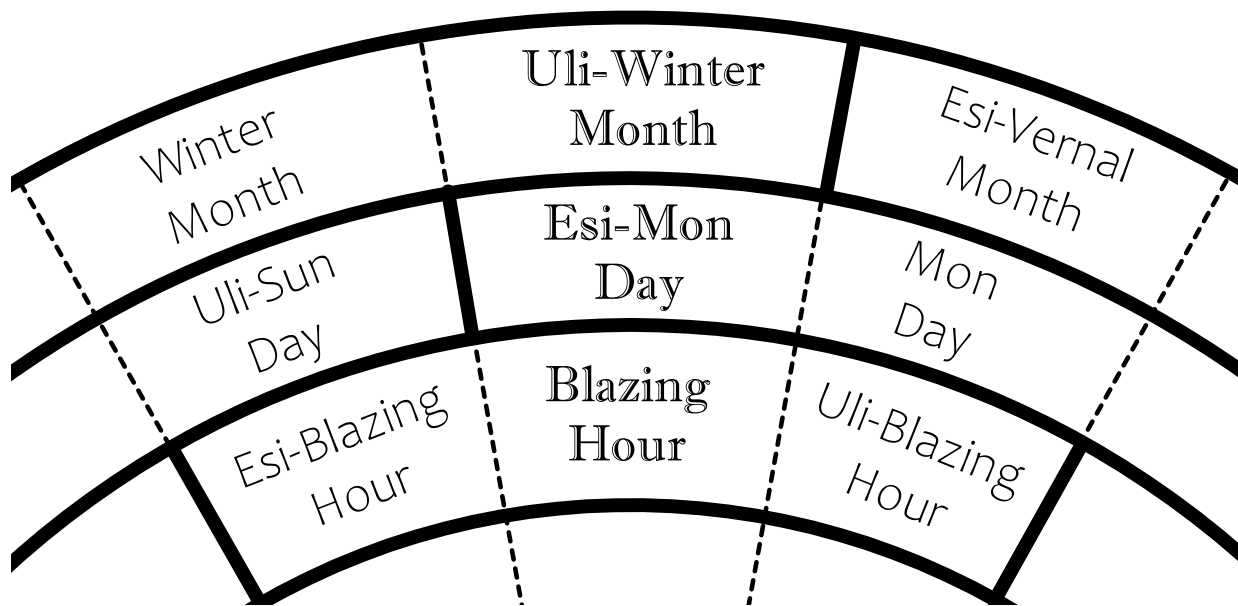


Chapter 3: Sahindra's Room

Seven Years Earlier

YEAR 640



OLENTHRA grumbled as he looked through the bars of his Bed Chamber window with the shutters wide open, in absolute defiance of Sahindra's orders.

It was high Blazing Hour and yet it was still dark and cold outside. Olen's breath puffed out whiffs of condensed Air into the freedom that was out there beyond the walls of the Master's Keep. The Mountain where the Mine was located loomed ominously dark in the background and blocked out some Starlight that illuminated the Inner Courtyard of the Keep.

For all of his almost twelve Years of his life, Olen *hated* the Winters; almost three whole Months of darkness, and the Sun would not rise for at least a few more Weeks yet. At least it was still too cold for Olen to go outside later and clean up the mess the Workers and the other Staff would leave behind.

The Sky was clear enough for the bright Winter Starshine to provide the Keep with crisp visibility. A thick layer of snow lay on the ground, sprinkled with soot from the many chimneys of the Smelter inside the Keep. Olen could see only a few Footpaths in the Courtyard Today.

That was odd.

Today, the sounds that Olen was hearing outside differed from the usual racket. Aside from the constant noise of the River in the distance and the familiar *rum-rum* of the waterwheel that ran the Lectrics, Olen could also hear muffled shouts and voices from what must be a Crowd of People at the Front Gate which was off to Olen's left and out of view.

The constant *tshhh* from the Smelter was also absent. It appeared to Olen that no one was working at the Rikkur Mine Today even though it was Mon Week.

With no breeze was blowing in, Sahindra would still have a fit when she came back with lunch knowing that Olen had opened the shutters. There was no fire or chimney up here on the third floor. Not even the wiring necessary to open a Heating Coil. The Guards had one downstairs, but up here; it was *always* cold. Oh well. Maybe he'd get sick again and then he could skip his work and studies.

With less to do outside, the Winter Months also meant more time to study inside. Sahindra was rather persistent about that. She would rather that Olen study than eat or sleep. She had told him it was vital to learn, learn, learn! Olen had to study reading, speaking, and writing, in the Basic, Ancient, and even that guttural Endemic language.

Sahindra also forced Olen to study the Maths, the Celestial Techs, the Founder Techs, and he even had to spare a few brain cells on Sahindra's pointless Faith Studies. Olen had to memorize multiple passages from her book of Holy Writings that Sahindra kept safe in her own Bed Chamber.

And it was all for what? Sahindra would say nothing to Olen except that one Day, he would leave this place and that he would need to be prepared for the real World. A real World out there past the walls of this Keep and the Front Gate. A World Olen had only heard of, but never seen.

No chance of seeing that World anytime soon. Master Mahan had made it *quite* clear that Olen was going *nowhere*. The Endemic Guards *always* had an eye on him with even supervised Lav visits.

Olen was always denied going beyond the grounds of the Keep. Even Sahindra wouldn't argue his case, as she preferred Olen to stay right where he was and—

Study, study, study!

Oh, and do a fair amount of her chores as well: cleaning, stacking wood for the Guards, fixing and mending clothes, cleaning the Lavs—basically, everything she or the Endemic Guards did not want to do.

While thus reflecting on Olen's miserable life, the Llectric lights of the Keep suddenly winked out and the *rumming* of the waterwheel wound down to a slow stop. The Courtyard darkened a little so that only Stars shone down on it now.

The noises from the Crowd outside also intensified. Olen was not too alarmed. Power failures were a common occurrence and since no Vasker wiring existed up here on the third floor, it had no impact on Olen's meager life.

Olen shivered and realized that it really was getting too cold in here. He closed and bolted the shutters and then turned back to his desk, rubbing some heat back into his arms.

An oil lantern was lit and the door to Sahindra's Bed Chamber was wide open so he could see inside her room. Oil lanterns shone in there, too. The scroll and marker lay empty on the desk where Olen was supposed to translate a passage from the Holy Writings into the Basic Language from memory.

That thick book was on a shelf in Sahindra's room, but Olen was not allowed to go in there and touch it. Now, which Scripture was it?

The Stick of Iris, Chapter two, verses three and four, Olen remembered. Something about not rising until after the One had fallen. Now, was the word "One" supposed to be capitalized? It normally was, but Olen could not remember if it should be in this Scripture passage.

Olen *could* go into Sahindra's room and take a quick peek at the book from her shelf, but he feared Sahindra would know someone had touched her precious book of Holy Writings. Besides, she was most likely

coming back at any moment. Olen hoped it would be soon because he was famished.

Sitting down at his desk, Olen could hear his stomach growling. Sahindra would most likely withhold the sweetened bread until he finished this translation, so Olen began writing with the marker on the scroll what he thought the Scripture passage said in his own Basic language.

Olen was just finishing when he heard a key being used on Sahindra's door. Both her and his hallway doors were always locked. No wandering around, of course!

Lately, it was getting harder and longer for Sahindra to get food up here for whatever reason. Olen could not recall if it was like this last Winter, but it was a nuisance. Olen would even hear the Guards complaining about being hungry all the time and they would often threaten to eat his leg, or a toe, or something, if he did not work fast enough.

Through the open door that adjoined their rooms, Olen could see that it was Sahindra coming in—and she did *not* have any food with her. Great.

Sahindra put her key away in a pocket of her humble, patchy and stitched woollen frock, closed her door, and then came straight towards Olen's own Bed Chamber. In the flicker of the oil lanterns, Olen could tell from her tight lips that she was agitated. He did not think it was *that* cold in here to make her look *that* upset.

Her clothes were dirty from wiping her hands on them all the time. She had long, dark hair which was pulled back and had tufts of grey on the sides. Her aged face was long, thin, and stern looking. Years of working in the Master's Keep took a toll on her and her callused hands. She had been Olen's Caretaker in this Keep for as long as Olen could remember.

Sahindra's dark eyes were wider than usual and quite glossy as she stared at Olen while he sat there, worried, at his desk. Olen was glad that he was sitting where she expected him to be instead of puttering around like he was doing before.

“Come, Olen,” she said. “We’re off to see the Master.” Sahindra then reached out her hand and wiggled her fingers as if to grab him physically through the Air and pull him along.

“But what about...?” Olen started, looking and motioning to his pitiful translation on the scroll, marker in hand.

“Never mind about it,” she interrupted. “Get up! Grab your shoes and coat, we need to go. Now.” Her stare was icy and showed no patience.

Putting his marker down on the desk, Olen stood up and put on his worn leather boots, which were by his bed. His grey matte coat lay on the corner of his wardrobe.

As soon as it was on, Sahindra grabbed Olen by the hand, pulled him out of his room, through her own immaculate room, and then out the door into the hall. She didn’t even bother to douse the lantern lights and lock her door.

Even with his longer legs, it was a challenge not to stumble as Sahindra pulled him down the hallway and past the Lav on the left. There was a commotion of some sort going on outside the window straight ahead, but Olen did not have time to look.

Never letting go, Sahindra raced down the stairs, to the second level where the Guard Room was. Oddly enough, there were no signs of the Guards anywhere. Here, the door to the ground floor was unlocked and Sahindra ripped it open to fly into the stairwell that led down to the main hall.

With no choice but to follow, Olen got worried. Meetings with the Master were infrequent and short, so Olen did not understand what this fuss was all about.

There were no Electric lights open downstairs anywhere because the Power was down. The long hall towards the main Kitchen Room was quiet, dark, and empty. Where were the Kitcheners? It was lunchtime, even for the Guards.

More stairs continued to the Sub-level of the Keep where the Cess Pit was, but Sahindra went straight into the main hall and towards a door that led out to the Inner Courtyard inside the Keep, not bothering with the main doors that led out to the Front Gate. The muffled shouts of a Crowd came from beyond those front doors.

This side door into the Courtyard was also unlocked. Sahindra opened it, and a flutter of snow attached to more cold Air breezed in with the force of her pull. It wasn't snowing now, but a blanket of the stuff, about a half-Span deep, covered the Courtyard almost up to Olen's knees.

A somewhat-used Footpath through the snow led out from this door and then on down various Paths that surrounded many leafless shrubberies, snow covered statutes, and empty fountains inside the Courtyard. To the left, from the Front Gates, the clamour of voices was louder and clearer now, though Olen still could not make sense of what was being said or shouted.

Rushing outside and down one Path in the snow, Sahindra led Olen towards the opposite side of the Courtyard, not looking back. Olen, however, looked around while being pulled along with the snow stinging the flesh around his ankles.

In the Starlight, Olen could see his shuttered window three stories up. All the windows on that top floor were barred. Straining to keep looking behind him as Sahindra dragged him forward, the Front Gate came into full view—and it was shut.

The snow by the front of the Gate inside the Courtyard was not broken in so no one must have come in to work Today, as Olen had suspected. Only now could Olen see the throng of People on the other side of the Gate, opposite the Courtyard he was in, and some of those People were reaching their arms inside as if trying to get their attention.

Even as Sahindra dragged Olen away from the din, Olen could see the larger Endemic Guards in that pandemonium trying to push People away from the Gate.

Olen stopped in his tracks, slipping a little in the snow. The sudden lurch backwards almost brought Sahindra down, too. She turned around to speak, but Olen opened his mouth first. He was tired of being in the dark; and he did not mean that literally. "What's going on?" Olen shouted at her. "Is it another revolt? Are we *really* seeing the Master, now?"

"Yes, Olen," Sahindra impatiently replied. "The Townsfolk want their wages. They came here just a few Spells ago. But we must hurry, we need to..."

Then her eyes diverted to the Crowd by the closed Gate. She squinted, and then looked shocked at something, or someone, she saw there. She let go of Olen. “Rulon?” she whispered to herself.

Olen turned back around, too. The commotion was in full force on the other side of the Gate, despite the Endemic Guards. About six People were facing them at the Gate, almost crushed between the throng of People behind them and the Rauter bars.

There were still too many voices mixed with the Endemic barks to make out anything that they were saying. Olen did not recognize any of them, and by their looks, they were all Smelter Workers. Olen did not know anyone named Rulon.

Sahindra did. She stepped towards the Gates, as if to get a better look, mouthing something to herself. One man at the Gate was waving frantically in their direction. He was thin, bearded and wore standard work clothes. Was that Rulon?

Sahindra turned toward Olen and said, “Stay here, Olen, and don’t go anywhere. I need to talk to someone alone, so don’t move!” Then, with no other explanation, she dashed off towards the Front Gate and the beckoning man, breaking through a new Footpath in the snow and leaving Olen to stand there in the cold.

Seeing Sahindra approach, more men at the Gate began pushing forward as much as they could to get her attention. They were all shouting. Sahindra stayed well back, away from their outstretched arms. No Guards were near the front, so the Brutes did not see her small, thin frame approach.

Cupping her hands around her mouth, Sahindra yelled something at Rulon. Rulon turned his ear to listen. Then he shouted something back while shaking his head. Sahindra also shook her head and pointed off behind her towards the Inner Keep. They went back and forth like this, Sahindra and Rulon using hand motions as much as they could to communicate. Sahindra even pointed at Olen once, causing the man to stare directly at him.

That caused Olen’s scar on his shoulder to freeze up more than it already was. It appeared to Olen that he might have been too far away for the bearded man to see him clearly enough, for the man just shrugged his

shoulders and turned his attention back towards Sahindra. They then began to yell at each other some more.

Other men beside and behind the man who was probably Rulon were also trying to get Sahindra's attention. Finally, Rulon nodded, and left the Gate, blending into the Mob behind him. Sahindra, to the despair of the others, also turned around and trudged back towards Olen, not even bothering to step into her own foot-holes in the snow.

Shivering in the chilly Air, Olen spoke out as she approached: "Who was that? What's this all about?"

Again, she grabbed his hand, more firmly this time, and said, "Never you mind. It was nobody. Come! We have to catch the Master before he goes!" So off they went, towards the other side of the Courtyard and towards the Inner Keep. Frustration and hunger seething inside, Olen kept his mouth shut and allowed himself to be pulled away from the racket behind him.

A wide Path from the Front Gates ran straight towards the main front double doors of the Inner Keep and divided the Courtyard in half. A huge, ugly, and snow-covered statue full of large metallic rings and thick chains sat in the middle of Olen's side of the Courtyard. Sahindra had to skirt around the thing as they moved towards the other side. She was not heading towards those main doors.

The Keep surrounded the whole Inner Courtyard with high side walls used to keep the People out and the "permanent" Servants in. Workers would come in through the Front Gates and then travel down the wide Path and then pass through those front double doors so they could prepare for work at the Smelter or at the Mine that lay up the Mountainside.

The Master's private rooms were also on this side of the Courtyard. Olen only remembered entering the Inner Keep a few times in his short Lifetime.

Instead of using the main front doors of the Inner Keep, Sahindra led Olen towards a door off to the side, and opposite of the Courtyard to the door they had come out of. The Servants and other Scullery used this door. Opening the unlocked door, Sahindra pulled Olen inside.

Grateful to get out of the cold snow, Olen stamped his frozen, booted feet. This large, dark room was a Mud Room for the Staff who lived off the Keep so they could store their belongings and change into their work attire. Dirty boots, frocks, and other Uniforms littered the floor, benches, and cabinets all around.

Light, seeping from the windows and from under the door opposite, illuminated the room only a bit. The light under the door crack flickered as it was not Lectric due to the Power outage.

Stamping the snow from her feet, Sahindra wormed her way through the mess in the darkness towards the opposite door. Opening it, Sahindra pulled Olen into a brightened hallway, and Olen had to squint his eyes a bit. Olen only slightly recognized the wide hall they were in.

A pair of male voices came from down the hall back towards the main Foyer where the main double doors were.

Instead of the regular Lectric lights on the wall, several lanterns of oil, impaled on Rauter pikes at various places, illuminated the hall. Pulling Olen along, Sahindra moved down this hall towards the sound of those voices.

She came to a sudden stop just before an open door on the right. Olen remembered this room as being one of the Master's rooms. The voice Olen recognized first was the husky voice of Kuollut, the Master's Chief of the Guard. That man scared Olen. Even though Kuollut was not Endemic, he was large in stature and tough as nails. Like a Sniffhound, he was always around the Master.

"Those responsible for tampering with the Generator have talked, Master," Kuollut said from inside the room. "They claim allegiance to the Church of the First. They say their leader is Markkus, the head Stabler. He let them in earlier this Morning. They claim he's the one sparking the riot outside."

Markkus. Olen knew him. He was always watching over the Stables out front. Olen used to spend a lot of time with his daughter outside—

"Thank-you, Chief," the Master answered. His voice was always slow, methodical, and cold. "Yes... I know him. Odd. He had my loyalties."

"Orders, Master?" Kuollut asked.

There was a pause, and the Master did not answer right away. The Master was always patient when he spoke.

A drawer opened from somewhere inside the room, and Olen could hear the jingle of metallic Credits being scooped and placed into some kind of container. “Appease the Crowd, Chief, and have these Credits distributed among them. I will deal with Markkus personally when I return. I am already late for my ride North to the Capital. Also, check to see if my Steed is prepared and my Sleigh loaded with crates of my Rikkur. I will deal with Markkus.”

“And the Saboteurs?” Kuollut inquired.

Another pause. “Record their names and release them. With a warning... a *verbal* warning. Then give them some Credits. It appears they were only acting under Markkus’ direction and were only trying to get my attention... or distract it...”

Another pause, as if thoughts took time to swirl and settle in the Master’s head.

“Chief,” the Master continued, “keep the Gates closed until my return and make sure that Generator is operational. I will be gone a Week or two at most. No one works.”

“Yes, Master,” Kuollut replied.

Inside the room, shadows cast by the flickering oil lanterns shuffled around and Kuollut stepped out into the hall, fully garbed in his Chief Uniform of chain mail, boots, and Sword belt. His long dark hair was pulled to the back into his characteristic Cumomtail.

Kuollut took a start at seeing Sahindra there and placed his hand on the Longsword that hung in its scabbard by his side. Turning back towards the room, Kuollut called, “Master, that Scullery woman is here with the boy. I do not know for how long they have been listening in.”

Grabbing Sahindra by the shoulder, Kuollut threw her into the Master’s room through the open door. Olen, still attached to Sahindra’s tight grip, went in alongside her. It felt like both Olen’s heart and scar stood straight out.

The Master stood by a desk littered with papers, scrolls, Credits, books, and markers. He wore warm riding clothes with padded pants and a black cape pinned around his neck. His thin bearded look was plain and

expressionless, and his slick, receding dark hair was combed back. Sahindra and Olen stood there, frozen, for a few Breaths. Olen felt completely exposed.

Master Mahan rose an eyebrow. “That is all, Chief Kuollut,” he said. “Go see to your duties.”

“Yes, Master,” Kuollut replied, and turned and left. Olen heard him stamp away towards the main double doors and out through them.

Master Mahan’s other eyebrow rose. “Ahh, Sahindra. This... is unexpected. As you can plainly see, I am quite busy and must leave now. We will resolve these labour issues. The lights will open soon enough.”

Sahindra found her voice. She stood, back straight, as if defiant. “I am not here about that, Master. It’s about Olen.” She held his arm up because she was still holding onto Olen’s wrist. That grip would leave a mark.

Olen’s heart leapt inside his throat and the cool sensation of the scar on his shoulder blade intensified. Olen stared at Sahindra and then at the Master as his Master’s glare crept toward Olen.

The Master *never* looked at him. His stare was penetrating, probing, as if inspecting every Span and Fingerprint of his body and invading his very Mind. The urge to use the Lav came suddenly and without warning. Olen struggled to hold it in.

“Yes. I see,” the Master said coolly. “You know, Sahindra, Olenthra is forbidden to be here. Especially on a Day like Today. What do you want?”

Sahindra swallowed, clearly shaking, eyes glistening. “In... In a few Months, Olen will be twelve Namedays old. It is time for his Conferring of Authority. You promised... you *promised* that when he comes of Age, he would be disciplined properly in the ways of the Faith. He Adhered four Years ago, and he has sufficiently studied since then. He is ready. I need your permission to see to his final preparations.”

Sahindra finally let go of Olen’s hand, and Olen wrapped the arm it was attached to around himself.

Olen had somewhat of an idea of what Sahindra was talking about. He remembered getting dunked in the cold, fast-moving River beside the Keep by some old man in white robes a long time ago. The Master had

allowed it back then. Maybe Olen should have paid more attention to the Sun Day Sabbath lessons and those Scriptures he had memorized.

After a few more Seconds of probing with those eyes, Master Mahan slowly gathered a few things from his desk and placed them in a satchel that was already wrapped around his shoulder, under his riding cape. When he looked ready to leave, Sahindra opened her mouth to say more but Mahan raised a finger to silence her with another one of his glares.

“Sahindra,” the Master continued, “I hired you on to look after the boy. To raise him and to educate him. I did not mind you teaching him the ways of the Faith. You have done well in that... however, I will take care of any advancements in Authority, personally. His Nameday is still over three Months away. During the Vernal Migration, as I recall.”

“Yes, but,” Sahindra rebutted, “this Esi-Mon Day, in just two Days, there is a Conference in Bryson and... and Elder Barython is arriving from Luomaan. I want him to meet Olen. To have him give counsel to his preparations...”

“You *told* someone outside these walls about the boy?” Master Mahan blasted, rather sharply.

Caught unaware by the sudden rise in volume and tone from Master Mahan’s voice, Olen jumped a bit, hoping fire would not shoot out of the Master’s eyes and devour them both.

“No, no, no... nothing like that. I just heard that the Elder would be at the Town... and, well, I knew Olen needed an interview with an Elder for his preparations. I thought we could sneak out while all this commotion is going on Today and... no one would know who he is and... I would claim that he is my visiting nephew or something...”

She stopped speaking as if some mental communication occurred between the two.

“No, Sahindra,” the Master announced. “No outside interaction for the boy. For *anything*. I know about this Elder coming. Don’t worry, the boy will receive his preparations. As I said before, leave that to me. His extended family gave me *explicit* instructions to keep this boy hidden and away from *everyone*. I intend to keep honouring that commitment.”

Family. A topic Sahindra *never* spoke about. All Olen was ever told was that his parents had died the Day he was born during a Vernal Migration. But to be hidden? Hidden from what?

Mahan moved stealthily closer to Sahindra and placed a ringed hand on her shoulder. Her shoulder froze as if ice transferred from his hand and seeped deep into her body.

“Go back to your rooms, Sahindra. Do *not* leave the Keep. Olenthra is safer here. There is great potential for him, and you are doing an exemplary job of raising and educating him. Keep it up.” He stared deep into her eyes.

Glistening in the lantern light, Sahindra’s eyes never left the Master. “Yes, Master.... Come Olen, let’s go. I... I am truly sorry for my intrusion. I know you are busy and that you need to go. You... you will have no more trouble with me about this.”

“Thank-you, Sahindra.” He then released her from his gaze and turned his attention back to Olen. Olen, again, froze in place, scar seething. “I am glad to see you, Olenthra. Apologies, but I need to go.” He then motioned his arm towards the open door, swishing his cape.

After a beat, Sahindra turned towards the door and waved for Olen to follow without saying a word. Mahan stared after them as Olen left the room. Instead of turning left back towards the Staff Mud Room, Sahindra turned right towards the main double doors. There were windows on either side of these large doors. One door swung open at Sahindra’s push and she left the Inner Keep going back outside into the Winter Air.

Olen glanced back at the Master’s room before leaving to follow her out. Mahan was at the doorframe, staring at him and casually putting on riding gloves.

Expressionless.

Outside, Olen did not feel the cold until the grand double doors shut behind him. Sahindra was well in front. Straight ahead, at the Front Gate, the mass of People silhouetted behind the Rauter bars were busying themselves around a few of the burly Endemic Guards holding out their hands towards them. Kuollut had been quick to have the Credits distributed among them.

Sahindra did not slow, nor look back. Olenthra bounded off after her and caught up to her as she veered left towards the side door they had used earlier. She was silent and tears were coming down her face. Because of the cold weather, the streaks of the tears remained on her face as new ones took their place.

Without pausing, Olen followed Sahindra into the front of the Keep and back up the stairs to the second floor where the Guard Room was. She paused at the door that led out to the walkway across the top of the Front Gate. No one was up here.

Through the window, Olen could see the Guards still calming the Crowds outside which were now congregating around the Stables. Then, in the dark, Sahindra turned her attention to Olen.

“Listen, Olen,” she said. “Go up and start packing your things because we are still leaving. There is a rucksack under my bed. Get some extra clothes and another pair of shoes. I will get some food later. The Guards are distracted. Now go! I’ve got something to do, but I’ll be up shortly.”

“But...” Olen tried to say.

“No, Olen,” Sahindra interrupted, “We are leaving. Do it quick!” And she patted him on the back as she pushed him up the stairs to their floor.

Outside! They were going outside! In absolute defiance of the Master’s orders! That line of action petrified Olen.

Behind him, Olen heard Sahindra open the door to the walkway outside above the closed Gates. What could she want over there? Feeling his way in the darkness, Olen climbed the stairs and entered his own hallway. They lived alone up here, even though there were many locked rooms.

A movement from the window to his right caught Olen’s attention, and he looked out. Sahindra was crouched along the top of the Battlements above the Gates and was creeping towards the other side of the Keep. She entered the opposite Wing of the Keep where a few Workers and Staff lived. Olen had never been over there. It appeared she did not want to be seen. The noise outside was now subsiding.

Olen wanted to wait there by the window and watch for her to return, but he knew he had better go get packing. Olen peeled himself away and went towards his Bed Chamber, which was down the hall on the left. Passing Sahindra's door by habit, Olen realized that his own room would still be locked tight right now, so he backtracked and entered her room.

Sahindra's Bed Chamber was larger than his own and it was filled with desks, drawers, and shelves. It was tidy, unlike Olen's room, with no clothes or papers on the floor. The desks held scrolls, markers, and other study materials.

One table held a Vasker pitcher for water, which was empty. Various dishes, all clean, sat on some shelves. It was Sahindra's bed, rumped yet neatly made, that Olen rushed towards. Under it, Olen found some boxes, and some bunched leather that must be the rucksack. He pulled the leather out. Hold on, *two* rucksacks.

One rucksack was already stuffed. He did not look inside it but took the empty one and headed off towards his own Bed Chamber. A large shelf beside the door leading into his room held religious items and the thick book that was the Holy Writings.

Olen wondered if Sahindra would want to bring that. He hoped not, as it was really heavy. Ignoring that shelf, Olen went inside his own room. The scroll with Olen's most recent translation was still on the desk, unchecked.

Ignoring the desk, Olen started gathering some clothes from his wardrobe: underclothes, more shirts, worn pants, and another pair of shoes that were even more used than the boots he was wearing. He only had the one coat, which he already had on. What else should he bring?

Looking around, Olen hoped Sahindra would not make him take any paper, markers, or books. The bedpan? No, he would just go outside. His pillow! Just in case there were no pillows where they were going, Olen stuffed it into his rucksack. Food? Eating Utensils? That led him back into Sahindra's room.

Upon entering, Sahindra's hallway door opened and Sahindra flew in. Huffing for breath, she closed the door behind her to lean on it. She did not seem to be holding anything.

Olen spoke as she caught her breath. “I’ve got more clothes and shoes, and I was about to get something to eat with...”

“That’s good enough. Excellent.” She glanced at her bed and saw the other rucksack. She went for it and peered in. Then she looked around the room and, without a word, scrambled through her own wardrobe and began stuffing a few more articles in there somehow. She then headed to the shelf where the Utensils were.

That was when Sahindra’s hallway door flew open again into the hallway, and Tandall, one of the towering Endemic Guards, walked in crouching his head to get it under the jam. He held a Spear that also had to be tipped so he could fit it in through the door.

Tandall re-shut the door.

Standing beside the large bookshelf of religious things by his own door, Olen could do nothing but stare at the large, broad-shouldered Endemic. Tandall looked at Olen’s rucksack and then turned to look at Sahindra. “Goin’ sumwheres, Tweed?”

Leaving her rucksack by the shelf she was at, Sahindra backed away and skirted towards and in front of Olen, holding her left arm out to keep Olen from going anywhere. Her right arm stayed by her side.

“Out of my way, Tandall,” she defiantly said. “We are just going to Town for a few Days. It’s important for Olen to meet someone. We’ll be back. You can come with us if you want...”

The door opened a third time and, to Olen’s shock, Master Mahan came in. He entered as if he regularly came this way, which, as far as Olen could remember, he never had. Master Mahan still wore all his riding gear, complete with shiny boots. Olen’s hope of leaving fizzled to nothing.

Master Mahan left the door open.

“Sahindra, Sahindra,” the Master said, not sounding angry at all. Well, maybe a *little* disappointed. “You have unfortunately interrupted my trip. I am afraid that I will need to take your key.” He casually walked towards Sahindra holding out his hand.

With her left arm still in front of Olen protectively, Sahindra rushed her right hand out, holding a small Blade. It was one she must have plucked from the Utensil cabinet she was just at.

Sahindra started sidestepping towards the open door. Olen sidestepped too, keeping right behind Sahindra. Olen's heart was thumping loudly.

Mahan stopped moving forward but still held out his hand. Tandall, who was by the door, rolled his eyes with a smirk and extended his Spear to block the way out.

Sahindra repeated, "I'm leaving with Olen. He needs to see the Elder." They approached her door with the Spear in front of it.

Mahan spoke: "No. On both. Who do you think you are? His Saviour? He does not need saving."

Sahindra was approaching Tandall's Spear which had not moved yet. She held out her Blade towards the Endemic Guard now, keeping more than an arm's distance, *his* arm's distance, away. Tandall glanced at Mahan and then got his signal from the Master. Tandall moved towards Sahindra.

With surprising agility that stunned everyone, Sahindra ducked under the massive Endemic between his legs and jumped up behind the Guard. She swung her small Blade and thrust it into his cheek while she was in mid-air.

The Blade disappeared and Tandall arched back, dropping his Spear and grabbing the hilt of the Blade with both hands. Screaming ugly, guttural, gurgle noises, Tandall fell to his knees. Thick, dark red fluid sprayed from between his fingers.

"RUN Olen! To the Stables!" Sahindra screamed.

Olen went for the door but just then, the still conscious Tandall threw a foot out and kicked Olen back a bit. Had the Blade struck a few Fingerprints lower or higher, that puncture could have been fatal. Instead, the Beast grabbed at the hilt and pulled the bloody Blade out of his cheek. Sahindra rushed back towards the Utensil cabinet again.

Olen went for the hallway door a second time, but Tandall was now up and with a free, bloody hand that was not holding the Knife, grabbed Olen and threw him across the room back towards the bookshelf which was beside the door to his own Bed Chamber.

Olen slammed hard against it, dropping his rucksack, and a flurry of books and papers fell from the shelf, including the large book of Holy Writ. He landed painfully in a heap beside it.

Sahindra was now holding another Blade out. Tandall had turned and was now standing in between her and his Master. One of Tandall's hands was still holding the ruined side of his face. It was not pretty. Mahan's facial expression only showed a hint of dismay.

"Olen, get up! Go! Again!" Sahindra called out. She moved quickly from Tandall's outstretched arm that still held the original Knife. Olen, without thought, grabbed the enormous book beside him on the floor and threw it at Tandall, hoping to distract him.

Olen threw the heavy Holy Writings with an ease he had never imagined he could. The book flew across the room and hit Tandall in the side of the head opposite the wound. It then fell open to the floor, pages ruffling.

Sahindra took this distraction and lunged again with her second Blade, but before she could land a more accurate thrust, there was a loud *CRACK* and Sahindra's eyes rolled to the back of her head while she was still in the Air. She fell to the ground like a rag doll beside the open book of Scripture.

Olen glanced up and saw Mahan, the Vasker water pitcher in his hand. It was dented and bloodied.

Silence for a few Breaths. Only moans from Sahindra's crumpled body could be heard. Even Tandall was quiet. Olen's frightened eyes remained fixed on the Master.

Mahan broke the silence and began his slow lecture: "Olen, I am sorry that you had to see this. This was *not* my intention. Your being here is of *vital* importance. I cannot and will not let you go outside. Not now."

Mahan dropped the pitcher beside Sahindra, who was now a little closer to Olen. She was alive and slowly crawling towards him, over the open book of Holy Writings. Bright red blood dripped down the side of her face. One eye was still turned upward, and it was bloodshot.

Horried, Olen continued to lie there beside the clutter of books. Tandall was up and reaching for his Spear, still holding his ugly face.

Mahan continued to speak: "I am afraid you will work alone, now. It is important that you just listen and do as we say. I..."

"Olen..." It was Sahindra; wispy and raspy. She was close now. "Olen... you... are not... who you... are..."

Immediately, Mahan's eyes widened, and he pointed at Tandall's Spear. Tandall got the message.

"Olen," Sahindra weakly continued, "go to Rabakial... Rabakial..." At that instant, Tandall's Spearhead drove through Sahindra's back and out the front. She went limp.

With one arm, Tandall picked her up, like a piece of meat on a Toothpick, and went out the door, continuing to hold his bloodied cheek with the other hand. Again, Tandall tilted the Spear, and the woman stuck on the end of it, so they could get under the door jamb.

Olen was now alone with the Master.

"Go to bed, Olenthra," he said. "Things have not changed."

Olen got up shakily, and started backing into his Bed Chamber, which was behind him, glaring at the mayhem all around. Overwhelmed, Olen turned, shut the door to Sahindra's room for what may be the last time, and ran to his bed to weep.

There was no pillow to cry into.