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OUTCASTS OF THE DARK CRYSTAL

by

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Chapter One

For perhaps the first time in her life, Droba lost her way.

Lod stomped his hooves beneath her, growing impatient. “Easy, Lod,” Droba said, stroking her landstrider’s neck. She let him drink from her water bladder, then took a sip herself. “We’ll get there by sundown. . . unless we get eaten first.”

They stood in a narrow canyon in the vast Fissure Desert. Droba needed to climb to the surface get her bearings. She knew the dangers of travelling on the surface of the Fissure Desert, the things that she couldn’t outrun, but the canyon was too narrow to navigate. She hated being so enclosed, longing for the orange, dunderburr plains, where her nose didn’t hurt from the dry heat.

“If you leave me behind,” Droba said to Lod, “I’ll eat your dinner tonight.” Lod snorted as Droba scaled the canyon wall. She had learned rock climbing when she lived with the Kilell Clan in the mountains -- there were no cliffs on the dunderburr plains -- and it had come in handy, so long as she didn’t have far to fall.

She reached the top. Standing on her bare toes, Droba poked her head a palm’s width above the salty surface of the desert. She could see the other canyons that laced the desert, the white sand blinding under three high suns, and beyond that the distant ruby mountains. To her left stood several tall, white spires, twisting upward like cobblecorn roots: the City of Salt. There it is! she thought.

Droba began her descent, but stopped when her eyes caught a dark purple glimmer on the horizon. A gust of wind blew sand into her face. She ducked below the surface and

rubbed the sand out of her eyes, waiting for the gust to die down. When she looked again, the purple glimmers had grown closer.

It was a pack of shard mantises. She heard their distant cries, sounding like knives scraping against rock. A few were young, but most were fully-grown, standing as tall as Lod.

Oh Thra, no.

“Here Lod, kikikiki,” Droba whispered. The landstrider pranced below her. Droba swung down the cliff, like the boys of the Kilell Clan, and landed in her saddle with a thump. “Let’s go,” she whispered. “Nakoshu. Nice and quiet.”

Lod padded down the narrow canyon, his hooves scraping against the sand. Above her, Droba heard the screech of knives against stone, the distant banging of rocks.

“Shhhh, nefiri, nefiri,” Droba urged. Please keep quiet. She eased the reins further, letting Lod take his own pace through the canyon. He wasn’t startled yet by the sounds from above -- like Droba, he had grown up on the plains among the stampeding bunderburr -- but if one of those mantises jumped into the canyon with them. . .

Several rocks tumbled down the cliff to Droba’s right. Lod squealed, panicking as he tried to avoid the rocks landing at his feet. Droba gripped the reins, keeping Lod in place as the avalanche subsided. She felt his rapid breath under her legs. “Shhh,” she urged.

They waited.

Shiny, purple, angular forms lept over the space above them: the herd crossing over the canyon. Droba lost count after twenty-two, yet they still kept coming. She wanted to shut

her eyes as they passed, but she had to be ready to run if one found them. She breathed deep and waited for her heart to slow. I have to make it. The city has to be warned. She felt for the scroll in her bag. They have to know.

Finally, the last of the pack lept over the canyon, their screeching subsiding as they moved far from Droba and Lod. Droba felt Lod ease under her, and her own breath loosened.

“That’s it, boy,” Droba said. “Let’s get going.”

She stirred Lod forward when a shard mantis landed in front of them. It stood a head shorter than Droba, possibly a child. Its murky, crystalline body resembled the Dark Crystal itself, or one of its cast-off shards. The mantis tilted its head like a curious youngster, flexing rod-like eyes at them.

The landstrider barked in surprise, nearly throwing Droba off.

“Easy, boy,” Droba said, stroking Lod’s back. But his chest was puffing too quickly. He shifted uneasily on his hooves, bobbing his head, growing agitated.

The mantis pranced closer.

Lod bolted, squealing and barking. Thrown off Lod’s back, Droba landed sideways on the ground. “Lod!”

The landstrider galloped about ten trors down the fissure canyon before he stopped. Blocking his way were more mantises, bigger ones than the youngster. Lod bucked and turned in fear.

Droba felt something slice her back, and she gasped. The young mantis had closed the distance between them. It opened its mandibles, clicking in anticipation.

Droba flinched, kicking the mantis in its thorax before it had a chance to bite her. I've attacked one of their young, she thought. Now the whole pack will be on us. She hurried to Lod, still bucking and kicking in fright. She grabbed his reins and held them tight, keeping the landstrider still. Seeing Droba made his panic subside, and she hurried up the stirrups onto his back.

By now, the mantis pack had surrounded them from all sides in the narrow canyon. Droba turned Lod, looking for any opening, but all she could see were the blade-sharp pincers of the shard mantises raised toward her. Nearby, the young mantis's mother stroked her child's back with the sound of a blade against a whetstone.

That mantis is still down, she thought. They're low enough to the ground, Lod might be able to...

"Jump!" she shouted, whipping his reins.

Lod responded, leaping over the young mantis and its mother. The landstrider shuddered as the mother ran a pincer down Lod's right hind leg. He stumbled as he landed outside the pack.

"Hurry!" Droba shouted.

Lod tore through the fissure canyons as the mantis pack pursued them. Droba drove him by instinct, hoping the fissures took them closer to the City of Salt.

However, Lod was slowing. His right hind leg twitched, and the blood from his wound dripped behind them. The mantises steadily closed the gap behind them, their pincers a few trors away from Lod's hindlegs.

Droba pressed on.

Ahead, the fissure canyon walls brightened. As Droba left the canyon and entered a clearing, she saw the white outer walls of the City of Salt, home of a thousand races. The spires of the city were studded with windows, their maroon and indigo curtains fluttering in the wind. The city gate lay about a hundred trors ahead, guarded by two Gelfling sentries above.

But the gate was closed.

“Open the gate!” Droba shouted to the sentries. “Let us in!”

“Absolutely not!” one shouted, hovering on her wings above the gate. “You’ll let the pack inside!” The sentry’s excuse was drowned by the sound of the pursuing mantises, their feet hitting the ground like an avalanche.

“Please!” Droba shouted, but by now she too far from the gate, skirting the city’s walls, the mantises too close behind.

Could Lod jump over that wall? she thought. Not with his bad leg. But he could still outjump a pack of mantises...

Droba headed for the nearest fissure canyon, the mantises’ pincers missing Lod by a few hair breadths. In the canyon ran a ramp-like outcropping, leading from the floor to the top of the fissure, onto the flats above. Poor Lod was getting weaker, huffing as he galloped up the ramp. “Just a little farther,” Droba urged him.

They reached the top. Droba led Lod along the top of the fissure, looking for a gap wide enough. Behind her, the mantises scurried up the ramp, slower even than Lod up the steep incline. She had a few short breaths to think.

“Okay, boy,” she said. “Get ready.”

Lod was trembling, his strength almost gone.

“No, Lod! We have to make it! They have to know!”

The mantis pack, now on the surface, spotted the Gelfling and her landstrider.

“Please, Lod! You won’t have to run again for a long time, I promise! Jump!”

Thra guide me. Droba prayed. Just as a mantis swung a pincer for one of his legs, Lod leapt.

For a brief moment, Droba flew. Tears streaked back across her cheeks into her hair. She smiled wider than she had in many trine, since she was a young girl on the dunderburr plains.

Lod collapsed as he landed on the other side, tossing Droba onto the salt flat. She lifted her pounding head from the ground, pulled herself to her feet. The mantises hesitated on the other side, stomping their rock-like feet. Then, in unison, they leapt for Lod and Droba.

They didn’t make the jump.

With a horrible clatter, they landed at the bottom of the canyon, their bodies shattering. They screeched for a long moment, then stopped.

Droba dusted off her clothes and stared down at the dead mantises. “I’m so sorry,” she whispered. Beside her, Lod struggled to stand. Using some healing moss and bandages, she wrapped the landstrider’s wounded leg, stroking his side as the dressing took hold. Then Droba took Lod’s reins, and the two limped back to the city gate.

As they approached, the giant wooden door was wrenched up by one of the sentries. The other, she who had warned them off earlier, flew to the ground in front of them. “You

survived a mantis attack!" she gasped. "Absolutely no one -- I can't imagine -- how did you know--"

"I didn't," Droba said. "I wish I hadn't had to do that."

"They're just shard mantises," the sentry replied. "They've always been a pest around here."

Droba didn't wish to think that way. "Doesn't matter," she said. "I need to speak to the Council of Elders at once. I have had a prophecy." She paused, her breath short. "The Skeksis will send their Garthim to attack the city. Unless they heed my warning, the city will fall."

Chapter Two

“Garthim?” the sentry said, her mouth agape.

Droba nodded.

“Well, let’s get inside these walls first,” the sentry said a moment later. “If you could hurry, please, so the gate isn’t open long.”

The sentry led Droba and Lod under the massive wooden door. “Are you a Dousan? You absolutely look like one.”

“No,” Droba replied. “If I were, I would hardly speak at all. I’m Droba of the Plains Clan. We’re a lesser clan allied with the Dousan.”

“I’m Oroki of the Spriton,” the sentry replied. She looks like one. Droba thought, with a dagger at the ready.

As they passed through the gate, Droba was dumbstruck. How bright everything shone! The light of the three suns bounced off the white salt walls and ground, as if the city itself were a fourth sun. The effect was almost blinding.

After her eyes adjusted, Droba could see all of the color of the city. Maroon and indigo curtains covered windows studding the towers. The ground was inlaid with colored sand, drawn in mandalas that Droba had never seen before. Either the mandalas traced ley lines through the city, or they simply aided navigation; Droba couldn’t guess which. I would need such a guide not to get lost in a place like this, she thought.

Behind her, the other sentry wrenched the gate shut again. The door crashed down onto the hard, salty ground.

The stalls of merchants surrounded her: from every Gelfling clan Droba knew of (and a few she didn't), and even some run by Podlings. Mongers shouted their wares.

"Gemstones from the Cave of Obscurity! Here is their seal of approval!" "Ancient UrSkek artifacts from before the Second Great Conjunction!" "Roots, roots of all kinds, grubs and tubers and leeks!" "Ensacho vila sowiya! Sowiya!"

"Isn't it something?" Oroki asked.

Droba merely nodded.

"If your warning is as urgent as you say," Oroki said, "you should be announced to the Council of Elders." Oroki hovered in the air, aloft on her wings. "Follow me."

"I would prefer to walk," Droba said, embarrassed. "I'm ... too tired to fly. I also need to see to Lod."

"Absolutely," Oroki said. "Let's walk to the stables first, then to the Main Hall afterward."

#

In the city stables, gathering his things, the Outcast had grown tired of the City of Salt. His purse was empty, every last shell spent on repairs or whatever food he could find. Most tiresome of all were the stares from the prim and proper Gelfling of the city as he passed.

It is well past time to go, he thought.

Klik-Klik scurried next to him. The shared mantis always grew restless when they stayed in confined quarters, almost too small for a creature her size. "I know, girl," he said. "I know." He fed her a handful of quartz.

As the mantis chewed, he heard voices from the far end of the stable. He put on his clay mask, threw his cloak over his head, stood high on his stilt-feet, and waited. The stable managers barely tolerated Klik-Klik; some feared her as they would a Garthim.

A red-skinned Gelfling woman, near his own age, led a limping landstrider to a stall three down from his. Unusually, her hair was left unbraided, flowing free in the constant breeze. She was led by one of the city's sentries, Oroki, who gave him an ugly look as they passed.

The red-skinned girl stared at the Outcast a moment before leading the landstrider into the stall. The landstrider stuck its head into a bag of marshmoss, grinding the leaves in its mouth.

The girl turned back to the Outcast. She was about to speak when she drew in her breath. "Do. . . do you ride that?" she asked, inciding Klik-Klik.

The Outcast nodded.

"All those sharp edges. . .why aren't your legs cut to pieces?"

"How do you know they are not?" he asked in return.

She smiled. "What kind of creature are you?" She tried to puzzle him out. "You're too tall for Gelfling, yet your accent sounds like a Podling's."

"There is only one of my kind," the Outcast replied.

"We should be going," Oroki said. She gave the Outcast a hard stare before leading the girl out of the stables.

She must be one of the Plains Clan, the Outcast thought. They rarely come to the city. What is so important to send a Plains Clan girl so far from home?

#

Outside the stables, Oroki and Droba followed the ley lines through the city. They walked with the wall to their left, in the manner of all Gelfling, through tall, narrow spaces that reminded Droba of the fissure canyons outside. The buildings, all built of salt and stone, stood eight, nine stories high. She had never seen dwellings built so high; even the tallest Gelfling houses of the richest clans rose only three stories.

Presently they reached a three-way intersection. Oroki led her to the right to a wider, longer passageway, which made Droba feel more comfortable. It stopped at the foot of the tallest tower in the city.

“The Main Hall,” Oroki announced.

Droba gawked, counting the windows.

Oroki followed Droba’s gaze. “Twenty-seven stories,” Oroki said. “One for every hour of the day.”

“Why do you divide the day like that?” Droba asked. “I couldn’t stand it, the day cut into pieces like a cooked tuber.”

“It’s absolutely necessary,” Oroki said. As she spoke, Droba heard a distant bell ringing above them. It tolled thirteen times. “We have so many things that need doing. If we didn’t have a way of keeping track of the time, we’d get nothing done!”

What a Skeksis thing to say. Droba thought.

Oroki led her inside. The main chamber reached three stories high. It housed a frieze, which depicted the creation of Thra and Aughra’s discovery of the Crystal, before it turned Dark. To Droba’s left ran a spiral staircase along the inside of the tower walls,

leading to the chambers above.

“Follow the staircase to the red door at the very top,” Oroki said. “Are you sure you’re too tired to fly? Only men take the stairs.”

“I just outran a pack of shard mantises,” Droba said. “I’d rather walk, if you don’t mind.”

“Absolutely.” Oroki nodded. “I hope they listen to what you have to say. Farewell, Droba!”

“Thank you.”

Droba climbed the stairs, surprised at how winded she was. She had gotten used to rock-climbing with the Kilell clan, but this was far more exhausting. Next time, maybe I will fly, she thought, laughing softly. She saw many Gelfling, most of them men, hurrying up and down. She passed ten or so doors as the staircase wound between the outer tower wall and some inner wooden one, enclosing rooms for unknown purposes. So many people to run such a large city, Droba thought.

At last, she reached the top. A single guard stood at attention outside the large red door, leading to the Council of Elders’ chambers. “I am Droba of the Plains Clan,” Droba said. “I have urgent business with the city leaders.”

“You and everyone else,” the guard said.

“I am not everyone else,” Droba replied, “if you could tell. Perhaps if you didn’t frown and squint so much, you might see better.”

The guard relaxed, smiling at her joke. “They’ve been debating the use of orchitrosses to deliver letters to Sifa villages near the sea. Go on ahead.”

The guard announced Droba as she entered.

The Council of Elders were chosen by the Matriarchs of each greater clan: Woodland, Spriton, Drenchen, Vapra, Grottan, Sifa, and Dousan. They ruled the city, which was the heart of Gelfling civilization ... not that it looked that way to Droba at the moment. Seated around a crescent-shaped table, they looked pale and tired, as though shut in these chambers for too long. Their discussion stopped when they noticed Droba.

“Elders,” Droba said, “I bring a prophecy of woe to this city. I hope you will heed my words.”

“Excuse me.” The elder at the center spoke. “I am Lychar of the Drenchen. Speak quickly, girl. You interrupted a long list of business to take care of.” He applied a salve to his glistening skin.

Droba cleared her throat. “I am the daughter of our Matriarch, Absensa. Among my clan I am known as a prophetess. I offer my hand in Dreamfast if you wish.”

The Dousan Elder rose from his seat. He was silent, clad in a simple white turban and robe. He beckoned Droba to the table, offering his hand. She took it--

--A floating ship sails a sea of crystals--

--Young Droba cries, frightened by her nightmares of Garthim and war--

--A dark-skinned Gelfling kneels in the cool, nighttime desert--

--Droba stares into a fire, entering a trance--

--The Dousan Elder let go. Droba propped herself against the table, still woozy from the Dreamfast. Satisfied, the Elder nodded and smiled, returning to his seat.

Lychar nodded in return. “Proceed.”

Droba regained her balance and continued. "Three days ago, I had a vision about this city. I meditated, using heat to burn the words into a rhyme, sealing it." Droba drew from her bag a scroll. She unrolled it and read the words that were burned into the paper.

"As Garthim march from a castle defiled
Gelfling ears are deaf to the prophet's call.
If the traitor within is not exiled,
The city built of salt and stone shall fall."

The Elders murmured to each other. "Garthim? Traitor?"

"Who is this person?" Elder Lychar demanded.

"I don't know," Droba said. "Once the prophecy is sealed, it cannot be seen again."

"Are you suggesting we search this entire city looking for one person, based on a vague prophecy?"

The chamber doors burst open. "Prophecy?" a whimpering voice said. "Prophecy causes so much trouble."

Droba gasped, her hackles rising. In shuffled a giant mass of robes, talons, and wrinkled skin. A birdlike head sneered at Droba. She could smell a stench of death and deceit on the creature. Skeksis!

"SkekSil," Elder Lychar said, "you are not invited here," although the Gelfling nodded subserviently.

SkekSil bowed in return. "Hmmm. Great Council of the City of Salt, pardon my interruption. I was merely passing through when I heard talk of some prophecy. Garthim . . . attack the City of Salt? Preposterous!" Skeksil shuffled to where Droba was standing, towering over her. Although his attention was focused on the Elders, Droba knew he was trying to intimidate her. "My good friends, we Skeksis would never attack a fellow Skeksis

with our own Garthim.” He stared at Elder Lychar. The Drenchen’s eyes glazed over, entranced by the Skeksis’s words. “I assure you, while I reside in this city, no harm may come to it.”

“No harm?” Droba said. Her words startled Lychar out of his trance. “You Skeksis enslave us, the Podlings, and so many other creatures! You drain us of our essence and turn us into your slaves! There are stories--”

“Do you refer to the disputed Journal of Rian?” Elder Lychar asked Droba. “It was written hundreds of trine ago. Surely it was a fabrication, or merely the whims of a delusional Gelfling.”

Droba sighed. “Elder of the Woodland Clan,” she said, turning to the old woman in green robes, “how many of you have gone missing? How many of your villages have disappeared?” She spoke next to the Vapra Elder. “You Gelfling are very good at disappearing, but I know more of you have disappeared than you can account for. And you,” she said to the pale, drowsing Elder of the Grottan Clan, “even the Skeksis have come for you, haven’t they?”

The Grottan Elder awoke with a start, his enormous eyes bulging. “Huh? What? Apologies, I was dreaming of the mysteries of the deep-dwelling nebries.”

Several Elders chuckled.

Droba turned back to SkekSil, the whimpering diplomat and chamberlain to the Skeksis emperor. “But we lesser clans have suffered most. Whole clans have disappeared, because the Skeksis know we don’t have the numbers to fight back, unlike the greater clans. Tell me true, Skeksis. Do your people still enslave us?”

“Hmmm,” SkekSil said, bowing. “I myself have never taken Gelfling.”

“This is not the time nor the place for such a discussion,” Lychar said. “What concerns us now is only the veracity of Droba’s prophecy.” He sighed. “SkekSil, leave.”

Whimpering, SkekSil nodded and shuffled out of the chambers.

“Well,” Lychar said to the others, “what do we make of all this?”

The Dousan Elder rose from his seat, strode to just behind Droba, and bowed. He supports me. Droba thought, although the Dousan would feign to use actual words unless their lives depended on it.

“She has my support as well,” said the Woodland Elder, rising.

“She does not have mine,” the Elder of the Sifa said, crossing her arms across her fishnet robes. “The prophecy is too vague, completely useless!”

“I say we prepare anyway,” the Spriton Elder said, drawing forth a dagger. “There’s no harm in caution.”

“Enough!” yelled Lychar, sounding like a croaking nebrie. “Droba, don’t think you can convince us that the Skeksis mean to take this city, based on a ... fever dream. You are dismissed.”

Droba tossed her scroll on the table in front of Lychar. “The Garthim will come soon,” she said. “You may still be talking when they arrive.” She left.

Outside, SkekSil stood waiting for her, his hands clasped in front of his ancient red robe. “My friend, I couldn’t help but listen,” he said. “There is nothing to fear from us. We love Gelfling.”

“On a plate,” Droba replied. She ran down the stairs and out of the Main Hall.

#

The Outcast strolled through the marketplace, staring at the same goods that had been sold all week. Not that he had any shells to buy them - his purse was all empty - but he had another reason in mind for walking among the merchants.

Where has she gone?

Discouraged, he went back to the stables. He welcomed the warm smell of Landstrider musk and marshmoss. The stables were full, the stalls occupied by landstriders, meepmeeps, and stranger creatures. He reached Klik-Klik's stall when he caught a glimpse of a Gelfling girl. She was crying, her face buried in her red-striped landstrider's side. Her.

"You appear upset," he said.

The Plains Clan girl turned. Her face was dry, but her cheeks were red and puffy. She frowned at him. "This city is corrupt. If someone built a city of salt where I lived, the spring rains would wash it away in a day. Here, it's so dry, such a fragile thing can last forever. Why do you stay?"

The Outcast sighed under his mask. "I was looking for something. Now that I've found it, it is time to leave."

"I wish I could," she whispered.

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe a creature like you will hear me better than others." She told the Outcast about her prophecy, how she traveled so far to get here, how no one would listen because of the influence of that Skeksis. "If you were Gelfling, we could Dreamfast. It would save so

much trouble."

"It would, but I'm something else completely, " he said. "This isn't my face." He tapped his clay mask. "You would hate me if I took this off."

"You're not Skeksis, are you?" She glanced at Klik-Klik, who stood still under her gaze.

He laughed. "I am no Skeksis. A shard mantis can be tamed by anyone, even the smallest Podling. And unlike those ancient lizards, you and I are of a similar age."

"Not that I can tell," she said, smiling. "I wear a mask too, you know. You can't see it right away, but if I pointed to it you'd wonder why you never saw it before."

"What, are you Skeksis?" he asked.

They both laughed. She shook her head.

"I'm Droba of the Plains Clan."

"I do not use my given name," he said. "I am called the Outcast."

"A creature who is called The Outcast and wears a mask and cloak," Droba said. "You seem very trustworthy." Droba turned back to her landstrider. Watching her tend to a bandage on his leg, the Outcast noticed something odd about this Gelfling woman. The way she held herself was . . . wrong. Yet there was nothing out of the ordinary he could place.

"What shall you do," the Outcast asked, "if the Council of Old Crones will not hear your prophecy?"

Droba sighed. "I have to keep trying. Maybe other Gelfling will listen. Maybe they'll leave before it's too late." The clock chimed at the center of the city; Droba winced. "They

divide the day into twenty-seven 'hours.' A day is either whole or not at all."

"Maybe this city doesn't deserve your help," the Outcast said.

Droba glared at him. "How could you say that? All Gelfling are my sisters and brothers. If you were one of us you'd understand. If a child is determined to walk off a cliff, a mother must keep trying to pull her back as long as she can."

"Even if that mother falls off along with her child?"

She nodded, her eyes shut.

"There is . . . one part of the city which I have not bored of yet." The Outcast felt uncomfortable, as if his mask had suddenly fallen off. "Have you yet seen the puppet masters of the Podling Ward?"

"I haven't wandered there yet," Droba said, smiling.

"I would go for the evening, if you would like to join me."

"I must say, I don't travel well in the company of others," Droba said. "My mouth speaks my heart before my mind can stop it. I think you've noticed."

"Those I meet are never completely honest with me . . . except you." He smiled under his mask. "I would not mind."

Chapter Three

The Podling Ward was far louder than Droba expected. As the Outcast led her through a diminutive stone arch into a maze of torches and banners, she could hear the raucous loud and clear.

“Doza aminia!” a Podling woman shouted, juggling empty mead bottles that were half as tall as she was. “Gorah, viseligche!” The tuber-like face of the Podling smiled broadly at them.

“Viseligche,” the Outcast replied. Droba noticed his accent resembled the Podlings’, although his voice was quieter and more expressive. She guessed that he had spent a lot of time with them, as she had with many different clans when she was growing up. Her mother had seen to that.

“You said there were puppet masters,” Droba shouted to the Outcast.

“The puppet masters are mostly Gelfling,” he replied. “Podlings make puppets too, but they are too small to see from a crowd. Follow me.”

The Outcast led her through the crowd of Podlings and occasional Gelflings, under brown and yellow tarps and banners. His long legs -- Are those stilts? Droba wondered -- made it difficult to keep up without running. The Podlings were hard to keep from running into, and at one point Droba worried she had knocked one over.

The Outcast finally came to a stop about ten or so trors from a large stage. Only the smallest sun was left above the horizon. The Podling Ward was lit by torches, as was the stage. Flat boards framed the front and the sides, and the back was covered by a curtain.

Overhead, a sign read in the Woodland tongue: Mupto's Puppets.

The clock bell rang twenty-four.

A tall, slender Gelfling strode out. He was clad in brown and green, with a bushy beard and a pleasant expression on his face. "Eh soi, poringas," he said in the Podling tongue. "Welcome, friends. I am Mupto of the Woodland Clan. May you be merry and playful for the next hour!" Mupto rushed behind the stage.

"Where are the puppets?" Droba asked.

"Wait."

A moment later, a strange creature, made of woven cloth and plucked landstrider fur, hopped to the center of the stage from behind the wooden panels. It looked like a Podling doll, but it moved and spoke.

That's a puppet?

The show continued. One, two, sometimes three puppets appeared onstage at any time. They spoke to each other, hit and embraced one another in almost equal measure. The show reminded Droba of her clan's shadow plays that she loved, performed during the winter moons.

"Are they not impressive?" the Outcast asked her.

She nodded. "Maybe you should ask Mupto to make you a better mask. Those puppets are more expressive than you are."

He laughed behind his brown, featureless clay mask, and Droba had a thought to pull it off right then.

By now, two puppets -- a Skeksis and a Gelfling -- were fighting over a nebrie. The

Skeksis accidentally knocked over one of stage panels, which toppled a nearby torch. The oil canister inside shattered. Flaming oil spilled over the ground and the stage.

The Podlings screamed.

The puppet masters... Droba started for the growing blaze, but the Outcast grabbed her shoulder. "That fire is spreading too quickly. The waterbringers will be here soon."

"There are Gelfling still in there!" she said, wrenching her shoulder away from his gloved hand. She pushed through the fleeing Podlings to the edge of the fire, which had now spread over the entire stage.

They'll know, she thought. As soon as I take off my cloak. She hesitated a moment before she cast it aside. Wearing just her travelling dress, she jumped over the fire to the inside of the stage.

Mupto was standing over another Gelfling, one of the other puppet masters, patting his burn wounds. His own shoulder had been charred badly. "Help me!" he shouted.

Droba stooped, throwing the other Gelfling's arm over her shoulder. She and Mupto lifted the unconscious Gelfling and dragged him to the edge of the blaze. By now it engulfed most of the hay-covered ground.

"Can you fly him over?" Mupto asked her.

"I can't fly!" she shouted.

"We'll have to run then," he said.

She nodded. "One . . . two . . . three . . . run!"

The fire licked her legs, singeing her skin under her boots, but she ran. The heat blurred her eyes, the smoke choked her throat. Eventually, they made it out of the inferno to

where the Outcast stood. From under his cloak he withdrew a canister of salve and rags for bandages. Droba and Mupto laid the Gelfling on the ground and applied some dressings.

The waterbringers arrived soon after, parting through the crowd of watching Podlings. The women flew above the blaze and poured water from pots, while the men filled pots from a nearby fountain below. One attended to the unconscious Gelfling.

“Your legs are burned,” the Outcast said to Droba.

Droba suddenly felt the scalding burns down her legs, noticed the singed fringes of her dress. “I’ll dress them later,” she said.

“Where are her wings?” someone asked.

Droba spun. A Gelfling boy was pointing at her back. She remembered she wasn’t wearing a cloak.

“She doesn’t have wings!” someone else whispered. Soon everyone started whispering, saying, or shouting it. That girl doesn’t have wings. She’s wingless! She’s deformed!

Droba felt as if she were in a block of ice. “I was born like this,” she whispered to the Outcast. His clay mask was unexpressive.

Several of the Council of Elders had gathered nearby, their attention split between Droba and the smouldering ashes of Mupto’s stage. Elder Lychar came forward, pointing a stubby, glistening finger at her. “You’re no prophetess,” he said, fear on his face. “Your visions are false!” He turned to the other Elders. “She’s a liar!”

“Calm yourself, Lychar,” the Spriton Elder said. “It may have been an accident.”

“That was no accident!” Lychar shouted. “She was born without them! Look, there

aren't even wing stubs!"

Droba stumbled away from Lychar's pointing finger, backing into the Outcast. Why do I trust him more than my own kind?

The Sifa Elder appeared with more city guards. She sent two of them to Droba. "If you would be so kind," the Elder said, "I think it would be best if you ... stayed inside."

"To shield others from an ugly truth?" She had meant her lack of wings, but she realized it meant her prophecy as well. "You might as well hide your ugly faces too, like he does." She pointed to the Outcast.

The Outcast placed his hand on her shoulder. "I could not see your mask," he said.

Droba couldn't meet his gaze.

The two guards took her by the arms, then flew away from the Podling Ward and the Outcast below.

#

The Outcast stood on a high roof, staring at the gap between him and the next dwelling. Thra, what am I doing up here? he thought. I am about to risk falling to a horrible death, just to see a girl I only met yesterday.

Earlier that day, the Outcast had sought out one of the street urchins. He had one thing left he could sell, but he would soon be gone from the city, someplace he could cast another. The urchin took his payment in exchange for what he needed to know: the whereabouts of Droba of the Plains Clan.

The urchin told him something else as well, something that chilled the Outcast's blood.

There was only one guard on duty outside her door, he discovered, but none guarding her window. After everyone discovered that she couldn't fly, they probably thought she didn't need any such protection. However, the Outcast knew how to use a rope to climb down a steep surface. It had only cost him two broken legs when he was little. All I must do is jump to the other roof. Right.

The Outcast paced to the opposite side of his roof. "By Aughra's eye," he swore. He sprinted across the stone-tile roof until his foot touched the edge, then leapt.

He crashed down on the opposite side, falling onto his left shoulder. It didn't feel broken, but he knew large, ugly bruises would linger there for a few moons after. That was the hard part, he thought. He took a coil of rope, tied it around a chimney, and started down.

He reached her balcony. She was facing the window, sitting on the floor on a thin cushion, bandaged legs folded underneath. Her cupped hands rested on her lap, thumbs pressed together. Her eyes were closed.

He pulled his cloak over his exposed face and whispered. "I apologize for the disturbance."

Droba's eyes sprang open. "Don't tell me you have wings under there," she said, smirking.

"None of the sort," he replied. "I had to part with my mask, so I must keep my cloak over my head, if you do not mind."

"You look less intimidating this way," she said. "Like you'll run into a grazing landstrider with it over your head like that."

"That is a good point," he said.

She sighed, her smile dropping. "I see the Council of Elders tomorrow. I'm being tried for false prophecy."

"Because you saved the lives of two Gelfling and warned them of danger?"

She shook her head. "You saw why."

"Is it not unusual," he said, "for some Gelfling women not to have wings?"

"It happens once every nine generations," she said. "That's what I've heard. Even Aughra's ancient magic sometimes slips. My clan doesn't look down on physical deformity, but some. . ." She sighed again.

"You Gelfling know nothing," the Outcast said. "Not every nebrie is born exactly the same, nor every orchitross. Even the Garthim--"

"Don't joke about Garthim," Droba said.

"Droba," said the Outcast, "what happens if you are condemned tomorrow?"

"I'll be exiled," she said. "I don't care what they think of me. I just wish they would listen." She shut her eyes, as if her lids were keeping back the tears.

"Maybe you cannot save them."

"I can't think that," Droba said. "Thra has given me the power of foresight. I can't waste it like a child who plays with toys and discards them when she gets older. I have to convince them!"

"I've heard something else," the Outcast said. "From an urchin boy. One of the nearby villages in the Fissure Desert was attacked by Garthim."

"Thra protect them. . ." Droba shook her head. "It still won't convince the Elders. As

long as that Skeksis is still here, whispering in their ears, they'll keep thinking the Garthim won't come."

The Outcast felt a heavy weight in his stomach. "I have to leave, Droba. I am no Spriton warrior or a Vapra spy. I am just the Outcast, and I can only protect myself and Klik-Klik. I believe you when you say this place will fall. If you stay, I will never see you again after tonight."

"You can't even see me properly under that cloak," she said. Suddenly, moving as quickly as a hunter on fallen prey, she pulled back the hood of his cloak.

She gasped. "You're. . . Gelfling?!"

"I'm not what I look like" he said.

She looked as if she might laugh. "You disguise yourself around other Gelfling? Why?"

"It is too long a story to tell," he said.

"Then let's Dreamfast!" Droba said. "We're both Gelfling!"

"...And that is part of it." He turned from her. "I have never been able to Dreamfast for as long as I can remember. Maybe that is why my clan..."

Droba shook her head. "You're still Gelfling."

The Outcast bowed and headed for the window. "I should be going. We will meet again in another life, I hope. Goodbye, Droba." Then he threw his hood over his face, grabbed the rope, and climbed away.

#

Seven-times-seven Gelfling sit in a circle, their hands joined in Dreamfast. From

afar stands an old woman, wearing a simple vine crown. She speaks. "We must heal the wound of the world. When single shines the triple sun--"

Droba awoke. She had fallen asleep on the cushion, her legs still tucked under her. She often meditated when she had the chance, as her visions came more easily when her mind could be kept clear.

It was hard to keep it clear at the moment.

Who is that Gelfling woman? she wondered, not for the first time. She had been seeing fragments of the same vision ever since she left for the City of Salt. It was as if Thra itself was trying to make her understand. That woman looks like a Clan Matriarch, but I don't recognize her clan at all. Could there be an unknown tribe? No, the other Gelfling were from the seven greater clans and some of the lesser clans like mine.

She changed her bandages, rubbing salve into her burns. They ached from sitting so long. After, she broke fast on some nebrie milk and cobble corn mash that the guards brought her. They looked nervous when they opened the chains on her door, as if the Plains Clan were even more fierce warriors than the Spriton, but they needn't have worried. Droba would stay, no matter how long it took.

What if that's the Gelfling Queen? No one had seen the Queen in centuries, except the Matriarchs, and only they knew where she was. Is that what my vision means, that I need to find the Gelfling Queen? My mother would take me if I asked, if it was important enough.

After breakfast, the guards escorted her above the city to the Main Hall. A crowd had gathered in the large lower chambers, which had been rearranged to serve as a court. Either the crescent table had been moved downstairs, or else another, identical one set

there. Droba scanned the crowd -- mostly Gelfling, but a few Podlings as well -- looking for someone. No, he's left already, she thought. He's really a coward under that cloak of his. He didn't even tell me his name! In a far corner stood SkekSil, his bony fingers crossed in front of him, contentedly watching. He looks like he planned all this, she thought.

Since she arrived in the Main Hall, the crowd began to grow tense. From outside, she heard a rumble of wheelcarts rolling past, and distant Podling screams. The Elders whispered among one another, except of course the Dousan, who was praying.

Finally, Elder Lychar was about to start when a messenger burst into the chamber. "Elders," she shouted, "the Garthim are here!"

"We've heard of the attack on the nearby village," Lychar said. "They will pass us by."

"No, they're right outside the gate!"

Chapter Four

The chambers erupted into gasps and panicked screams. Elder Lychar tried to shout above the din, but his voice couldn't penetrate the noise. Droba looked on, sullen.

If the traitor within is not exiled... Her eyes caught SkekSil, still standing the corner.

Finally, the Droban Elder grabbed a geode and banged it against the metal edge of the table. That seemed to get the crowd's attention. The Droban then nodded to Lychar, who a moment ago had looked confused.

"Everyone, please listen," Lychar said. "The city gate is closed. Our walls are too high for the Garthim to climb, and too deep to breach. So long as we stay inside these walls, we'll be safe!"

Two Podlings, an old man and a woman, stepped forward from the crowd. "Li sobafi no truun! Li sobafi elderano!"

"I know you need trade to sustain your business," Lychar said, responding to the Podlings' query, "but until the Garthim have left we must keep the gates closed."

"So they can starve us out?" a Gelfling shouted from the back. Several in the group agreed, nodding their heads, shouting "Hear, hear!"

"How many are there?" The Spriton Elder asked the messenger.

"Several hundred or more," she said. "All of them have cages on their backs."

"They mean to capture us!" another Gelfling shouted.

Enough! Lychar shouted. "No one will be captured today." He turned to SkekSil. "You said this city would be safe while you were here. Why have the Garthim come,

Skeksis?" Lychar avoided SkekSil's gaze.

"I am no commander, Elder Lychar," SkekSil said. "SkekUng is the Garthim General, and they only take orders from him. I'm sure this has all been a misunderstanding. Allow me to speak to him from the top of the city gate, and I may persuade him to depart in peace."

"Only for you to open the gates for him!" The Spriton Elder said.

"Hmmm. I suggest that your guards accompany me," SkekSil said, his whimper louder than before. "As you can see, I am unarmed, and my body is weak with age."

"Yet it's strong enough to carry a dozen robes," Droba said, regretting it almost immediately. "It's a wonder you can walk at all in those."

Lychar whispered something to a nearby guard. "We'll deal with you later," he said, dismissing Droba. The guard gestured for another to follow, and they grabbed Droba's arms, dragging her out of the chambers.

The crowd filed out of the chambers, making their way to the city gates, as the two male guards continued to drag Droba back to her quarters. A third guard, a woman, landed in front of them.

"It'll be faster if I take her myself," Oroki said.

"Thanks," one of the guards said. "Let's go see what all the fuss is about." He and his companion left Oroki and Droba alone.

Oroki wrapped her arms around Droba's chest and lifted her. "Don't make any noise," she said. "I'll be cast out if I'm caught disobeying the Elders, absolutely."

"Where are we going?" Droba asked.

“To get a better view of the gate, of course!”

#

They landed atop the third-tallest tower, which Droba had learned was a school for Gelfling children. They couldn't hear much from up there, but Oroki had an eyepiece, and the two shared it so they both could watch.

The Council of Elders had all gathered near a ladder. SkekSil, guarded by one Gelfling in front and one in back, was climbing the ladder to the top, where he could speak to the Garthim below. Beyond the walls, the Garthim stood waiting in a large group, not in any kind of rank or file. They looked like leaping beetles waiting to eat the dung of the nebrie.

Standing in the ramparts, SkekSil raised a speaking horn to his beak, as if he were about to command the Garthim. Suddenly, he lowered the horn and turned to a third sentry, the male that had opened the gate for Droba a couple days ago.

“No, Kereti, don't!” Oroki shouted.

The sentry froze, his gaze locked onto SkekSil's. The Skeksis's trance on Lychar was nothing compared to this. The two guards raised their swords, but SkekSil's gaze fell on them as well, and they froze in place. He turned back to the sentry, Kereti, who slowly turned from the Skeksis to the wench that opened the gate.

Creaking, the gate began to open.

“I have to get down there!” said Oroki. Before Droba could respond, the sentry flew off the tower, leaving Droba alone on the roof.

Not for the first time, Droba wished she had wings.

Below, the Garthim wedged their enormous, beetle-like bodies through the half-open gate, and slowly they lifted the massive wooden door open. Many of the fiercest Gelfling warriors -- most from the Spriton clan, but some from the Droban and Woodland clans as well -- came forward from the crowd to a defensive line at the front.

Among the Garthim, towards the back, Droba spotted a purple velvet litter. The curtains parted, and a Skeksis poked his head out, shouting orders. SkekUng, the Garthim Master? Droba guessed. At his urging, the Garthim marched forward.

They trampled the Gelfling at the front.

Droba was frozen in doubt. She had to get down there, had to help the people of the city defend themselves against the Garthim. But there was no way off the roof! She crawled to the edge and stared down the wall, looking for ledges or balconies on which to fall. The window ledges were thin, and there were no balconies, keeping younger Gelfling from falling out by accident. However, one window was open, and a short, indigo curtain fluttered in and out in the breeze. There were gaps between the stones and the salt blocks, big enough to fit her toes or fingers into.

Thank you, my friends of the Kilell Clan, she thought. I'm sorry the Garthim came for you.

She tore off a strip from her leg bandages and braided it for strength. She tied one end to a protruding nail at the edge of the roof, then looped the other end around her chest. She pulled it taut, testing her weight against it, and it held. It was long enough to get over the roof's edge, but she would have no rope to catch her further down.

Droba swung her legs over the edge, took a breath, and slid off.

The bandages yanked against her chest. Her breath was forced out, and she gasped. She heard the bandages rip and strain. Legs dangling, her toes felt for a gap. The right foot found one, but the left slid against gaps too narrow. Her right hand grasped a protruding stone nearby.

She untied the loop around her chest. Still gasping, she shifted her weight on her right hand and foot. Now she had nothing to catch her.

Her fingers grew sweaty. I can't stay here long...

She glanced down. Below, a curtain fluttered in and out of an open window. It looked thick enough to hold her weight if she caught it. But Droba could see no hand- or footholds to climb down that far.

Thra guide me. She jumped.

Her eyes shut, Droba felt for the fluttering curtain. When her fingers found it, she grabbed hold, yanking herself forward. She tumbled through, falling against a cushion. She felt cloth puppets and animal dolls beneath her.

She had landed in a playroom.

Droba caught her breath, then bolted out the playroom, down the stairs, to the bottom. She reached the ground and sprinted outside.

She froze.

The Garthim were running rampant through the city, quickly filling their cages with those Gelfling and Podlings too slow, or too sick, or too old. Others, those with weapons, those who fought back, lay dead at her feet. The Garthim moved like waves, smashing through walls, as houses teetered or collapsed in clouds of salty dust.

She ducked back inside as a Garthim rumbled past, but too late: the Garthim had noticed her. Gaze locked on her, it lumbered toward the door, but it was too big to pass through. Instead, the Garthim smashed the doorframe and the surrounding wall down, leaving chunks of salt and stone on the ground.

Droba ran for the stairs, but another Garthim, sensing easy prey, smashed another hole in the wall and blocked her way to the stairs. Too many of you and the whole thing will come down, Droba thought. She reached for a dagger, but remembered that her things were still in her quarters.

“I will not be taken,” Droba said. She backed into the pillar at the center of the room, just below a carving of the Gelfling Queen, wearing a crown of vines. “You’ll tear down this whole tower first, and me with it!”

“There is no need for that,” a voice said. It came from the Garthim that had blocked her way to the stairs. As Droba puzzled as to how a Garthim could speak, the door to its cage opened, and a black-cloaked figure jumped out. It smashed a staff into the head carapace of the Garthim, then swung for the other. They backed away from the figure, then sensing more Gelfling to chase, left Droba and the cloaked figure inside the tower.

“You!” Droba said, smiling. “You’re still running into things with that cloak over your head.”

He pulled back his cloak. “There is no one left to care. My apologies, I left before I could tell you my name. The Podlings who raised me called me Nosun.”

“Nosun, of the Podlings.” Droba bowed. “But how did you get back in--”

“We must find a place to hide,” he said. “We need to leave soon. The Garthim, they

are not just taking Gelfling this time. They mean to to tear down the whole city.”

#

“You climbed into in one of their cages?” Droba said. She and Nosun hid among the fallen debris in the school tower. So far, no other Garthim had come looking for them.

“What if you couldn’t get back out?”

“The lock looked broken. I had to take the chance. I hid with Klik-Klik in a canyon until I found the right Garthim to ride. It was then that I heard the Skeksis talking. They had taken the Elders captive. The whimpering Skeksis, he said he wanted to keep the city, but the other Skeksis, their general I think, said it had to be torn down, so the Gelfling could not use it to fight against the Skeksis.”

“We should rescue as many as we can,” Droba said.

“I told you. I am no Spriton warrior. I can only fend for myself.”

“I could very well fend for more,” she said. “We need to find my friends. Oroki was fighting the Garthim, and I don’t know where Mupto and his companion are--”

“No, Droba. If we go looking for others, the city might come crashing down on us!”

Droba sighed. “If only there were more of us. If we just didn’t squabble so much...”

She remembered her vision from this morning. “Nosun, do you know of the Gelfling Queen?”

“I hear she is twice as tall as other Gelfling, with eyes whose gaze burns through the thickest metal armor.” He smiled. “I think some of that may have been exaggerated.”

“Nosun, if we leave the city together, promise me you’ll help me find the Queen. She could get the other clans together to fight back. And promise me we’ll rescue the Gelfling

and Podlings captured today.”

Nosun hesitated, but he nodded. “I promise.”

Droba shut her eyes. “This will mean nothing if we can’t get out of here.”

“About that,” Nosun said. “I know how we can get out.”

“I’m not riding a Garthim, Nosun.”

“No, not that.” Startled, he glanced around the wall they hid behind for a moment.

“The Main Hall is the tallest tower in the city. If we could get to the top, before the Garthim tear it down, we could fly out.”

“On whose wings, Nosun?” She showed him her wingless back. “We’d fall like stones.”

“Not if we built wings for both of us. Have you taken a long fall, and noticed how the wind resists your clothes beneath you?”

“Quite a number of times, when I lived with the Kilell clan,” she said.

In the salty ground, Nosun drew what looked like an upside-down basket with two Gelfling hanging from the handle. “If we find something big enough, we can use this to carry us all the way down. We shall both fall like Gelfling with wings.”

“And where do we find a cloth large enough? I’ve never seen one that size, even in a place like this.”

“I suppose that is the hard part,” Nosun said.

Droba rose. “First, we’ll free Lod from the stables. He’ll be able to find his way out of the city on his own. After that. . .” She smiled. “We’ll fly together.”

Droba rides to the City of Salt to deliver her prophecy: the Garthim are coming and the city will fall. However, the Council of Elders, leaders of the city under the influence of the Skeksis, ignore her. Her plight worsens when an accident reveals she was born without wings, a blasphemous deformity to some Gelfling. While imprisoned, she receives a vision of the mysterious Gelfling Queen and forty-nine Gelfling prophets, but she doesn't understand. When the Garthim finally attack the city, she escapes with Nosun, an outcast Gelfling raised among the Podlings. They go in search of the Gelfling Queen, whose whereabouts are unknown.

Meanwhile, Oroki, a sentry from the City of Salt, is a prisoner in the Castle of the Crystal. Her life essence is about to be extracted when a platoon of Garthim, rebelling against their Skeksis masters, take her "captive" and escape. The rebel Garthim, made more intelligent by one of the Skeksis's experiments, need Oroki as their new general. Soon after, they rescue a group of captives from the City of Salt, but the rescued Gelfling are unwilling to follow Oroki because of the Garthim.

Nosun and Droba brave the myriad dangers of the Fissure Desert, eventually finding the Podling village where Nosun was raised. Soon after, Oroki's rebel Garthim and the freed captives also discover the village. After a tense standoff, Oroki convinces Droba that her Garthim won't harm anyone. Oroki proposes to use the rebel Garthim to aid the now scattered Gelfling clans. However, Nosun doesn't trust Oroki, believing she's under the influence of the Skeksis.

Unsure whether to use Oroki's Garthim or continue her search for the Gelfling

Queen, Droba leads the others to the Plains Clan for guidance from the Matriarch, her mother. However, the Skeksis send their loyal Garthim after Oroki's rebels, attacking them before they can get to Droba's clan. Droba gets separated from her companions and flees into the vast, desolate Crystal Sea. There she finds the Dousan Elder from the City of Salt, in hiding since its fall. He reluctantly informs Droba that the Gelfling Queen is a lie, a red herring to keep the Skeksis off the real leaders of the Gelfling: the clan Matriarchs.

Droba decides that she should act the part of the Gelfling Queen, since the Gelfling truly need a leader, and to retake the City of Salt. Meanwhile, Nosun and Oroki, after becoming tenuous friends, free the rebel Garthim from the loyal ones. They reunite with Droba and rescue her clan. Together, the rebel Garthim and Droba's forces retake the crumbling City of Salt. Droba finally discovers the meaning of her earlier vision: she must build the Wall of Destiny with forty-nine Gelfling prophets, or else the Skeksis will rule Thra forever.