

**THE
SPIRITSTONE
SAGA**

TARIQ

and the
DROWNING
CITY



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ORCHARD

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TO MY WIFE AND DAUGHTERS



CHAPTER 1

TARIQ

Everyone froze when the bell started ringing. It clanged from the great bell tower, its heavy toll echoing across the city. Its citizens stared at each other, bewildered. Then the ground shook, tiles fell from the roofs and the trees swayed. The canals through the city flooded, washing the narrow streets and wide piazzas with greenish, befouled water.

People ran for the gates, knocking over market stalls, tripping and trampling over those slower,

weaker than themselves. They fought each other as they tried to cross the bridges spanning the canals – some wide, most not – pushing, shoving, not caring who was thrown over into the now broiling waters, not looking back to people begging for help as they sank, still clinging to whatever meagre belongings mattered to them most.

Tariq watched it all from the top of the bell tower. He let go of the bell rope and faced the sea.

The wave rose higher and higher. A few ships hadn't made it to harbour before the immense sea gates had closed. The wave smashed them to splinters and dragged the remains down into the deep.

But one boat battled on.

It was silver and small, and rode the waves with stubborn determination, galloping over the huge crests. The sea raged against it, and yet the tiny silver craft fought on, the last hope of an entire city.

Then the tidal wave struck the walls, the bell tower crumbled as if made of sand. Tariq fell, fell into the swirling, roaring, fathomless depths . . .

*

‘Tariq? What’s wrong? Tariq?’

Tariq gasped, flailing as if he was still tumbling. He stared around frantically, bewildered at what was real and what was a dream, until he saw Nani squatting beside him.

She was real. She always was.

She put her hand against his forehead. ‘You’re hot. You got a fever?’

‘I’m fine. Really. It was just . . . nothing,’ he lied, quickly throwing off his blanket and getting up. The rest of the clan were already packed, with rafts loaded and canoes being pushed off the bank into the water. ‘We have to pack. We can’t keep everyone waiting.’

Nani wanted to ask more, but instead turned towards the dawn sun. ‘We’ve got a long way ahead of us, but by tonight we’ll be in our new home. Our home in Ethrial.’ She lumbered to the canoe with her bedding, but suddenly doubled over as she started coughing.

‘Just need a sip of water. *Clean* water.’

Tariq knew what she meant. Once, they’d merely dip their hands in the river and scoop out a

mouthful, watching the droplets sparkle through their fingers. Not now. Not since the business owners of Ethrial had lined the rivers with factories and diverted the streams that the clan had lived off for countless generations. Not since the building of the Four Rivers Dam.

If you drank from the river now, you got sick. The fish had found new streams to swim in. The animals that had once thrived on these familiar banks had perished. The river stank of rot.

Tariq fished out their water flask, which he'd filled from a stream coming down off the mountains. He shook it, barely half left. 'Just a sip.'

'You first,' insisted Nani. 'You have a whole day paddling ahead of you. Sweaty work.'

'I'm not thirsty,' said Tariq.

She knew he was lying, but Nani didn't have the breath to argue so took the bottle and drank. Sip by sip, the coughing stopped. *Good*. But when she breathed, a wheezing hiss passed through her thin throat. *Bad*.

How much further would they have to journey? They had to be near Ethrial. Smoke smeared the

west and he could taste the dust of vulcanite ash in the back of his throat.

After a few more sips, Nani stopped wheezing and pushed the flask away. ‘We need to save it. You have to pay for water in Ethrial.’

‘Pay? For something that falls from the sky? They’ve just flooded our homeland to make their great dam. They have more water now than . . . than . . .’

The tidal wave. The wave that drowned a city.

Nani nudged him. ‘What?’

‘Nothing.’ He pushed the canoe into the water. Some were already paddling out to the middle of the river. ‘We don’t want to get left behind.’

‘We’re all going to the same place,’ she replied sourly.

‘Ethrial can’t be that bad.’

‘Wait till you get there and trapped between its walls. Air so filthy it turns your tongue black.’

‘The huge sea wall and the bell tower . . .’ he said, remembering the city of his dream.

Nani flinched. ‘What did you say?’

‘It was just a stupid dream. It doesn’t mean anything.’

‘I’ll decide what it means. What did you see? A city?’

He nodded reluctantly.

‘What colour was the tower?’ Despite her age, Nani swung herself smoothly into the canoe, sighing as she settled in.

Tariq climbed in and picked up his paddle. ‘Old stone, yellow and all cracked. Green tiles on the roof.’

Nani sucked her few remaining teeth as she pondered. ‘You *know* it’s not a dream. You had a vision. Like before. What happened?’

He told her. About the colossal wave that overwhelmed the horizon and dragged a city under the sea. Of the tiny silver ship.

‘You’ve told no one else, have you?’ she whispered.

‘No. I know how people feel about people . . . like us. Seers.’

Seers. Wizards. Magicians. The Gifted. Shamans. There were so many terms for people like him.

Seers had advised tribal leaders and kings once. They'd been celebrated – but now? Despised and feared.

Nani sighed. 'You'll need to keep your powers hidden, especially now they will grow as you approach your thirteenth spring. When is it?'

'Six months from now.' But this was the first time she'd mentioned other powers. 'What do you mean, my powers will grow?'

'Each seer is different. The visions are part of your powers awakening, but as time goes on you'll gain strength in one area or another. Some learn to speak with beasts, others have the ability to read minds, then there are those who can control the elements. A rare few can do all three. All because of their connection to—'

'The three spiritstones. I know the stories, Nani.'

Nani nodded. 'The spiritstones once gave the whole world harmony, and the seers drew their greatest strength from them.'

'Until the stones were stolen,' said Tariq. Everyone knew they'd been taken by Imix, the most powerful seer of the age.

‘Yes, and without the stones seers cannot accomplish the legendary magic they were once known for. But that doesn’t change anything. Many believed that much power shouldn’t belong to one person. That’s why people are afraid of us. Something your parents never understood. You must learn from their mistakes. What you saw in your vision—’

‘Dream. It was just a bad dream.’

‘Enough, Tariq!’ Nani smacked her fist into the side of the canoe. ‘Your mother’s gift got her and your father banished, and they were lucky that was the worst of it. There were those in the clan who wanted them to be punished far, far more severely! And places like Ethrial? They’ll have you rot away the rest of your life in some dank hole underground, never to see daylight again. Used wisely, your powers can avert disaster, guide folk along a better path. If you’re foolish, then all you’ll unleash is chaos. Like your mother.’

He hated it when she talked about his parents like that. Tariq remembered Nani pulling him away from the gathering, not even giving him the

chance to say goodbye. Seven years ago now. He'd not heard anything from them since.

The flotilla slowed down as the river traffic increased. The river widened as more streams joined it, bringing other boats, small ships and rafts laden with fruit and crops from remote farms. Wagons and pedlars plodded along the muddy road on either bank. Seagulls circled overhead and there was something new in the breeze.

Smoke.

Factories dotted the riverbanks, belching great clouds of smoke from their towering, tottering chimneys. Filth-encrusted sewers poured the factory waste straight in where the workers washed, cooked and gathered water to drink. Flies buzzed merrily, feeding on the foulness.

Some factories were mere sheds, small workshops with glowing furnaces, where smiths beat iron upon their anvils and artisans assembled vulcanite heart-engines into the empty shells of metal horses, oxen, even toy dogs and cats. Others factories were gigantic, the heat from their furnaces prickling Tariq's skin even from this distance.

Nani began coughing again. Tariq gave her his flask and said nothing when she emptied it. ‘This is why they flooded our lands. This is civilisation. *Progress.*’

A man, his raft piled with apples, drifted in front of their canoe. Tariq pictured those apples tipped over, bobbing in the water. The vision was so clear. The apples bobbing, the man floundering in the water as his raft drifted away from him, carried in the wake of another boat. Tariq felt almost dizzy, as if he was standing on top of a steep slope, not knowing if he would fall or not.

Tariq smiled at the apple seller, gesturing towards the bank. ‘I’d stay on the side of the river. You’re taking up too much room. Might get knocked over.’

The man just scowled and ignored him. He pushed on with his punt, forcing the other small craft to paddle to the sides, into the stagnant pools between the sewers.

‘Clear the way!’

A boat, unlike any Tariq had ever seen, came tearing along the water. As sleek as a knife, with a

silver prow, its hull was engraved with swirling designs. It had a single funnel belching acrid smoke, and ploughed arrogantly through everyone else. Upon it stood three elves in decorative silver armour.

The boat buffeted against the apple raft, the wash off its hull making the raft wobble and tipping the tall pile of apples straight into the river. The man tried to keep balance but it was no good – in he splashed. The smaller children of the clan took no time and dived in, laughing as they gathered up the bright red orbs even as the apple seller yelled.

I tried to warn him.

Tariq's dizziness passed. He'd stepped away from the edge, for now.

Another vision. Not as intense as the tidal wave, not as overwhelming, but he'd seen the future, and had a chance to change it. If only the apple seller had listened.

It was scary, thinking he could get these glimpses from nowhere, at any time. He'd avoided talking to Nani about them, but maybe he should. Could he control them? Choose when to have them?

No wonder seers had been so important, and so feared.

‘The Silver Guard,’ cursed the apple seller as he hung on to his raft. ‘They think they’re better than everyone.’

‘Warriors always do,’ said Nani. ‘Grab us an apple, Tariq. A big, soft, juicy one.’

The apple seller glared at them. ‘Apples ain’t free.’

‘Yeah, they are.’ Nani chortled. ‘They literally grow on trees.’

‘Nothing grows on these trees,’ Tariq said. The trees lining the river were dead, their trunks and bare branches coated in thick ash. ‘Is that progress too?’

The crowds grew as more traders joined the ever-widening river. A barge – longer than three canoes – chugged past, belching smoke from its exhausts as its paddles churned the oily water.

It was afternoon when the clan headman, Malah, stopped. They all gathered around him, and saw.

They’d reached the end. Their river clan had reached Ethrial.

As Tariq took in the view, he noticed how one tower rose higher than all the rest, a bell tower with a green roof. He held his breath, captivated by wonder.

Ethrial was the city of Tariq's dreams. The city he'd seen destroyed.