

Chapter 1

The visitor appeared in the early morning, before the Great Sun had reached its summit in the pale blue sky.

Naia watched from the cooler canopy of the great tangled apeknot trees. At first, she put her hand to her rock-and-rope *bola*, but paused when the visitor hesitated to shed her cloak, which was heavy with mud and algae. Beneath the hood, Naia saw a stern-faced Gelfling woman with long silver hair. What was a Vapra doing so deep in the Swamp of Sog? It was peculiar—maybe even suspicious—yet Naia felt no fearful quickening of her heart, and her hand dropped away from her *bola*. All around, the Swamp of Sog stretched and yawned for morning, the droning of buzzers and chirruping of climbers *crik-criking* in harmony with the great song of the world. Watching the visitor, Naia took a sour alfen fruit from her waist-pouch and munched on it in thought.

“She must have come a long way,” Naia murmured. Her companion, Neech, coiled in her vine-like hair, gave only a quiet burble in response, burying his head further in her dreadlocks. As the visitor resumed her journey, Naia balanced the alfen fruit’s smooth knuckle-size pit between two ridges of apeknot bark. A quick flick of her finger sent the pit tumbling down through the spirals and twists of the tree’s bark, disappearing into the depths of the gnarled trees. Then she followed, another flicker within the kaleidoscope of canopy shadows.

The stranger spent the afternoon traveling toward the heart of the swamp. Once or twice, Naia thought about running ahead to alert her village, but she worried she might lose the visitor to quicksand or any number of hungry swamp creatures. An alternative would be to make herself known and offer help, but strangers were called *strange* for a reason. Confronting an outsider in the depths of the swamp might be just as dangerous to Naia as a swamp creature might be to the Vapra.

What would have taken Naia a few hours on her own became an all-day trek. Just as the sky began to dim, the dense apeknots gave way to a circular clearing where the trees were huge and ancient, lovingly maintained by Gelfling hands. They’d reached the home of the Drenchen clan. Naia looked from the system of boardwalks that floated on the swamp floor between the apeknots to her village above. Lattice walkways and walking-ropes connected buildings carved into the crooks of the enormous trees to those hanging from thick pendulums. A whole world suspended above the swamp.

While the visitor, shining with sweat and bruises and buzzer bites, paused to catch her breath at the Glenfoot, Naia made haste toward the heart of the village. She leaped from a branch to the closest

walking-rope, gripping with her bare toes as she dashed along it. At the center of the glen loomed Great Smerth, the oldest tree in the swamp, in which her family had lived for generations. Winding walkways circled its enormous trunk, studded by circle-shaped entryways and windows decorated with lush flowers and thick, dangling vines.

She took a flying leap, clearing half a dozen paces and landing with a calculated *ka-thump!* on the outer landing balcony. The wingless landing made her sound like a boy, but it was unavoidable. She didn't have time for grace, anyway. As she shouldered through the doorway, her footsteps echoed against the golden heartwood of the rounded hall within. Friendly faces met her on the way, but she had no time to return their greetings now.

"Mother!"

Neech gave a tiny chirp of relief and fluffed the fur around his neck into place as Naia entered, breathless, into her family's chamber. Her mother, swathed in an embroidered cloth of deep turquoise and gold, was seated on a small stool, while Naia's two younger sisters wound beads and colored string into her thick locs. Maudra Laesid looked every bit the *maudra* of the Drenchen clan, her kind face patient with wisdom and young with laughter. The spots that dappled her clay-colored skin reflected the spring green in the light, and her wings shimmered like a beautiful cloak of indigo and turquoise. In her hands rested a fledgling muski, only half the size of Neech. It was ailing from a small cut that broke its slick black skin.

"Ah, Naia, good evening!" said Laesid. "You missed lunch, though I suppose you're in time for supper."

"An outsider," Naia said. She plucked a damp cloth from the basin near where her sisters were tending to their mother, swabbing swamp mist off her cheeks with it. Her sisters gave her a tilted look, and she realized she hadn't begun at the beginning. "This morning, on my watch. I saw an outsider enter the swamp. She's here now, at the Glenfoot. She seems a Vapra—a Silverling, fair of hair and face. Mother, did you call for the All-Maudra?"

"No," Laesid said. She had not looked up from the baby eel where she held it gently in one hand, waving the other above it in a slow, circular motion. Her fingers shone with a gentle blue gathering light as if it were a palmful of crystal water. By the time the *maudra* withdrew her hand, the cut had closed and the puffiness had receded, leaving the eel to chirp in thanks before flitting away out the window.

Eliona, the *maudra's* middling daughter, stood and perked her ears up with any excitement their mother failed to express. "An outsider!" she exclaimed. "From the Ha'rar? Has she brought gifts from the All-Maudra?"

"If she has, they're heavy with mud by now." Naia snorted. "She took the low way. It took all day, Mother! Haven't Silverlings any sense in the swamp?"

"No, they don't have swamps on the Vapran coast," Laesid replied wryly. "You could have helped her, you know. It would have helped you, too."

Naia pressed her lips together, crossing her arms and choosing not to respond to the light scolding. Her mother always seemed to have a better solution on the tip of her tongue, no matter how much thought Naia put into her decisions. That was what being the *maudra* was all about, after all—and Naia wasn't *maudra* yet.

"Anyway, what shall we do?"

"If she was in fact sent by the All-Maudra, we had better greet her, and sooner better than later. Meet her at the Glenfoot. Pemma, summon your father, have him join Naia and our visitor. I'll see her in my chamber if she calls for it."

As Pemma, the youngest, scampered out to fetch their father, Laesid reached to the floor and grasped her crutch, leaning on it to pull herself up. Naia dried her face with her sleeve. She was unsure about greeting the visitor alone, and although she was too old for a child minder, she was secretly glad that her father would be there. There was something about the Vapra's arrival that was causing a worming feeling in Naia's gut.

"Mother," she said, quieting her voice. "Could this be about Gurjin?"

Maudra Laesid shrugged, raising an open hand with no answers in it.

"Not everything is about your brother, my dear," she replied, but her voice sounded uneasy, and the salt in it fed the worm in Naia's stomach.

"The last time a Silverling came—" she began.

"And not every messenger from the All-Maudra is here to take your family away," Laesid finished. "Now go on, don't keep our visitor waiting. Show me your skill with formalities. Invite her to sup, and we'll see what all this huff-puff is about."

Naia kept her mouth shut, unsure how to explain what she was truly feeling. When Gurjin had first been sworn into service at the Castle of the Crystal, Naia had been filled with resentment and envy. Though she and her brother were precisely the same age, same in skill and will, their fates were different. His was to respond to the summons while she remained in Sog to apprentice to her mother. It was the duty of the eldest daughter, after all. That was the way it had always been. Naia had since come to accept it, but it didn't stop her from hoping that one day a soldier would arrive to summon her to leave the swamp as well. Her mother, however, seemed to know better.

Swallowing her pride, Naia took the Stone's Way: a long, twisting tunnel down to the foot of Great Smerth. She ignored the careful glances and smiles from the men and children in the winding passage as she hurried by. She worried about what they might be thinking; even Eliona's wings had bloomed, and she was one trine younger . . . Naia pushed the self-conscious thoughts out of mind. It was only a matter of time, her mother had told her: *Coming of age is a journey, not a destination.*

The Great Sun had long been at full height, its red brother peeking just along the border of the visible sky and warming the glen and shining on the pensive faces of the Drenchen scattered across the walkways and rope bridges. Above and around, Naia's clanfolk whispered, gray and green and brown faces peering out their carved windows at the exhausted traveler resting against the knees of a nearby root. Naia approached and took the closer look she hadn't been afforded earlier in the day. Unlike the sturdy Drenchen, the visitor was as skinny as a stick, with a narrow face and high, soft cheekbones. Where Naia's thick locs were bound in twists and ropes of black and green, the Silverling woman's hair hung in sad sheets of pale lavender, and though she had a proud, even brow and the posture of an adult, it would be easy to lift her with a hand and toss her back into the swamp through which she'd come.

"Hello," Naia called as she approached. Startled by her voice, the visitor's ears flicked toward her like delicate white cup-flowers.

"Hello," she replied. She spoke with an accent, shaping the word a bit sharper and shorter. Despite her weariness, she stood and did a quick, formal bow, holding the carved, unamoth-shaped brooch at the neck of her cloak.

"Perhaps you can assist me. I am Tavra of Ha'rar. I'm hoping I might ask the inconvenience of your clan's hospitality—if I could speak with your *maudra* . . ."

When Tavra trailed off, Naia realized she was done speaking, even if she hadn't finished her sentence, letting Naia guess the rest instead of saying it out loud. Naia tongued her teeth and took on a relaxed posture while still holding her chin up, a pose that was well practiced.

"The *maudra* is my mother, and I am her eldest daughter. You may speak with me in her place."

A look of relief passed over Tavra's long face, though her eyes still watched Naia the way she might look at a wild Nebrie, wondering whether it was dangerous or not. Was that what outsiders thought of the Drenchen? The look, and whatever words Tavra was about to utter, flitted away when Naia's father joined them. Bellanji was stout and heavy, with the locs of his great beard wound with string and beads, a spear held loosely in his hand as a formality that might befit the role of husband to the *maudra*.

“Hello there!” Bellanji said in his big voice. “Naia! I thought I asked you to clean your catches before bringing them to the supper table!” Then he let out a big laugh, mostly at Tavra’s expense, and Naia felt a little smile prick the corners of her mouth.

“Father, this is Tavra,” she said. “Of Ha’rar.”

Bellanji raised one thick black brow.

“Ha’rar, eh?” he said. “Did the All-Maudra send you? Or maybe you’re one of her daughters! How many of them are there now? No fewer than sixty-four, I’m sure.”

Tavra’s cheeks were so pale that they turned pink, and she raised a hand.

“I am merely a traveler who happens to hail from the home of the Gelfling All-Maudra,” she said. “I have long since heard of the sights and . . . smells . . . of the Swamp of Sog. I was hoping I might ask the inconvenience of your hospitality, that I might witness all you have here for myself.”

Bellanji waited, allowing his daughter to do the decision making, though she was not *maudra* yet. Naia let the talk fall quiet, sensing something riding below Tavra’s words. There was much the Vapra wasn’t saying, but so far as Naia’s instinct could tell, it was nothing more dangerous than the Drenchen clan could take care of, should trouble arise. Resolved, at least for now, she gave her father a decisive nod. His smile returned, and he stomped the butt of his spear on the boardwalk before striding away.

“Well then, we’ll all witness something either way, won’t we?” he said over his shoulder. “Naia, find Tavra of Ha’rar a place from which she might enjoy our hospitality. She may stay as long as she likes—and tonight at sup, she can enjoy the sights and smells she’s so longed for!”

Though Tavra’s request had been granted, the look on her face was hardly enthusiastic.

Chapter 2

That night, Tavra sat to Naia’s left at the head table in the Feast Hall, deep in the belly of Great Smerth. After a bath and some rest, the Vapran visitor looked more noble than weary. Naia imagined their guest standing in the white stone halls of Vapra Ha’rar, the home of the All-Maudra. From her seat, Naia had a closer view of the woman’s face and the nervous expressions she was stifling as the servers pushed carts of traditional Drenchen fare before them. On each cart were tiered trays stacked with wide wood-and-leaf bowls filled past the brim with squirming delicacies: fuchsia wort beetles and fermented Nebrie-milk dumplings, mushroom wing-fronds, and Naia’s favorite, blindfish plucked from the very bottom of the

swamp floor. Naia took her helpings by the handful as the carts passed, piling them on the wide leaf in front of her as the drum singers played and sang from the balcony overlooking the bustling hall.

“Where are—” Tavra began, glancing up and down the long table before rethinking her question and trying again. “Do you use eating utensils?”

“Skewers,” Naia said. She gestured at the reed cup holding a dozen pointed eating skewers at the end of the table, near Gurjin’s usual place and the only empty chair. Tavra shook her head, looking paler than usual as Naia slurped a wriggling white blindfish whisker. After a few carts had passed, hunger finally got the better of her, and she reached for one of the leafier dishes as it passed, only to find it was seasoned with crawling, furry algae. In the beginning, Naia struggled to contain her amusement at Tavra’s dilemma, but she soon felt a drop of pity in her heart for the poor woman and pushed her chair back.

“Come on, Neech. Let’s find something that our guest can catch.”

Neech stirred from his coil around her neck, his slippery skin sliding until he balanced over her shoulder and stretched his webbed wings. He gave a little chirp and darted out to catch a leaf hopper that had hopped too far from the table, munching on it lazily while Naia wove between the cart servers and the gregarious group of feasting Gelfling. Between bites, some of the Drenchen pounded on their tables along with the music of the drums, the tumultuous rhythm resounding off Great Smerth’s interior like a heartbeat. All sorts of creatures from the swamp heard the music, and even now were creeping in through the carved windows and between the feet of the chairs and tables, hoping to catch a delicious bite that had fallen to the floor.

Naia gathered a platter of greens and a blindfish that she carefully cut into bite-size fillets. She returned with it and set it before Tavra with a glass of Nebrie milk. Beads of sweat dotted the Silverling’s forehead like a tiara, as if the feast were more stressful of an ordeal than her journey to the glen.

“Thank you,” she said, though she still looked faint. Concerned about their guest, Naia forced a grin to set the other Gelfling at ease. Eventually, a warmer smile crawled across Naia’s face. Although she’d been doing it for Tavra, Naia found the gesture unexpectedly comforting.

“Sorry we don’t have . . . utensils,” Naia said, taking her seat again. “We believe that feeling your food is part of the experience. Smell, taste, sight, *and* touch.”

She showed Tavra how to wrap the greens and fish in the crisp leaves, and she took a bite. The Vavra’s squinted eyes widened from apprehensive to surprised, and she remarked, after swallowing, “This is quite good!”

Naia laughed and took a bite of her own meal, rolling a tendril of leafy algae between her fingers before tasting its salty, musty flavor. She watched Tavra eat with rising enthusiasm and smiled to herself. From down the table, she saw her parents watching, and they were smiling, too.

“How do you like Sog, now that you’re not waist-deep in it?” Maudra Laesid asked.

“I have seen many places in my travels,” Tavra replied after clearing most of her plate, “but this is certainly the place I would call most different from where I come from, near the ocean.”

“I can imagine,” Bellanji said with a chuckle.

“I’ve never seen the ocean,” Naia said.

“There is a profound difference between the swamp and the sea. When you stand near the swamp, the water and the earth are one. At the ocean, you can stand on the earth where the water begins, and then it goes toward the horizon as far as the eye can see.”

Naia tried to imagine such a thing, but it was difficult. In Sog, there were always things to see nearby, and far away, in all directions. Even looking into the night sky, there were countless stars and the three glowing white faces of the Sister Moons. Imagining that any one thing might go on farther than she could see sounded boring—or maybe, she realized with a shiver, overwhelming.

“Who is that around your neck?” Tavra asked.

Naia looked down at Neech, who was lazily looped across her shoulders like a scarf.

“His name is Neech. Muskis are trained for hunting—once you hit your target, you never know where it will fall, and losing your quarry or *bola* is a big waste.” She scratched Neech under the chin, and he let out a content purr. “He’s just a baby now, but he’ll get to be bigger as he gets older. My mother’s eel was nearly big enough for both me and my brother to ride on when we were young.”

Tavra reached out to pet Neech, but he puffed out the fur and quills near his head and spread his wings to look bigger. Tavra jerked her hand back and apologized. Naia shushed him, smoothing down his spines.

“Your brother . . .,” Tavra said aloud, though it was quiet enough that she might have been talking to herself. She tilted her head toward the empty chair, past the scrabbling of Naia’s sisters’ hands as they reached for passing trays of dumplings. “Gurjin?”

Naia nodded. “He is sworn to service at the Castle of the Crystal,” she said, though mention of him formed an uncomfortable bubble of silence around them amid the drumming and clamoring and feasting. “Two trine ago. He used to visit, but it’s quite a journey between here and the castle, and I suppose with how magnificent and grand everything is there, with the lords and all, visiting us back in the swamp doesn’t get his gills in a giggle.”

Naia tried to sound proud of her brother, as she should, but it came out flat. When Gurjin last *had* made time to visit, all he had done was talk about the castle and the world beyond Sog. It was always about him, and the elaborate celebrations and the visitors from all corners of Thra. As much as Naia loved blindfish, Gurjin had once said the lords' feasts were second to none—not even those of the Drenchen. She longed to see the banquet hall he'd described, with its tall vaulted ceiling encrusted with jewels and shining metals—to taste the rich broths and sweet-cakes and crawlies, piled high in opulent mounds across dozens of cloth-covered tables. Was he feasting at one now, while she was here in Sog, spending every day wandering the same old swamp and suffering her mother's strict *maudra* training? Probably.

"Sibling rivalry can be difficult," Tavra said. She was trying to be consoling after Naia's rigid tone, but her attempt only brought an outburst from Naia's mouth. What did this traveler know about rivalry?

"Rivalry, ha! Gurjin and I have the same skills, the same interests. We're even exactly the same age—twins! But I'm the eldest daughter, so I have to become *maudra*, and he was sworn to the castle. If it hadn't been so, we would both have gone."

Tavra shut her mouth with an audible click, held her breath, and then uttered a quiet "oh," and that was the last either of them spoke of it. Naia let the old soreness fade before brushing it aside completely.

Something barreled into them from behind. Naia let out an *ooph* as she tumbled into Tavra, knocking them both out of their seats and to the ground. Naia leaped to her feet, shouting after the two roughhousing Drenchen boys as they darted from behind to upon the table, upsetting wicker platters and bowls and drinking pods before racing through the hall, laughing the whole way.

"Sorry!" Naia exclaimed. She stooped and offered her hand to Tavra, who was lying on her back, the breast of her recently cleaned robes now soiled with the food that had previously been contained by her plate. Tavra reached for Naia's hand, and when they touched, Naia gasped at the sudden images rushing before her mind's eye: a beautiful Vapran Gelfling with a gleaming circlet, bedecked in flowing silver robes, her white hair braided and coiled in intricate swirls and knots. Her otherwise gentle face held a hint of hardness: the burden of guiding the Gelfling people.

A voice rang in her mind's ears. The voice of Mayrin, the Gelfling All-Maudra . . .

Find Rian. Find Gurjin.

Her brother's name brought forth memories that slipped into the dreamfast before she could stop them: saying good-bye to Gurjin the day he left with the other soldiers. The fights with her mother when she was denied permission to go along as well . . . and the day Naia gave up, hiding her anger in a little black ball. Accepting her duties to become *maudra*, and learning healing *vliyaya*, history, and how to settle disputes among the people of their clan.

The All-Maudra's voice surfaced from Tavra's memories again, this time harder and more harsh:

Find them. Find any of their allies—

The command dissolved into air when Naia finally pulled her hand back, letting Tavra fall again to the floor. When the touch was broken, the visions ended.

"I'm—I'm sorry," Naia said. "I didn't mean to— Here."

Focusing on restraining her mind, she reached again. When Tavra grasped her palm this time, there was no dreamfast—no sharing of memories. With warm cheeks, Naia helped Tavra douse her ruined garment with some water. Tavra said nothing the whole time, though Naia was sure she was thinking about what had happened. Inadvertent dreamfasting was an intrusion of privacy, and certainly something a Gelfling of Naia's age should be able to control.

"I'm sorry," Naia said again.

"I ought to be turning in," Tavra said instead of acknowledging the apology. "It's been a long day for me, and I fear I won't be able to keep my eyes open much longer anyhow."

Naia stood by, wringing her hands, as Tavra made her hurried thank-yous and final exit. When she was gone, Laesid beckoned. Chagrined, Naia stood near her mother and rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand.

"That was a hasty exit," Laesid remarked, absentmindedly stroking Naia's locs. "What's happened?"

"I accidentally dreamfasted with her," she muttered, half hoping her words would melt away before her mother heard them. She gently pushed her mother's hands from her locs, wanting anything but to feel like a child just then. "I'm so embarrassed."

"So long as no harm came of it, I'm sure you'll both survive," Laesid said, folding her hands in her lap. Bellanji, apparently having overheard, leaned in.

"Did you see anything important?" he asked.

Naia thought at first he was teasing, but his eyes weren't smiling at all. She had already been trying to forget the private memories she'd seen in Tavra's mind, but when her father asked, the images of the beautiful Gelfling All-Maudra came to mind too easily, as did the ominous words:

Find Rian. Find Gurjin.

Who was Rian, and what did he have to do with Naia's brother—and more importantly, what did Tavra want with either of them? Naia told what she'd seen, and after her telling, Bellanji and Laesid leaned away, looking to each other and exchanging the silent conversation they sometimes had—the kind that required neither words nor dreamfasting. They nodded to each other in agreement.

“Naia,” Laesid said in an even but stern voice. “In light of this, I believe the time has come for us to clear up our guest’s less-than-satisfactory pretense. Finish your supper for now, but after, meet us promptly in my chamber. We are overdue for some hard-talk with Tavra of Ha’rar.”