



## Godspeed

Malachite stopped running when Thenaria pulled on his arm. He needed to get them to the escape tunnels, but he turned to her, nevertheless. She stood, mouth agape, staring at the heavens from beneath the cloistered walkway. Holding Lilian in his arms, he moved closer to see what captured her attention.

The ever-present shield that encompassed the city with its shimmering silver dome of light fell away. Enormous cracks raced along its circumference like frozen bolts of lightning caught splitting the night. The scent of ozone drifted like whispers of defeat.

Klaxons sounded, drowning out the panicked cries of the populace.

"This way." Malachite tugged Thenaria away from her vantage. "We have to get you to the tunnels."

"What about the expedition?" She allowed him to lead her along. "What about Raqui?"

"No time! I have to get you both out of the city."

They turned into a spiral stone staircase that led downward, and he hurried along at the fastest pace Thenaria was able to maintain. Back out into the night, they ran across one of the elevated walkways that gave Sa'Doran such an immense sense of grandeur. Lilian held tight to his neck, and Thenaria matched his pace stride for stride. He had to give it to the girls; they did not complain once.

A call sounded in the night, and the deep and guttural croup brought Malachite up short. Two more calls broke the silence, echoing from the stone entrance.

"Come child," he whispered to Lilian. He passed her over. "Go to mamma now."

A muffled cry escaped her, and she struggled to hold on. Thenaria pulled her away, breaking her grip.

Malachite's sin'del thickened and condensed around him. With a pinging sound, it snapped into place above his flesh, and he was encased in a silver glow similar to the failed shield. The energy surrounded him and stretched out from his fists forming two swords, one a half foot longer than the other.

"Stay behind me," he ordered. "Do not run."

From the entrance stepped a beast, its jaws snapping at the air before it. It was longer than it was tall, with a thick tail to balance it. Short feathers adorned it; the blue, green, and black colors making it difficult to see in the dark. It stood on two legs; its short forearms pulled in tight against its chest. As it walked, claws clicked out from the middle of each foot, tapping against the stone. It raised its head and called three more times. The sound was repeated from within the doorway.

Malachite strode forward, unconcerned with the display. The creature cocked its head to the side, watching him come. Lowering its head, it launched itself forward. Malachite stepped to the side and swung his left blade in a downward arc. It passed through the monster's head, and the beast fell lifeless to the ground.

Its two companions charged. Malachite lunged forward. Each creature was impaled on the bars of light. With a sweep of his wrists, he freed the weapons by ripping them out the other side.

Howls filled the air, and the entrance came alive with a swarm. Malachite flowed into them, each hand working different targets while he moved across the bridge. Beasts fell when he met them. His blades lashed out, ripping apart each creature he touched. He danced between them. His feet snapped bones with kicks that sent them over the sides. Spines snapped beneath the impact of his elbows. He spun to the side, slicing through the belly of one that tried to circle around him and, with his other blade, sheared the head off another coming in low.

He did not stop. He did not give ground before them. He did not pause until they all lay dead at his feet or broken on the stones below.

A terrific cry echoed from the alcove, and a monster larger than its peers smashed through the stone arch. It too was covered in coarse, dark feathers, with a shock of dark, oily hair for a mane, and the same shortened forearms. It turned its head, searching for its prey with its blind

eyes. It snuffled the air, its tongue flicking out to find its quarry. Its gigantic muzzle settled in position toward Malachite. It opened its mouth and roared; the sound felt as much as heard.

Malachite thrust his arms forward, and a pair of shards flew from his sin'del: small, hardened bits of soul matter stolen from the smaller creatures. The impacts enraged the beast but did not penetrate its flesh. Malachite increased the volume of projectiles launched, no longer moving his hands but filling the air between them, nevertheless. The impacts pierced its hide, and it wailed in pain, swinging its head from side to side while it roared its displeasure. He closed the intervening space with increasing speed. Gathering the remnants of the life force he stole, Malachite seized the sin'del of the stone bridge and liquefied it. The bridge disappeared beneath the beast, flowing away from it, and the monster plummeted to shatter on the streets below.

At last, Malachite stood before the doorway. The stone of the bridge reformed and solidified into its original shape. With a flourish of his arm, the bodies littering the causeway were tossed aside. There were no more enemies in sight.

Looking behind him, he saw Thenaria standing before her child. One hand protected the whimpering girl, and the other clutched a recurved knife. Her sin'del shone with panic and shock, but sparks of motherly protection cascaded through the display.

He regretted the need for them to witness such carnage and motioned them toward him.

"I'm glad you followed directions and remained where you were," he said when they caught up. "Had you fled, the shrulks would have forgotten all about me and went straight for the pair of you."

"What was that other thing?" Awe and terror vied for prominence in Thenaria's voice.

"A manoc," he said. "Shrulks are female and smaller; manocs are male and larger. They are bred expressly to hunt us. They are apex predators, and they live for the chase. Never run from them. They will not stop. They will keep coming."

When she did not respond, he faced her.

"Promise me," he said. "You must remember this."

She pulled her gaze from the bodies littering the ground below them and met his gaze.

"I will not run from them," she said. "I will remember."

"Good. You are formidable. Even without a weapon, your magic will give you enough of an edge to hold them off. Remember this bridge and what happened here. I was able to hold them

at bay and control the way they came at me. Therefore, I was able to defeat them. You choose the terms of engagement, not them."

Thenaria nodded, and he saw in her sin'del she was committing the lesson to memory.

"The entrance to the tunnels is only three floors down," he said, giving her a smile. "We're almost there."

The sensation started with a tingle in his finger. In the second it took for him to glance down at the appendage, the quiver encompassed his entire hand. His eyes opened wide in shock when the realization struck him. He gripped the ring and tried to tug it off.

The next moment found him hurling through the chora; Sa'Doran, Thenaria and Lilian left far behind him.