



Chapter One

The Two Feathers

The golden sea of grain danced and swayed, gleaming in the warm sun. A cool breeze raced down from the forested hills and rustled through the stalks, whisking flecks of chaff up into the blue sky. Tufts of downy clouds drifted overhead, casting lazy patches of shadow on the ground. Black bees and shimmering snapflies buzzed about, their sounds melding with the chirps of the crickets hiding under the heavy leaves. Late summer had ripened in the Valley of Andan.

The sun glinted off the scythe as it swung gracefully through the air, toppling stalks of wheat as it went. Again it fell, and again, swinging in smooth arcs. The young man toiled alone in the field, a dark speck set upon a sheet of gold. The rickety cart standing behind him was laden with sheaves, product of the morning's work. With each swing of the scythe, the farmer breathed in the full scent of the fresh wheat and the sun-warmed soil. He enjoyed this work—the ground felt good under his feet. It was here that he found himself most at peace.

Overhead a flock of large birds squawked as they began their long journey southward, leaving behind their summer nests in the north. He squinted up at them as they passed, and for a moment they were lost in the glare of the sun. Their fluid formation spread out across the sky, breaking and reforming in great sweeping angles with an intelligence that was far beyond him.

As they flapped their way south, a group broke off and alighted on the large rock outcropping that dominated the landscape of the valley. The farmer watched as they made their tired descent to the craggy stone, standing alone amidst the rolling fields. Most people called it Saka's Knoll, but some of the older townsfolk still called it Saka's Spite, a sculpted granite block forty feet tall, thrust up out of the fields of rye besieging its weed-choked base. Like so many things in Andan it was older than anyone could remember, and while few could agree on where it came from or how it had gotten there, no one could argue that there were no veins of granite in the mountains for fifty miles in any direction, which made it peculiar indeed.

But as with most things, peculiarity yields to familiarity over the passing years, and most Andaners didn't look twice at it. Perhaps it was just out of habit that the farmer peered at the weathered stone, trying to see the face carved into it. Sometimes when the light was just right he could barely make out a nose and the soft ridges of cheeks and the curve of a sinuous mouth, but in the sharp sun of the afternoon it just looked like a massive and misplaced boulder.

Theo sighed and wiped his brow on the sleeve of his shirt. Autumn was not far off, though it hardly felt like it today. It was hot in the full sun, and the breeze did little to cool him while he worked.

Summer was always short in Andan, but he was grateful that this summer had been longer than most—it was already harvest-time and the generous weather still held strong. Far to the north, however, the clouds lay thick over the interminable glaciers of the Northern Reaches. In all his years (which were admittedly not very many), the young farmer had never seen the Reaches without an ominous glare of coming storms. Even now one seemed to hover above the grinding snowfields, eager to descend on the valley.

But he was not to be fooled. He had gleaned enough earthy wisdom over the past few years to know a real storm when he saw one, and he knew that the weather would be clear all the way through Alaen'tin.

It had surprised him to discover how much he enjoyed working with the land, watching things grow. Something he got from his mother, he supposed, or at least that's what everyone told him. He liked to think that it was something of hers that he carried with him.

His plot was smaller than most, a few thousand paces square of ripe red wheat bordered on one side by a copse of dense oaks with musk-scented shadows and a bright, fluttery pear orchard on the other. Further down the valley he could see homesteads with graceful windmills and land a hundred times larger, but he never paid that much mind—he was content with his field, in no small part because it was *his*.

He turned back to his work, the rhythm of his reaping following the peaceful motion of the windmills turning lazily in the breeze. He was only vaguely aware of the synchrony that happened all around him, how the trees and the rocks and the water and the windmills all conspired together in subtle and unspoken ways. To him, it just felt right.

But then, just as he was settling into the groove of his work—the scythe becoming an effortless extension of his body—he heard a stick crack somewhere behind him...

...and just as he was turning to look, a small rock hit him squarely on the head.

An involuntary curse escaped his lips as he dropped the scythe, his hands rubbing the aggrieved spot.

“Thanks for that, Jor. Really.”

The smiling face emerged from behind the slender trunk of a nearby pear tree, the juices of a freshly pilfered fruit dribbling down the prominent chin. The smirking young man was lean and lanky, with sandy hair and mischievous gray eyes. He bobbed the pear in his hand before taking another large bite. “My pleasure!” he said around his chewing. “Besides, someone has to keep an eye on you, else you’d be off daydreaming for who knows how long.”

“And you reckon you’re the one for it?”

“Absolutely. Hey—!” he exclaimed as Theo picked up the rock and flung it back at him. Despite his attempts to get out of the way, he yelped as it thumped him soundly on the backside. “Oy, what’s that for?” he demanded, dancing around in exaggerated pain. “You could’ve done some real damage carrying on like that!”

Theo chuckled. “You’ll live.” He bent down and picked up his scythe. “What are you doing up here, anyway?”

“Coming to check on you, of course. Can’t have you wasting your life in the fields, ‘specially not with Alaen’tin coming up! We have preparations to make,” he said with an eager glint to his eyes. “I’m going to make sure those suthers don’t win it this year.” He added then, with a smirk, “and we have all those fine young ladies to attend to. They’re already down there!”

Every year in the days leading up to Alaen’tin the unmarried women of the town would gather in the main square and on the green to hang ribbons and strands of sparkling glass from the balconies and tree branches, and somehow the young men always found themselves gathered around, casually not noticing the conspicuous combination of long skirts and tall

ladders. It was a tradition Theo was oblivious to when he was young, although recently he had come to understand.

“Melanda’s there,” Jor went on with a slow smile. “I saw her and Lorra when I was coming up here to save you from the snapflies!” He looked over at the cart, idly plucking at the grain. “I still don’t see why you spend so much time up here, mate. You can’t possibly be making any good copper...”

“It’s not about that,” Theo said flatly. He had tried to explain it before, but just like all those times he sensed that saying anything more would likely be futile.

Jor shrugged. “S’your life. But I reckon you’ve done enough for today, eh? Let’s get down there!”

Theo turned back to his field, where the wheat was more than halfway gathered. His lip had found its way between the soft press of his teeth. A reluctance tugged at him, too subtle for Jor to notice (or was it because he was too preoccupied with finishing his pear?) It was something very familiar to him, something he worked to keep hidden, though not nearly as well as he thought.

After a moment, Jor laughed and tossed the gnawed fruit into the sun-baked grass tufting around the orchard fence. “Come on, will you! You’re not an old man yet!”

Theo sighed, but the corners of his mouth turned up. If there was one thing that Jorundar Hall excelled at, it was goading.

“That’s the spirit!” his wayward friend said, rubbing his hands together like a hungry cat.

With a loud creak the cart was rolling, and they set out down the well-worn path that cut through the orchard, the green-gold leaves fluttering on either side. Jor led the way, his anticipatory steps carrying him faster than Theo with his bountiful encumbrance.

Soon the path left the orchard and emptied out onto a narrow road, and the cart bounced awkwardly as Theo urged it over the small gutter with its dried mud. “Slow down, will you?” he called after Jor, who was already ten paces ahead.

“Stop being such a grandmother! Put some muscle into it, eh?”

The road dipped away to the south, following a low ridge topped with a band of green-fingered conifers. Far to the east the River Ander sparkled like a glittering snake weaving through the fields as it made its way towards the sea, just a hazy line of blue on the horizon from that far up the valley. He could barely make out the smudge of Andan City packed at the mouth of the river, the largest town in all of Andan and for hundreds of leagues beyond.

Theo had of course heard stories of the great Southern Cities, places that made Andan look like a speck on a wilted leaf, but who knew if that was true? He had never left Andan,

nor had anyone he knew—and those sailors who brought the tales could hardly be trusted, thick with wine and crazy with women as they were.

The thought of it reminded him of when he and Jor were last in the City, now nearly a year past. Trips down there were not so common, and it had marked the first time that they'd made the journey as adults. They both had been as giddy as whelps to see the quays and bustling markets without the watchful presence of their parents, which was particularly ironic given how mature they'd felt in their newfound independence.

But, as they quickly discovered, the fantastic and mysterious novelty they remembered from their childhood visits was not the same experience afforded a grown man, and it only took a few hours for Jor to lead them into a dice game with a group of salty shipmen who were, to say the least, unapologetic in their carryings-on.

After ungracefully escaping the ensuing scuffle—which left Theo with a pair of purple bruises, both small compared to the one delivered to Jor's otherwise remarkable pride—they spent a sleepless night crammed onto cots in a crowded dormitory that reeked implacably of fish and tobak-smoke.

Needless to say, the ride home the next morning had been a quiet one.

It was an odd thing about Andan—only in the briny enclave of the quays and dockyards of the City did it intersect with the world beyond its shores. Just beyond the bustling markets with its sea-smells, Andaners had little care for the distant lands across the water.

The notable exception to this, however, was found in none other than Theo's father, whose penchant for collecting and relishing in anything outlandish or exotic was as famous as his unmatched skill in recounting the myths and legends that populated the depths of Andan's long history. He had plucked more than a few treasures out of the back-alley shops, strange and incredible things from the distant fringes of the Free Isles and the dusky settlements on the Long Coast, and even a few that might—just *might*—have come from the veiled lands even further South, the whispered places with their impossible cities.

Just ahead the road merged with a wide thoroughfare, rutted with the tracks of many carts and horses. It was nearly empty now, however; no doubt everyone was already in town. Tall poplar trees framed the road with their swishing height, and tangles of light and shadow played on the ground as a breeze stirred the leaves, already showing a hint of bronze and yellow. They passed by a number of slant-roofed homesteads standing proudly alongside their fields, soaking in the warm sun that was so precious on this northern cusp of the sea.

Jor was now much further ahead, and Theo pushed his cart hard to keep up. It teetered more than once as it hit a stone or skirted into a divot, but he had done this enough times to know how to keep it level.

He had just passed by the last of the homesteads that radiated away from town when he saw it.

He turned as the streak of motion caught his eye—it wasn't the turn of a windmill, nor the dash of a fox after a hare. No, it was something much smoother, much simpler.

It was a little girl, running through a field of dancing barley...

She moved with an otherworldly sort of grace, flowing through the fecund stalks like a breath of innocent wind.

Her hair trailed behind her as she ran, drifting in a slow waft that seemed—somehow—like it was moving outside of time.

What's she doing this far out from town? he thought as he squinted at her across the long distance.

Just then a far-off rumble spilled down the valley from the icy north, making him jump. He looked towards the Reaches—somehow the clouds had turned even darker since he had looked last, not more than a few minutes past.

Somewhere in the back of his mind, a cog suddenly shifted. Fragments of a dream bubbled up, a dream he knew he'd had recently, and probably many times before. Or maybe he'd had it long ago, and only just remembered. It felt... important, but just out of reach.

Images came to him, tugging, demanding his attention but scattering as soon as he tried to recollect them. There was the sound of a bird, perhaps a sparrow, but also not a sparrow at all. There might have been grass—the brightest green—and thunder, though without fear.

He suddenly found himself wanting to gather them up and make sense of them, but the more he grasped, the more diffuse they became. He could feel something trying to break free, trying to call out to him, but it was as impossible to corral as a heat-shape rising from the fields.

And then, just as quickly as it came, it was gone.

He blinked, suddenly wondering what had happened to the last ten seconds.

He felt like he had forgotten something, but what was it?

The feeling nagged at him, but a moment later he brushed it away, not unlike the way one would flick away an exploratory ant that found its way onto the skin.

That was odd, eh?

The road around him was still sweetly kissed with the afternoon sun, and the shrinking shape of Jor still padded away with eager steps.

With a heave he got the cart rolling again, and it bounced down the rutted road. It was only another few minutes before he rounded a small bend, where just ahead Jor was waiting impatiently.

“Will you hurry up?” he called.

Behind him the town of Eldeholm spread out, a cheery gathering of buildings and cottages clustered by a river at the foot of the hills, the lofty white peaks of the Andras rising in the distance behind. It was one of the biggest towns in all of Andan, and more than a few of the buildings sported the bright, intricately tiled rooftops that gave the town its renown, polished to a high gloss in the sun.

A few labored steps later Theo caught up with Jor. “This *is* heavy, you know,” he said flatly, the sweat standing on his brow.

“Quit complaining. We’re nearly there!”

Theo rolled his eyes as the two made their way into town, his arms just beginning to ache. Here the buildings were small and homely, mostly cottages with finely thatched roofs and tightly packed yards, but soon the dirt beneath their feet gave way to cobblestone, and they clattered along through neighborhoods with progressively finer homes, where the yards were more likely to boast rosebeds rather than geese.

“Oh, we’re missing it!” Jor exclaimed as the street spilled onto a wide promenade that followed the Eld as it flowed through the heart of the town. The main square and the large, open green on the far bank were packed with people, and they could hear peals of laughter and the clamor of many voices echoing across the water.

“Come on!” Jor urged impatiently.

Theo couldn’t help but crack a smile as his friend burst into a long-legged run towards the Old Bridge. Jor could be as stubborn and single-minded as a moose-ox in winter when he got set on something, and he had been talking about Alaen’tin non-stop for weeks. Theo knew he had something cooked up, something that he was immensely proud of—but no matter how many times he or Bil or Geomm or any of their other mates pressed him on it, he would only deliver one of his preposterous winks and say no more about it. *One of these days his schemes are going to bite him*, Theo thought, but outwardly he yelled, “Wait up, you goat! I have to drop this at Thomm’s.”

Jor came to a sudden halt, his boots skidding on the bridge. “What?”

Theo pointed to the cart in front of him, piled with sheaves nearly as tall as himself. “I have to take this to Thomm’s.”

“Just leave it! Can’t be worth enough for someone to steal.”

“Are you mad? I’m not just going to leave it sitting around!”

Jor shrugged. “Your loss. But you better not miss the game. We’re gonna take it this year!” And he was off jogging across the bridge.

Theo mumbled something under his breath and hefted the cart back up. The burrah game was not something he particularly looked forward to, but he didn’t think there was any

way out of it. He was a man now—even if he was still a month shy of his second Sun-Cycle—and he was expected to be out on the field with all the other unmarried men. He chafed at the confines of the tradition, but there was a powerful orbit around it, a pull that was so well-grooved that it felt nearly inescapable.

It might have soured his mood if he dwelled on it, so he set it out of his mind and made for Thomm's. He could see the mill just downstream, where the wheel made use of a natural drop in the river and spun under a powerful sluice of water.

For the first time all afternoon he saw a good number of people on the street, all headed in the other direction on their way to the square. He met the first few passersby with a kind smile and a 'Good day', and it looked as if he would make it the whole way uninterrupted.

But even though he had hardly to go farther than a few hundred feet, he only made it twenty before he heard his name ring out. "Theoun! Theoun Bretton!"

He looked up just in time to see a proud man with a large frame approaching him, smiling from behind his moustache.

"Good day to you, Master Nortmund."

"And what a fine day it is," the man said, shaking Theo's hand with a near-painful firmness. "This Alaen'tin is looking to be the best yet! My ships pulled in more fish than the last two years combined. Times of bounty, my boy! I thank the moons, I do. Something special in the sky, eh? I keep going at this rate and I'll double my fleet by next season. Could always use more strong lads like you on the oars!"

Theo murmured something noncommittal, but the man continued right on without pause. "But of course your da wouldn't have you working away like some shelb on the hawsers. No, no, wouldn't make sense't'all. You geared up for the match?"

"I suppose, yeah," he said with an inward cringe.

"Excellent. Excellent. I think the northers could take it this year! Been a long time coming, I always said. You just mind those suthers when they've got the footie. Some of 'em have got feet as quick as the river itself, have since the time I played in the Alaen'tin matches—but my that was far before your time, eh!"

He paused then, and looked at Theo in a knowing sort of way, his dark eyes suddenly sharp above his formidable moustache. "You keep your head on square, lad, you hear? I have a feeling this Alaen'tin's a special one." He looked as if he were reading something on Theo's face. "And keep an eye on the moons, eh?"

He landed a firm pat on Theo's shoulder, and with that he was gone, merging back with the stream of people heading towards the square.

Theo stood there for a moment, looking after the large man. Janas Nortmund was known in some circles—most, actually—as a man with a fondness for superstition (and a

coin-purse as tight as a duck's tail-feathers), but that had been downright bizarre. There *was* something unusual about the moons lately, of that there was no question, but he had no idea what Master Nortmund was on about.

The image of the moons and their strange formation in the sky suddenly entered his mind—making him shiver—but he didn't get much time to ponder it. He had hardly taken another breath before a plump, sweet-faced woman peeled off from the crowd and made straight for him.

This was one encounter he didn't mind, however, and he smiled openly as she caught him in a hug. "Hello, Mrs. Burridge."

"Oh, Theo!" she said as she pulled away, taking his face in her soft hands that smelled, as always, of rosewater and fresh baked bread. "You've been taking too much sun out in that field of yours," she said in a tone that had no hint of scolding. "You have been taking care of yourself, yes?"

"Yes, Mrs. Burridge."

"Good! You're far too handsome to become some leather-faced old farmer," she said with a smile.

Theo smiled back, still feeling a bit strange. "I'll keep that in mind."

She looked at him appraisingly. It was a look he had seen from her before. "Llewlyn was asking about you the other day..." she said gently. It was a topic they had broached so many times it had almost become a joke between them, a shared understanding that Theo was grateful for. "I take it you'll be at the green?" The question lingered for just a moment.

"Yes, I imagine I will. Once I drop this off at Thomm's." He felt as if he should add something more, but found he didn't know what to say.

"Good. I'll let her know." She continued to look at him in that knowing way before gracefully changing the subject. "Well, I for one am proud of all the hard work you do, Theo. We'd all be so lucky if there were more men like you."

Theo smiled and offered his thanks.

"We'll see you tonight, then?"

"Definitely."

"Good." She leaned in and fondly touched his cheek before heading on her way.

The cart was feeling particularly heavy as he finally arrived at the mill, where he found the large wooden door propped ajar. The millhouse was a tall, sturdy building of rough-hewn stone, three stories high and topped with a thatching of river-reeds, these still freshly green from recent mending. Just next to it however stood one of the finest houses in all of Eldeholm, with exquisite gables and beautiful tiles of blue and red and yellow laid down in a stunning pattern on the multi-pitched roof. Though Thomm was a simple man and claimed

he didn't much care for any of it, Mrs. Cooke was known as a woman of fine and discriminating tastes.

He was just about to push his cart through the doors when something snagged him. He looked over to his right, where the big waterwheel was sloshing its way under the current.

And there, on the waterwheel, were two bright white feathers. At first he didn't know what he was seeing, but on the second pass of the wheel he could make no mistake.

Two feathers.

As he looked at them, another shiver rippled through his body. For an instant he seemed to lose his balance, although he didn't sway at all. It was as if something was flowing through him, a part of him suddenly on the move while the rest of his body stood there. The feathers came around again, and this time they brought a deep knowing, delicate and refined but just beyond his perception. It was a pull, gentle yet strong, like he was being reminded of something so cherished but only recently forgotten.

A face suddenly appeared to him, a face so familiar he could hardly recognize it. It was that of a young girl—but also a woman, woven together as one—kind and strong and living and ancient, with a wreath of hair like a star-shot constellation. It was a face he had seen a thousand times before, yet it was so new to him. Seeing it again lit a spark deep in his heart, kindling something dormant but no less alive.

“You coming in, Theo?”

He started and looked back to the doors, where Thomm Cooke was brushing the chaff from his heavy apron.

Theo could only gape at him. He looked back to the waterwheel. It was turning peacefully. Two full rotations he watched it. There was nothing on it.

“You alright?”

“I... I just—” He turned back to Thomm, who was watching him with the benign neutrality that was his hallmark. He sighed, and did his best to reel his eyes back into his head. “I guess it's just been a long day in the field...” he said with a shaky laugh.

Thomm shrugged. “Well, come on in then.” He stepped aside to let Theo pass.

Theo looked back over his shoulder as he wheeled the cart inside, expecting to see something—anything—to confirm that what happened had actually *happened*. But outside everything was as it should be: the busy promenade full of people heading to the square, the Eld gurgling through the manicured banks and stone walls of the waterfront, the dependable sluice of the waterwheel.

Everything was in its place... but...

He drew a breath and shook himself back into the room. Even though the face was fading—like the ghost-image of the sun that lingers after looking away—he could still remember the feathers. It was like they had been emblazoned on his mind...

The Chapter Continues...

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