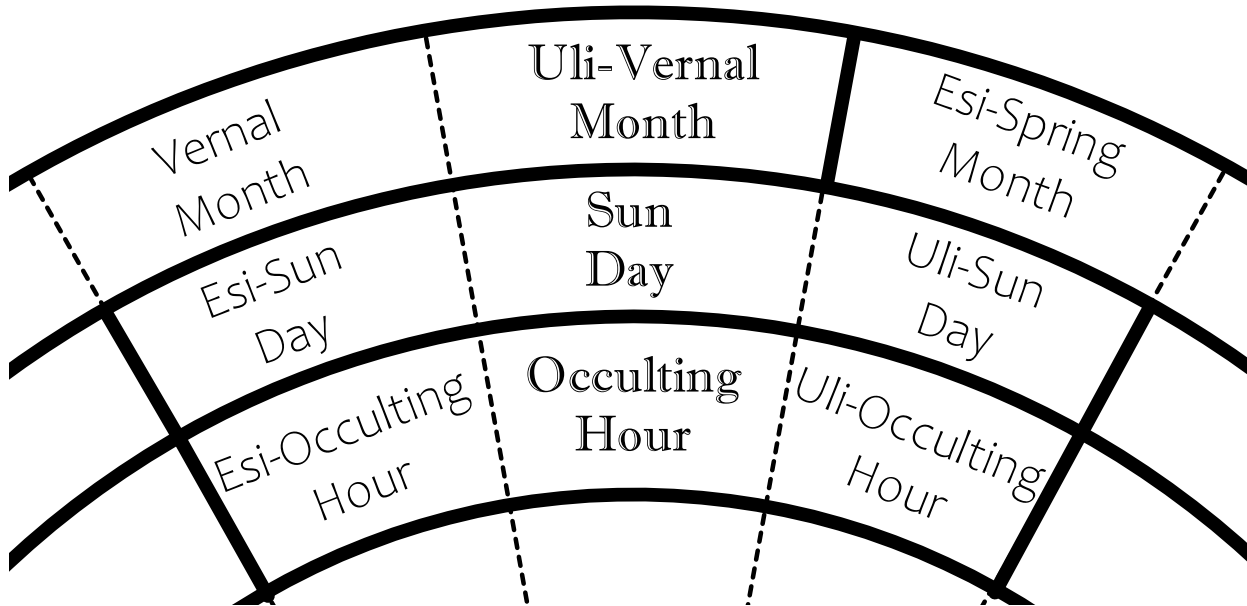


Chapter 2: A Way Out

YEAR 647



STATICUS listened and heard the Water Clock chime its Hourly Song. He also heard Tandall approaching, and by the sound of his expletives, Tandall was in no mood to sing and dance along with the Clock's cadence.

Backing away from his door, Staticus' thoughts frantically wished for Olen to take this chance to run to his room.

If he was even there.

Waiting for Olen to return was nerve-wracking. Time went by so weeping slowly that Staticus' Mind had earlier wandered into bouts of dread. Would Olen find a way out of here and run off without him?

Deep down, Staticus did not think Olen would do it even if an opportunity to flee presented itself. Olen just had too much integrity in him to leave Staticus behind. But a part of him hoped Olen had found a way out. If he did, then *maybe* he'd come back and get good old Staticus out of here, too. Visions of escape swam through Staticus' brain as he sat there by his door waiting, listening, and hoping.

After what seemed like an Eternity, Staticus heard noises from far away and then the rhythmic beat of heavy footsteps coming up the stairs at the other end of the hall.

That was bad. Olen would not have tread so heavily. That was an Endemic Guard coming up the stairs.

Olen had said that he would signal Staticus upon his return and because Stat hadn't heard anything from him yet, that Guard was up here, and Olen was not. That would be bad for Olen when they found him missing from his room.

If they found him missing.

There was only one thing Staticus could hope for: he had to distract that Guard from checking out Olen's room. Then maybe, just maybe, Olen could sneak back into his room after the Endemic Guard had left his door and came over here. Olen was possibly hiding down there somewhere, believing he was done for.

After arriving at the top floor, Staticus heard the Guard bark something down the hall from somewhere near Olen's door and Staticus knew he had to act fast. So, raising trembling arms, Stat clenched his teeth and began slamming his fists repeatedly against his heavy door.

"Help!" Staticus had yelled, hoping to turn the Guard away from Olen's door. "Quick help! Before it gets me!"

Sure enough, the Guard responded and unfortunately, it was Tandall, the ugly and fiercest one, who was barking near Olen's door.

Great! What was that Biterash doing up here so soon? Staticus knew things would not end well for him Tonight, but Staticus continued his charade.

For Olen's sake.

"Whazzis?" Tandall slur-screamed in Staticus' direction. The diversion worked and Staticus could hear Tandall marching towards his end of the hall along with the bongs of the Water Clock. "Whazz'up wit'you Today? You Half-Breeder Teamite! Didn' I warn you 'nough already?"

The chiming of the Clock ended and Tandall had his nose to the peephole on Staticus' door. "You Squeal!" Tandall continued rampaging. "What you doin' outta bed?"

“There... there’s something in my r... room!” Stat stammered. His fear of Tandall was real enough, even though the story he was making up was fake. “There are noises! I can’t see it!”

“You ‘fraid of’ a weepin’ Mulchratt? Iz’ that it? Born alive! You waste m’ time!” Tandall then turned his ugly face to look down the hall as if he had heard a noise from down there. Stat, wide eyed, hoped it wasn’t Olen that had distracted him.

It wasn’t.

“Sturn!” Tandall roared down the hall. “Iz’ that you down there? You back yet?”

A muffled response came from somewhere near the stairs. Staticus could not hear what it said.

“Get up here and bring a lantern! We’ve got t’ teach Half-Stock here ‘nother less’n!” Stat didn’t think Tandall was talking about teaching him some Brickets. Stat swallowed hard and nervously caressed his sore hand. This had better be worth it!

After a beat, a soft glow of light approached. Tandall continued looking down the hall and bellowed, “Wait, Sturn! Stop there an’ lock Olen’s door. I jus’ noticed that it’s still unlocked. You musta forgot t’ lock it when you threw ‘im in bed! He coulda got out! Gnashes! I am *surrounded* by Fruitlings! Hurry up! Get over ‘ere wizzat light!”

Stat was speechless. Weeping and wailing! Tandall must have tried Olen’s door! Tandall did not seem too alarmed about it, so he must not have noticed that Olen was gone. Staticus’ distraction must have caught Tandall in the Tick of Time. With that door now locked, Olen would have a hard time sneaking back into his room!

A moment later, the hallway brightened, and Staticus heard Sturn coming close with a lantern. Not a Lectric one, as those were not very portable, but an oil lit one. Tandall grabbed it from Sturn and shone it through the peephole of Staticus’ door.

His room lit up. There were now serious tears welling in Stat’s eyes.

“You wait ‘ere, boy,” Tandall spat, “and I’ll show you whata Mulchratt looks like! Sturn! Open th’ door.”

Stat heard the keys jangle inside his door lock and the door opened. Stat backtracked up onto his bed and sat down on his sore hand. Tandall,

and then Sturn, lumbered in, enlightening the room up more with their lantern. Their odours also filled in the small space. With their two massive bodies blocking the way out, there was no hope of running for it.

“Sturn,” Tandall grated through his teeth. “Hold this.”

Tandall extended his muscular arm and gave the lantern back to Sturn. The look on Tandall’s ugly face looked dark and penetrating.

At least it was not possible for him to look any uglier.

O LENTHRA was hiding and peeking just behind the partly closed door inside the Lav when Sturn and Tandall ungraciously strode into Staticus’ room. With sweet relief, neither Tandall nor Sturn had seen him yet, even when Sturn ran past him a Minute ago holding the lantern.

That relief soured when Sturn locked Olen’s own door. It seemed, however, that neither of them knew Olen was out of the room yet. Maybe his Dummy in the bed had fooled them for now.

What had *really* saved Olen’s freaked out behind was good, brave Staticus. Had Staticus not distracted the Guard and given Olen the time to slip into the Lav, then Olen would have been caught for sure.

Poor Stat! If Staticus survived until Morning, after the brutal punishment Tandall was sure to inflict on him, Olen would not hear the end of it.

The Lav was a small room across from the stairwell at this end of the hall. Its door was usually left ajar unless someone was inside using it. Sturn did not pay it any mind when he rushed up the stairs and past it, with a lit lantern, to do his Chief’s bidding.

The Lav had a cold wooden bench with a hole in it, a bucket of water, some rags, and other cleaning supplies. This was also the place to dump and wash the bedpans. It did not smell so great, even after a thorough cleaning. The hole in the bench led to a smooth wooden duct about four Fingerprints wide which ran down to the Cess Pit in the Keep’s Sub-level.

With both Guards in Stat's room, Olen knew Stat was giving him a chance to get back into his own room. Olen had to take advantage of this opportunity.

More shouting came from Stat's direction, followed by a loud howl. Olen cringed. He hated it that Stat was hurting because of him. Olen regretted taking off and exploring without thinking this whole thing through. If only he could get back into his now locked room. How would Olen get back in?

A solution slammed Home. The key! It had worked in the room opposite of this Wing. So, why not here? There could only be so many weeping keys for this unforgiving Keep. It would be absurd to have a different key for every single door here. Sturn's keyring would not be big enough. Some door locks just had to be the same!

Olen put the mysterious ball of twine he was still holding into his pocket and pulled out the key again. Tiptoeing out into the hall, Olen heard another shout and wail come from Stat's room. Mulchrats? Tandall was screaming something about Mulchrats.

Instinctively, Olen ran past Sahindra's room to try the key in his own room first. Gnashes! The key didn't work.

Sweating, Olen backtracked to Sahindra's door, put the key in, and turned. The door opened a bit with a *crack!* Olen stood there, his heart *screaming* to be free of his body. Olen did not want to go in. There would be too much pain inside. Too many grisly memories.

Olen's hand trembled, and the scar on his back tickled. A loud "Sorry! Please!" came from down the hall and Olen, with a swallow of saliva, found the courage to open Sahindra's door wide enough to slip in. He quickly closed the door and locked it with the key.

A wave of nostalgic smells and shadows flooded Olen's senses as he looked around Sahindra's room. Everything was just as he had last remembered it: the window, the cabinets, the bed, the book shelves—all undisturbed since the last time Olen had been in here.

There were some exceptions: the door to his own room now had two Rauter brackets attached to each side of the door, with a heavy bar across both brackets. There was also a heavy desk wedged up against that door.

The clutter all over the floor was also just as Olen remembered.

Olen meandered through the mess, trying not to touch anything, and went to the desk that sat up against the door leading to his own room.

Olen pulled on the desk just a little. It made a grating noise as it scraped across the wooden floor, but Olen did not care.

Olen then lifted the bar off the two Rauter brackets and laid it gently on the desk. Opening his door just a crack, Olen was thin enough to squeeze through and close the door again.

Olen was leaning on his own door in relief when, right away, Olen noticed the Guards were also back in the hall. Olen could see the light from their lantern through his own door peephole and he could also hear them approaching.

Dashing to his bed, Olen threw all his clothes that lay there towards a far corner, out of view. His bedpan crashed to the floor with a loud clanging noise. A moment later, Tandall's ugly face appeared in the peephole with the oil lantern brightening up the room. Olen sat up.

"Now, whazzwrong wit' you?" Tandall slurred out.

"I...", Olen stuttered, "I dropped my bedpan. Is Stat okay? I heard him screaming about Mulchrats."

"Never y'mind! Just get t'sleep. I've had 'nough of you two!" Tandall wiggled the door latch to confirm that it was still locked and whisked away. The two Guards continued down the hall with the light departing with them.

Olen did not move, though his insides felt as if the whole ground was shaking with the way his heart was pounding. Listening to make sure that there were no Guards out there, Olen took a shaky breath, and opened a tight fist where the key had left an imprint because of how hard he had been gripping it. The key had been sticking out of his fist the whole time and Tandall did not see it! Relief again washed over Olen when he realized his success: he had found a key.

He had found a way out.

STATICUS smiled as he rubbed the new, swollen prominence on his cheek. It hurt like Rapture, and it was worse than the other welts

Tandall had given him, but at least it wasn't bleeding. Stat didn't care. Olen did it! Somehow, Olen had gotten back into his room!

Staticus did not know for sure if his Mulchrats tirade helped Olen out or not, but it was worth the shot. Stat was sure Olen would be *very* apologetic in the Morning.

Most likely, Olen would insist on doing most of the rougher chores on the Morrow. Well, technically, later that Morning now. Not that Stat would take advantage of the situation. Staticus revered Olen too much to do that kind of thing. Stat was, though, desperate to know what had happened while Olen was away.

Whatever it was, it would have to wait until Morning. The distance between their rooms was too great to make communication possible, so Stat rolled back into bed. His hand, head, and backside thumped the steady rhythm of *pain... pain... pain...* coinciding with the pumping of his own heart.

Drowsiness descended upon Staticus. It wasn't long before a soft tap came at his door, followed by a whisper. Just like what had happened earlier. Staticus was dreaming; or so he thought.

The rapping came again, a little louder this time, and Staticus woke up and sat straight up on his bed. Was that a dream? Now he *was* hearing Mulchrats! He blinked awake, and his quickening heart amplified the throbbing pain.

Tap... tap... whispers. It couldn't be! That was real!

Staticus got up and limped to the door again. It was Olen, and he was out! There was no way Staticus would help Olen again and take another licking from Tandall Tonight. "How in your Heavens, Olen?" Stat whisper-shouted through the window. "Your door is locked. I heard them lock it!"

"I found a key," Olen whispered back, constantly looking back towards the other end of the hall. It appeared to Staticus that Olen was most likely ready to peel back to his room the moment he heard anything from downstairs.

"No way!" Stat said, amazed at Olen's luck. "Can you unlock my door with it?"

“Dunno. Hold on,” Olen replied and there was some clicking by his door latch, but the door did not open. “Sorry Stat, it so far unlocks only Sahindra’s door. My room connects to it. The key might unlock other doors, but I’m not sure.”

“You found *that* while you were out? That’s how you got back to your room after they locked it?” Stat asked, still amazed at what Olen had found.

“Yeah, I found it on the other side of the Keep. Where you were earlier Today. Some doors were unlocked when I went, but I almost got caught. I don’t want to risk *that* again, so I need to get back to bed. We need to think this through and come up with a safer plan... I only came out here to say I’m sorry for getting you hurt. You saved my scarred skin back there. Distracting the Guard was a gnashing bright idea. I’m so *sorry*, Staticus!”

This was a victory! Stat had to tell Olen that and lift his mood: “You got a key, Olen! I would break a *leg* for a chance to get a key like that! Don’t worry about me, buddy. We have each other’s backs. Wow... Sahindra’s room... Weeping and wailing! I’ve never been in *there* before. You’re right, this changes everything. Listen Olen, I am okay. Honestly. Get off to bed before they get up here again. If we get a chance, we will talk about this on the Morrow.”

“Okay. You’re right Stat, Heavens’ Fortune has shone on us Tonight. Again, thank-you.” Olen then left so soundlessly that Staticus could hear nothing in the cold, dark, empty hall.

Staticus shuffled off to bed, again ignoring the pain. There was so much to think about now that they had hopes of escaping!

Soon, the weariness of the Day caught up to Staticus, and he fell asleep, enormous feet dangling off his bed, with no more interruptions.

RULON of House Dennar, Elder and Seer of the Church of the First, still stood in the cool Vernal Night beside the closed Front Gate of the Keep to the Governor’s Rikker Mine, his long white beard rippling in the windy drafts.

He was cold and alone, as he always was these Days when he was out here, his blanket tossed to the side of the Road. All those Years waiting, all those Years preparing, came down to a few quick Breaths Tonight—

And he almost missed it.

Twice!

Still panting with relief, his aging heart pumping faster than it had in Eras, Rulon reverently prayed thanks to his Almighty Father again. He also asked for repentance for lacking in the Faith.

For many, many Years, Rulon had been here looking out for the Prince of Luomaan; first as a Worker in the Mine, and then, after he was banished from smelting the Rikkur here, as a Serf. During these times, he had only seen the Prince fleetingly; most often from the third floor window above the Gate.

Elder Dennar knew the Prince was kept as a Slave in the Keep in secret. The Governor would never let him out; he was too valuable. Sometimes, Weeks would go by without a hint of his presence, and Rulon would often let his Faith waver. The past few Weeks were exceptionally strenuous, as it was now so close to the upcoming Migration and Eve of the Vernal Equinox.

That meant the Prince had little time. Rulon thought for sure that the boy would be out *Days* ago. The Foretelling was quite specific which Day the events it Foretold would come to pass.

That Day was coming up in exactly a Month's time—less than a Month now if it was, as Rulon figured, now well into the Occulting Hour by now. There were still quite a few things that still had to happen *before* the Day of the Foretelling.

Chuckling to himself, Rulon knew that there seemed to be always room for the Almighty Father to make last-Minute adjustments. Still, the Vernal Migration was only around eight Days away and Rulon hoped that he would have had more time.

Watching for the Prince was difficult because Rulon's eyesight was getting worse, and his body was old, and it tired him out more often than not. Tonight, Rulon had turned away for just a moment and he had almost

missed the Prince running across the top of the Battlements above the Front Gate.

The boy, well adult now—it was hard not to think of the Prince as a boy after all these Years watching him grow up—was obviously trying to stay low and hidden. Heavens' Fortune, at the last moment, Rulon saw the Prince on the Battlements just before he went through the door opposite from the side where the Prince lived.

The only son and Heir of King Razur and Queen Marta of Luomaan did not linger on top, or attempt an escape, like Rulon thought he might.

By the time that Guard came, following the Prince to the other side with the keg, Rulon was almost at the base of the Keep's Front Gate. That keg on the Endemic Guard's shoulder blocked the Guard's view, thank the Heavens!

Package in hand, Rulon was ready for the Prince to come scurrying back across the top. Rulon was not expecting that Guard to come and follow the Prince so closely, and Rulon hoped that the Endemic Guard would not catch the Prince and then come back across the walkway above Rulon dragging the poor Prince by the ear.

Again, Rulon's Faith had wavered at that moment and Rulon wondered how he would ever deliver the package. Rulon had clenched his chattering teeth and waited below, trusting in his Almighty Father that this was *all* according to His Will.

Sure enough, Rulon heard someone, hopefully the Prince, come back through the door up above, alone, and head back towards his side of the Keep.

Rulon threw the package up. He had practiced this toss niners of times with rocks of similar weight to the package. By the end of his practicing, Rulon was getting the stones over the Battlement wall every single time. But what Rulon did not consider was the Aerodynamics of the twine that was wrapped around the stone.

Rulon's initial throw went awry, and the package did not make it past the height of the Battlement. The twined ball just bounced off the wall and then back onto the ground.

Breathing in and stifling a gasp, Rulon grabbed the package from off the ground and tossed it up a little harder. It had just made it, to Rulon's relief, over the top of the wall.

There was a beat, just long enough for Rulon to *hope* that the Prince saw his gift and bend over to pick it up. Then Rulon heard the door on the Prince's side of the Keep open and close and Rulon assumed that the Prince had gone back to his room with his package.

Done. It was done! Why did Rulon ever believe it would not happen?

Then the Guard came back from the other side, following right on the Prince's heels and, just like that, Rulon's Faith had wavered again.

Now, well over a Spell of an Hour later, and with no sign of any more discontent from the Guards for quite some time, Rulon felt satisfied with what he had come here Tonight to do.

Heading back down the Road, Rulon picked up his blanket and wrapped it around himself. Up ahead, hidden in the Woods, his granddaughter's Curelom, Firedrop, would be waiting. It would be a long, dark ride Home. Rulon did not mind that at all. Today was now Sun Day. The Sabbath Day. A Day to prepare for the Sacraments.

A Day to fulfil the next Phase of the great Almighty's Plan.

OLENTHRA sat on his bed and felt the key he had placed under his pillow. He wanted it close, for now, but he would have to hide it better, and soon. Reaching into his pants pocket, Olen pulled out the ball of twine that he had found earlier outside.

It looked just like a ball of twine, but it felt weighted down by something inside. Someone had thrown this thing up to him. Someone *outside* must have seen him dash past and wanted him to have this. Olen was lucky that he got it, as he almost left that walkway without seeing it.

Olen supposed it could have been the old man that had seen him and then thrown this up to him. That Serf was always there, Day and Night, begging for food, or whatever. Would the old man have waited there every single Night for that *one* chance when someone other than a Guard would happen along? Olen thought it very unlikely.

How would that old man know someone would even pass by? Olen was only out there by a fluke chance. There were just too many questions. Perhaps there was something inside the ball of twine that would make sense to all this!

Unravelling the twine, Olen noticed that it was rather long—about three Spans, or the height of his room, he guessed. As Olen unraveled, he discovered there was a piece of paper wrapped around an oval shaped object. The twine was literally tied to the object.

He unwrapped the paper, which had some writing on it, and found that the central object was just a thin, but unusually heavy, black stone.

The stone was concave in the middle, so the twine, which was tightly tied to its centre, would not slip off. The black stone was about a half a Fingerprint thick. Olen held the small stone up by the twine and watched it dangle back and forth for a few swings. Could it be Lodestone? It was heavier than it seemed.

Olen took the Rauter key out from under his pillow and held it near the swinging stone. The two objects stuck together with a small *click*. It *was* Lodestone! Lodestones stuck to all sorts of Metals and they were also used to Power the Lectricity in Generators.

Olen pried the key off and wound the twine around the stone until it resembled a ball again. He put both under his pillow, noticing that two objects were sticking together again. Olen then picked up the piece of paper so he could read what it said.

There was only a single sentence. Handwritten in dark ink, the message was easy to read by the Starlight from Olen's lone window. Even though the text was in simple Basic, the note made little sense: **TAKE THIS STONE TO THE PIT TOMORROW NIGHT**

Olen crinkled his forehead. The Pit? What, the *Cess* Pit? It was the only Pit he knew of. The Master's Mine was not an open Pit Mine, but one with tunnels and drops.

Why would someone go through all this trouble to get him this Lodestone only to end up in the *Cess* Pit? There was no Metal in the *Cess* Pit, only a—grate! There was an old, cast Rauter grate that covered a large hole. A hole that led to an underground Stream, that itself fed into the Layzy River!

One of the worst punishments here in the Keep was the job of cleaning the Cess Pit. All the solid and liquid waste from cleaning, eating, using the Lav, or emptying the bedpans, would be dumped down the holes in the Lavs and then end up in the Cess Pit.

After a while, the odours would be quite rancid in the Lavs and so the Cess Pit would need cleaning. If no one got into huge trouble with the Guards, then they would find some excuse to haul either Olen or Stat down there with a bucket of water and some rags. It was usually Stat.

The Cess Pit, which was reached only via a single door in the Sub-level below the Keep, was small, round, and dug with a slightly concave floor so that any fluids that entered would run to the centre of the room and down through the grate. The door was a good half-Span above the floor so when the grate got clogged, which was often, the waste would be ankle deep.

Holes at the top of the Cess Pit came from various Lavs up above. Disgustingly, waste would sometimes trickle down through those holes while Olen was cleaning, accompanied by distant laughter.

The job was awful: unclog the grate and then scoop all the waste through the many small holes in it. Since there was no light at all, this had to be done completely by touch. After scooping, the walls and floor were then wiped as best as could be done with the limited water in the bucket.

The worst part of the punishment was not the cleaning: it was the waiting. Once the door to the Cess Pit was closed, there was no way out because there was no knob or latch from the inside. It was an inescapable pitch-black Cell. One had to wait, usually until the next Day, for the Guards to open it for you. They would then complain about how badly you stank and then send you off to bathe.

There was no moving that grate. It was hinged so it could be lifted, but the hinge was on the underside of it. The top side was bolted to a lock that was so rusted, even a key would not open it anymore. Even a pry bar would have no effect.

The holes in the grate were also too small for Olen to put his hand through. Maybe if he peeled off a few layers of skin, or broke a knuckle or two, he could fit a hand down there, but Olen would not do that.

Olen and Staticus had tried to open the grate while they were down there. Olen had even once snuck a Spoon in, at Stat's urging, by dropping it down one of the Lav chutes.

Olen could not use it at all; his hand was just too big. The old rusty hinge on the underside was too far away and the angle of it made it impossible to reach. Stat claimed he had had an even worse time with it because of his larger hands.

If it were even possible to open that grate, Olen thought he might be just skinny enough to shimmy down the rocky hole to the small Stream. The water at the bottom was fast moving and very noisy—probably too dangerous to walk in. Olen would have to hope that the grates into and out of the Keep would be easier to open.

Not gnashing likely.

But the Lodestone might fit through the grate-holes. Was someone on the outside trying to free him by attaching something to the stone so he could haul it up? That thought made Olen's heart skip a beat. Who would know that Olen was even in here? Did the Guards talk outside of the Keep about a boy, now an adult, held up in the Keep against his will? Maybe the message was for Staticus instead! More questions.

So why use a Lodestone? The best thing Olen could think of would be to haul up something metal, like another key. A better key! A master key! One that would unlock a door to the outside! The possibilities were endless. Staticus was going to *flip* when he found out.

Olen folded the piece of paper and put it under his pillow with the rest of his treasured loot. He laid down, feeling exhausted. There was so much to think about—and to *not* think about. The key to Sahindra's Bed Chamber had led him into her room. A room Olen had *never* wanted to go back inside again; and yet he had to.

Earlier, Olen had rushed through her Bed Chamber these past few times, but he could not help and see what was in it. He tried to forget what he saw. He tried not to think about what had happened in that room Years ago, but he just could not forget.

The objects in the room were left just as he remembered it, aside from the barred door: the rucksacks, his old pillow, the emptied bookshelf, books all over the floor, the largest of which was the open book of Holy

Writings, and beside it, the dented Vasker water pitcher. The water pitcher that had the bloodstain.

Sahindra's blood.

That dark and Wintry Day, when Olen was almost twelve Namedays old, swam in Olen's head as he drifted off to sleep.