

Prologue

Silas had the view of a god. From a vast window, he observed Earth's roundness, a sphere of color. Arctic white and ocean blue, desert gold and forest green: all of it was his to see. The whorls of a massive storm front were heading south towards the equator. It took the form of an abstract shape. Many centuries ago, he had often laid on the grass to look up at the clouds, watching them drift into the shapes of animals and people. It was somewhat disorienting looking *down* on the clouds instead of up. Silas supposed the imagination could sculpt them just as well from this angle as from down below. He saw the clouds beginning to form into eyes, a nose, and a mouth, the likeness of a human face. It reminded him that somewhere down there, scattered across the continents, were people. If they still lived. He wondered how many fell under his gaze at that moment, how many were being born and how many were dying. He would know nothing of them and their short lives, for they were specks so minuscule as to be unseen from the cold heights of orbit.

The face he saw in the storm front became more defined. It was shifting into a woman's face, one all too familiar. A distant memory came to mind and Silas shuddered, turning away from the view of Earth.

All around him were sterile white walls, white tiers, and white tables and chairs. The air here had been pumped in only minutes before he'd arrived and it smelled new—not fresh, new. The powdery and metallic tang of air canisters. The chamber was called the Forum. It was a place where people could gather in the thousands. At least, that's what Silas had intended it to be. People hadn't been gathering for a long time. Nowadays people preferred to lie in their pods and stay plugged into the Dream. Fantasies made reality on demand. Silas couldn't blame them. Who would want to leave an imagined world tailored to their personal desires? Especially when the view from the Forum brought no comfort. The memories of Earth showed in one window, while the terrible black emptiness of space stretched on in the other.

When Silas had taken over the design of the space station Olympus, he had thought people would take breaks from the Dream and come to the Forum to stargaze. Since hardly anyone left their pods anymore, he could see he had miscalculated. Still, he was proud of his creation. Leaving the Dream helped him remember what he had developed: a construction nearly three miles long. More than six hundred years orbiting Earth. Over three million inhabitants, all hibernating and Dreaming in their pods. All safe and snug.

At least, they *had* been safe.

A sliding door hissed open at one end of the Forum and nine figures entered: the other Founders of Olympus. They looked like hospital patients in their white robes and slippers. They were hairless; even their eyebrows and

eyelashes were gone. Their noses had been softened to nubs, their skin was translucent, faces and limbs webbed with veins. Silas looked down at his own hands, his fingers like yellowed glass, his threads of muscle practically visible within. He pulled his hands back into his sleeves, ashamed at his hideousness.

The Founders approached him, the soft whirring of mechanical supports at work under their robes. Silas remembered when he had been able to walk on his own. Now his muscles had nothing to do other than wither away while he hibernated in his pod. There were gyms on Olympus, but Silas suspected they had been left unused far longer than the Forum.

‘Where’s Dane?’ one of the Founders huffed. ‘He should have been here by now.’

‘You can’t expect him to hurry to his own execution.’

The Founders took their seats at the nearest table, Silas sitting at the head. Many of them fidgeted impatiently. Silas understood. Like him, their bodies would long for the comfort of their pods. Even the briefest stint of being ugly and weak was unbearable after spending ages in the Dream being beautiful and strong.

Finally, a pair of doors slid open and in walked another figure robed in sterile white. Silas remembered when Dane had been swarthy and handsome, a stalwart presence demanding respect. Now he was a knobbly, emaciated thing—a fossilized bird-given movement. A pair of red-eyed security droids hovered alongside him like two great insects, their pronged tasers poised in case he should try anything. Silas sniffed at the treatment. What possible threat could this frail man pose to them now? The droids escorted Dane to the table, where he took his seat. The others regarded him

with grim looks. He didn't meet their eyes but held up his head with what little of his dignity remained.

One of the Founders said what everyone was thinking: 'Let's get this over with.'

Everyone looked to Silas, waiting for him to begin. He cleared his throat and read from the plex-tablet that lay in front of him on the table. His voice sounded strange to his ears, thick and slimy from long disuse, like an old pipe pumping out sludge. His gums smacked together, his teeth all gone.

'Seventy-two hours ago, Home Tower-257 had a power outage. Of the ten thousand residents occupying the tower, over three thousand were killed when their pods suddenly separated from the system. You have all received and reviewed the files showing what caused the outage. Founder Dane Garrows had been siphoning energy from Olympus's grid in order to power his private projects in Research and Development. As a result of his actions—'

'We all know the story,' grumbled Founder Amir, a withered man who barely filled his seat. 'Let's just do what we came for and be done with it!'

Silas blinked, unused to this treatment. In the Dream he was never interrupted.

'Very well,' he said in a small voice. 'We all know the charges, and each of you has privately reviewed the evidence. Now... I suppose we can come to a verdict. Does anyone think he's innocent?'

No response.

'Does anyone think he's guilty?'

Hands went up, and some Founders even voiced their judgment: '*Guilty!*'

Silas nodded. 'Founder Dane...'

He glanced across the table at the man accused. Dane's eyes had a glaze of rheum (as all the Founders did), but Silas sensed something looking back at him from underneath, a haunting pain that rose from the depths of the man and reached out. In response, there was a stirring in Silas's innards. At first, he couldn't tell what it was. It was nothing he allowed himself to feel in the Dream. The Dream for him was all happiness and pleasure. What he felt now held none of that shine. This was a dimmer, grayer feeling. He remembered its name. Pity. Through the ages of manufactured paradise, he had almost forgotten what it was.

'On with it!' cried Founder Melanie, a woman with papery skin stretched over her skull. 'Has hibernation made you forget your tongue?'

Silas winced at the rebuke. He forced his mind back to the task at hand. All of this would be over soon. He cleared his throat, avoiding Dane's eyes.

'Since you've been found guilty of the deaths of thousands,' Silas said, reading off the plex-tablet, 'you will be taken to an airlock and... ejected into space.'

With a claw-like finger, he numbly scrawled his name on the plex-tablet. Such an easy gesture to send a man to his death. It was best not to think about it too much. He passed the order along for the others to sign.

'Can't believe I woke up for this,' muttered the woman with a pinched face seated next to him; Silas couldn't remember her name. 'Just a stupid formality. Droids could have thrown him out on their own.'

As the others signed, Silas remembered when they had gathered like this before—not to discuss a man's fate but to dream up Olympus. Earth's most brilliant minds brought together to complete the impossible: taking the remnants of their civilization up into orbit. It had been so long ago. The

memory rose up through the haze of centuries—how their work sessions had gone on late into the nights, blueprints and holo-files laid out next to pizza boxes and Chinese takeout, their minds growing so fatigued that everything became hilarious. They'd laughed together in those days. Now they barely acknowledged each other, and no one showed an ounce of remorse even now that one of them was about to be cast into the abyss.

This was the Olympus they had dreamed up. Here was its justice at work. Quick. Efficient. Cold.

Once they had all signed, there was no ceremony of closure. They made to get up and leave, to hurry back to their home towers and pods. But then Dane spoke up.

'I don't want to go alone.' His voice, though quiet, was firm. 'If I'm going to walk to my death, I want someone to go with me. Not just these machines.'

The Founders stilled and then looked to one another, not knowing what to do. They may have been an unfeeling lot, but none could bring themselves to deny the man his dying wish. Still, no one volunteered. After a moment, all eyes fell on Silas. He shrank under their stares, feeling as though his robe had dissolved, leaving him naked and exposed. He could feel their impatience growing to heated irritation as his hesitation held up their exit. Nostrils flared. Knuckles rapped the table. Silas wanted nothing more than to flee from that moment and return to the Dream where he could get back to writing his music and forget this whole meeting had ever happened.

'I'll go,' he said at last.

The ride on the monorail was short but miserable. The ovular car that carried Silas and Dane was too cramped. It wasn't that Silas was unused to small spaces—he lived in a

pod, after all—but rather that the compartment put him much too close to Dane. Their knees were nearly touching. Silas fidgeted with the hem of his robe and looked at the floor. He looked anywhere but at that haunting expression just across from his seat. The moment demanded something of him and pressed in from all sides, squeezing his throat—he felt he should say something. Parting words, perhaps. But what could he possibly say to the man he had sentenced to death? Goodbye and good luck? The monorail car hummed as it sped down one of Olympus’s many tubes, and the security droids buzzed on. The moments stretched out in the awkward lack of words, and the droids’ buzzing and buzzing filled Silas’s ears until he couldn’t take it anymore.

‘Did you say goodbye to Helen?’ he said at last.

Dane looked up from his thoughts. Unlike Silas, he appeared collected, as though evaluating something other than his impending doom.

‘Helen? No, I didn’t say goodbye.’ He shook his head. ‘I’d prefer if she never learned of this.’

‘But won’t she notice her husband gone?’

‘I doubt it. We haven’t spoken in two hundred years.’

Silas was unfazed at the mention of such a passage of time. He understood. Time was a funny thing in the Dream. One moment, he would be composing music so powerful it could raise islands from the sea, and then in the next, a decade would have passed. The centuries went by too fast.

‘That is to say,’ Dane went on, ‘our *physical* versions haven’t spoken. I had her persona, and I’m sure she has a copy of mine. She won’t miss this,’ he said, pinching at the flesh of his arm.

It was a common practice in the Dream to make mental copies of people known in real life and turn them into virtual versions—perfected versions—of themselves. Pull them up

whenever; no need to suffer the inconvenience of setting up a meeting with their real self. Silas had his own library of digital personas filled with all the people he cared about. All but one.

When the monorail car came to a stop, it jolted Silas from a memory. Here they were: end of the line. Silas and Dane got out at a dimly lit platform that reminded Silas of the old subway stations on Earth, only this one was much smaller, cleaner, and devoid of other people. Dane and the security droids moved towards the platform's sliding doors, but Silas hung back towards the monorail car, wondering if he had come far enough. Maybe he could go back to his pod now. But Dane stopped and looked back at him.

'We're not done yet.' He proceeded forward.

Silas cowered and obeyed, following after. Looking down, he remembered the plex-tablet in his hands. Of course, he couldn't leave now. He hadn't given the droids the order of execution yet. One more terrible duty to come.

Doors slid open for them and they entered a square chamber. Unlike the Forum, this room wasn't bathed in sterile white; rather, it was a metallic gray, marking it as an area only authorized personnel could enter. One end had an observation deck with a control panel and a large window looking out at space. Next to it stood a round door of industrial steel with great pistons for opening and closing. The airlock and, beyond it, the infinite nothingness. As Silas and Dane neared the door, Silas's knees began to shake, his mind reeling with the coming judgment. Dane was only a few paces away from passing into eternity.

The two of them came to a stop by the observation deck, the closest Silas was willing to come to that dreaded door. The security droids hovered nearby, awaiting his command. All he had to do was wave the plex-tablet before their red-

eyed scanners. They would take care of the rest. Silas nervously fingered the glassy tablet as he looked out the window. An image intruded into his mind: a tiny frozen body spinning away and disappearing into the black. Silas's breathing grew shallow and quick as an old feeling welled up from the pit of his being. He remembered its name immediately. Fear. The cold that crept over his skin even as it made his brow bead with sweat.

A frail hand touched Silas's shoulder. 'What's wrong, my friend?' Dane asked.

Silas recoiled at the touch. 'Don't call me that! I'm not your friend! I can't be.'

He backed away until he leaned against the glass, his breathing heavy. The plex-tablet fell from his grip.

'I can't do this.'

'Of course,' said Dane in a sympathetic tone.

In this dim and ominous place, it was the last response Silas had expected to hear. So empathetic and assuring—and from a man going to his death! It gave Silas pause, and he studied Dane.

'Why are you so calm?'

'Because you know I don't deserve this.' He casually strolled by the airlock and tapped his knuckle against the steel door.

Silas grew still, intrigued. 'What do you mean?'

'I was dealt a losing hand,' Dane continued, pacing across the chamber. 'The Board put me in charge of Research and Development and gave me a job to do: make advancements for Olympus. Why? Because lying around in pods forever and winding up like this—' his hand motioned to his body, his expression betraying his disgust '—was never the plan. The pods were meant to be temporary until my department figured out a way to advance our society. Maybe we could

have expanded Olympus, made it a grand city in the stars. Maybe we could have gone out and explored other worlds. But none of that was meant to be.

‘We grew too comfortable and the Board’s interest in R and D faded to nothing. Every time there was a resource audit, it was my department that got the cuts. Less staff. Tighter rations on energy. One day it was just me, and I had barely enough power to keep the lights on in the workshop. Almost all the power had been allocated to the Dream. And what of the original dream, our advancement?’

He shook his head and turned back to the window, his rheumy eyes seeming to grow foggier still. ‘Perhaps I got a little over-ambitious, but only because I had no other choice. I was trying to do my job. With one hand you and the others gave me responsibility, and with the other you cut me off at the knees. So, in truth, you’re just as guilty as I am. Of course, I’m the one who’s paying the price.’

Dane stopped his pacing and stood before Silas, looking him dead in the eye.

‘You can make this right.’

Silas grew rigid. ‘How?’

Dane looked from Silas to the large window. ‘There’s a way.’

Silas followed his gaze to Earth below.

‘You can’t be serious.’

‘I realize I can’t stay on Olympus, but that doesn’t mean I have to die. There’s exile. A fate better than death. Not much better, but we work with what we get.’

‘But...’

‘The other Founders would never have to know. Besides, I doubt they’d care. They’d get me off Olympus. I’d get to live. Win-win.’

Silas stared at him in disbelief. ‘You want to go down *there*?’ He pointed a crooked finger at Earth. ‘What will you do? Sweat, bleed, work—knowing death is just around the corner after a mere eighty years?’ He shook his head. ‘What am I saying? Eighty years! Look at you! You wouldn’t survive a day among the savages.’

‘True,’ Dane replied, nodding in agreement. ‘I wouldn’t make it. Not as I am. But if I brought a few things from my workshop to help me, I might survive. All I need is your permission. Only you can unlock the shuttles.’

‘I can’t believe you’re considering this. Even if you had the tools you need to survive, you’re not allowed to go down there.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because of the Treaty.’

Dane rolled his eyes. ‘That antiquated law? You’d bring that up now in a life-or-death situation?’ He tapped a finger against the window. ‘Do you think there’s anyone alive down there who even remembers the Treaty? At best, it’s ancient history to them. Most likely it has become a myth.’

‘I don’t know,’ Silas said, his uncertainty growing and compounding his discomfort. They had wandered into forbidden territory. Life off Olympus? An unspeakable heresy. ‘I’ll need to think about it.’

‘What time do we have to think?’ Dane snarled, throwing his hands up in the air.

His face was red, and Silas shrank back from the sudden outburst of anger. For a moment it looked as though Dane was about to yell. Then he let out a long breath.

‘Here, let me show you something,’ he said, forcing calm into his voice. ‘I’ve already done some investigation into where I’d like to go.’

He swiped his hand across the large window and an image appeared on the glass: a wide-angle scene showing a desolate land of gray hills. It was still and quiet until, after a moment, people came into view—dirty, barefoot, pathetic people walking in a line. Coarse ropes tied them together at the wrists. Silas felt his stomach turn at the sight. More horrors appeared. Towering over the line of prisoners appeared grotesque ape-like creatures. They had snouts and tusks like hogs, small eyes hidden beneath thick brows, leathery skin like the dry flinty hills over which they tromped, and long limbs dragging knuckles over the dust. They marched the prisoners up to a cave in a hillside where there emerged another one of the creatures, this one larger than the others. Upon seeing the prisoners, he howled in savage glee and leaped on them.

Silas turned away before he could witness the gore.

‘Enough!’ he cried. Trembling, he stepped back from the window. ‘Why show me this?’

‘I thought you would want to know. The land that you saw... it is where your daughter is buried.’

His daughter. Silas thought of the photo he kept clipped to his pod, the only possession he had taken from Earth and the only image he had of her. Memories welled up to the surface, and with them came an emotion he had tried to get rid of. Grief to drown him in bitter waters. He swallowed hard and gripped at his chest, but he couldn’t clutch the pain within. He may have forgotten many things, but he hadn’t forgotten where his daughter was entombed. A cemetery of green lawns and stately oaks. Not these grey hills.

‘It can’t be,’ Silas murmured.

‘Six hundred years have passed. Much has changed on Earth.’

Silas shook his head. He remembered his daughter's funeral. It had been the last time he visited Earth. He had never returned. Good riddance. That planet had taken her away from him. He had begged her to come with him to Olympus. She had refused. She said there was still work to do, that she couldn't abandon her home. Foolish child. Beautiful, wonderful, foolish child.

'Her resting place doesn't have to remain that way,' Dane whispered. 'I could fix it. I'll just need a few of my things to make it happen.'

Silas stood unmoving. After a moment or two, he handed the plex-tablet to one of the security droids. 'Dispose of this and then dock at your posts.' The droids left to carry out his orders.

Silas thought of the creatures desecrating the land where his daughter lay entombed. Something he hadn't felt in a long time welled up within him. Anger. It burned in his stomach and made his frail body tremble. Never had he allowed such an emotion to touch him in the Dream. Now his blood began to boil. He couldn't bear to endure it. As it threatened to erupt from the surface of his being, his gaze fell upon Earth.

'Go,' Silas said, 'but make sure no one finds out.' He headed towards the exit and the monorail platform, longing for his pod where he could extinguish his pain. Then, over his shoulder, he said, 'Murder those beasts while you're at it.'

Chapter 1

It was a well-known truth in all the Elkhorn Valley that Corvala Keen would one day fall into madness. Now at seventeen, her wits were still intact. But give it a year or two and she would go the way of her mother—chasing voices that weren't there and disappearing into the deep dark woods. It was a hereditary madness, going back to her great-grandmother and beyond. All the women of Corvala's line began with right minds, but when they turned eighteen or nineteen, they started to have strange dreams and hear voices calling to them. They disappeared one way or another. Corvala was bound to follow their fate. And though she wasn't crazy yet, people could only see her for what she would be, not what she was. And so they talked, but always behind her back for fear of her father, the local Judge.

Corvala led a life set apart from everyone else in the valley. It was a lonely existence, and she longed to be free

from her parents' shadow. Mostly she longed for a cure. Anything to make her normal.

For now, all she had was her fiddle, the last gift from her mother. It was a funny little instrument with a face carved into the scroll on top. The face had a pointy beard, a sharp nose, and little holes bored into the wood to make eyes. Sometimes Corvala would look into those wooden eyes and say, 'Just wait, Sir William. One day we'll get the chance to escape this place.'

And indeed that chance came.

It was late spring in the Elkhorn Valley. The oaks and maples were beginning to take on the deep greens of summer, the early corn shoots were spearing from the soil, and the evenings were growing warmer. The Windborne, a travelling troupe of performers, had come to the valley and set up their colorful tents outside the town of Dawn's Landing. They came only once a year, staying a few days and then continuing on their way. Performers—jugglers, fire breathers, magicians, and others besides—would entertain in the evenings. Their most spectacular show always happened on their last night in town. It was on this night that Corvala came to the Windborne camp with her fiddle, Sir William, sheathed at her back.

The tents and wagons spread out in a wide circle lit with torches and bonfires. All around the circle, merchants' booths displayed goods from faraway lands. Colorful silk scarves and music boxes; vessels of bronze and blown glass inlaid with gold; beads for girls to put in their hair, some made of rare and expensive plasteek—treasures rarely seen in this valley of farmers and ranchers. There were caged exotic beasts: tigers, rhinos, even a chimera. The grounds were packed with people perusing the vendor booths or gathered in groups to socialize. Corvala entered the camp

circle and headed towards the far end where the largest tent stood. Inside, the main show was already in full roar with its drums rumbling, horns blaring, and people cheering. Corvala made straight for the entrance, determination in her step.

On her way, she passed the Capel brothers gathered near the caged beasts—*Fitting*, she thought. The thirteen brothers, all rough and surly, passed around a huge jug of mud-wine, filling the air with curses and coarse laughter. Whenever a woman passed by, they'd whistle and catcall. But not at Corvala. She wasn't wearing anything that called attention to herself—trousers and a tunic with a buckskin vest. Her eyes were dark and quick, and her raven hair was tied in a braid down her back. Her frame was lithe like a willow, and she carried herself with the steadiness of an oak. The Capel brothers watched her and said nothing. Knowing word could get back to the Judge, they wouldn't dare harass her. They weren't that stupid—at least, not this early in the evening, with their drinking just starting. So Corvala passed by, forcing them to lock their vulgar spew behind their teeth. Even Gage Capel, the middle brother and the unruliest of their lot, kept quiet as he stared at her.

Corvala was used to the stares—sometimes accompanied by snickers and snide whispers that followed just out of earshot. Did they bother her? No! Never! Not in the least! That's what she told herself, and she nearly believed it. And why should she let that kind of treatment bother her tonight? Tonight, she was going to break free from this valley and leave her reputation far behind.

Corvala entered the main tent, stepping into a colorful place full of humanity and the smell of popcorn and spicy sausages. Here the wooden bleachers formed a vast semi-circle curving around the stage, creaking under the rollicking

weight of spectators. The stage now featured the classic Demon and Clumsy Priest act, a standard for any show. A portly, balding man in an oversized robe played the part of the Clumsy Priest. He waddled from one side of the stage to the other, always searching for the Demon while tripping on his robes and falling on his face, his ungainliness tickling the crowd to laughter. Meanwhile, the Demon kept barely hidden behind a large wooden box. He was a character costumed in black and green with horns on his head and machine-like parts attached to the arms and chest. He appeared throughout the show, sneaking on stage while other performers had their backs turned. No matter how loud the audience yelled and pointed, the performers would feign ignorance. All the while, the Demon would creep about and duck behind curtains, stealing props and putting strings out of tune.

As Corvala entered the show and walked the opening between bleachers, she felt a hand pat the top of her head. Looking up, she saw a bright-faced man leaning over the railing and looking down at her from his high seat in the bleachers.

‘Hello, Miss Keen,’ he said, smiling broadly.

‘Hello, Gilly,’ Corvala replied, smiling back.

Gilly was perhaps the only person in the valley who sought out Corvala to talk with her. But, then again, he sought everyone out. He was a man with the mind of a child, wandering about town with his shoes untied and handing out dandelions to everyone he met.

‘Come and sit with me?’ he asked.

‘I’m sorry, Gilly. I can’t tonight,’ she said. ‘I’ll find you tomorrow and play a song especially for you. Would you like that?’

Gilly lifted his fists to his mouth and nodded vigorously. Then he returned to watching the show, rocking back and forth and laughing with the children.

At any other time, Corvala would have sat with him. Tonight, she wasn't here for entertainment; she had an important matter to take care of, and so she went around the front seats to the far end of the bleachers. A curtain spanned the width of the tent, dividing it in two—the front half for the audience and the stage and the back half as a backstage area. Corvala stood off to the side near the tall curtain. Normally there was a guard keeping watch here, making sure none of the audience would enter. Tonight, though, there was no guard to be seen. Perhaps the Capel brothers were causing a ruckus outside, taking security from their posts. Whatever the reason, Corvala was thankful for her luck.

On stage, the Clumsy Priest accidentally bumped into the Demon, causing the Demon to stumble backwards and fall through a trapdoor on the stage floor. There was a big puff of smoke from the opening, and the Demon was gone. The crowd cheered. Corvala took advantage of the diversion and slipped through the curtain.

Here the sound of the show came as a muffled roar. In this mess of tables and boxes, performers waited for the final act. Corvala stood hidden behind a rack of props and costumes. She scanned the troupe, looking for someone in particular. There were performers tuning instruments and others applying makeup in front of mirrors. Then she saw him—a tall bald man with a tremendous moustache twisted up at the ends. Solomon Swain, the master of the Windborne. He was with the unmasked Demon who had just come off stage. Fixing her eyes on him, Corvala took a deep breath and left the cover of the props and costumes.

‘Mister Swain,’ she said, walking right up to him. ‘I’d like to talk to you about that audition.’

‘You again!’ he said, both surprised and bothered by the interruption. ‘How did you get back here?’

‘I just need a minute of your time.’

‘I’m too busy. Get back outside where you belong.’ The troupe master walked away to tend to other business. Corvala followed.

‘You were too busy yesterday and the day before that. You promised me an audition.’

‘I did?’ Solomon asked skeptically.

‘Yes, you did. You said to come by later. And seeing as you’re leaving tomorrow, I reckon later is now.’

Before he could refuse her, Corvala took the fiddle from its sheath and brought it to rest on her shoulder. She drew the bow across the strings and sawed out a jig, a popular song in the valley, one the bands always played at the summer parties and harvest festival. Corvala had mastered the tune, her fingers skipping up and down the neck like nimble dancers. The music raced from the strings and even caught the attention of several nearby performers. Some stopped what they were doing and listened, tapping their feet to the music. By the time Corvala drew out her final note, she had a little audience of her own, a dozen or so people who gave her quiet applause. Corvala only cared about Solomon’s response. His arms were crossed, and he looked at her with a sideways glance, an amused smile on his face.

‘You’re good, kid,’ he said. ‘Real good.’

‘Thank you,’ Corvala replied, feeling her cheeks flush.

‘But,’ Solomon added, putting a hand on her shoulder, ‘every bumpkin can play that tune. True, you saw it good. But I’m not looking for good. I’m not even looking for

great. I'm looking for something special. You're not there yet.'

Corvala stood, stunned.

'What— what do you mean?' she murmured.

'You know how to play the fiddle, that's for sure. But you haven't yet learned how to play the soul.' Solomon looked down at her with an intent stare. 'Every musician has their song. Now I'm not talking about a piece of sheet music or a collection of notes. I'm talking about a sound that comes from deep within your being. *Your* song. When a musician finds their song and taps into it, the earth and sky tremble. You're not just playing your instrument; you're playing the souls of those who hear you. And they think to themselves, "*That's* what I needed to hear." Every musician has their song, but few find it. You haven't. Not yet. Come around again when you have.'

With that, he gave her shoulder a pat and turned away to prepare for the final act. Corvala's cheeks burned with shame, her failure witnessed by the performers around her. One woman gave her a pitying look. A young man shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Tough break.' Not knowing what else to do, Corvala retreated the way she had come, leaving through the curtain. She hurried past the stage, past the audience on the bleachers. All about her were bright lights and cheering, but she was numb to it. Arms wrapped about her chest, she left the main tent and headed home.

That had been her chance to join the Windborne, to escape this valley. Now it was gone. For years she had dreamed of leaving this place behind and making music in faraway lands. True, the madness of her mother would have followed her—but she could have learned how to cope with it and hide it, to ignore the voices if she had to. Dealing with it would have been tough anywhere. As a travelling musician

on the road, at least she wouldn't have had her old reputation following her. She could have been anyone. She could have been Corvala the Magnificent.

Not anymore.

She walked around the outskirts of Dawn's Landing until her father's little log house appeared. She entered the house to find it dark. Her father must be out. He was always out working on something. That was fine with her. Right now, she wanted to be alone. She went straight to her room, where she collapsed on her bed. For a long time, her eyes stared up at the ceiling beams. Then the tears rushed in, and she wept.

How long she lay in her misery, she couldn't tell. A few hours, maybe. It didn't matter. She wanted to be holed up in the dark for a hundred years. Her shame was still raw, the wound of rejection wide open. Solomon Swain's words cut into her mind. *You're not there yet... you haven't found your song.* As much as she wanted to, she couldn't get those words out of her head.

After a few hours of drifting in and out of restless sleep, a sudden knock on the front door shot her bolt upright from the bed. She sat there, listening. Who would be knocking at this hour? The house became quiet again and she wondered if she had imagined the knocking. Then it came again.

Rubbing her eyes and wiping her cheeks, she left her room and looked out the front window. A man stood on the front porch. He wore a wide-brimmed hat and carried a short sword sheathed at his side. Corvala opened the door just wide enough to face the visitor.

'Sheriff Kilagrin,' she said, her voice wary. 'What brings you here?'

'I've got some news,' he said, scratching the palm of his hand. 'Your father just killed Gage Capel.'