THINGS SEEN AND UNSEEN:
A COLLECTION OF NOVEL CHAPTERS

by

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Abstract

This thesis includes eight chapters of a fantasy novel entitled “Things Seen and Unseen”. Rainflower, an otherworldly changeling who seeks to understand her origins and leave behind a bloody past, crosses over into the human world. Savina, a girl haunted by a spirit in waking and sleeping, is suddenly uprooted from her life when she and Rainflower are brought together. As they journey to a better home for Savina, they discover unexpected companionship in each other despite their differences. This novel explores forgiveness and the struggle against self-hate. The included chapters detail part of the beginning of Savina and Rainflower’s connection through themselves and other characters.

Thesis Advisor:

*Kathy Flann*
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Introduction

I began writing at a young age, and after growing up immersed in the worlds of C.S. Lewis and Brian Jacques, I have always held a fascination and a fondness for the fantasy genre. I began developing my own fantasy novel ideas at the age of eleven, and those ideas have grown up with me. Since I began the Master of Arts in Writing program at Johns Hopkins in 2022, I have honed my skills and further developed the stories and characters that have been with me since childhood.

“Things Seen and Unseen” is a fantasy novel that follows the converging paths of Savina and Rainflower, two very different people who are more alike than they know. Savina is a human girl haunted by a monster that follows her in waking and sleeping, a curse that causes her to be sent away from her home country. Rainflower is a changeling who has come to the human world in search of one who can teach her about the power of aether, a power that belongs to humanity. Savina is thrown together with Rainflower when she is sent away to a new land in the, and as they journey together, they realize they share a fundamental similarity: they are outcasts. They find unexpected companionship in each other that will be put to the test when Rainflower’s bloody past catches up with her. The novel follows themes of redemption and learning how to forgive oneself and others. This thesis consists of the first forty pages of the novel, divided into eight sequential chapters with varying points of view.

Through this program, I have learned more about writing various points of view and the rules they follow. I have also gained a better understanding of exposition and how to utilize it more effectively as Lewis and Jacques have in their works, so I can emulate the effective worldbuilding they have accomplished.
All of this work was written since 2022 in the Johns Hopkins University Master of Arts in Writing Program.

I would like to thank my thesis advisor Kathy Flann for all her help and guidance with my work, as well as my peers for their feedback on my assignments. I also give thanks to God for blessing me with the gift of writing and a supportive family.

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The rain came with a rush of noise, drawing a veil across the world, obscuring it in a glittering curtain. Rainflower pulled the hood of her tattered cloak up, mirroring the action from the soldiers around the cart she pursued. Large raindrops beat against her head, but after preserving through many storms in this land, she had come to understand that there was no direction or control behind the wind and rain. In Elphane, the world she had come from across the Schism, everything was dictated by the four Aspects and the Fair who ruled them, but here there was no such order. Nature was wild and uncontrollable here, and Man-kind had to contend with it as best they could.

The cart that she followed did not stop for the rain. Five men walked alongside the cart at different positions, their paces even and relaxed, just fast enough to keep up. A sixth walked alongside the ox, guiding it. They talked amongst themselves, shouting a little to be heard over the rain, their words amounting to nothing but a foreign jumble in her ears. All six were strongly built and dressed similarly in light garments like her own, but theirs were overlaid with cuirasses of a thicker material, each bearing a curved sword at his side. Aether, the fifth Aspect and the only one that belonged to Man-kind, did not rest in any of these men. She saw their emptiness now that she had laid eyes upon them, but aether remained close at hand, a flicker in the back of her mind like the instinctual knowledge of being watched.

She had come into this world seeking aether, and had originally found nothing but an empty wasteland. But then she began to receive a strange visitor in the night, something she could not see or hear, something that existed in the Schism between
worlds that was full of aether. She had trailed that presence to a large city she had seen in the distance, which the cart now headed towards, in the hope of finding the source.

She kept her distance. She had observed Man-kind much since her arrival, particularly travelers on this road, but she had not yet learned how close she could get before their ears picked up on her arrival. In Elphane, there had been many kinds of Fair with their abilities to account for, but Man-kind seemed less so. Though they were varied in form and personality, they seemed to possess a mere fraction of the strength exercised by the Fair.

Each step she took through the thick underbrush was swift but carefully chosen, for though the downpour afforded her some freedom, she could not risk an untimely detection. She drifted over the roots and leaves on light feet, heedless of the cloying damp, her shoes and clothing built to withstand far harsher elements.

The ox did not seem happy about its position in the weather, tossing its horned head and occasionally attempting to stop, slowing their progress, though it inevitably plodded onwards with the soldier’s goading. For all the strength of the wind and rain, the thunder stayed distant, only the occasional faraway flash of lightning flickering through the dark barrier of the treetops illuminating the travelers in stark shades of white only for an instant.

Then, there was a flicker of movement inside the cart, though Rainflower was afforded no chance to truly see who was within. The soldier nearest to the window looked up, a brief conversation passing between him and whoever was inside, then he walked on.

Rainflower’s daggers were in her hands before she even noticed them, their presence innate, an extension of her body. The occupant of the cart had to be the one she
was after. She did not want to kill them, for they had done her no wrong, but there would need to be some pain no matter her course of action. She would have to go through the guards to reach the cart’s occupant, and more than that, she would need blood. What words she could hear that had passed between those in front of her were nothing but meaningless noise, and the blood of Man-kind would grant her understanding.

Still, the cart rolled on, growing ever closer to the city. There was no one on the road save for her and them, shrouded in the concealing veil of rain. She had to know how much the person inside the cart knew, and she would not get a better chance than this.

She flipped her daggers so the hilts faced outwards. She would not kill them. The blood she had spilled was left behind, beyond the Gate in Elphane, and she would not stain this world similarly. Before she could think better of it, she leapt from her hiding place, her body moving in the old rhythm of battle that she would never forget.

Man-kind was slow. That was Rainflower’s first impression as she sprung upon the nearest soldier. He barely had time to acknowledge her presence before her dagger hilt cracked down on his head, making him drop like a stone. She sought out each living body, and the old instincts bade her find the weak points, the places where air and blood could be cut off. She refrained from exploiting them, even though they were easy to pick out, focusing her efforts on gauging how much force was necessary to incapacitate.

As the man fell, his companions out of her immediate reach began to react. More shouting, more weapons glinting in the rain as they focused on her. She glimpsed their faces in flashes, confused and angry at her intrusion, but the ones who were far enough away to see her became full of terror. She did not know how much they saw in the night, but her skin burned with the knowledge that eyes lay upon it, her true form. Their fear
surpassed any she had ever seen in the eyes of the Fair; she was unknown to Man-kind, just as they were to her, and she had come out of the night-dark forest in what may well have been the blink of an eye to them.

Someone charged across the muddied road. Rainflower turned, catching the unfortunate man with a swinging strike to his head in the same motion, and he tumbled to the ground. However, his action spurred his fellows to follow suit as, when no further assault came, they realized there was only one attacker to be contended with. In a blur of weapons and limbs, several men ran at her at once, the terror briefly overpowered by the confidence of sheer numbers.

Rainflower had lived an outnumbered life. This was no different, and they were slow.

She spun and struck, following the rhythm, entering the old dance in full. Her dagger hilt cracked against the skull of a man running at her, blade poised to strike. The enemy formed the steps of the fight, and she merely followed them. She dodged sideways as a sword was thrust towards her midriff, laying out the sword’s owner in the dirt. The dance was familiar, instinctual, but now she formed a deathless variation.

Somewhere behind Rainflower, the ox bellowed. A woman’s voice shouted in the night, drawing her eye. The cart’s occupant had emerged, a woman clad in pale robes that made her almost ghostly in the rain. Their eyes met, and all doubt left Rainflower’s mind. Aether was upon her.

Rainflower’s pause was little more than a breath, but it was enough. More men appeared in front of her, eyes wild and weapons upraised. She darted backwards, only to catch a glancing blow from another attacker who had come up from the side. The metal
of the curved sword sliced against her clothing, the force behind it enough to break skin. It was a shallow blow, but Rainflower could not restrain the pained noise that rose from her mouth, a hiss like water meeting fire. The men’s eyes widened at the sound, visible to her even in the dark, but that fear was swiftly dimmed into unconsciousness as she set upon those within her reach.

Then she realized all six men were felled, spread out in the mud, but they were not dead. She repeated that to herself, watching the faint shifting of breath in the sprawled figures as bloodier images threatened her mind. Her wounded side throbbed, and she touched it, her hand coming away smattered with silver.

The woman’s voice came again. Fully out of the cart, her skirts dragged in the mud as she crouched to rouse one of the soldiers, her words high and frantic.

Rainflower stood as still as the felled men around her for a few breaths, letting her mind catch up with her body again. The smell of blood still hung in the air, but not with the stifling thickness of slaughter. She swept her gaze across the woman and her soldiers, the action little more than a slight turn of her head, but that caught the woman’s attention. Their eyes met, and unbridled terror took hold of the woman, a look Rainflower knew well as she was afforded a true look at her form rather than a fleeting glimpse before oblivion. She froze, all efforts to rouse her men forgotten, her eyes going wide. Her mouth opened, but no sound came forth.

The blood-scent drove into Rainflower’s senses, her awareness of it intensifying as her shame did. This woman, touched by aether where so many lacked it, still looked upon her with nothing but fear. Her skin burned despite the rain upon it. The woman did
not look away, but shook the fallen soldier beside her, speaking sharp, desperate commands to stir him.

Rainflower turned, searching the bodies around her, finding the dark wetness of cuts and scrapes seeping through clothing. She bent over one man, stretching her fingers towards the discolored spot on his arm. One touch was all it would take, and she pushed through any hesitation. Her fingertips brushed the blood of Man-kind, and the silver in her veins ignited.

A multitude unfolded beneath her skin, an array of voices, faces, forms streaming into her blood. She needed a form to hide behind, and she had seen enough faces, enough people, for the desire to be realized. Her skin began to change, shifting from bleak gray to the darker tones of the people around her, and so too did her perception begin to shift. The words that had been meaningless now took root in her mind, the blood of Man-kind granting her understanding. When the woman in front of her finally spoke, she knew every word like she had been born into this country.

“What have you done?” she demanded.

The new form washed over Rainflower like a warm breeze. The stony pallor of her skin deepened into brown, and her face shifted, the monstrous features of a changeling retreating behind the mask of Man-kind. The burning of transparency faded, made dormant by the reassurance of a veil.

“Answer me!” The woman stood armed with a small dagger, the faint reflection of the blade quivering with her hand. The fear remained, but beneath that now was anger, burning in her eyes. And yet for that anger, aether did not stir in the woman like Rainflower expected it to. It remained dormant, lifeless.
“I will answer you.” Rainflower spoke, her lips forming words she had never spoken before but now knew. “If you answer me.”

The woman wavered. Rainflower took a step toward her, and she raised the dagger. All it took was one more step and a strike against the woman’s wrist to send the dagger skittering into the mud. Then they stood face to face, and the woman fought to hide her terror.

“I am Kaveri, sister of Ascended General Vasta,” she said, raising her chin. “You are making a mistake.”

“Those names are nothing to me,” Rainflower said. “Get in the cart.”

The woman—Kaveri—was still, her eyes flickering away from Rainflower’s face to the dagger and her fallen men. Then she slowly turned and entered the cart, and Rainflower followed behind her.
Rainflower slid into the cart, seating herself opposite Kaveri, the proximity offering her a better look at the woman’s appearance. She was youthful, not a child but not aged by the standards of Man-kind. Her face was clean and well-kept, her cheekbones pronounced beneath dark, almond-shaped eyes. Her hair was long and dark, interwoven with pale beads that sparkled like faint stars with each quick breath. Her expression was carefully controlled, though there was no disguising the fear that ran rampant in her eyes. She spoke first, her voice strained with an attempt to sound unshaken.

“You hurt my men.”

“I did not kill a single one,” Rainflower said, taking care not to stumble over the new words. “They will wake, and they will heal.”

Kaveri’s eyes darted to the bodies on the ground, her shoulders loosening just a fraction. “If you’ve come to take my money, my jewelry, I will give them to you if you let me go.”

“No.” Rainflower resisted a contemptuous sneer. “I do not need that. I want to know about aether.”

Kaveri, who had already pulled a small coinpurse halfway from her sash, went very still.

“You know what it is,” Rainflower surmised when she did not speak.

“Of course I know it, from the stories.” Kaveri spoke slowly, but her voice did not waver. “Of what concern is that to you?”
Rainflower realized she was not merely a princess or nobility who knew nothing but life’s pleasures. She was shrewd despite her fear and uncertainty, trying to gain information before divulging any of her own. “I see it on you.”

Kaveri’s face offered no insight. “How?”

“Because I was born into the same power.”

“But you are not of Man-kind.”

“No.” Rainflower was not aware she had leaned closer until Kaveri physically recoiled, pressing her back against the cart’s wall, but she did not immediately correct herself. Aether was undoubtedly upon her, but there was no reaction, no volatility like she had experienced through her visitor. In this woman, there was no agency, and nothing stirred. It seemed increasingly likely that she was being truthful, and felt nothing at all. The invisible visitor that often came to her could surely sense her back, but not this woman. “Surely, you know of the Schism, if you know aether.”

“I have never seen the Unseen Land.”

“Tell me what you know of it, then.”

Kaveri’s grip on her skirt tightened, and she suddenly looked more unsettled than ever. “It is a strange land that only the strongest are meant to walk. You would do well to stay away from that place, if you do not come from it.”

“That is of no matter right now. If you tell me to stay away from the Schism, then why is its mark upon you?”

“This mark you see is not my own doing.”

“Whose is it, then?”

Kaveri gave no answer, but neither did she avert her gaze.
“Tell me,” Rainflower urged, a hint of a growl undercutting her words.

“What will happen if I do?” Kaveri replied.

“I will learn from whoever left the mark how to channel the powers of the Schism.”

Kaveri shook her head. “There are dark things there, things that should be left alone.”

Rainflower considered her warning. The few times she had glimpsed the Schism found it empty, devoid of all presence like her initial exposure to this world, except for her unknown visitor. “What things?”

“Damuta,” Kaveri said, her voice lowering as though speaking the name would somehow bring it forth. “Monsters.”

Rainflower was surprised by her fear. Superstition or not, the mark upon her was very real, and perhaps her fear was as well. “How so?”

Kaveri did not speak for several moments, but finally did when Rainflower shifted with impatience. “Damuta are parasites, choosing someone to haunt, and they will not leave. Long ago, we knew how to use them, to grant us strength and see things visible and invisible, but that art has been lost. Now only a chosen few of the greatest magicians dare to look into the Unseen Land, for fear that a damuta might find them.”

“And yet you have been touched by one, it seems,” Rainflower observed. “How?”

“I cannot tell you.”

“Cannot, or will not?” Kaveri did not answer again, and Rainflower’s temper began to fray, but then it struck her. “It is family.”
Kaveri’s eyes widened but a fraction, something that could have easily been lost in the dark before she masked herself again.

“Is this monster you speak of real?” Rainflower demanded. “Or is it a lie to keep me from pursuing this any further?”

“It is very real.” Kaveri straightened, a fierceness in her eyes. “As real as you are, a creature from the Otherworld bleeding in my cart.”

Rainflower glanced at her wounded side, the pain having faded into the back of her mind as she sought answers. “Monster or not, it has visited me many times, which is why I have come seeking it. But I do not wish to take your family away from you.”

Kaveri looked at her for a long moment, her gaze searching through the dark.

“What if I wished for you to do just that?”


One of the men on the ground groaned, and Rainflower stood up, but a hand seized her arm before she could act. Kaveri’s grip, though weak with the lacking strength of Man-kind, was surprisingly steadfast.

“You have not come to kill or make war,” Kaveri said, a statement more than a question. “If you did, you would have killed them. I know the look of uncaring ambition, and I do not see it in you.”

The soldier had not yet begun to stir, so Rainflower paused. “And what difference does that make to you?”

“Prove it,” Kaveri said. “Prove the peaceable intent you claim by letting me and my men go, and I will try to help you.”

“I do not have what I came for yet.”
“You will not find it in me, I assure you, and you will not find it like this. Soon, my absence will be noted, and there will be no way out for you except through a battle.”

“Look around. Man-kind is nothing to me.”

“You have conquered six, but what about scores?”

Rainflower decided she spoke truly. Her garb and the ferocity with which her men had fought to protect her spoke enough.

“If you wish to keep things peaceable, you will have to let me go for now,” Kaveri said. “But I can help you find what you are searching for, provided this remains unknown to my men. You are not the only one with such interests, and soon they may become entirely out of your reach.”

The soldier groaned again and twitched, cementing Rainflower’s decision. “Very well. I will let you go, for now. Five days from now, storm or sun, you will return to this place at midday, when the travelers cease with the heat. I will meet you. Do we have an agreement?”

Kaveri nodded after a pensive pause. “Yes, we do.”

“Good.” Rainflower stood. “I make you this agreement to honor you as a possessor of aether. If you attempt to be rid of me, or do not honor this agreement, I will take a different path. I have now seen you, and I can find you.”

Kaveri said nothing more, giving no outward reaction. Rainflower stepped out of the cart, the drumming of the rain undercut by the pained murmurs of the soldiers beginning to break the surface of consciousness again. She walked past them and did not look back, letting the welcoming shadows of the forest swallow her in oblivion.
Silverbark had searched with his brothers and sisters for Rainflower. The perceived treachery had to be a mistake. They found her path, the trail of aether power she left in her wake, faded but still noticeable. They followed it with haste, hoping to find her nearby so that they could turn their attention to enemies outside their own kin. But the path went on and on, until it crossed the border of their territory and vanished beyond. Some pursued the path further, but it was already clear that Rainflower had fled with the lodestone.

Silverbark wanted to blame somebody, anybody but one of his own family, but the betrayal seemed to be Rainflower’s alone. No one else had passed over the border, or come anywhere near their territory, since the lodestone had vanished. He had been from one end of the land to the other, and everything had remained untouched save for Rainflower’s departure.

The Hollow loomed before Silverbark, a great tree with a height and width spanned massive proportions, the distant leafy canopy seeming to touch the sky. It was home, and the sight should have been welcome after several days and nights spent searching, but he only felt a pressing dread that weighed on every step he took towards the entryway carved into a space between the large, interwoven system of roots.

As he approached, the guards hidden in the nooks between the roots turned questioning looks on him, and he met them briefly. His quiet return alone was answer enough to what they wondered. He passed them in silence, following the well-used footpath towards the Hollow’s trunk.
He had returned in failure. They had been close, so close to achieving a true position in the world. When Rainflower had recovered the lodestone, what once had been dreams seemed as though they could become reality. Lodestones could open the broken Gates, something a privileged few were fortunate enough to happen upon, that some would kill for in order to see the Schism and Man-kind on the other side. The changelings had a chance to be freed from their revilement, but Rainflower had stopped that dream before it had ever been realized.

The door loomed before Silverbark, seeming massive and dark, waiting to swallow him. The faint gleam of sunbuds within the darkness did little to reassure him as he stopped just beyond the threshold. Already, the coldness trickled into his awareness, sending a shiver up his spine. Uncolar was waiting for him to step through the door, waiting to learn more about the betrayal of one of their own, and he had nothing to offer but his own confusion. Breathing deeply of the cool air scented with earth and wood, he stepped through the door.

*My child, you are troubled.* The rasping voice slithered into Silverbark’s mind, coalescing as a coldness settling on the back of his neck. He stared at the carved hallway ahead of him, seeking the words he had neglected to think over in his frenzy to find Rainflower.

*One of us is missing.*

“Yes.” Silverbark’s answer was little more than an exhale, but Uncolar would hear him. The Hollow, and all the changelings themselves, were created by Uncolar, and few things evaded his notice, including the now missing lodestone.

*Come,* the voice beckoned in his mind. *Let us speak.*
Silverbark obeyed as the cold prickle of Uncolar’s presence receded. He could never refuse the call when it came, no matter how it frightened him. He was the Elder Brother, the leader of the changelings, and it was his task to confer most often with Uncolar, as well as commanding his brothers and sisters. But this time, he wished the duty was someone else’s. It had been over a day since the lodestone was discovered missing, and any hope of finding Rainflower had diminished the longer the searchers were absent. Never before had there been such a betrayal. All they had was each other, or so they had thought, and there was no telling how Uncolar would react.

He descended into the winding halls of the Hollow’s base, using stairs carved into the tree itself. The massive width of the trunk at its base allowed for vaulting ceilings and craftsmanship reminiscent of Fair abodes seen often from afar. Daylight filtered through windows interspersed here and there, dappling the floor with rings of light that gradually slunk towards the wall as the sun moved in its course. The rooms normally bustled with foraging parties leaving and returning, menders repairing and making new clothes, herbalists picking through their stocks, but as Silverbark passed through everything was muted and subdued, with many rooms left empty. Such quiet was typically reserved for the loss of a brother or sister. It was fitting, under the circumstances.

Finally, another figure appeared in the halls, slinking towards him. It was Dewleaf, a sentry who had likely spotted him returning from one of the higher levels of the Hollow. She had been one of the first to notice Rainflower’s absence, and as she drew near, the questions etched into her jagged features turned to grim understanding before a word had passed between them.

“You did not find her,” she murmured.
“No.” Silverbark did not stop but slowed his pace, allowing Dewleaf to fall into step beside him. “Her trail went into the Fire Land. Those who have taken the blood of the Fire-kind will follow it. I thought it best to return.”

“Father has been waiting for you,” Dewleaf said. “He has been…disturbed by this. He has asked many questions, and we have had no answers.”

“I bring no answers with me,” Silverbark murmured, “but we shall find a way to retrieve them.”

“Do you go to him now?”

“Yes.”

Dewleaf frowned, and Silverbark could guess why. There was no telling how Uncolar would react. “Do you think she truly betrayed us?”

“I do not want to think such a thing, but…” Silverbark trailed into troubled silence, and they stepped from the hall into an open room. A few changelings, some of whom had only recently returned from their own fruitless searches, were scattered across the area. Whispers of conversation died when Silverbark entered, all eyes turning to him.

“I bring nothing yet,” Silverbark said to them, his quiet admission seeming loud in the pressing quiet. “But Father will give us a path.”

No one spoke. None of them, him included, knew what would come of the meeting, and what it would mean for Rainflower if she was found.

Silverbark turned to Dewleaf. “See that everyone is made aware of my return. When I come back, we will discuss how Rainflower can be found.”

“I will,” Dewleaf said, departing to do as he asked.
Silverbark passed beyond the open rooms, stepping from the glimmer of daylight into the dimness of enclosures lit by sunbuds once more. The halls were larger, more ornate, in homage to where they ultimately led. Lines hewed into the wood formed many pictures of trees, flowers, and fruits flourishing, and in the midst of them stood one figure, carved with little detail but recognizable enough. The figure boasted of the great, twisted antlers that belonged to the *ulda*, standing tall amidst the nature around it.

Silverbark did not spare the images a glance as he passed by. The radiant being was an echo of a bygone time that no changeling truly remembered, the images drawn in worshipful reverence to something that was a distant dream to them. What lay below was far more broken and twisted.

He arrived at another staircase leading downwards, this one reaching beyond the Hollow’s trunk into the earth. The stairs started as wood but quickly changed to stone, spiraling down out of view. Silverbark descended, giving no pretense of hesitation. As soon as the walls of earth and stone rose up around him, everything shifted, though it went beyond the transition from above ground to below. A low hum rumbled through the stairs, the walls, shivering at the base of Silverbark’s skull. It was the presence that infiltrated every aspect of the earth, which had given life to the Hollow tree.

Silverbark was aware of every step he took. The earth beneath the stairs proclaimed much even through the smallest vibrations, the minute shifting of silt and rock and root, and it offered up his presence through each movement.

The tight, dark confines of the stairwell finally ended, giving way to a large cavern. Small beams of sunlight filtered through small holes in the root-covered ceiling far above, casting dim illumination over the cave’s expanse. It was as large as the tree
above it, the roots running the length of the walls and the ceiling. Several huge sections of root arched down from above, stretching all the way to the cave floor. Grass covered the entirety of the ground, rich with a variety of flowers, but they were not normal blossoms. In the course of a few moments, they bloomed, withered, died, and bloomed again in a constant cycle that rendered the cave floor akin to a living, seething mass. The cycle was faster than usual, seeming to follow the nervous cadence of Silverbark’s heartbeat.

He stepped into the grass, almost afraid to step on the blossoms though they would rise again. He passed beyond the large roots, approaching the opposite end of the cavern. There lay an entangled mass of roots that spilled from the wall and encroached on the cavern floor, creating a writhing hill that stretched almost to the cave ceiling. In the small gaps afforded by the roots, there was only darkness, but it was not empty as he approached. He stopped just short of where the hill began, kneeling amidst the ever living and dying flowers.

“I have come, Father,” he said, his voice echoing in the expanse.

There was no response. Something shifted within the mass, giving forth the crackling of wood and stone being disturbed.

“The lodestone is gone.”

Silverbark flinched. The voice was little more than a breath of wind spilling forth from the darkened recesses, but it chilled him like ice. “Yes, it is.”

“And a sister has gone with it. The one called Rainflower.”

“Yes.” There was no more Silverbark could say. A fragile blossom of a duskrose opened, closed, and decayed in front of him.
“She bowed before me and offered it up, so one must wonder…why.”

The flowers shivered and withered, as though seeking to hide their faces from the power contained in the final word. So too did Silverbark wish he could do the same, but he was left exposed to the invisible gaze beyond the wall of root. “I do not know why she has done this. None of us do.”

“She was as fiercely loyal as any other child of mine.” The voice did not waver a mite, the cold sound rolling across the expanse of the cave. “Has treachery befallen us? Could she have been compelled to take it to one of the paltry lords who yet battle for control?”

Silverbark considered the possibility. The true Fair had nothing but contempt for the changelings. “I do not think so.”

More shifting, as though the unseen presence had leaned forward with interest. “Then tell me what you observed of your wayward sister.”

“I see now that she was changed in the recent days.” The words stumbled from Silverbark’s mouth, and the duskrose bloomed again. “I do not know if it was the lodestone itself that did it, but she became different than before. She no longer worked as unwaveringly as she once had.”

“Why?”

Silverbark winced and shivered. The duskrose died again. “She was dissatisfied with our life as it is, with...” He opened his mouth to speak further, but the words hung in his throat.

“Do not withhold anything from me.”
“Once, she spoke to me when I could see she was troubled. She told me, she was unsure if it was you who had created us.”

The silence that followed Silverbark’s proclamation was almost more terrible than a response. When the answer finally came, it was low, so low that the ground quivered beneath Silverbark’s feet. “Where did this doubt come from?”

“I do not know,” Silverbark breathed. “When I pressed her, she would not give me an answer.”

“And why did you not impart this to me sooner?”

Silverbark strove to keep the tremor out of his voice. “I did not know what to make of it. I have never seen such doubt before, not even during the time of your long sleep. I thought that it, like many other things that have assailed us, would eventually pass from her. It has not been long since she spoke to me of these things, but I never thought that she, or any of us, would ever do something like this. I have never had reason to question her loyalty.”

Another dreadful pause hung in the air. “You have followed her, searched for her, have you not?”

“Yes. Her trail remains, but we have not yet caught up to her.”

“I too have searched, but she has passed beyond my view. I believe that she may have sought a Gate, and passed through it.”

Silverbark looked directly at the entanglement for the first time as disbelief washed away his fear. He had not entertained that idea in the slightest; one changeling, alone, passing through a Gate to cross the Schism into the world of Man-kind seemed like
an impossibility. He realized too late the question that slipped from his mouth. “Are you
certain of this?”

“Do you question me, child?”

“No.” He averted his face again. “It is only that no changeling has ever been to
the other side of the Gates. To do so alone, without aid…”

“You must confirm this. Follow her trail to its end, whether you find her or a
Gate.”

There was no indication of affliction in Uncolar’s tone, but Silverbark nodded his
agreement. If they found her, they would have the answers they wanted, but he was afraid
of what it would mean for her afterward. “And if we do find her? What would you have
us do?”

The duskrose shriveled again, but another flower sprung up in its place, this one
composed of many small blue buds. Silverbark’s mouth went dry. A rainflower. “Bring
her to me.”
Silvery trails slid down the segmented glass of Savina’s bedroom window, and the Monster paced restlessly in the deepest shadows of the room and her mind. The town of Dalmu was only a couple of hours away, and Kaveri had made the trip to and from before countless times. If she had decided to stay overnight, a message would have already arrived.

A low voice spoke from the doorway. “Savina.”

A silhouette filled the darkened space, dressed in an ornate tunic and sash. The Monster flared at the intrusion, reacting to Savina’s startled unease. No one came to her chambers at this late hour, unless her dreams became distressing. The Monster moved like a dark wind, invisible to all but Savina, but she restrained it before it could act as recognition overcame her surprise. It was Lord Vasta, Kaveri’s brother, hardly a stranger but seeming so at such a late hour.

His approach had been muted by the rain and the volume of Savina’s thoughts, but he had always moved with a nimble silence that belied his appearance. He was imposing in both form and personality, his demeanor one of intense calculation. However, she was not alone in her concerns about Kaveri, the sharpness of Vasta’s gaze muted, his brow bearing a slight furrow.

“My lord?” she asked.

Vasta’s face was inscrutable. “I take it you are aware that Kaveri...”

“I am.” Savina could not help the anxious question that bubbled up from her thoughts. “Have you heard nothing from her at all?”
“No.” The deep drone of Vasta’s voice pitched down slightly, a further indication of his unease. “I have already sent men out to search, but I want…swifter confirmation of her whereabouts.”

“Yes, my lord.” Savina stood automatically, fighting to keep an appearance of unbothered obedience. The Monster was restless in response to her worry, and she did not wish to let it step forth, but neither could she refuse.

Vasta turned away without another word, and she followed him through the halls, forced to trot to keep up with his long strides. His sturdy boots tapped slightly against the marble flooring, the noise fading into the darkened recesses of the arched ceilings as the drumming rain overtook it. The estate was among the smaller ones that made up Lunku’s more affluent sects, possessing neither the space nor the gilded grandeur of the larger constructions, but the sense of vastness it elicited in Savina had never faded through the years. The floors were tiled in intricate crisscross patterns that spun and flowed out before beginning again, the walls comprised of equally decorated sandstone interspersed with high windows that now seemed cavernous with the night’s dark seeping through.

Savina trailed after Vasta dutifully, and the Monster prowled with her, an ever-present follower in her wake. It had followed her for as long as she could remember, haunting her in waking and sleeping. There were times when she could ignore it, but when worry overtook her mind, it gained further life. It had no form that she could clearly define, a being that clung to her like her own shadow, but it was unquestionably strong. It frightened her, and it grew stronger with each day.

No one else could see the Monster, but Vasta and Kaveri knew of its existence well enough, having contended with its grasp on her for many years. She had been
haunted by the *damuta* for the length of her memory, which was not long at her age of fourteen years, but it felt like an eternity. She had never desired to commune with a *damuta*, nor did she recall being among the devoted ones that sought them, but she bore one nonetheless. Some may have considered it a blessing, but she saw only a frightful curse. In her younger years, she had referred to it as a monster. The name stayed, for she had never thought of it any differently.

They reached Vasta’s study with haste. During the day, the large westward facing windows allowed plenty of light to flow into the spacious room, but the nighttime consigned much of ornate furnishings to the shadows. The only light came from Vasta’s desk in the middle of the room, two candles burning in the low, spherical holders, casting shivering images across the flooring and the tapestries on the walls.

“Kaveri left by the eastern gate,” Vasta explained brusquely, seating himself on the cushion behind his desk. “And she would have remained on the eastward road until she arrived in town. Will you be able to see that far?”

“I will,” Savina said quietly, her slippers sinking into the rug. Vasta cared about Kaveri, if nothing else.

“Will you need something of hers to aid you in the search?”

“I do not think so.”

“Good.” Vasta steepled his fingers, his brow furrowing slightly as he turned his gaze to the maps laid out on his desk. “Begin.”

His tone was edged with uncertainty, hanging somewhere between an order and a request, but Savina took it as an order. She retreated from him to a far corner of the room, almost beyond the candlelight’s reach. There, a plush cushion covered in blue sati
waited for her, but she felt no sort of comfort in the luxury. It was where the Monster arose, to search out that which she had been ordered to find. Her stomach churned as she settled on the cushion, pressing her back hard against the wall. She toyed with the edge of her tunic between her fingers as she tried to slow her breathing and her heart, to calm herself and open her mind to the things beyond the world her senses perceived. These were methods that Vasta had learned from old texts relating to the art of walking in the Unseen Land, and though they were limited, what could be gleaned from them had worked once Savina put them into practice.

Rain droned against the windowpanes. The Monster shivered, creeping further into her awareness as she sank into her own mind. She would find Kaveri, and that would be all. Nothing more would happen, and she would control it.

The room around her began to fade away as the Monster’s senses began to overtake her own. She took one last look at the rivulets running down the glass nearby before shutting her eyes, the Unseen Land opening up before her mind.
Chapter 5

The Monster stood upon the reflection of the lacquered floor of Vasta’s study. It could feel him, standing somewhere behind it, but it did not look. Obeying the unspoken commands Savina gave it, it reached out, searching for traces of Kaveri’s presence in the house. They came into its perception easily; Kaveri’s presence was everywhere, the faint echoes lingering and familiar. The Monster turned, and in two steps it stood beyond the walls of Vasta’s estate, in the pale reflection of the rainy streets of Lunku.

Even on a rainy night, Lunku did not sleep entirely. Phantoms of people passed the Monster by as they hurried to get through the rain, their forms like mist, their traces brushing up against its perception. No one sensed the Monster. Men, women, and livestock alike passed through it and around it, oblivious to what was watching them.

The Monster began its hunt, searching for the traces of Kaveri that stretched beyond the estate. It passed by the others, walking outside the city’s walls in only a few steps, knowing who it sought was not to be found within Lunku. It went down the road to Dalmu, walking the path that opened up before it through the traces of Kaveri’s passage earlier that same day. Hundreds of other traces abounded on the roadway, the echoes of the day’s travelers coming and going from the city. Soldiers, merchants, farmers, and craftsmen among many others brushed by the Monster’s perception like small swells in a great sea. However, at this late hour, there was no one on the road, only the echoes. The Monster disregarded the ocean and remained affixed to Kaveri’s familiar trace, following it down the reflection of the rainswept road.
The ghostly trees and glimmering underbrush blurred as the Monster increased its pace, covering large swaths of ground with each step. Unbound from the restrictions of the body, distance was of little consequence to it, and the pale veil of the world passed by swiftly, spurred on by Savina’s urgency.

Kaveri’s traces grew gradually stronger, promising that she was close at hand, and the Monster increased its speed. The traces began to morph from echo into true presence, the faint but enduring undercurrent that all people seemed to bear in the Unseen Land, though there was no awareness in it. The presence of a person only served as guidance to the Monster, who followed Kaveri’s gladly.

As it got closer to Kaveri, something else came into its perception, something familiar but startling. It was the presence of the strange creature it had visited many nights now, the creature filled with aether. The creature had been traveling closer to Lunku, though it had not expected to find the familiar presence so near to Kaveri’s.

Any curiosity about the matter was ignored as Kaveri loomed into view, capturing the Monster’s undivided attention. Her form appeared, shivering like it was underwater.

Heedless of any invisible watchers, Kaveri and her little retinue of men sat in the forest a good distance from the road, huddled in the underbrush to shelter from the rain. They were without the oxcart they had departed with that morning, and all of them were coated in mud and grime.

The Monster stepped closer to Kaveri’s sodden form. Her knees were pulled close to her chest as she shivered, but she was unharmed. In the darkness, much was hidden, but the Unseen afforded no such cover. All the soldiers around her were in various states of consciousness, some of them speckled with blood on their skin and clothes.
Something hot and burning boiled within the Monster. The shimmering images of the world around it darkened in response. Someone had tried to hurt her. Rage built inside it, thrumming across the Unseen Land.
The shadows in the study deepened, the candles no longer seeming as bright as something nameless, formless, strode through the Unseen Land atop the Seen. It could have been a trick played by the eyes to perceive that which was deemed imperceptible. Even if no change had truly come over the room, it seemed real to Vasta.

He envisioned the damuta standing just in front of Savina’s diminutive form, stepping forth at her will. Perhaps its gaze even rested on him, before departing to do the work he had demanded. Unease pricked him, a feeling he had never been able to master despite having commissioned Savina to use the damuta’s gifts many times. He was unafraid of much, but that which could not be seen or touched elicited fear in him, try as he might to do away with it.

There was a time when he thought the Unseen was legend, or at least inaccessible to all save for those who studied the ways of the damuta. He had not wholly denied its existence, knowing the many old Gates and the presence of speaking creatures in other countries beyond Pavelekan, but just as the ability to reach the Otherworld was lost to many, so was the art of walking the paths of the divisive Unseen and taming the things that lurked there. He contended with the world of flesh and bone, and no more.

Or he used to.

Eight years ago, his view of the world had changed in the span of a few days, opening beyond his physical senses. His men had found Savina alone and half-starved, lacking most of her memories. Her skin and the reddish tint of her hair revealed she was of the Binu, a people of the mountain clans given to strange practices with the Unseen
Land. Kaveri had been the one to take the girl under her wing, and he had allowed it, taking pity on her. It only became clear later that the girl was more than she appeared, afflicted with a *damuta* that granted her visions and unnatural abilities. The powers of a *damuta* were strange and frightening, but they had their uses, though they required more patience from him than he was used to.

He restrained the urge to run out into the rain and begin searching with his men. Ascended Generals were beyond rash decisions, or so they were supposed to be, but waiting at his desk let the potential horror of Kaveri’s absence pile to the forefront of his mind. Her delay may have been nothing more than being caught in the storm, but he could not reassure himself. There was danger in his position of power, and Kaveri had inherited that burden.

He glanced toward the darkened window, which offered only his and Savina’s candlelit reflections against the black. It quietly unnerved him how still she became when she delved into the Unseen, something that had never changed. Such stillness was typically only seen in the most highly trained soldiers, who spent years honing their bodies’ movements down to the most minute twitches, but she exhibited the same behavior with no such practice. If he were not focused on her, it would have been frighteningly easy to forget she was there altogether.

It was a symptom of her abilities, one of several. Vasta was not blind to the dreams, the fear, the lingering shadow deepening in her eyes, but there was nothing that could be done about it. Kaveri had already tried. The only solution he saw was to train her, so that the thing inside of her could be controlled. He believed her efforts had not
been in vain, but there was no way for him to be sure. She did not contend with the world of physical strength that he had learned to measure easily.

The stillness ended abruptly as Savina gasped, her eyes flying open as she slumped against the wall behind her. The candle flickered wildly in its holder, sending light and shadow bouncing across walls like it had been blown in a heavy gust of wind. Unnerved by her extreme reaction, Vasta stood and searched the room around him for any sign of intruders, but there was no one but them and the invisible watcher.

“What happened?” He hurried to her, crouching at her side.

Savina blinked at him, her gaze distant like her mind had not yet returned to her.

“Speak, child!” Vasta commanded when she did not reply. “Are you hurt?”

Savina sucked in a deep breath, straightening herself on her cushion as she regained her focus, though her voice was small. “I’m not hurt.”

Vasta frowned. She was shaking. “Then what has happened?”

“I…” Savina faltered. “It merely took more strength than I expected.”

Vasta stared at her for a moment, then went to his desk, pouring a cup of cool tea from a pitcher and offering it to her. She accepted it, obeying the unspoken command to drink. The trembling in her hands threatened to spill the tea onto her lap, but she managed to bring the cup to her lips. He waited until the quivering began to cease, then returned to his desk, unrolling a map he kept stored nearby.

Savina stood when she finished the tea, her legs trembling just as much as her hands, but she made it to the desk without incident. Vasta stepped back, allowing her a full view of the map. It depicted the whole of the Lun Province, with Lunku at its center.
Through her trips with Kaveri and the Monster’s far-flung eyes, she had learned how to orient herself to the places the Monster went.

“Around there,” Savina said, pointing to an empty space on the map that would be forest land. “They are in the forest…hiding.”

Vasta glanced at her sharply. “From what?”

“I did not see, but they did not have the cart. The soldiers were hurt, all of them.”

Vasta’s mouth went dry. “And Kaveri?”

“She was unharmed, or so it looked.”

Vasta nearly upended his inkstone across the table in his haste to roll up the map.

“Was there anything else?”

“No, my lord,” she murmured.

All other considerations beyond Kaveri left Vasta. He had what he needed. He nodded to Savina once, leaving to gather his waiting men.
Kaveri had made a mistake this night.

The driving rain lashed at her face, making it nearly impossible to raise her head. She could only rely on Pevan, her loyal retainer, to keep her going in a straight line. His breathing was labored, though he tried to hide how his wounds pained him. Every few moments, she could not help but look over her shoulder to ensure that all five of them were still behind her. The most injured of them rode on the ox that she had refused to mount, his form dangling like a broken puppet.

Their sorry state could only be blamed on her. The proceedings in Dalmu had taken longer than expected, but she had not wanted to delay returning to Savina. The girl was little more than a maidservant in her duties, but she had become a closer friend through the years. Her dreams had become stranger of late, and there had already been too many nights spent trying to calm her as her mind struggled to grasp what was waking and what was sleeping.

With that at the forefront of her mind, Kaveri had urged her men into making the trip home. But as was the way of the rainy season, storms came and went as often as she did, and by the time it arrived, they were too far along to try and turn back. As the storm raged, what seemed to be the very cause of Savina’s unusual dreams had appeared. Kaveri was still unsure if she had seen things correctly, but she was almost certain it was real. The creature’s face was exactly as Savina had described her dreams, manifested in front of her on the road. Then it had transformed into a woman, all but unrecognizable as the creature it had been mere moments before.
It was all so outlandish that Kaveri wondered if she had hit her head somewhere in the scuffle, and she resisted the desire to question Pevan on what he had seen as they struggled through the mud. Only he of all her servants knew the greater extent of Savina’s new dreams, in trust garnered by his service to her, and only he could begin to understand what it was they had glimpsed.

Kaveri looked over her shoulder again, blinking away the rainwater that threatened to blur her vision. Her men were lagging; they all were, tired and wounded from the ambush. Lunku was not far away by now, but they had been struggling against the storm and the muddy roadway for long enough.

“We will stop for a rest,” she said, raising her voice to be heard over the pounding rain. “We all need it.”

“We should leave the road, then,” Pevan said, his words strained.

Kaveri expected some form of disagreement; the soldiers under Vasta’s direct employ were the sort to drive themselves forward regardless of the detriment to their own bodies, but there were no complaints. Quietly grateful for that, Pevan guided them off the road and into the forest. The trees swallowed them easily, and the layered canopy of leaves above them took the edge off the rain, allowing Kaveri a chance to see something beyond her own feet.

Everything was cast in shadows and the flickering silver of passing raindrops, but her eyes were adjusted enough to the dark to see that all her men looked just as weary as she felt, if not more. The decision to trek through the rain after the attack was perhaps yet another mistake, but they could not stay for fear of another.
With a sigh, Kaveri sat down on the firmest patch of ground she could find, uncaring of how much mud and water soaked into her already ruined clothing. However, she did not relax, keeping her gaze trained on the surrounding undergrowth for any followers.

“My lady.” Pevan’s large silhouette hovered close by, accompanied by the rustling of cloth. “Are you hurt?”

“No,” she replied. “See to yourself.”

Pevan gave her a careful look before kneeling close by, beginning to wipe away the grime from himself. Stray strands of his dark hair were plastered against his temples, the stubble on his face similarly affected. Bits of mud and grass littered his clothes and cuirass, turning his normally composed disposition into something far more unkempt.

Kaveri tugged at the tangles in her hair, trying to free the strands that had become caught by the ivory beads woven into them. She was far from presentable, but her own appearance was no longer important. Her thoughts remained fixed on the changing of faces she had witnessed, from something she had only heard about in old stories to a mere woman. The speed by which the creature had dispatched of her soldiers was frightening enough, and the face she had glimpsed was nightmarish, with eyes slitted like a cat and a mouthful of fangs. But she had come away from the encounter unharmed, and the conversation had been almost diplomatic, something she knew well.

“Do you understand what happened?” Pevan spoke up, just loud enough to be heard over the rain, so as to keep the exchange between the two of them.

“No at all,” Kaveri replied, “but I saw something…strange. Something Savina has seen in her dreams.”
Pevan glanced at her, then at the soldiers standing nearby. “I only heard the voice. Are you certain?”

“Yes. Her face was like nothing I have ever seen, but it was exactly what Savina has described. But then she touched Jeshar, and it changed.”

Pevan paused his work, looking at her fully. “Changed how?”

“Into a normal woman, just like me.” Kaveri shook her head. “If I didn’t know Savina’s dreams, then I wouldn’t believe it, but…”

Pevan held her gaze a moment longer. Concern was heavy in his eyes, and he was likely considering if she had hit her head, but he finally said, “Do you know if the others saw anything like it?”

“I do not know, but I will ask.”

Pevan tied off a makeshift bandage on his leg, giving it an appraising look. “I will do it for you.”

“No. I need to hear their descriptions myself.” Kaveri stood before he could argue against the decision, approaching the other soldiers. She began with the most lucid of them, a sturdy man named Jeshar who had been in their employ for many years. He nursed a few bruises but had resurfaced from unconsciousness swiftly.

“I’m not sure what all happened, my lady,” he confessed when she inquired. “I only saw one of them, but there must have been more. How many did you see, if I may ask?”

“Several,” she replied, “though I was not focused on their number as much as their actions.”
Jeshar pressed a hand to his head. “I am thankful no harm came to you, my lady. Maybe my eyes are beginning to fail me, but the one I saw seemed like…”

“Like what?” Kaveri prompted.

“It’s a foolish thing, but I thought I saw a monster’s face, with eyes like a snake.”

Jeshar shook his head. “Forgive me, my lady, for saying such a thing.”

“We were all caught unaware,” Kaveri said. “I’m merely glad you can speak to me so soon after being injured.”

“How did you come away unharmed?” Jeshar asked. “When I came around, I feared you would be gone.”

“My coinpurse sated them. They ran with it.”

Jeshar scoffed. “Bandit cowards. Lord Vasta will make them regret it.”

“I expect so.” Though it was dark, Kaveri tried to give him a reassuring smile.

“Be assured that I do not fault any of you for this. It was my decision to travel this late.”

Jeshar bowed his head. “That is most kind of you, my lady.”

“Keep your wits about you, and tell me if you begin to feel ill. Vasta will send men to find us soon, if he hasn’t already.”

Kaveri moved on to the four remaining men. They were more unsure than Jeshar, their memories hazier and slow to form. One had hardly seen anything at all before he was knocked out, and another was sure there must have been several attackers. With a little prodding, she was able to draw out another sheepish confession about a monstrous likeness, which were quickly dismissed as a mistake through the dark and the rain.

However, as she made her way back to Pevan, the reality of what had transpired was
cemented fully in her mind. There had been a creature who took the form of a woman, and she was looking for Savina.

“How are they?” Pevan asked as she returned.

“All but Jeshar will likely need to see a healer.” Kaveri lowered herself to the ground next to her, casting another careful glance at the forest around them. “They’ve survived worse.”

“If you wish it, I could send Jeshar ahead to notify Lord Vasta,” Pevan said.

“No. I do not want to risk anyone traveling alone after the attack. If Vasta hasn’t begun searching yet, he will send men soon.” Kaveri twisted the leaf-patterned hem of her kurta. She was certain it would not be the soldiers who would discover them first.

“We will wait for the storm to lessen before attempting further travel, unless you have ample reason to disagree.”

“My mind wishes to disagree, but my body does not.” Pevan’s voice was strained as he probed at the bruised flesh of his torso. “The attacker likely could have overtaken us some time ago if they had a mind to. There are not many safe options in this situation, but this is one of the better ones.”

“That is what I hope.” A gust of wind blew a fresh sheet of rain through the silhouetted trees, and Kaveri tucked her legs close to herself to stave off the chill that was beginning to settle on her skin.

“What did they see?” Pevan murmured.

“Akhu heard a voice. Jeshar thought he saw a monster, but he thinks it sounds foolish.” Kaveri sighed. “It was real.”

“You would keep this between us?”
Kaveri met Pevan’s questioning look. “I would.”

He turned his eyes to the forest, his hand hovering close to the sword at his side.

“I am unsure if that is wise.”

“Why?”

“Because this goes beyond Man-kind, beyond this world. To withhold this is not the same as what we have done before.”

“Nothing concerning Savina is merely Man-kind.”

“But this is not concerning things Seen and Unseen. This is something from across the Unseen, something that should not be here.”

“That is precisely why I would withhold this. I do not know how Vasta would react to something of this nature. It could jeopardize everything.”

Pevan gave her a knowing glance. “If you are certain.”

“I am, for the moment.”

“Then I will do as you wish, my lady.”
Kaveri sighed as her family’s estate loomed into view beyond the other buildings. They had passed into Lunku’s bounds some time ago, but despite being safely in the city and the tight hem of her brother’s soldiers around her, she had not truly relaxed yet, remaining vigilant for more attackers despite the increasing improbability. Pevan had remained dutifully alongside her the entire way, and she took comfort in his closeness.

Vasta had found them in relatively short order as she expected, and she did not bother asking how. That was an argument waiting to happen, and it did not need to begin on a muddy road in the middle of the night. To her relief, he had refrained from asking too many questions about the attack, focusing his efforts on getting them back to the city without further complication. She could not remember the last time she had seen such emotion on his face as when he and his men came crashing through the bushes. Now, as they arrived at the gates of their estate, all traces of feeling were gone, vanished behind the mask of an Ascended General.

The gates creaked as the guardsman opened them inside, and Kaveri wasted no time, slipping through as soon as the gap was big enough. Finding and reassuring her was the first thing she wanted to do, but before she could get any further, a hand clasped her shoulder firmly.

“I need to know everything,” Vasta said, his eyes glittering like jetstones in the bobbing light of the guards’ torches.

“I know.” Kaveri shivered, the warmth of his hand reminding her how cold she had become. “But I need to see Savina and clean myself.”
“Very well. I will send a healer to assess you.” Vasta let her go, and after trading a look with Pevan, she moved into the manicured courtyard that preceded the estate proper. A small gaggle of servants came to greet her, though many had already gone to bed or returned to their homes in the city. She let them usher her inside, enduring their fussing as she silently sought out the one face she had not yet seen.

She found Savina watching her from the estate’s main door, her body silhouetted by the candlelight within and dwarfed by the high arches. The other servants gave her a wide berth, unconsciously aware of the strangeness that followed the girl. Outwardly, she looked like any other girl beginning to sprout towards womanhood, almost fourteen winters old. She was not of complete Pavelekan heritage, her skin a shade lighter and her hair containing a reddish tinge found among most people of the eastern mountains. However, her eyes were possessed of a depth unnatural to anyone, much less a girl her age. A shadow lived inside her, that which she called a Monster, and Kaveri did not fear the damuta half so much as she feared the toll it exacted on the girl.

Savina’s face dropped with dismay when Kaveri approached, and she hurried forward. “My lady, are you hurt?”

Kaveri did her best to smile, though it was weak in her disheveled state. “Only a few cuts and bruises. I will be fine.”

Savina dithered as the other servants swarmed, but Kaveri made sure she did not fall behind. “Come with me, Savina.”

She obediently hurried to her lady’s side, falling into step alongside her. The group of servants escorted Kaveri through the arched hallways, their footsteps echoing in a pattering rhythm to accompany the tapping of the rain against the high, patterned
windows. Once they arrived in her bedchambers, they began relieving her of her soiled garments, sending for water to scrub the dirt away. A full bath would be needed to completely rid her of the grime, but she had neither the time nor the energy now.

Once she was cleaned and dressed, a healer entered, clearly having been roused from her bed and hurried to the estate, based on her rumpled appearance. Nevertheless, she took care of Kaveri’s wounds in a timely fashion, applying salve to her bruises and cleaning the small cuts.

When the healer was done, Kaveri sent her away, as well as the other servants. However, Savina remained, having watched the proceedings wordlessly from the other side of the room and only deigning to approach as the others filed out.

“You should be abed as well,” Kaveri said, tightening the soft robes about her shoulders to ward off the lingering chill of her time in the rain.

“The beads are in your hair, still,” Savina replied.

“I can remove them myself.”

“But I…I wish to.” Savina’s voice wavered with uncertainty, an unspoken request to stay.

“Very well,” Kaveri replied, seating herself at her little vanity.

Savina hurried forward, positioning herself behind the older woman. She gathered Kaveri’s long, dark tresses together and began methodically removing the beads, taking care not to pull too hard. It was more troublesome than usual, the grit and dirt clinging to her hair clumping the strands together and hindering the beads’ removal.

Kaveri watched Savina in the mirror, her brow scrunched with concentration. Despite the slight tugging, the normalcy was soothing after such a wild night, perhaps for
them both. One by one, the beads fell into the little wooden bowl on the vanity with a distinct clink. Some of them were dirtied from the grime, and they would have to be washed before she wore them again.

As Savina worked, she finally said, “The soldiers looked hurt.”

“Some more than others, but they will all heal quickly, I’m sure.”

Savina nodded. Another bead dropped into the bowl.

“You looked for me, didn’t you?” Kaveri finally asked. “That’s how we were found along the road.”

Savina breathed in, then out. “Yes.”

Kaveri frowned to herself. “At my brother’s behest?”

“Yes.”

Kaveri’s frown deepened. The darkness in Savina’s eyes seemed especially pronounced tonight.

“Was I wrong to?” Savina asked, catching her expression in the reflection.

“No, I am thankful for your help…but I know how much it takes out of you.”

Savina said nothing, continuing her work.

Kaveri waited until the last bead fell into the bowl and Savina stepped back. She turned in her chair, looking the girl in the eye. “What did you see?”

Savina blinked. “I saw you, and your injured guards, walking along the road.”

“No. You had already gotten away.” Savina twisted her fingers together, her brow pinching. Something remained unsaid.

“Was there something else?”
Savina breathed in, this time holding the air in her lungs. When she spoke, it came out in a rush of air. “The Monster was angry.”

“Why?” Kaveri asked, alarmed. The Monster watched and often moved as Savina bid it, but it rarely displayed any feeling of its own.

“I don’t know for certain,” she said quietly. “It saw you were hurt and…and it did not like that. I thought I might lose control.”

Kaveri hesitated. She had never been the cause of the Monster’s feelings before. Its nature had always been uncertain, and now it only became murkier.

“I restrained it quickly, but I did not tell Lord Vasta,” Savina continued hesitantly. “Do you think I should have?”

“He was preoccupied with my absence, so I do not think you did wrong,” Kaveri replied. “I will see to it that he is informed.”

Savina sighed. “Thank you, my lady.”

“Of course.” Even after such a trying night, Kaveri could not help the genuine smile that played across her lips. Savina’s companionship, though occasionally fraught with strangeness, was something she treasured. “I will need nothing more from you tonight. You may go to bed, if you wish.”

Savina replied automatically, “Are you certain?”

“I am. Once I speak to Vasta, I will be retiring as well.”

Savina nodded once, drifting towards the door. “Then sleep well, my lady.”

“I hope the same for you.” Kaveri turned away, but watched Savina leave out of the corner of her eye. Though she looked as unassuming as could be, a monster followed her every step of the way.
Author’s Biographical Sketch

Rachel Barton, a native of Virginia, grew up on a steady diet of books, movies, and video games that fostered a love of storytelling, particularly fantasy. She began writing stories when she was eight and has not stopped since, completing two self-published works in her childhood. She is set to graduate from Johns Hopkins in 2024 with a Master of Arts in Fiction. She lives in North Carolina with her family, where she works as an audio-visual technician.