And his socks were still wet, and dammit, he needed to pee.

“Wait.”

With a glimmer of hope Zarando looked at Jagemir, who was holding his sword with an innocent expression on his face. Jagemir offered him the hilt. “You forgot this.”

His heart dropped, and he put his hands in his pockets. He almost muttered ‘you ksairing keep it’, but Daevi’s disapproving face appeared again, so he reluctantly took it from Jagemir’s hands.

“Thanks.”

Jagemir smiled. “You’re welcome.”

Before Zarando could say anything else, Miro ushered him out of the house, and a few seconds later he found himself staring at a grassy landscape that was riddled with puddles, and no indication of which direction would lead him to Assie. Sighing, he sat down on Miro’s doorstep. This was bloody brilliant. What was he supposed to do now? He sniffed. Just ksairing guess?

Somewhere in the distance, a bird screamed. He almost screamed back, but he wasn’t quite there yet. He was still sane, just disappointed as ksar.

A watery sun peeked through the clouds, its hesitant light

reflected in the countless puddles. He had to admit, the warmth on his face was nice. Maybe he'd stay here for a while, wait for Miro and Jagemir to leave, if they would leave. Then he could simply follow them to A... the city Assie was in. Maybe they wouldn't like that, but they wouldn't be able to stop him.

He studied his nails, which were getting a bit long for his taste. He could always torture them if they became troublesome. It had been a while, but he was sure he hadn't forgotten how to.

The door behind him creaked, and Miro's head appeared.

"Oh great, you're still here. We will be there in a few minutes, Jagemir is just packing his weapons."

Zarando raised an eyebrow, not in a state to voice any questions. Miro chuckled. "You didn't really think we were going to let you travel alone?" They opened the door slightly further and patted Zarando's shoulder softly. "No, we were just joking with you. Travelling alone would be far too dangerous, with all the bandits and whatnot. Plus, you intrigue us too much. So, just a few minutes!"

Zarando almost stabbed them then and there, almost. The only thing stopping him was that he finally realised who Miro reminded him of.

It was Taeri.

Bright-eyed, cheerful Taeri. Ksat. Come back to haunt him, hadn't he?

He smiled weakly while Miro closed the door again, then glanced at his sword, the memories of that day playing vividly through his mind: marching down the hallways, the fight. Marching down the hallways again. The blood, dripping on the floor, the smudged blade. The distinct sound of his sword falling in a puddle; the betrayal in his friend's eyes. The pain in his heart.

To this day, he had never been able to get the blood out of the creases of his sword, and he detested it. But maybe he deserved it. Loith, he probably deserved it, he deserved all of it. He had killed Taeri, after all.

Sighing shakily, he wiped his eyes with his sleeve. No use

crying over it now. Plus, he didn't want to have to explain himself to Miro and Jagemir; they wouldn't understand anyway.

Zarando stood up and glanced at his reflection in a nearby puddle. The person glancing back at him reminded him of a ghost, as if he was the one who had been killed that day, not Taeri. Oh how he wished that were true.

The door creaked open again, and Miro and Jagemir stepped outside with huge backpacks on their backs, their step cheerful, their faces radiating excitement. Well, at least Miro's did. Jagemir looked expressionless, sullen even. Zarando figured he'd probably need to spend a lot of time with Jagemir before he could even guess what the guy was feeling.

Miro's eyes slid to Zarando, and their excitement melted into concern. "Have you been crying?"

Cursing silently, Zarando crossed his arms. "No."

"You can tell us if you have. We're friends."

Zarando cursed again. Miro truly was exactly like Taeri, and he hated it, and he hated how much he wanted to protect them.

"That's nice," he muttered, and averted his gaze. "Which way do we go?"

Miro stepped past him, splashing through a puddle, making Zarando's ghostly reflection flee. "This way."

Jagemir walked past him too, casting a quick glance at Zarando. He knew, didn't he? Zarando had a feeling this guy knew way too much, noticed everything. He could tell from those eyes, the way Jagemir looked at him. It was good that Jagemir wasn't his enemy.

After standing there indecisively for a few seconds, the arm with his sword hanging limply at his side, Zarando shrugged and followed Jagemir. He better get on with it, then. The sooner he completed this job, the sooner he could leave this wretched rainy place.

They took a path that might once have been a thriving road, but had since been overgrown with grass and weeds. The landscape didn't change much during their walk — grassy hills,

specked with colourful flowers. A few trees now and then, but they steered clear of anything Zarando would call a forest. No houses. A lot of wind, an icy wind that had a way of finding even the tiniest piece of bare skin and chilling it to the bone. His toes had long lost feeling, as had the hand that was carrying his sword. If he wouldn't be so cold, he'd be complaining about it non-stop – but bial, he was cold.

Zarando swapped his sword to his other hand and put his freezing hand inside his shirt, against his bare stomach. The shock of cold made his eyes tear up, and he cursed softly underneath his breath. For the millionth time, he considered just dropping his sword, leaving the cursed thing behind forever. He couldn't, he knew he couldn't, but bial, did he want to.

Jagemir, who walked in front of him, slowed his step just enough to end up walking beside Zarando. For a while, Jagemir just walked there, quietly matching Zarando's pace, not even looking at him. Zarando didn't mind; he wasn't really in the mood for conversation.

When Zarando swapped his sword again to warm his other hand against his stomach, Jagemir finally spoke up.

“Where did you get it?”

Zarando glanced at the sword. “I don't recall.”

He did recall. He had received it on his 15th birthday, during a party organised by Taeri. Daevi had taken him outside, to the dark training grounds, and had shown Zarando a pair of swords she had made. She had been a marvellous blacksmith already, a true prodigy, and Zarando had been in awe at both of the swords.

“For you and Taeri,” Daevi had explained. “You can choose first, because it's your birthday.”

Zarando had known Taeri's sword preferences by heart, so of course he had chosen the sword that Taeri would like least, even though Taeri would have been content with either of them. Daevi had teased him relentlessly about that afterwards, but he never cared. Taeri's happiness mattered more.

Jagemir's voice broke through his thoughts. “It looks like one of the legendary Twin Swords.”

“It does?” It did. Zarando was well aware of this.

“Yeah. Forged by the legendary Daevi-ri.”

Zarando couldn't help but snort. “Legendary. Ha.”

Their feet swished through the grass, sloshed through the puddles of mud. Zarando could feel Jagemir studying him, studying his sword. The boy wasn't fooled, he knew that. But as long as Jagemir stopped asking questions Zarando didn't feel like answering, it didn't matter.

Zarando switched the sword to his other hand again. He needed to find a sheath soon; his arms were getting sore. And would he even need this thing for his job? Holes didn't get fixed by fighting them, as far as Zarando knew at least. Holes got fixed by manual labour or magic, the same way they were caused. He didn't really like either option.

On the other hand, if this God-Regnant Assie was his job, he might need his sword after all. People could definitely be fixed with swords; hitting them hard enough with one never failed to stop them from causing problems.

“Eh, guys? We might have a problem.”

Zarando stopped, just like Miro in front of him had done, and followed Miro's gaze to some spot down the hill, where two figures were keeping watch on both sides of a large bridge. Zarando raised an eyebrow. “What's the issue? We aren't doing anything illegal, are we?”

Miro scratched their neck. “Err, yes and no. Technically, we are allowed to cross this bridge.”

“But...?”

“Well...” They chuckled awkwardly. “I'm pretty sure I forgot our passes.”

“Why would we need passes to cross a bridge?” Something about it just didn't click in Zarando's mind. Actually, nothing about it clicked in Zarando's mind. The bridge didn't even look that important to him. It wasn't leading to some fancy city, or a palace even. No, it was just leading to grassy hills identical to the ones they had been travelling through all day.

Miro stared at him as if he'd gone mad. “Because they don't want just anyone crossing into a higher ring? What if

we're bandits?"

"Can't anyone become a bandit?" Zarando frowned. "What if we weren't bandits before crossing, but decided to become bandits after crossing?"

"He has a point." Jagemir was cleaning his nails with a dagger that he had conjured up. "Everyone can become a bandit."

Miro looked exasperated. "But the passes! They make sure that... only certain people can cross. Good people, you know?"

"Okay." Zarando didn't have enough interest in the conversation to continue arguing. "So how do we get passes?"

"It's a process that can take days. You have to send an official request to the God-Regnant —"

"Assie."

"Yes, Assie. Then, she looks at your information, and decides if you can be trusted. If she approves, the passes need to be fabricated, which can take a few days, and they are then delivered to your home."

"Ah." Zarando scratched his chin. "So, it'd be faster to just go back and get them." Except that'd still leave him without a pass. Plus, he was in no mood to walk all the way back through soggy country.

"Do *you* have a pass?" It was Jagemir who asked him the dreaded question. Of course it was Jagemir.

He decided to be honest for a change. "No."

"Then walking back has little use." Jagemir went back to cleaning his nails with his dagger. "I say we stab them."

Miro sent Zarando a panicked look, as if they expected Zarando to offer help with this situation. Little did they know that Zarando was about to agree with Jagemir.

"Sounds good." He lifted his sword. "You take the right one, I the left?"

"No, stop!" Before they could go anywhere, Miro had grabbed them both by the shoulder. "I don't want any more deaths on my conscience."

Zarando almost asked them about the word 'more' — almost. The only thing holding him back was that this wasn't

the time for some lengthy story. He would have to ask Miro later.

“So, what do you propose?” He asked instead.

Miro sighed, a relieved one. “We sneak past them. The river is quite shallow not far from here. We can easily wade through.”

Scrunching his nose, Zarando glanced at his shoes. Of course his feet had to get ksairing wet again. Of course they did, and just when they were so close to being dry. He groaned.

“Alright. Let’s ksairing wade through that ksairing river.” If the bial guards wouldn’t stop them, that is. They weren’t being very inconspicuous, arguing on top of this hill. But they could always decide to stab them later – Zarando didn’t doubt for one second that he and Jagemir could take those guards easily, even though he had never seen Jagemir fight. Miro had given him a reputation, and Jagemir had done nothing to refute it.

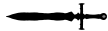
Miro nodded and strolled down the hill, apparently without a thought in their mind, because they strolled straight towards the guards. The guards, who had spotted Miro, straightened their backs and put their hands on their swords.

Zarando exchanged a glance with Jagemir before following Miro down the hill, his own hand on his sword as well. Not that he actively chose to do that – if he removed his hand from his sword, it would fall, and Daevi would be mad at him forever. But still, his hand was on his sword.

As soon as they were in earshot of the guards, Miro smiled widely and raised their arm in a greeting gesture. “Good afternoon! You two look cold, care for some hot soup? Me and my friends were just discussing having some.”

Zarando exchanged another glance with Jagemir. This wasn’t what they had planned at all. What the faeloith was Miro doing?

CHAPTER THREE



I would never do anything illegal

To Zarando's disappointment, the guards happily accepted Miro's offer, and within minutes Miro had set up their portable stove. As a result, Zarando now found himself sitting cross-legged on the ground, next to one of the guards. The only thing that separated his butt from the damp grass was a thin sheet that Miro had fished out of their backpack.

Zarando shifted a bit. Even though he had only been sitting here for a few minutes, the cold had already started to seep into his butt bones. How much longer was this going to take? He wasn't even hungry. Why the ksat had Miro decided that this was the perfect time for soup? What were they planning, and why hadn't they shared it with him and Jagemir?

He glanced at Miro, who was sprinkling some sort of dried herbs in their pot. They seemed extremely focused. Maybe they were making poison? That would be quite smart, the guards would never see it coming. But then what was that comment about not wanting any more deaths on their conscience?

Zarando frowned and stared at his hands, studying the lines on them as if they held the answer. No deaths, so no poison. Or...

Of course. Miro *was* using poison, only not a deadly one. They must have thought of a poison that'd incapacitate the guards without causing any harm, a sleeping drug or

something. They'd be able to safely sneak past, without getting their feet wet. Amazing.

"Where did you get that sword?"

Zarando blinked and directed his attention to the guard who had asked the question. They had a pretty intriguing face, with two unequal eye colours: blue and yellow. It reminded him of his cat, Seaz. He hoped Seaz was doing well without him. Historically, she was quite good at taking care of herself, but he still felt guilty about leaving her alone so often.

"My grandma gave it to me."

As soon as the words had left his mouth, Zarando realised he had made a mistake. He had *just* told Jagemir that he couldn't recall where he had gotten it. Mere minutes ago. Ksat. He was getting sloppy.

He almost cast a glance at Jagemir, to see if he'd noticed, but he stopped himself. He could already *feel* that Jagemir had noticed, that Jagemir was studying him, watching him panic. He could *feel* the boy thinking, drawing conclusions, formulating questions for later. Ksat. He didn't like questions.

"Your grandma must be very kind, to gift you such a beautiful sword," the guard said, drawing his attention again. They drew their own sword. "I got mine from family as well, but my family values simplicity over elegance, so it's not as beautiful. But it's sturdy, and it means a lot to me." The guard tenderly traced the symbols on the hilt with their finger. It was some kind of fruit, Zarando noticed, a fruit surrounded by petals that looked like they were gently floating on a summer breeze. A family crest, maybe?

Zarando smiled at the guard. "Yours is beautiful too. There's beauty in simplicity." Taeri used to say that to him, too, every time he called himself simple. It had always been a comfort to him that Taeri thought that. Maybe it could be a comfort to this guard too.

"Soup is ready!" Miro's cheerful voice interrupted his wistful thoughts. A few seconds later, Jagemir pushed a warm bowl into his hands. Zarando let out an involuntary sigh; he hadn't realised how cold his hands had been until now. Bial wind.

For a moment he just sat there, soaking up the warmth from the bowl. When his hands were decently warm again, he put the bowl to his mouth and took a big sip – which he spat out immediately, coughing.

“What the ksat?” He put his bowl down and wiped his mouth before glaring at Miro. “You were supposed to poison *them*, not *us*!”

Miro looked up at him wide-eyed, their expression mirrored by the guards, who had stopped drinking their soup.

“They what now?” The one with the fruit-crested sword asked, at the same time as Miro muttered “Poison?”

Zarando was too angry to care that he had just revealed their plan to the guards. “Yeah, why the ksat else would this taste like denní leaves, a known poison?”

Miro’s face was blank. “What now leaves? I’ve never heard of those. It’s just normal soup man, I didn’t put anything weird in it.”

Meanwhile, the guards had risen to their feet, their faces wary. “It did taste different from normal soups,” the fruit-crested one whispered to the other, but not soft enough for Zarando not to hear. The non-fruit-crested one drew his sword.

“I’ll have to let you know that attempting to poison an employee of the God-Regnant is forbidden by law,” he said sternly. “If this was truly your intention, we will have to apprehend you.”

Miro rose to their feet as well, shaking their head profusely. “No, no no no. That was never my intention. I don’t know what he’s on about. To be honest, I don’t even know him that well.”

Frowning, Zarando looked at Miro, then at the guards. “Wow. That’s low. Just this morning, you said we were friends.”

Jagemir leaned back in the grass. “He’s right. Miro called him a friend.”

“Jagemir!” Miro hissed, but then they slunk down defeated. “Well, alright. He’s a friend. But that doesn’t mean I agree with him.”

Zarando smiled. “That’s okay. I don’t always agree with me either.”

One of the guards – the fruit-crested one – cleared their throat. “I’m afraid we are going to have to capture you for the time being – at least until we have cleared up what your intentions were. You can go with us willingly, or we can use force. Your choice.”

Zarando sighed. Seemed like the stabbing plan was back on – well, maybe without the stabbing, since Miro was obviously a bit particular about that. He glanced at his sword. He could easily take them, just knock them out with the flat side of it. Then they’d be able to cross the bridge, and...

Before he could finish the thought, Jagemir had jumped up and kicked both guards with lightning speed against their heads. Without a sound, they collapsed, dazed expressions on their faces. Zarando looked at Jagemir incredulously. The skill that took... That one really could fight well. If he didn’t know any better, he’d think Jagemir was born with Earine’s blood, like Zarando.

Miro frowned and prodded the guard closest to them with their bowl. “You didn’t kill them, did you?”

Jagemir smiled. “Of course not. I would never do anything illegal.”

Still smiling, Jagemir sauntered across the bridge. Zarando shivered. He would never want that guy to be his enemy. Never.

“So, what was that about den... something leaves?” Miro asked, slowing their pace such that it matched Zarando’s. They had not wanted to leave the ‘crime scene’ before having laid down the guards as comfortable as possible, an apology note stuffed in one of their pockets. They had even left some kind of potion for the headache. It was almost annoying how goodhearted Miro was, with their conscience and all. Bah.

Still, Zarando was glad that he hadn’t been the one to knock out the guards. And although he didn’t feel like determining why exactly, he was sure it had something to do with Miro, with the way Zarando kept seeing Taeri’s face in

theirs.

Zarando shook his head as he realised that Miro was still watching him expectantly, waiting for an answer about the denní leaves. He shrugged. “I don’t know. It tasted like denní leaves, so I thought it was poisoned.”

“Tarmi flowers.” Jagemir’s voice was calm. “They were tarmi flowers.”

Zarando frowned. Oh. That made a lot of sense; tarmi flowers were famous for tasting remarkably similar to denní leaves. Jumping to conclusions so quickly had made him make a fool of himself, and he could barely resist the urge to hit himself for his stupidity. He clenched his jaw, an uneasy feeling settling in his stomach. Ksat.

“But what are denní leaves?” Miro seemed more curious than anything. “I’ve never heard of those. What do they look like?”

Zarando shrugged again. “Just... leaves. Purple.”

“I have heard about them. They’re legendary, just like Daevi-ri.” Jagemir stared straight at him. “Rumoured to mess with people’s mind so bad it always ends in homicide. Would have been a poor choice to use in this scenario.” It was the most Zarando had ever heard Jagemir talk.

Pursing his lips, Zarando glanced at the sky, where dark clouds were gathering quickly. Jagemir was right. Zarando knew first-hand about the effects of denní leaves. Once, a long time ago, he had unsuspectingly ingested them, mistaking the taste for tarmi flowers. Luckily they had found traces of denní leaves in his blood just before he would be sentenced to death – changing his sentence to a life of regret. It was more of a curse than a blessing that he hadn’t been himself – if he had been himself, maybe he would have been able to justify what he had done.

Zarando sighed. “Well.”

For a few seconds, the only sounds were the rustling of the grass and the thumping of boots on the earth. Zarando cast a glance at Miro, who seemed deep in thoughts.

“What about you, what was that soup thing about? I thought we had agreed to sneak past them and wade through

the river?”

Miro scratched their head. “It suddenly occurred to me that friendliness might work,” they explained sheepishly. “The power of friendship, and all. Overcoming obstacles with kindness.”

Zarando couldn’t keep in a snort. “You read too many books.”

“Maybe so. But at least I come up with other solutions than ‘just stab it’.”

“Yeah, solutions that don’t work.”

Miro crossed their arms defensively. “Only because you started blabbering about poisons. Seriously, the timing of that...”

“Just leave it.” Jagemir’s voice was curt. “It’s probably some trauma of his.”

Zarando almost gasped at that. The audacity. The sheer audacity to psychoanalyse him, just like that, and be right about it. What the ksat?

To his surprise, Miro came to a halt to look at Zarando, concern in their eyes. “Oh, I’m sorry man. Do you want to talk about it?”

Zarando averted his gaze. “No.” Why would he want to talk about his traumas? They were none of their business. *He* was none of their business. He was just tagging along so that he could do his biual job and leave this biual world. Return to Seaz for a short break, before continuing with the next job, and the next, for eternity, or at least until someone killed him.

He felt a soft hand on his shoulder, heard Miro’s kind voice say “That’s okay”, and he had to use all his willpower not to break. Why in the world did Miro have to remind him so much of Taeri? Why would the gods do that to him? Hadn’t they punished him enough?

Before long it started to rain again, a weary rain that soaked them all instantly, that made Zarando wish he had been born with Uris’ blood instead of just Earine’s blood. Uris’ blood would at the very least give him more resistance against the cold, and the wet that had — once again — soaked his socks.

They sought shelter underneath a small clump of trees, but it did little against the rain that got blown in their faces by the icy wind, or the fat drops that trickled through the canopy. Shivering, they huddled against the trunk of a tree, where the soil was the driest. For a second, Zarando considered using his magic to warm himself. He, however, quickly decided against it: the further he was from the Gift, the slower his mana regenerated, and he didn't want to be caught unprepared in case of emergency.

A flash lit up the hills around them, followed by a loud crack. Zarando shifted from one butt cheek to the other. The soil was getting wet, his trousers were damp. Great day, really. Made him wish he was an Administrator, able to sit on his butt all day and do literally nothing – he probably wouldn't even notice if all Administrators were gone, that's how little they did. As was evident from the complete lack of information they had given him about this job, and every previous job. Bunch of lazy ksats. But would Centric ever reprimand them? No, of course not. The Administrators were never wrong, it was always the Field guys' fault.

Another flash, this time almost immediately followed by a crack. The thunder was getting closer, and if this world was anything like Tijor, they should move. It wouldn't be a great addition to his day if they were to be caught underneath these trees when one of them would be struck by lightning.

"We should move." Jagemir had reached the same conclusion. The guy gestured to a small ditch nearby. "There."

Zarando was just about to run when he noticed that Miro was just sitting there, staring into the distance, a frown on their face. Their hands fidgeted with some kind of necklace they had presumably pulled out from under their shirt. Zarando glanced at the ditch, at Jagemir who was already halfway there, then back at Miro. He scratched his ear. "Miro?"

Miro looked at him, their eyes wide, and Zarando almost dropped his sword. Stop looking so much like Taeri, biu it!

"Do you think they'll be alright?"

Zarando squinted. "Who?"

"The guards. At the bridge. We didn't exactly leave them

in a safe place, and – ” A deafening bang interrupted them, followed by a loud creaking noise. Jagemir appeared next to them as if out of thin air, grabbed Miro’s arm, and ran. Dazed, Zarando followed him, skidding and sliding until they collapsed in the wet grass of the ditch. Raindrops ran down his face, and he had to blink a few times before he could see clearly again. His vision cleared up just in time for him to see the tree they had been sheltering under sway and, with the eeriest creaking noise he could imagine, collapse until it hit the ground with a thud. Zarando shuddered. That had been close.

He cast a glance at Miro, who was staring blankly ahead of them once again, fidgeting with their necklace. Zarando clenched his jaw, silently cursing himself. He should’ve moved faster. Dragged Miro with him, instead of wasting time talking. Miro had almost died, for the gods’ sake! And Zarando couldn’t – he couldn’t let Taeri die again.

Even if it was just someone who reminded him of Taeri.