



CHAPTER

CHARRED BONES

The bones of the dead are a burden too great,” Abraham murmured as he tramped through the dark cave. Carrying only two handfuls on this trip, his load was light, though only in a physical sense. The precious bones in his cupped palms meant more to him than the finest gold in all of Second Eden. He followed the glow of a lantern several paces ahead and continued his lament. “A great burden, indeed. Especially the bones of my son.”

The lantern stopped. “Did you say something, Father Abraham?” a female voice called.

“Yes, Angel, but more to myself. When I get tired, I tend to mumble out loud.” He caught up with the young lady, at least young in his view. Nearly every time he saw her, the image of her little body cradled in a birthing plant came to mind, and when he blessed her arrival as she lay in her mother’s arms, he knew she would be someone special. Angel’s one hundred thirty or so years in Second Eden had proved him right, but his own thousands of years in this world certainly skewed his perspective.



She was a lovely young woman, yet in his eyes, barely old enough to take an Adam, though she was already a widow with two children. Still, if ever he were to take an Eve of his own, Angel possessed every quality he could imagine wanting in a woman—courage, kindness, humility, and, above all, complete integrity and faithfulness. Her time of widowhood, according to their traditions, would expire in the near future, perhaps this week. She would have to select a mate very soon. Someone would be a blessed man, indeed.

He shook his head sadly. He would never be able to receive such a blessing. Even though he appeared to be the same age as the other adults, he was a founding father to all in this realm—the Prophet, many called him, or simply Father Abraham, certainly not a candidate to be anyone's mate. As Enoch had told him long ago, "Until the day fire consumes your body, you will not be able to take an Eve into your heart." He resisted the urge to heave a loud sigh. With their tradition of burning the slain warriors, it seemed clear that only death would break the millennia-long span of companionless leadership.

Angel raised the lantern, allowing the glow to illumine her smooth skin and braided blond hair. The shimmer of perspiration on her narrow face and angular jaw proved her hours of effort, though it seemed a garland of virtue, a testimony to her work ethic.

A sparkle floated near her eyes, then disappeared—her companion, shifting to the opposite side of her head to avoid the sudden light. In her other hand, she carried a long curved bone, perhaps a rib, blackened on both ends. The cave's fire had scorched most of Timothy's skeleton, but not enough to keep his loved ones from collecting every last piece.

Angel's eyes gleamed in the flickering lantern light. "Darkness will soon be upon us, Father. Shadows have likely already covered Candle and Listener, and the dragons will be anxious."



“Especially Albatross. He has not forgotten our last episode here.” Abraham pushed onward, buoyed by Angel’s urgent tone. When they reached the cave entrance, Angel blew out the lantern’s wick, leaving only the failing light of early evening to guide their steps.

As soon as they passed through the yawning mouth, the distant sound of rushing water greeted their ears, yet it seemed to cast a hush across the small forest glade of grass and ferns that spread out like a skirt around the cave entrance. Oddly shaped bones littered the area closest to the cave—the flat bones of the shadow people who had faced their execution within the blazing light this tunnel had always, until recently, emitted.

Abraham closed his cloak and tied his belt. The breeze, colder than usual, gnawed at his clean-shaven face. With the season of death only days away, it would soon be time to grow his beard. It wasn’t like the old days before the altered tribes formed—no seasons, no death, no pain, and no need for the prophesied warrior chief who would come to restore what was lost.

He breathed in the smoke-tinged air and allowed his eyes to adjust. Arching trees cast shadows over the garden of ferns that stretched to the edge of the deeper forest—the Forest of Erebus, so named for the terrifying blackness it concealed when night’s shadows blanketed its soil. About five paces away, Candle—a handsome, twelve-year-old boy dressed in a sweatshirt and woolen trousers—knelt by a square animal hide, counting the many bones covering its leathery surface.

“One hundred and ninety four!” Candle turned toward Abraham, his brilliant smile framed by a dark brown face. His dreadlocks swayed as he added, “Do you have the rest?”

Abraham poured out several bones onto a clear corner of the skin. “A few. I think some are from his left hand.” As he spread them out with his finger, he touched a sharp-edged fragment that



looked like most of a thumb. "This one is broken," he said, picking it up again.

Angel looked over his shoulder. "Do we have the rest of it?"

"Not that I can see." He slid the fragment into a small pocket under his belt. "I will search for the rest when we have more time."

Angel brushed cave dirt from the knees of her riding pantaloons and sat on the long-leafed ferns that bordered their collection blanket. She laid her bone next to a loosely reconstructed rib cage. "I found another rib."

Candle positioned it to line up with the others. "Only one is missing now."

Listener, a little girl with nut-brown braids, plopped down next to Angel. Sitting cross-legged, she spread her corduroy jumper over her knees and laid a spyglass on her lap. With creamy white skin, rounded cheeks, and a button nose, she barely resembled her brother at all, except for her bright, inquisitive eyes. Cocking her head, she studied the collection. "You even found the ear bones!"

"Leave it to Listener to think of the ear bones," Candle said. "She's going to be a doctor, just like you, Mother."

Angel set her finger on top of an egg-shaped crystal that floated in front of Listener's eyes. Slightly smaller than a hen's egg, it sparkled, as if tickled by her touch, then zipped around and nestled behind the girl's ear. "The art of medicine is a noble pursuit," Angel said, "but we will allow her companion to guide her."

Abraham looked up at the darkening sky, now purplish in the glow of the rising Pegasus moon. "Prepare the dragons. The shadow people are no longer shy about roaming in this part of their valley, especially with only one moon tonight and its eclipse at hand."

"They're ready," Listener said. "Grackle behaved, but Albatross wouldn't let me buckle his saddle strap until I gave him a carrot." She aimed her spyglass at Pegasus. "May we watch the eclipse while we're flying home?"



“Without a doubt.” Abraham pulled Angel to her feet and reached for one corner of the skin. “We can reconstruct the skeleton in the morning.”

Angel and Candle helped him gather the corners to the center, making the skin into a bulky leather bag. As Abraham tied a leather strap around the opening and held it against his chest, his heart thumped. His own son, born as a dragon, perished twice as a human, now a bag of bones.

Angel brushed a tear from his cheek with a gentle finger. As a tear traced her own cheek, her lips trembled. “I loved him, too, Father.”

He returned the favor, using his thumb to remove her tear. Her eyes, sad and sincere, spoke volumes—never hesitant to speak the truth, unashamed of her feelings, her heart as pure as the waters of the highlands. Angel was truly a symbol for all the people of Second Eden. Untarnished by the lies and deceptions of the original Eden, they knew nothing but truth and would be dismayed by any words spoken that harbored a shadow of falsehood.

Abraham firmed his chin. His people would never follow in Flint’s footsteps. Not if he could help it.

Listener let out a thin gasp. “I see her!”

“Who?” Angel asked.

“The white-haired girl! The same one I saw before! She’s wearing a white dress and a blue cloak. She’s holding some kind of light in a dark place, and she’s walking toward me.”

“Could it be the tunnel?” Abraham gave Candle the bag of bones and strode toward the cave. “If she is the Oracle of Fire, she could well bring us news of the warrior chief.”

“What of the shadow people?” Angel asked, following close behind. “The danger grows with every passing second.”

He stood next to the face of the cliff, just to the side of the cave entrance. “Should we miss this opportunity to speak to the Oracle?”

“If I were the only one at risk,” Angel said, “then no, but my children would be easy prey.”



Abraham looked at Candle and Listener. They stood in the nearby ferns, now in deeper shadows as the arching trees shielded them from the bare glow of evening light, Candle with the bag drooping at his side and Listener still gazing through the spyglass.

“Shall I build a fire?” Angel asked. “The lantern is nearly out of fuel. The bone collecting took longer than we expected.”

“Not yet.” Abraham nodded at Listener. “What do you see now, little one?”

She kept her gaze locked through the spyglass. “The Oracle and a small girl are riding on a white horse, and a young man is leading them. Could he be betrothed to one of them?”

Abraham shook his head. “They come from a world with different customs. If there is a horse—”

“I see fire!” Listener cried.

Suddenly, flames erupted from the cave, a gushing stream that shot out and up into the sky, billowing into a trio of fiery blossoms that painted the trees in an orange hue. Then, as quickly as it had ignited, the river of flames vanished, yet not a hint of residual smoke hung in the air.

A glow brushed the sides of the inner cave wall with dancing ribbons of white light, brightening with every moment. The sound of clapping hooves drew nearer, then echoing voices made their way to the entrance.

“Acacia, I see something,” a male voice said. “Maybe it’s an exit.”

“Or an entrance to something else,” a deeper voice replied.

A female spoke up. “Dikaios, please stop for a moment. I’ll lead with a brighter light.”

“The Oracle,” Abraham said as he leaned into the cave’s opening. “I recognize her voice.”

The horse hooves fell silent. Seconds later, the glow strengthened, steadily growing brighter as the hoof clops echoed once again.



A petite female form took shape within the light. Abraham backed away, whispering, "She is here."

Listener, now carrying the spyglass at her hip, sidled up to Angel and took her hand, wide-eyed and silent. Candle drew near as well, lugging the bag of bones through the ferns.

The light in the cave grew so bright, Abraham had to shield his eyes. The girl emerged, a brilliant white fire blazing in her palm. With hair that matched her flames, the girl stared at Abraham with dazzling blue eyes. A cloak of royal blue dressed her shoulders, its cape flowing behind her in the soft breeze.

With a quick puff, she blew out the flames. As a teenaged boy emerged from the cave, followed by a horse ridden by a little girl, the Oracle dipped into a low curtsy, her head bowed. "I am pleased to meet you, Father Abraham, founder of this realm." She straightened and looked him in the eye again. "I am Acacia, the Oracle of Fire who spoke to you in this cave."

Abraham fell to his knees and folded his hands. Angel did the same at his side, while Candle and Listener knelt next to her. Abraham bowed his head as he spoke. "I am honored to meet you, most excellent Oracle. Your presence here is a joy beyond words."

Laughing gently, Acacia motioned for him to rise. "You honor me too well. I am little more than a slave girl, born in the darkest of realms, yet lifted by grace to the highest of kingdoms." With a blue sparkle in her eye, she added, "But I'd like to stop talking like an uppity princess and just be friends, okay?"

Abraham straightened, giving a hearty laugh of his own. "Plain speech is welcome here." Angel, Candle, and Listener rose as well, each one staring at the visitors.

Acacia turned toward her fellow travelers. "This young man is Elam, son of Shem, grandson of Noah. Our valiant horse is Dikaios, sired by your moon's namesake, Pegasus himself. And last, but certainly not least ..." She reached for Dikaios's rider. The girl



slid off, and Acacia guided her to the ground. "This is Paili, my sister from the lower realms."

Paili, a girl of about eight or nine and draped in an oversized, hooded cloak, grinned, spreading her thin, pale cheeks as she dipped into a shallow curtsy. "I'm pleased to meet you."

Angel gave Abraham's cloak sleeve a slight tug but said nothing. He nodded at her, trying to signal that all was well. With the Oracle of Fire present, there was no need to be anxious about the coming darkness. He turned to Elam. "Young man, are you the warrior chief?"

Elam stepped forward, his dark brown hair whipping around in the stiffening breeze. Wearing a tunic with elbow-length sleeves, he rubbed his upper arms and bounced on his toes. "That's what I've been told."

Abraham took off his cloak, revealing his long-sleeved white tunic, and laid it over Elam's shoulders. "I am accustomed to our weather, so please allow me to do you this service."

Giving Abraham a thankful nod, Elam pushed his arms through the sleeves. "I hear you have been expecting me."

"We have been awaiting your arrival for a very long time." Abraham gazed at the young man's square jaw, firm chin, and deeply set eyes. He definitely looked like his father, Shem. "Do you know of the prophecy our people have sung together during our prayer vigils?"

"I do," Acacia said, "but I don't think Elam has heard it."

Elam shook his head. "No, but I'd like to."

"Very well. I will sing a portion of a longer psalm that relates to you." Abraham smiled at Angel, then looked up at the dark purple sky and crooned.

The tunnel leads a warrior chief,
A youth with mystery in his eyes,
With flames he walks to burn the chaff.
A child he leads to silence lies.



And once the hearts of gold he trains
 Are drawn to lights of holy depth,
 Then wielding swords they journey where
 Corruption's harvest draws its breath.

When his final note faded, Abraham flapped his arms against his sides. "I hope I avoided damage to your eardrums."

"It was great," Elam said, "but what's the danger? Enoch told me I was supposed to come and help, but he wasn't clear about what I'm to do."

"The danger?" Abraham scanned the dark ground. "We are in the Valley of Shadows, the home of the shadow people, a race that makes up one of the altered tribes. They are likely already nearby, awaiting the darkness. But with your presence, perhaps they will not be bold enough to attack. Since you have no companion, they could well assume that you are the prophesied one."

Elam looked up at the sky. "It would be better to discuss the prophecy in a place of safety. If nightfall gives these shadow people courage, we should be on our way."

"Agreed. But getting back to our village presents a challenge. We have two dragons with two seats on each. We could manage to squeeze Paili in with Angel, and perhaps Acacia could ride with me, but you would likely make the load unbearable, and transporting the horse on a dragon is out of the question."

Dikaios blew through flapping lips. "I will carry Elam and follow the flight of the dragons. I am swift enough to keep pace."

"A talking horse!" Listener ran up and petted his snowy mane. "Do all horses talk where you come from, Dikaios?"

Angel stepped forward and gently pulled Listener away. "He is a warrior's horse, not a pet."

Dikaios bobbed his head. "True enough, good lady, but I am always pleased to let the little children come to me."



Elam guided Listener's hand back to Dikaios. "I see you found Enoch's spyglass," he said, touching its metal casing. "I once had it, but it fell from a bridge into a deep chasm."

"I found it in a strange bag." She ran her fingers through the horse's mane. "The bag was hanging from a branch high in a tree."

Elam looked up at the sky. "Very interesting."

Abraham patted Dikaios's flank. "I have no doubt of your swiftness, good horse, but you are lacking your sire's wings. The only easy route into or out of this land is by air. Even the shadow people have to attach themselves to large birds in order to cross the surrounding mountains, and they cannot escape by way of the river. We call it Twin Falls River, because it enters this valley by a steep waterfall and exits in a similar fashion, and, with the exception of eclipse nights, we guard that exit. So far they have been able to attack our village only in small raiding parties. If they could move en masse at night, we would not be able to fend them off."

"I don't think we have a choice." Elam brushed the shadowed ferns with his shoe. "We'd better get moving."

A dark hand shot up from the ground and grabbed Listener's ankle. She shrieked and tried to pull free, but it held fast. Abraham dove headfirst onto the ground, grabbed a human-shaped shadow, and wrestled it away from her. He then leaped to his feet, holding the shadow by its throat with its arms and legs flailing underneath. "Foul fiend!" Abraham growled. "I ought to—"

Another shriek sounded, this time from Paili. A dark form dragged her feetfirst toward the forest. She grasped for ferns and dug her fingernails across the ground, but to no avail.

Acacia pointed at a tree in the kidnapper's path and shouted, "Ignite!" Instantly a raging flame shot up the trunk. The shadow squealed. It released Paili and writhed in the ferns like a shriveling slug.

Abraham leaped ahead and kicked the shadow against the flaming tree, then, with an angry grunt, he threw the other one



into the blaze. Purple sparks flew. Popping sounds and dying squeals filled the air. Like roaches skittering across a floor, dozens of shadows rippled along the ferns and scurried into the forest as light from the fire spread across the glade.

Acacia grabbed a hefty stick from the ground and lifted it high. “Flames! Come to my firebrand!” The end of the stick ignited with a bright orange flame. She passed it to Abraham and snatched up another stick that ignited the moment she touched it. “Lead us to safety!”

Waving his arm toward the sound of rushing water, Abraham shouted, “Follow me to the river!” He wrapped Paili in her cloak, scooped her up, and sprinted along a narrow path through the forest, swinging the burning stick back and forth as if cutting the underbrush with a machete. Seconds later, he burst into the open where a wide strip of beach sand bordered a swiftly flowing river. Chunks of ice floated in the churning current, knocking into each other as they tumbled along.

Two dragons, one white and one purple, stood at the edge of the water in the relative safety of the moon’s light. Abraham dropped the flaming stick and whistled a “mount up” command at Albatross. As soon as the white dragon lowered his head, Abraham climbed his neck and set Paili in the second of two chairs attached to the dragon’s back. His hands flying, he strapped her in with a leather belt. He then took a breath and placed a hand on her cold cheek. “Peace, little child. All is well.”

He leaped down to the soft sand, and, as Angel led the others out of the forest, another firebrand in her grip, Abraham barked out commands. “Angel, you will fly Albatross, and we will try to fit Acacia in with you. Candle and Listener will take Grackle.”

While Candle and Listener clambered up the purple dragon’s neck, Angel hustled up the white dragon’s. When she reached the top, she stood with one foot on her seat and one on the dragon’s neck, her hands on her hips. “And you, Father?”



“I will guide the warrior chief out of this valley.”

“But what of Adam’s Marsh and the truce zone?”

“We will try to ascend the trail to the northern highlands.”

“But the avalanche! You will have to—”

“No time to argue!” He pointed at the edge of the forest. A sea of shadows emerged, crawling rapidly toward them. He slapped Grackle’s flank. “Fly!”

With a mighty leap and beat of his wings, Grackle launched into the air. Abraham reached for Acacia. “Come. You will take Angel’s seat. She is able to sit higher on the dragon’s neck.”

Acacia shook her head. “I will stay with you. Without a light, you will never survive.”

Abraham stared at her determined face. Who was he to argue with the Oracle? “Is there anything else we need to know before we send them off?”

“Yes.” Acacia looked up at Grackle as he circled above. “Just before I left the Bridgelands, Enoch told me that the bones must be spread over your birthing garden immediately, and I will burn them at the appropriate time.”

Angel dropped heavily to her dragon riding chair. “Burn the bones?”

“Enoch’s word is never to be doubted,” Abraham said. He let out a shrill whistle and slapped Albatross on the flank. “We need a shield, my good dragon. You know what to do.”

Albatross beat his wings and rose into the air. As soon as he climbed to the tops of the trees, Angel guided him into a sharp turn, and he swooped toward the ground. A stream of ice gushed from his mouth and splashed against the beach, coating the strip between the forest and the river in a sheet of white.

His wings pulling madly against the air, Albatross swung upward and headed for the sky. As the two dragons shrank in the distance, their silhouettes flew across Pegasus, their dark wings flapping gently as they each carried two riders to safety.



“The ice will keep the shadows at bay,” Abraham said, “but not for long.” Heaving a sigh, he turned to Acacia. “I must say, your talent will be very useful in our battles.”

“The shadow people are merely pawns.” Acacia lifted her hand and whispered, “Give me light.” A small fire erupted in her palm, a yellow blossom with flaming tongues for petals. “Your real enemy won’t be frightened by my talents.”

Abraham looked back at the forest. The shadows began to slither across the ice, so many, they looked like a slick of burnt cooking oil sliding their way. “Come,” he said. “We will have to ford the river at a place I know. The shadow people on the other side likely are unaware of our presence. It will be a cold and dangerous crossing, but I am not willing to face ten thousand shadows, even with the Oracle’s talents in our arsenal.”

