

Chapter 1

Only in the direst need does the TaiGethen body first seek its full potential through the subconscious mind.

Auum, Arch of the TaiGethen

Ollem prayed that his feet would find safe purchase on the sodden, sucking ground and pushed yet harder through the slapping leaves and whip-like vines of the dense rainforest growth. The sudden downpour was both blessing and curse, obscuring his scent and sound from the quartet of rogues hunting him while misting the way ahead and turning the ground to a dangerous sludge.

He was tantalisingly close to safety. To reach the cliff tops of the Verendii Tual and begin his descent there would allow him to escape the rogues' jaws. But they were fast and merciless, too fast for a TaiGethen to outrun, and they would tear him apart if they brought him down. The temptation was to climb to evade them, but the boughs of the banyans were broad and low to the ground and the rogues would be able to follow him into the trees.

Ollem ducked a branch and jumped down a steep bank into a stream which was already swollen with rainwater, the current running swiftly over the slick stones. His right foot slipped momentarily before finding new purchase and he hurried on. In the stream he was free from the snagging foliage, but much easier to see.

Easier to kill.

The stream he had chosen cascaded over the cliffs into the River Shorth hundreds of feet below, but in the fog of the rain he couldn't tell how far he was from sanctuary. Ollem pumped his arms harder, trying to find that fraction more speed. He leaned forward, taking the risk that his feet might slip again but knowing, deep inside, that to risk anything less would be to fail.

He cursed his fortune. Had he achieved the state of shetharyn already he would have escaped the rogues comfortably. But here he

was, seven days into his emergence cycle and not yet feeling the joy of it, the sheer speed and clarity of it. When Ollem had begun the cycle he'd had no idea what would happen to him . . . but it shouldn't have involved rogues. No one controlled them. And there was no one nearby to save him.

Ollem quashed any thoughts of injustice. He was TaiGethen. He would save himself if it was possible to do so. Chanting prayers to Yniss that were lost in the thunder and rain, he ran on. His ears twitched at a whisper to his left and he glanced over his shoulder.

A low dark shape was streaking through the forest above the stream gully, slipping easily through the packed undergrowth, gaining on him pace by pace. Ollem didn't need to look behind or to his right. He knew the pattern: one on each flank to get ahead of him and the other two behind. Once they surrounded him, the kill was inevitable.

He had no option but to carry on running and pray he would reach sanctuary. Ahead, the rain and low cloud disguised his path. Ollem found himself laughing deep down in his throat, imagining himself escaping the jaws of the rogues only to fall to his death on the rocks that bordered the Shorth.

He heard a roar behind him, close and loud. A shiver ran the length of his spine but he kept running. Through the din of rain on rock Ollem could hear the splash of paws, fleet through the stream. To his right, the rogue was now level with him and moving ahead fast, its sleek dark body hard to follow as it wove through the trunks and bushes that bordered the gully.

Not long now.

Ollem ran on, experiencing a growing anger at his fate coupled with a refusal to believe he could not avoid it. It burned at him, sending needles through his body, re-energising his aching limbs and sharpening his vision. And there, through the mist and rain, he caught a glimpse of the edge of the cliff. There was still a chance.

The first pair of rogues leaped down into the gully ten paces ahead of him and turned to face him. Ollem screamed in frustration and slithered to a halt, his chest heaving. Behind him, the other pair slowed. They knew he was dangerous; they recognised his garb, the paint on his face and the twin scabbards on his back. But he was cornered. They knew they would kill him; they just wanted to do so without being injured themselves.

Ollem weighed them up just as they did him. They were panthers,

black and slate-grey, which had shunned the touch of the Claw-Bound and chosen to run free. There were few rogues but they were exceptionally dangerous. They followed his every move, every twitch of his hands. Ollem glanced back to see the pair behind him had stopped and were hunkered down, tails twitching, waiting their moment to strike.

Ollem took a deep breath and looked beyond the pair ahead of him. The safety of the cliff face was close enough that if he could evade them just once, he would save himself. Even so, he reached for his blades. The rogues growled in response and settled themselves for the charge. Ollem let his hands fall back to his sides.

‘Yniss guide my steps.’

Ollem ran at the rogues, veering to the left to reduce the chances of both hitting him simultaneously. The panthers crouched to spring; he saw their muscles bunch and their eyes fix on his head. Ollem’s body chilled with the certainty of his death. Yet, in his mind, a voice insisted that this was not his time and that there was a way to survive. He felt energy surge within him from his toes to the top of his shaven head.

Ollem relaxed and his body felt fluid and clean, his movements suddenly easy, free of tension and the fear of death. In front of him, the scene cleared; the rogues were moving slowly, their paws making lazy splashes in the stream, their mouths opening as if in a long, luxurious yawn.

He smiled, seeing the beauty of their movement and the shimmer of muscle beneath their shining coats. He could see the individual drops in the teeming rain and could pick out the sound of each drop as it struck rock or water. He could feel his body moving faster than he’d ever experienced, reacting instantly and balancing perfectly.

Ollem swayed left and saw the panthers track his movements. One of them, its claws outstretched and its teeth bared, travelled steadily through the air. The other was leaping too, aiming to pin his legs while the first took his head.

He ducked and turned a forward roll through the stream, feeling the rush of water across his already soaked body. The first panther’s jaws snapped shut on fresh air. Ollem came to his feet and jumped high, seeing the second rogue pass beneath him, his momentum carrying him well beyond it. He spread his arms wide and dropped gracefully back into the stream.

Ollem spun round. The rogues were already twenty paces from

him, almost as if they'd stopped to watch him. They were regarding him cautiously, no longer approaching, no longer a direct threat. Ollem frowned and began to walk back towards them, not reaching for his blades.

'You cannot harm me,' he said. 'And I am not your enemy.'

The rain was falling in a blurring torrent once more. The panthers ran easily out of the gully, and Ollem watched them go, feeling the energy settle in his body but not leave it entirely. It remained at rest, ready to be called on at will. The panthers disappeared into the forest and the calls they sent up were carried by the voices of elves too. They were calls of celebration.

Ollem frowned and turned back towards the Verendii Tual cliffs. Two elves stood there, their arms wide in a gesture of welcome. One was a ClawBound, tall, thin and with half his face painted white and the other covered in piercings and tattoos. The other was TaiGethen.

'Auum?'

Auum smiled and walked towards him.

'Welcome to the ranks of the emerged,' he said. 'Welcome to a joy so pure you will wonder how you existed without it. Welcome to a new phase of your life with the TaiGethen.'

'The rogues—' Ollem began, his heart racing and his excitement barely in check.

'Claws can imitate their lost brothers and sisters much as we can ours,' said Auum.

'I thought they were going to kill me.'

'As you were meant to,' said Auum. 'Because only in the direst need does the TaiGethen body seek its full potential through the subconscious mind. Only then can a TaiGethen emerge and join the shetharyn.'

Ollem shook with relief and tears began to flow down his cheeks. Auum took his head in his hands and kissed his eyes and forehead.

'I'd begun to question everything,' said Ollem. 'I had no idea seven days spent alone could seem so long.'

'And now you need never fear isolation. You are joined with the energies of the earth and can never truly be alone.' Auum smiled and stepped back. 'Now, come and speak with Serrin. I always let him tell the emerged why they must never reveal the secret to any yet to enter the cycle.'

'Why Serrin?'

'He is the most persuasive,' said Auum. Ollem shuddered.

‘Remember that fear and respect it. You might be faster than a rogue but you are not faster than him. Never him.’

Ollem followed Auum along the path to his new life.

Nerille was ancient. She was surely the most long-lived Gyalan in the bloody history of the elves. Had she been Tuali, she’d be old . . . and even as one of the Beethan she’d be getting on in years. She’d outlived all of her children, and the only mercy in that was her six grandchildren, all of whom were still alive though well into middle age themselves.

She was sitting on a bench in front of the flagpole as she had so often during the long centuries of her life in Katura. Today she was here for the last time. Around her she could still picture the bustle of the market, the scents of spice and herb and meat, the chatter and bustle of offer and deal, laughter echoing from the walls of the buildings surrounding the central circle.

All gone now, of course, consigned to memory just like the rowing tournaments, the excited babble of children during the lake race, the climbing tournaments and the feasts; all the things that spoke of a city blossoming in the wake of war. Nerille smiled to herself and pressed her shaking hands to her mouth.

She should have known it wouldn’t last for ever. With the rout of the humans and the freeing of the enslaved cities seven hundred years ago, their reasons to come here, to live in the Palm of Yniss, were gone. And one by one the Katurans had felt the call to return home. She couldn’t blame any of them for desiring a return to their old lives.

Thousands had left after the war, choosing to help rebuild Tolt Anoor, Deneth Barine and the capital, Ysundeneth. And over the years the trickle had continued until it became clear that Katura was unsustainable. So the city had been dismantled, timber and stone, and the materials taken to help rebuild elsewhere, cities whose repair was yet to be completed. It never would be. The scars of man would always remain.

All that remained of Katura now was the Wall of the Fallen, which held the names of every elf from every thread who had given his or her life to the cause: for the salvation of the elven race. The wall had been built from the temple stones and was a spiral structure that led to a central shrine to Yniss and all of the elven gods. The flagpole stood proud above the shrine.

There was not a day that Nerille had failed to walk the spiral, her trembling hands trailing over the thousands of names, the memories of struggle still fresh despite the passing of the centuries. They mingled with more recent acts, equally brave though not undertaken in warfare. The images that played in her mind gave her a reason to draw her next breath.

Nerille never ceased to be amazed at how quickly Beeth's root and branch had returned to the deserted city, grabbing greedily at the land vacated by the elves and erasing the wounds of civilisation. The wall and flagpole would soon be covered, hidden beneath vine and leaf, and that was as it should be.

The mists that dominated the Palm of Yniss had already returned, sweeping from the cliffs and sitting on the lake, swirling around her ankles and giving the ground in all directions a ghostly, ethereal aspect. As the vegetation gained ground, so the mist would deepen.

'Nerille?' She started and looked up. The silhouette of a tall elf was before her. 'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to startle you.'

The figure approached and knelt before her, revealing the face of an old Tuali warrior, Arch of the Al-Arynaar until his advancing years had forced him into a very active retirement. His eyes were hooded and his hair all gone but still he pulsed with a zest she envied.

'Hello, Tulan. I hadn't thought to see you here again.'

'How are you feeling?' he asked, taking her hands in his and raising them to dry lips.

Nerille thought for a moment and shook her head.

'I don't really feel anything,' she said. 'Is that bad?'

Of all the things she had expected – sorrow, relief, even a weary acceptance – it certainly wasn't this.

'Nothing you have ever done or felt could be described as bad,' said Tulan. He levered himself back to his feet and sat beside her. 'All that Katura and its people have become since the war is because of your work and your sacrifice.'

Nerille could feel herself blushing, and her smile was warm with the recognition of her efforts.

'You came all the way from Aryndeneth to embarrass me?'

Tulan laughed. 'In front of who, the macaques?'

'So why are you here? Bit old for a bodyguard, aren't you?'

'That depends how slow the attacking animal is. I'm still more than a match for any sloth.'

'Well, that's a relief.'

Nerille looked at Tulan, saw the smile cracking his face and laughed hard, her shoulders shaking and tears filling her eyes at the idea of a ferocious battle against a sloth.

‘And I’m still highly skilled at crushing ants.’

‘Stop!’ said Nerille, smacking his arm with a bony hand. ‘I’ve missed you, Tulan. You were always too long away from here.’

Tulan’s smile faded. ‘I know. I could hide behind my duties, but the fact is that when you started dismantling the city it became too hard to come back here and see what was happening. I still think it’s a mistake.’

‘You and me both, but we are very much in the minority.’

‘I still feel the pain of Pelyn’s death and that was seven hundred years ago. She died protecting Katura, and we’ve abandoned it.’

‘No, Tulan,’ said Nerille. ‘I wanted Katura to survive because it was my home. But the fight was never for the city, it was for the elven race. That’s what Pelyn died defending, not the buildings.’

‘But this place should have become the focus of our renewal. The energy and harmony should have been the beacon for all to follow.’

‘Yes, but it was the same in all the cities. After all, in the end humans managed to do more for elven harmony than Takaar ever managed. And, romantic though our notions were, Katura is just too distant and difficult to reach.’

Tulan shrugged. ‘I know you’re right but it still doesn’t feel . . . fitting. Not elven.’

‘The memories will always be here for those who wish to find them,’ said Nerille. ‘So tell me, what *are* you doing here?’

Tulan smiled again. ‘Sloth attacks notwithstanding, I’m not here as your bodyguard. Honour guard would be a more accurate description.’

Nerille felt heat in her cheeks. ‘There you go again, making me blush. It’s lovely of you, Tulan, though you didn’t have to. There are seventy or so of us making this final trip after all.’

‘Respectfully I must disagree,’ said Tulan. ‘This is one journey I would not miss for all the years of an Ynissul. And I’m not the only one.’

Tulan pointed behind them at the wall, where two elves stood studying the names and whispering prayers when they touched that of a loved one. Nerille gasped to see them and her hand went to her mouth. She felt giddy as a youngster excited at the sight of a hero, and she was most certainly in the presence of heroes.

Nerille pushed herself to her feet, feeling a moment's unsteadiness. She reached out a hand, which Tulan took, and the pair walked to the wall together.

'This is where we met for the first time,' said Auum, not turning.

'Not precisely,' said Nerille. 'You were balanced atop that flagpole after all.'

'Will you ever let me get away with the slightest inaccuracy?'

Auum turned, Ulysan with him, and Nerille shook her head.

'Not while I draw breath,' she said. 'Gyal knows it's good to see you.'

Auum embraced her, and Nerille clung to him hard, feeling the lack of strength in her arms and remembering the energy she used to have.

'There was nowhere else I could be.'

'Don't you start,' said Nerille.

Auum broke the embrace and kissed her eyes and forehead.

'What do you mean?'

'Ask Tulan. What are you doing here, then? Come to watch me walk extremely slowly into the forest?'

Nerille studied Auum's face. How old he must be. He'd witnessed thousands of years and yet he retained such vitality. And it would be thousands more before he showed the signs of a tiring body. But his would never deteriorate like hers, to the point where death seemed a sensible option. She knew why and she envied him the sheer joy that serving his faith gave him. Every day in the rainforest was a renewal. How magnificent to be inspired that way.

'I heard a rumour that the Mother of Katura felt she was unlikely to survive the trip to Aryndeneth. I am here to ensure that she reaches her destination very much alive.'

'Blabbermouth grandchildren,' muttered Nerille, but she could not stop a smile crossing her face. 'Well, whatever the reason, I'm . . .'

It hit her then – the enormity of today and what it meant to have the Arch of the TaiGethen escort her away. She stepped away from Auum and looked quickly around at the huge open space where Katura had once stood and where the lines of foundations still ran like veins across the ground. A cascade of memories ran through her and with it came the tears, the weakness in the legs and Tulan and Auum's arms about her, supporting her body and soul.

'I don't want this to end,' she managed eventually. 'I should have died here.'

‘Yniss blessed you with long life. So this is not an ending; it’s another step on the journey for you, and for Katura.’

Nerille composed herself, taking her time to wipe the tears from her face and stand unsupported again with her skirt smoothed and her shirt arranged properly about her shoulders.

‘You talk such rubbish sometimes, Auum,’ she said. ‘Still, at least you stopped my whimpering. Let’s go.’

‘It’s a long way,’ agreed Ulysan. ‘Best not waste time.’

‘That has nothing to do with it,’ said Nerille, recovered and beginning to feel mischievous like she was a child once more. ‘I fear staying here might lead to more pomposity from the Arch, and no one deserves having to put up with that.’