

ONE

ONCE UPON A TIME, a young man opened his eyes.

It was the day of the Equinox Festival, and certain things had to be done if he was going to enjoy the music and bonfires and dancing and beer and wine and sweet fizzy cordials of the celebration that night. His father had to be kept happy. His brother had to be kept from doing anything stupid. And the work had to get done before the sun set.

At the end of the street, a short, dark man with dreadlocks leaned on the side of a building, watching him.

The young man took a deep breath. The sky shone blue and cloudless, and the air felt unusually humid for a day so early in spring. The cobblestones warmed his feet. The creaks of stalls and the flaps of cloth awnings and the occasional sharp crack of laughter filled the air.

“This way, boy,” grunted a voice over the young man’s shoulder.

The young man wasn’t a boy. Not anymore. He was twenty years old, and his name was Litnig Jin, and the grunting man was his father and ought to have known all that.

Litnig didn’t argue. He coiled his arms around a bushel of spring potatoes, lifted it, and ducked behind his tall, fat father through the shaded door of a home. Inside, he set the bushel next to a half-dozen just like it and dusted off his hands while a sandy-haired woman paid for the food.

“Thank you, Torin,” she said.

The fat man just grunted.

The city hummed in Litnig's ears. Eldan City was waking up for the spring, and he felt like he was waking with it after a winter of rain and cold and throbbing heartache that had refused to leave him alone. The streets shone with colored ribbons strung from tall iron poles. Stacks of wood waited to be lit at sunset in the city's largest squares. He'd made Cole promise to introduce him to a girl or two during the festival, and he'd promised himself that this time he'd talk to them and ignore any thoughts he had about Ryse Lethien. He was a man now, and it was time to move on.

When Litnig left the home, the dark man was still at the end of the street, watching.

The hair rose on the back of Litnig's neck.

He briefly considered not telling his father about the man. But the risks of letting Torin Jin find out about things on his own tended to outweigh the benefits.

"Ta," he whispered. "Someone's watching us."

Torin faced the end of the street and grunted. He ran a hand through his thinning hair, rubbed his chin, and then turned and stepped toward the old gray cart in which they made their rounds. "He's an Aleani," he replied, "and far from home."

Litnig blinked and looked back at the end of the street. The Aleani didn't come to Eldan City often. Hadn't for centuries. The figure leaning on the wall was short for a man and a little stocky. Large beads glinted in his dreadlocks. His clothes were black and new.

The family cart sat between two brightly plastered, red-roofed buildings, and when Litnig turned around again, Torin was already climbing into it. Litnig's brother Cole, seventeen, small of frame, and reclining in the driver's seat, shot their father a glare and scooted over to make room.

"Probably hungry," Torin continued. He wiped the sweat from his face with a stained sleeve. "If he moves toward us, hit him with the orphan breaker."

Litnig hesitated at the cart's headboard. The Aleani stood motionless in the sun. He didn't look gaunt or sullen, like Litnig would expect if he was starving.

“Boy,” Torin growled. “Get in the damn cart.”

Litnig did as he was told.

He sat next to a box of coldweather lettuce and pulled the long oak club his father called the orphan breaker from its place behind him. Litnig had never actually used it on an orphan, but he’d hit a thieving man with it once, square in the face, as hard as he could. The memory still made him shudder.

When Litnig looked up, the Aleani was staring at him again.

Torin clicked and snapped the reins, and the graying mule in the traces plodded into motion. The cart rolled toward the mouth of the street.

The Aleani didn’t move, but his eyes, dark brown and glittering, tracked Litnig as the cart approached him.

When they passed him, he smiled.

His teeth were sharp and yellowed.

LITNIG RETURNED HOME just before sunset with the bed of the cart mostly empty and Cole and his father sweat-drenched and silent in its driver’s seat. His arms and legs ached. His skin felt hot and tight. He was looking forward to a quick dinner and a wash before heading to Marcus a’Beddon Square for the festival. He was already thinking about what he’d say to the girls Cole was going to introduce him to.

Hi and a smile would make a good start of things, he thought.

His home stood near the center of the merchant district, a few blocks from the muddy point where the bright, shallow Northwater River flowed into the dark, steady Eldwater on its way south to the sea. The house was a simple two-story structure of timber, blackened by time and treatments and the sun. As the cart approached it, Litnig jumped out to open the gate to its yard.

His father drove through without so much as looking at him.

Litnig was undoing the mule’s harness and thinking about how good it would feel to wash his face and his feet when he heard his father’s voice.

“Boy.”

Litnig’s heart froze, and the festival night he’d been hoping to have cracked in half.

Torin stood with one hand on the cart, staring at Cole. Cole, carrying a box of unsold potatoes, turned around halfway to the house and stared back. His unruly brown hair was matted to his skull, and his eyes, the color of almonds, took on a mixture of resignation and frustration. He took a step backward, away from their father.

Litnig swallowed. “Ta...”

Torin stepped forward. Cole set the box on the ground. Litnig abandoned the harness and began working his way around the cart.

“Did you give my food away today, boy?” Torin asked.

Litnig quickened his pace. Torin had a temper like a cornered scorpion, especially when it was hot out, and especially with Cole.

Cole held his hands in front of his chest. “No...”

In two long steps, Torin crossed the distance between them and smashed a fist into Cole’s nose. The younger Jin brother dropped like a stone.

So did what were left of Litnig’s modest hopes for the evening.

“Ta, stop!” Litnig barked.

Torin looked back. The big man loomed red and sweaty over Cole, the sinking sun setting his face alight in fire and shadow. His hands curled into fists, opened, closed.

When he turned back to Cole, Litnig started inching forward again.

“Did you give my food away today, boy?” Torin asked a second time.

Cole was still on the ground, blood dripping from his nose. He inched up on his elbows and touched his lips. His fingers came away red, and his eyes settled on Torin with fury in them. “Yeah,” he said. “To a hundred starving kids. A potato and an onion and a kiss on the cheek.”

Torin’s right hand lashed out, and Cole’s head snapped back against the ground.

“Ta!” Litnig shouted.

The left followed. Then the right again.

And then Litnig was running toward his father and wrapping his arms around him, clasping his hands together, squeezing as tight

as he could. For a moment, they danced. Torin's arms bulged and strained in Litnig's grip. The big man squirmed, struggled, bent his knees and made Litnig carry his weight.

But Litnig was bigger, and Litnig was younger, and Litnig was stronger.

He just kept squeezing.

His father's struggling slowed, then stopped. Litnig loosened his grip. The two stood pressed together, breathing hard, avoiding each other's eyes.

"Boy," Torin whispered. "You'd better sort that brother of yours out one of these days."

Litnig let him go.

Torin Jin took a deep breath and looked at Cole on the ground. "You're not going anywhere tonight. Either of you," he said.

And then he walked away.

Litnig watched him go. It had been a little over a year since he'd gotten big enough to squeeze the anger out of his father like that.

Torin hadn't tried to hit him since.

The back door of the house opened and closed, and the rear stairs creaked as Torin climbed them.

"You didn't have to do that, you know," Cole said. He was sitting in the dirt, staring into the sky and pinching his nostrils shut. "I would've been fine."

Litnig frowned. "He—"

"I goad him because it hurts him," Cole said, switching the hand that was pinching his nose. "Because he knows I am the way I am because of the way *he* raised me."

Somewhere over the river to the east, a crow called to the setting sun.

"No matter how hard he hits me," Cole said, "he can't change that."

Litnig held out his hand. The sun was sinking closer to the round, tall shadow of Palace Hill in the east. The bonfires would be starting soon. He could already hear music playing from Marcus a'Beddon Square.

His heart felt empty and beat-up. He wouldn't be there for the fires. He could disobey his father, sneak out, deal with the consequences, sure.

But he wouldn't. He never did.

He helped his brother up. There was blood on Cole's chin, his neck, his shirt.

"Come on," Litnig said. He walked Cole toward a rain barrel at the side of the house. "Let's clean the blood off before 'Sa sees us."

THAT NIGHT, as others danced and ate and drank across Eldan City, Litnig lay on a hard straw mattress in the room he shared with Cole. He closed his eyes, and he crossed his feet, and he recited the same prayer he'd said every night for years.

Tomorrow, give my father the strength never to hit Cole again. And let my mother wake up healthy. And let my brother start the day smiling and stay that way. Whenever she sleeps, let Ryse sleep soundly.

And tonight, let me dream.

He drifted off to sleep wondering whether his prayer would ever be granted.

A few hours later, a part of it was.

LITNIG BLINKED UP AT NOTCHED RAFTERS and thick straw the color of brandy. His chest felt tight and heavy. His blankets were twisted around him, as though he'd been thrashing in his sleep. A few feet away, his window was open to the night. Outside, moonlight glowed on the tiled roof of the home across the alley.

This is my room, he thought. I'm in bed.

A few seconds before, he hadn't been sure of that.

Cole's breathing echoed calm and regular off the far wall, and the sweet scent of rain on stone wafted up from the street. Marcus a'Beddon Square was silent.

A dream.

I dreamed.

Litnig sat up and slipped a shirt of rough wool over his head. Already, the dream was fading, but he remembered a gray stone disc as wide as his yard, and faces in the darkness, and teeth, and chains.

And an Aleani.
Litnig shivered.
He breathed.
He thought of Ryse.

Everybody dreams, she'd told him once. Some people just don't remember.

And everybody but Litnig did. They dreamed, and they talked about their dreams, and they argued over what they meant or didn't mean, and Litnig stayed silent and pretended it didn't hurt.

Another time, Ryse had told him that she didn't care if he didn't dream, and for years she'd run carefree with him and his brother around the white stone mansions and muddy, ramshackle hovels of Eldan City. She'd laughed and cried and played with him. She'd soothed his bruises and told him stories. He'd planned to marry her one day.

And then she'd left and come back changed.

The priests of the Temple of Eldan had taught Ryse to see and use the river of souls that flowed around the world like the air. She had better things to do now than talk to Litnig.

Litnig wanted to see her anyway. Wanted to tell her about the dream.

And about the Aleani.

He sighed and rubbed his hands on his thighs. The dream hovered at the edge of his memory, all teeth and iron and shadow.

You should go back to sleep, he told himself. This was going to be the night you moved on. That you grew up. You can tell Cole about the dream tomorrow.

But truth be told, he was glad that instead he had a reason to go and talk to Ryse again.

Litnig rose and stumbled his way into the dust and dirt and discarded clothes that marked his brother's half of the room. Cole was mumbling and kicking softly at the footboard of his bed as he slept. His nose looked swollen and red, but in the moonlight he seemed calm, happy, peaceful.

Something moved outside. Pebbles blowing in the wind or rain peppering the side of the—

Litnig's ears popped. The door slammed open with a bang, and a gust of air pushed him forward. He felt something tear deep inside his chest, tangled his feet in the clothes on the floor, lost his balance.

A shriek like a piece of metal being wrenched apart filled the night.

Litnig hit the floor face first. Hard. The dream flashed back through his mind, and then he had a vision of Ryse lying pale and panicked somewhere in the dark.

A deep voice filled the empty spaces between his thoughts.

Everything will be all right, it said. *Bring your brother.*

The vision disappeared. Litnig lay on the floor with his ears ringing and his head pounding and the voice echoing in his mind. He clapped his hand to his chest, but everything felt normal there except for the racing of his heart.

Another dream? Part of the first dream, returning?

Or something else entirely?

Above him, Cole sat up. His back ran straight as a flour rod, and he stared wide-eyed toward the shadows in the corner of the room. His chest moved in and out in deep, rapid breaths.

Bring your brother.

There was a moment of silence. Litnig swallowed.

Only a fool would risk the wrath of Torin Jin to go out in the city at night just because he'd had a bad dream. Even if that dream was the only one he'd ever had.

But Litnig had never laid any great claims on wisdom.

He rolled to his feet. Cole's eyes left the shadows and settled on him.

"I'm going to see Ryse," Litnig mumbled. His lips felt numb. He rubbed his forehead, cleared his throat. "Come with me?"

Cole's breathing slowed. Usually, Litnig didn't get easy favors from his brother. On most days he had to twist an arm—sometimes even hard—to get him to do anything.

But Cole just looked at him, swallowed, and swung his legs off the bed.

"Sure," he mumbled. "Gimme a second."

And as his brother dressed hurriedly in the dark, Litnig was much too wrapped up in his own worries to stop and wonder why.