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BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT

# Apocrypha

*by Matt Burns*

*Ash still drifted down on the Spires of Arak. It would for days to come. Weeks, perhaps.*

*Reshad was fine with that, he decided. Smoke and ash he could bear—genocide he could not.*

*Charred forest, filled with broken trees and the blackened corpses of his fellow Outcast arakkoa, surrounded him. Above it all rose the craggy spires of Skyreach, home of the high arakkoa who had sought to eradicate Reshad's kind. The natural stone towers clawed at the belly of the sky like talons. Atop the highest rested a giant gold crystal, the high arakkoan weapon that had rained down death and destruction on the Outcasts and their forest home.*

*If Reshad closed his eyes, he could experience it all again: the beam of white-hot fire harnessing the power of the sun, lancing down from the crystal and setting his world aflame. He could hear the shrieks of wood splintering, the cries of the Outcasts burning alive.*

*But all of that was over now, he reminded himself.*

*The order that had ruled the high arakkoa with unyielding fanaticism—the Adherents of Rukhmar—was in shambles. Their weapon was destroyed. From the ashes they left behind, something new was emerging. Slowly but surely, it was emerging.*

*Reshad saw it right before his eyes. The Order of the Awakened, a new society of arakkoa, striving to abandon the hatred and rivalries that had ruled their people for generations. In the burned-out forest, former enemies walked as friends. On one side, the wingless Outcasts, twisted by the Curse of Sethe. On the other side, their cousins, the elegant and powerful winged high arakkoa, who had once viewed all things that dwelled below their spires as inferior.*

*About time, Reshad thought. These old bones grow tired...*

*A familiar squawk drew Reshad's attention. A blur of red feathers circled overhead. His kaliri, Percy, swooped low, clutching a satchel overflowing with scrolls between his black talons.*

*"Ah, you found them!" Reshad clapped his gnarled hands. He had sent Percy out to check on one of his caches of scrolls. The crafty scholar had hidden many throughout the forests over the years. "Bring them here—"*

*Percy flung the satchel beside Reshad, sending the scrolls tumbling across the sooty ground.*

*"Raaak!" the elder Outcast screeched. "Careful, Percival! You know these are fragile!"*

*The kaliri landed on the jagged stump of a tree and shrieked a retort.*

*"Yes, yes..." Reshad sighed, digging into a cloth pouch on his gold-trimmed violet robes. His hand emerged, trailing a mix of seeds and nuts. "I haven't forgotten your reward..."*

*He scattered it at his feet and wiped his palms on his robes. Percy hopped from the tree trunk and tore through the seeds in a frenzy of beak and talon.*

*"Show some dignity. There are strangers about," Reshad chided as he began looking through the fallen scrolls. He picked through them lovingly, as one would handle kaliri eggs. They were old histories depicting arakkoan society before it had been divided between those with wings and the Outcasts. Apocrypha, lore suppressed by the Adherents of Rukhmar in an attempt to manipulate and brainwash their kind.*

*Reshad carefully placed the scrolls in the satchel, examining each of them for signs of damage from the fires. He stopped at one about Terokk, the ancient king who had ruled over the arakkoa, titled Before the Fall. Reshad weighed it in his hand.*

*Such a small thing, he thought. Just ink and parchment. Yet so powerful it could rival even that false sun the high arakkoa had wielded.*

*"Reshad!" An Outcast hobbled forward, his ash-streaked feathers the color of a stormy sky. A high arakkoa, wearing a dark blue leather tunic over teal plumage, marched by his side.*

*"We have not been able to find Iskar," the Outcast continued. "Scouts have gone in search of him, but it will be some time before they return."*

*"So be it," Reshad said, a coldness pressing down on him. Shadow-Sage Iskar was the leader of the Outcasts. His absence was disconcerting. He had seemed aloof and angry in recent weeks,*

*and Reshad wondered about his intentions. Iskar had always been somewhat obsessed with power, a byproduct of his personal history.*

But what is he after? Is this new society of arakkoa not enough for him?

*"Should we be concerned?" the high arakkoa asked.*

*"That remains to be seen," Reshad replied. "Sit. Both of you. Rest."*

*The high arakkoa nodded as he perched atop a fallen tree. The Outcast took a seat on a small tree stump nearby, wiping soot from his face.*

*Reshad unrolled the scroll in his hand. The dry parchment was much like him, weathered and frail but full of secrets. He had made it his life's work to collect this knowledge, to teach it to a new generation of his kind. Arakkoa who would follow wisdom rather than the prejudice and mindless zealotry of the past.*

*Now, he figured, was as good a time as any to start.*

*"What do you know of Iskar?" he asked, turning to the high arakkoa.*

*"Only that he leads the Outcasts."*

*"And what do you know of the ruler of the Adherents, High Sage Viryx?" Reshad asked the Outcast.*

*The dead high sage, thankfully, he thought. It was by her will that the high arakkoa had unleashed their weapon, hoping to exterminate the Outcasts.*

*"She did all of this... Hrrrrk!" The Outcast eyed the shattered woods, voice raw and sharp.*

*"Yes," Reshad continued. "On the surface, they seem very different, as some might say the two of you do. But there was a time when they were the same..."*

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Adherent Viryx tilted the wood scepter over the nest of ravager larvae. The gold crystal atop the trinket pulsed with warmth and energy, glowing like a sun in miniature. Once again, Viryx was mesmerized by the power contained in such a tiny thing.

She had crafted the device herself, using artifacts from a lost and highly advanced culture of arakkoa: the Apexis. Signs of its presence littered the land around the spires of Skyreach. Most of Viryx's kind considered Apexis artifacts to be nothing more than novelties. She was one of the few who believed there was something to be gained from studying the Apexis.

*One day, she thought, they will see things my way.*

The crystal grew brighter until a beam of gold fire exploded from the stone, lancing over the larvae. The tiny grubs squirmed, their skin melting and bubbling under the heat.

"Put them out of their misery already," Adherent Iskar called out.

The purple-feathered arakkoa paced nearby, adorned in the gold bangles and dark blue hood and raiment that marked him as a sun-sage. He was a strange arakkoa in many ways. Hunched and small for his age. Not the brightest or the most promising of the sages, but despite all of that, he was Viryx's friend. Her clutch brother. She found Iskar's peculiar look and quirks endearing.

"You're not getting sentimental, are you?" Viryx asked.

"Of course not, but we will be late," Iskar hissed. "The elders commanded us to return by nightfall."

"They also told us to clear out the pests. *Thoroughly.*"

"*But we will be late.* That's how we got into this mess in the first place."

Viryx bristled in annoyance but also felt a pang of regret. It wasn't Iskar's fault they were out here, she reminded herself. *She* had been late to the dawn ritual yesterday. The punishment for her transgression did not end with her. Years ago, the elders had paired Viryx and Iskar together, as they did with all young Adherents. Doing so meant the fledgling

members of the order could watch over each other and ensure that everyone followed the decrees of their sun god, Rukhmar. If one accomplished a great feat, both would be showered with praise.

Likewise, if one transgressed, both would be punished.

And so here they were, in the dirt beneath Skyreach, exterminating troublesome ravagers. The mindless insects often encroached on arakkoan territory, building their stinking nests among the rocks of the spires.

Purging ravagers was a menial task, especially for sun-sages like Viryx and Iskar. They had trained their whole lives to wield Rukhmar's fiery power as their own, to call down her light as a weapon against their enemies.

Still, some part of Viryx enjoyed the task. She was out of Skyreach, out from under the watchful eyes of the elders. *She was free.* And she wanted to savor that feeling for as long as possible.

"They will understand," Viryx said. She looked out across the grassy hills that rose and fell like waves around the rock spires. Charred ravager corpses lay on their backs, long, spindly legs reaching toward the sky. "We did good work. They won't punish us for that."

"They won't punish *you*..." Iskar said.



Viryx opened her beak to offer a retort when something agile scrambled from a tangle of thornbushes nearby. Another ravager. The large, mottled gray insect skittered across the ground, disappearing into a dense forest just ahead.

"Leave it..." Iskar pleaded.

But Viryx was already in pursuit. "We have our orders, clutch brother. *Thoroughly.*"

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*We will get the whip for this,* Iskar thought as he stumbled after Viryx. *Correction: I will.*

That was how it always was. The elders always punished him more than his clutch sister, no matter who was at fault. He knew the reasons. Viryx was brilliant. Everything—from their studies in wielding Rukhmar's powers to understanding the sciences—came so easy to her. Even her looks, her pale red eyes and pink feathers, were considered beautiful among their society. She was a model Adherent on her way to great and glorious things.

But Viryx did have her faults. She was disobedient, spontaneous, and restless. She reveled in breaking the rules whenever possible, probably because there was never a real cost. Because of her gifts, Iskar believed, the elders lessened the severity of her punishments.

Try as Iskar did to please his elders, he often made some foolish mistake. He wasn't perfect like Viryx. He should have envied and hated her for being born gifted, but he didn't. When others scorned him, she always stood by his side. She always protected him. Iskar wished only that one day she would understand the consequences of her little adventures and acts of rebellion.

It wouldn't happen today.

Iskar shivered from the cold that closed in around him. The thick forest canopy blotted out the last light of the setting sun. He stepped carefully over massive roots, his talons digging into wet mud.

Strange wood-and-stone talismans swayed from ropes attached to the branches overhead. They were crude effigies of arakkoa. Sticks of incense burned in the closed talons of the figures, sending ribbons of smoke through the forest. The bitter odor made Iskar's eyes water.

They had gone too far. This was the land of the *others*: those arakkoa who had fallen from Rukhmar's grace. The cursed, wingless creatures who dwelled in the dirt beneath the spires.

*The Outcasts.*

Iskar said a silent prayer to Rukhmar. He pulled his dreamcatcher from beneath his thick raiment. He clutched the circular wooden talisman, leather cords crisscrossing at its center, tightly in both hands.

Iskar held the dreamcatcher in front of him, just as the elders had taught him. It would act as a net to capture the curse that afflicted the Outcasts and protect him from its withering effects.

In his head, Iskar was already planning how he would hang the dreamcatcher outside his roost when he returned to Skyreach. By midday tomorrow, Rukhmar's light would cleanse the befouled trinket of whatever vestiges of the curse it contained.

"We are forbidden to come here without the guidance of the elders," Iskar said as he caught up to Viryx. "Please just give up."

"Quiet. Look." Viryx pointed forward.

Iskar gazed across the forest. All he saw were trees and shadows. "I do not see the ravager."

"Forget the ravager. I have found something more interesting. Ahead."

Then Iskar saw it. A form. *An arakkoa.*

It was skulking among the gnarled trees. Brilliant red feathers peeked out from beneath the figure's ratty cloak. Iskar judged that it was a male from its gait and size. The mysterious arakkoa also walked upright, meaning he was not an Outcast. He was one of Iskar's kind.

"He should not be out here alone with the ceremony starting soon," Viryx said.

"Yes... the one *we* are supposed to attend," Iskar replied.

Today marked the start of Rukhmar's Grace, a time of year when the sun was at its highest and the days were long and bright. All Adherents were required to attend the ceremony and perform rites, a fact that Viryx seemed to shrug off so easily, despite Iskar's warnings.

"Aren't you the least bit curious what he is doing?" Viryx said.

"Not particularly. The longer we linger here, the worse our punishment will be."

Viryx said nothing. She darted forward and then took wing, flying up into the tree canopy.

*Stubborn*, Iskar thought as he followed. *Foolish*.

They tracked the strange arakkoa deeper into the woods, alighting on the branches of one tree after another. This was a land that Iskar knew the Outcasts called Veil Akraz. Crude huts, draped in rune-etched violet cloth, dotted the dim forest. The only illumination—if one could even call it that—glowed from purple orbs spaced haphazardly throughout the forest.

"Please..." Iskar gripped Viryx's shoulder as he landed beside her on another thick branch.

"He seems to be stopping."

The mysterious arakkoa disappeared into a large cluster of Outcast huts. A village of sorts. Cold dread pressed in around Iskar, stoking his fear. He took short, sharp breaths, hoping he would not inhale the curse that filled the air of this place.

"Think about what you're doing." He kept his voice low. "The curse..."

"We are not here to perform shadowy deeds. Rukhmar will protect us. Just... wait here for me."

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A euphoric mix of fear and excitement raced through Viryx as she moved quietly behind the Outcast hovels. She had meant what she said. She was not afraid to be among

these *things*. Even in this forsaken place, Rukhmar's light, her warmth, would protect her from the cursed.

The cloaked arakkoa stopped outside a large hut built of rotting wooden poles. Small scrolls dangled from the entrance by strands of frayed rope. He looked left and right and then stepped inside. Viryx landed on a bare, crooked branch that stretched over the dwelling.

Wide cuts of violet and dark blue cloth had been stitched together and draped over the hut, forming a roof. Through a space between two strips of ratty fabric, Viryx could see the arakkoa.

She cocked her head, listening.

"Shadows gather..." the disguised arakkoa said.

A cloud of smoke appeared from thin air, swirling and coiling until it transformed into a flesh-and-blood Outcast.

*Intriguing.* Viryx had read tales of the dark powers used by the Outcasts.

The one who took shape was male with dull red feathers. His fingers were the color of ash, twisted and worn like the skin of something dead. A small red kaliri, barely hatched from the look of it, clung to a purple-and-goldwork shawl that adorned his shoulders.



"... when the raven swallows the day," the Outcast rasped. "Might I recommend a better disguise?"

"Time is of the essence, Reshad. Where is the scroll?"

"Just a moment, just a moment..." The one called Reshad lowered his voice.

Viryx edged along the bough to hear what was being said. A little farther. A little—

The branch cracked under her weight. The disguised arakkoa jerked his head up.

And for a brief, unsettling moment, Viryx met his eyes.

Then he was gone, storming from the hut, throwing off his cloak, and flying up into the canopy.

Viryx cursed. She abandoned all subtlety and leapt through the air, soaring over the village. Thick tangles of branches scraped at her back and wings as she gave chase.

The dense woods offered little in the way of visibility. She hopped from bough to bough, swatting at leaves, eyes nearly closed to protect them from debris. Viryx charged through a clump of branches and, quite by accident, slammed into the back of the other arakkoa. The pair fell to the ground, tumbling across roots and sliding in the mud.

The male was quick. He was back on his feet, one of his hands raised high. Wisps of fire curled like wind serpents around his talons as he began to call on Rukhmar's power.

*By Rukhmar*, Viryx thought. She recognized him. *That is Ikiss. An Adherent!*

"They sent you after me?" The male snapped his beak, raising the crest feathers on his head to make his form more imposing.

"I..." Viryx fumbled for words. "Who?"

The other arakkoa narrowed his eyes. "Why are you here?"

"I could ask you the same question." Viryx slipped her hand toward the small bone dagger strapped to her belt. Her eyes never left the other arakkoa. She weighed her options. Was he an enemy of Skyreach? Or had he been sent here on official business by members of the Adherents? The latter was a possibility, however remote. He was, after all, an Adherent.

From afar, she heard the sound of voices, the beating of wings. Branches rustled and cracked.

"No..." Ikiss whirled, gazing up into the canopy. "They know. *They know.*"

He rushed forward, grasping Viryx by her sun-sage raiment before she could draw her dagger. "Terokk. The ancient king. It is lies... all lies. What he was. What he did. What the curse is."

Four bladetalons, elite warriors of the Adherents, crashed through the canopy. They carried a wingblade in each hand, a crescent-shaped weapon embossed with gold filigree.

"It is all lies! All—*hrraaaawk!*" Ikiss's words ended in a shrill cry as one of the warriors cracked him over the head with the blunt-edged side of a wingblade. Ikiss fell to his knees, gasping.

A second bladetalon slid a black leather blinding hood over Ikiss's head, covering his eyes, while another shoved a rune-etched metal ring over the captive's beak, forcing it closed. The last of the bladetalons tied Ikiss's arms together with a length of thick crimson rope.

"Viryx!" Iskar landed beside her. "They found me just as you entered the village. It appears they have been following him for some time."

"And you nearly ruined our hunt." One of the bladetalons approached Viryx, towering over her. "You are not supposed to be here."

Viryx had to back away to avoid getting cut by the jagged edges of the copper-hued armor that flared out from the bladetalon's chest and rose over his shoulders. "We were

hunting ravagers..." she said, her voice meek. For the first time, a sliver of fear raced through her.

"I don't see any ravagers." The warrior made a show of looking around. He turned his gaze toward the other Bladetalons and pointed at Viryx. "Take these two back with us. They have been among the cursed."

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The crack of Rukhmar's Tail thundered in Iskar's head. The whip clawed down his back like talons of fire, searing feathers and flesh. White-hot pain exploded behind his eyes.

He cried out in agony, despite telling himself that he would stay silent and endure the punishment with dignity. He had made and broken the same promise yesterday. And the day before.

"I am finished now." A soft but stern voice echoed in the dark.

The blinding pain ebbed. Iskar's vision slowly returned, taking in the scant light that filled the room. A single solar orb, blazing like a miniature glass sun, hung from the top of the windowless chamber. It was one of many out-of-the-way places in Skyreach's Grand Spire, where the academies, ritual chambers, and disciplining rooms of the Adherents of Rukhmar were located.

Iskar knew the latter well.

Two bladetalons turned Iskar around to face his tormentor: High Sage Zelkyr. The ruler of Skyreach, an arakkoa whose word could change law, could grant life or death, glared down at the sun-sage. Iskar trembled in the presence of this arakkoa, the living voice of Rukhmar.

Zelkyr wore ornate orange robes over his yellow-tipped teal feathers. The cloth glittered in the solar orb's light, a subtle enchantment woven into the fabric that reminded Iskar of the sky at sunrise. In his right hand, the high sage clutched Rukhmar's Tail. Intricate gold filigree spiraled around the scepter. From the end dangled three long tendrils of sizzling fire.

"You have disappointed me, Adherent Iskar," Zelkyr said.

*It was not my fault! Iskar wanted to scream. I tried... I tried to stop her...*

But he could not argue with the voice of Rukhmar.

"It will not happen again," Iskar replied. "I promise you that."

"How often have I heard you say that?" Zelkyr sighed.

"I will... try harder." Iskar bowed until his beak touched the floor. "By Rukhmar's grace, I will try."

"We shall see," the high sage said. "I have a task for you. An important one."

"Anything."

"You will watch Viryx. Observe her activities—where she goes, whom she speaks with, what she does. Report to me directly should you notice anything unusual."

"Unusual?"

"She was among the Outcasts. A sun-priest performed purification rites on her, and so we are in no danger from the curse. But it may have some lingering effects on her mind."

Something about this troubled Iskar. Had that heretic—Ikiss—done anything to Viryx? Iskar was not sure what the fool had been up to. But it was not his place to ask. If the high sage had deemed that information important to Iskar, he would have already told him about it.

"Y-yes..." Iskar nodded. "I am yours, High Sage. I am yours to command by Rukhmar's will."



Later, Iskar wandered out onto one of the many open terraces of the Grand Spire. He winced as his feet touched the stone platform, each step sending a jolt of pain up his back.

No one paid him any mind as he hobbled forward. A handful of Adherents milled about on other parts of the terrace, almost all of them discussing news of Ikiss and his capture.

Iskar ignored the discussions and made his way to a giant brass sundial that towered at the center of the platform. Notches around the edge of the device denoted different times of the day. Whenever the shadow of the sundial fell across one of these notches, all of the Adherents would stop to whisper their thanks to Rukhmar for sharing her light with the arakkoa.

Iskar repeated the invocations to himself, making up for the ones he had missed while receiving his punishment in the disciplining room. When he was done with his prayers, he found a spot at the edge of the terrace and leaned against the gold-plated railing.

A strong breeze whipped over the platform, tousling his hood and sending the embroidered banners that hung from the terrace above into a frenzy.

A crimson kaliri landed with a squawk on the railing. Iskar stroked the bird's feathers and breathed deep, trying to relax, trying to make sense of the last few days.

Below, a sea of green, red, and yellow forest stretched in all directions, broken only by the rising stone talons of Skyreach. Arakkoa soared through the air above and below where Iskar stood. Among them were pairs of young Adherents.

Iskar wondered whether any of them had been given the same task he had. To watch over your clutch brother or sister—that was a normal part of life as an Adherent. It was the purpose of placing the followers of Rukhmar in pairs. They were trained to watch for symptoms of the curse: lethargy, tardiness, questioning the orders of elders. Those were the first warning signs that the affliction was present, ideas ingrained in all arakkoa from the moment they hatched.

But to actively spy on your clutch sister's every action and report it... that was something else.

Was he betraying Viryx by doing this? Or was he protecting her?

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*Lies... all lies...*

That voice had dogged Viryx's thoughts over the last three days. She had spent that time isolated in her roost—that was the punishment handed down to her by the high sage. Each day, a sun-priest had come to perform purification rites to purge any lingering remnants of the curse that she carried.

Through it all, Viryx's thoughts had remained on Ikiss. She had no sympathy for the heretic. According to the sun-priest, Ikiss had been conspiring with the Outcasts against the Adherents. He would be exiled in a few days. His wings would be cut and he would be cast out. He deserved that and more.

But what had driven someone like Ikiss, someone so gifted and respected among her order, to throw away his life? And what was that scroll he was after? How could something like that be dangerous?

The mystery gnawed at her, haunted her. She could not rest until she discovered an answer.

So, on the day she was released from isolation, she found herself drawn to the deepest corners of the Great Archive of Skyreach, surrounded by old and dusty tomes.

Viryx rubbed her eyes, leaning back from the stack of books on the table of the reading alcove she'd claimed. It was one of many carved into the stone walls of the archive. Outside, hundreds of teardrop-shaped nests, filled with tomes and scrolls, hung from the walls, spiraling up the length of the chamber. Kaliri soared to and fro among the nests, delivering books to visitors and replacing those that had been left in the reading alcoves.

She watched the highly trained birds for a while, thinking about everything she had read. There was something here, she knew. Something not quite right.

Viryx leaned forward, again reading through a passage about Terokk she'd found in *On the Histories of Ancient Kings*. It told the story of the legendary arakkoan king Terokk, who had once ruled over Skyreach. The tome recounted his many crimes and depraved acts. It painted a picture of Skyreach under his rule as a time of suffering and tyranny. Only when the brave Adherents of Rukhmar rose up to challenge Terokk did this tragic era end. They overthrew the king, casting him out of Skyreach and liberating all arakkoa from oppression. Rukhmar then turned her back on Terokk. He became an Outcast, shriveled and maddened by the curse.

This was not new to Viryx. She had heard the story countless times. What was strange was that every historical account she read about this event was worded the same. *On the Histories, Terokk's Tyranny, Rukhmar's Deliverance*—these were documents supposedly written decades, even centuries, apart.

Yet their chapters on Terokk were identical.

Viryx imagined Ikiss sitting in the archive, reading over the same scrolls and books she was. What had led him here in the first place? More importantly, where had he gone afterward?

That the histories were identical was odd, but that did not tell her anything new. She needed to find answers elsewhere. The Great Archive was public, open to all arakkoa. But other repositories of lore existed, caches of rare tomes accessible only to the Adherents of Rukhmar.

Viryx tapped her talons against the table, thinking. Plumbing the archives of the Adherents would be far more difficult than coming here. The sun-scribes who watched over those hallowed places would question her sudden interest in Terokk. And that could raise suspicion among the elders.

*That would be a challenge*, she thought, a sliver of excitement racing through her.

Viryx stuffed the scrolls and tomes in a small basket hanging outside the lip of the reading alcove. The kaliri would come later to put the writings back in their correct places.

As she leapt from the alcove and began flying up toward the entrance of the Great Archive, her thoughts turned to Iskar. She'd been so obsessed with this mystery that she hadn't sought him out.

The sun-priest had told her of Iskar's fate. Three days of isolation and lashes from Rukhmar's Tail. It was her fault, and she knew that her punishment was nothing in comparison. She promised herself that she would not involve her clutch brother in this new investigation.

Viryx would seek him out later, she decided. Now, she had questions to answer.

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From the shadows of his reading alcove, Iskar watched Viryx fly away. He had been following her ever since her release from isolation. The high sage had not forbidden him from speaking with her. Iskar simply chose not to. He did not trust himself to keep his task a secret.

As he watched her go, a tiny voice in his head urged him to tell her about his orders from the high sage. But still another voice, a much louder one, commanded him to obey.

He did.

When he was certain Viryx had left the Great Archive, Iskar emerged from the alcove, soaring down in a circle through the library. He drifted to the alcove at the lowest level, the one Viryx had spent so many hours in.

Nearly all of the other reading spaces were open. So why had Viryx chosen one at the bottom? Why had she sought one so secluded and distant?

A kaliri reached the alcove just before Iskar. It began poking its beak through the basket hanging outside. He shooed the bird away and then unloaded the scrolls and tomes. Iskar read each title as he set them side by side atop the table.

*Strange.* They were all histories about the time the Adherents had taken power in Skyreach. The problem was that Viryx *did not* like history, unless it had something to do



with the lost Apexis culture. These types of books were Iskar's specialty. Scholarly pursuit was one of the few things he had ever excelled at in his life.

A low, uneasy warble rumbled in Iskar's throat. He took the largest tome, *On the Histories of Ancient Kings*, in his hand. He held up the closed book, examining it from all sides. He could tell from the way the spine was bent what page Viryx had spent the most time reading. It was a trick an older Adherent had once taught him, a way the elders verified whether their underlings were studying the chapters and sections that they had been assigned during their schooling.

Iskar flipped to the section Viryx had been reading. A single name stared up at him.

Terokk.

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For the next two days, Iskar became Viryx's shadow. He followed her path, observing her every activity. She never returned to the Great Archive. She did, however, spend many hours alone in her roost. Afraid that he would appear suspicious, Iskar did not attempt to spy on her during those times. But he had a good idea what she was doing. From what little he knew of her research, Viryx had been looking into the old king Terokk and the story of his exile.

That alone was not cause for alarm. From the time arakkoa were hatchlings, they learned about Terokk. But the manner of her research, the elusiveness and secretive nature, was odd. Viryx seemed to avoid contact with other arakkoa whenever possible, emerging only late at night.

Were those not signs of the curse? Iskar did not want to believe so. Rukhmar adored Viryx. She was blessed. Wouldn't the sun god protect one so gifted as Viryx from the curse?

The question weighed heavy on Iskar as he soared to the highest levels of the Grand Spire for his meeting with the high sage. He had lain awake the night before, wondering what he would say to Zelkyr.

What *could* he say, other than the truth?

Iskar located the high sage on the spire's highest terrace, a platform inlaid with colored glass arrayed in the pattern of a giant plume of feathers. Above, ornate banners and glimmering sun stones hung from long wooden shafts embedded in the rocky face of the spire.

The decorations were beautiful, but Iskar found no joy in seeing them. His attention was focused on one thing: a cage of iron, shrouded in black cloth, dangling from a wood pole directly over the terrace.

Ikiss was within. He had been there ever since his capture. And there he would remain, alone and in the dark, until the day of his exile. An elder sun-sage had enchanted the black material that covered the cage to expel and ward away heat and light. That was part of his punishment: to be so high, to be so near Rukhmar's embrace, but to experience none of it.

Iskar shuddered at the thought of being cut off from the sun like that. He had heard that arakkoa would go mad from being locked in the cage. They would pluck out their own feathers.

For a moment, he imagined Viryx in that cage, put there because she had shown signs of the curse. Iskar's heart ached with a terrible sense of loneliness.

"Adherent Iskar," High Sage Zelkyr said.

Iskar forced his eyes away from the cage. He kneeled, bowing his head.

"Rise." The high sage beckoned him to come closer. "What have you learned?"

"I have been watching her," Iskar replied.

"And?"

"And she has changed."

The high sage did not show any sign of surprise. He remained stoic as always. "In what way?"

"She is, well..." Iskar hesitated. "She is reformed. More dutiful and obedient than ever."

The lie just spilled out, as if someone had taken control of his mind and body, someone he did not know. But even as he spoke, even as Iskar reeled in shock and apprehension, he did not stop. "She has spent her time reciting prayers to Rukhmar. I have seen it with my own eyes."

"You are certain?" Zelkyr asked, fixing his gaze on Iskar.

At any other time, that gaze would have withered Iskar and sent him begging for forgiveness.

But something unfamiliar, something exhilarating, surfaced from beneath the self-loathing and shame that usually ruled his thoughts. For the first time in his life, he felt *strong*. The high sage, the most powerful arakkoa in the world, believed *him*. Iskar, who had been the object of scorn among his peers, so often passed over by his elders, had power over the voice of Rukhmar.

"I am certain." Iskar's words were even and unshaking.

The high sage turned away, waving him off as one would a kaliri. "Continue your watch."

Once he was away from the terrace, Iskar's strength vanished. A wave of panic seized him.

*What have I done? Rukhmar forgive me...*

He landed on a small platform lower on the Grand Spire to catch his breath. His stomach twisted in knots. He feared for a moment that he would hack up his morning meal.

*It was for a righteous purpose, he told himself.*

He couldn't take the lie back. But he had won a second chance for Viryx. If he could turn her away from whatever foolhardy path she'd set out on, if he could save her, then it would all be worth it.

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The soft song of wind chimes drifted across Skyreach. Viryx heard it from within her roost. She knew what it meant: the heretic would be exiled tomorrow at the break of dawn.

Viryx was surprised that it was already happening. She had lost track of the days, and she had little to show for it. Her research had led her nowhere of substance. She had

rifled through the Adherent archives to the best of her ability but had found only references to lost texts about Terokk. Writings deemed apocryphal by the Adherents. Whether they existed somewhere in Skyreach, Viryx did not know.

She paced her small roost, wondering what to do next. The place was in disarray. Bedsheets dangled out from the lip of the cocoon-shaped nest that hung from the ceiling. Open tomes and scraps of parchment littered the floor. Her reading table was cluttered with broken Apexis artifacts, tools, quills, and bowls of half-eaten, rotting food.

But the fact was she simply didn't care. Reaching a dead end like this infuriated her. It only made the mystery's hold over her stronger. Nothing else—*nothing else*—mattered.

"Viryx!" a voice called from outside the door to her roost.

Through the cloudy glass windows on either side of the entrance, she could see Iskar perched in the alcove outside. Viryx let him in, feeling guilty about her days of avoiding contact with her clutch brother.

"Iskar." She considered a few different excuses, harmless lies to explain why she'd been keeping to herself for so long. "I'm sorry I haven't been out to see you. The sun-priest—"

"*Kreeeeek*. No lies!" Iskar cut her off. He barged into the roost. "I know what you've been doing."



Viryx was silent for a moment. She wasn't sure what to say. Finally, she asked, "How?"

"How? Because the high sage ordered me to find out. To watch you. He thinks—"

"Watch me?" Venom laced Viryx's words. "And you didn't tell me?"

"Will you listen?" Iskar moved close, lowering his voice. "He was afraid you were cursed."

"Cursed?" Viryx chirped with laughter. "You can't be serious."

"I didn't believe him. That's why I kept your research about Terokk a secret. I..." Iskar turned away from Viryx. He let out a long, tired sigh. "I lied to the high sage."

*That* surprised Viryx. She had never imagined Iskar would have the courage to do something so bold.

"It is not a good thing," Iskar said, as if reading her thoughts. "Just tell me why you were researching Terokk."

Viryx considered this. She decided that Iskar deserved the truth. Viryx explained what had happened with Ikiss in Veil Akraz, his meeting with the Outcast and the cryptic

words he had spoken before his capture. Then she recounted her findings about the similarities among every account of Terokk's fall.

"Is it not strange they are all the same?" Viryx asked when she was done.

"Perhaps?" Iskar circled the reading table. He sniffed at the bowls of old food and reeled, shuddering. "But if the event was clear, the histories would depict it accurately."

"There is a difference between accuracy and..." Viryx trailed off, unsure of how to say what she thought.

"And what?" Iskar prodded.

"And fabrication."

Iskar shook his head. "It's evidence of good recordkeeping. What exactly are you looking for, anyway?"

"I don't know," Viryx said. "Perhaps that scroll Ikiss was after... Perhaps the answers are there."

Iskar's talons raked through the feathers on his head. "Why would you believe the heretic in the first place? He wanted to manipulate you, cast doubt into your thoughts." He

spread his arms, gesturing at her squalid chambers. "You've become obsessed. *Crazed*. Clear your mind and prepare yourself for the exile tomorrow."

"Hyeeek... I don't need you to watch over me." Viryx momentarily let her annoyance get the best of her, and the words came out much harsher than she intended. But she found herself growing tired of this talk. She was wasting time—time she could be spending on her research.

Iskar's eyes widened in disbelief. "It would be nice, for once, if you thought about the consequences of what you do. If you thought about how they affect others."

Anger rose up in Viryx, and her voice was a sharp screech. "I never asked you to lie for me."

"I..." Iskar stared at her, and she could see the hurt in his eyes.

Without a word, he turned and stormed from the room.

"Iskar—" Viryx called after him, but he was already gone.

She went to the window and watched as he flew away through a dozen red kaliri circling in the air. Viryx knew she should be thankful. *She was*. He had taken a great risk for her.

But she couldn't stop. Not when there was still a chance to find answers, however slim.

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Before dawn, almost every member of the Adherents of Rukhmar gathered in the ceremonial chamber of the Grand Spire to witness the glorious exile. As was tradition, the elder Adherents took their positions along the edge of the chamber's stone-and-crystal platform, where the ritual would take place. They stood in perfectly ordered rows, staring forward at a pair of bladetalons who held the heretic by chains attached to his wrists. Two massive stone statues of arakkoa, holding crescent-shaped scepters adorned with solar orbs, looked down on the condemned.

The rest of the Adherents perched along ledges above the platform. They organized themselves by vocation. Iskar took his place among a cluster of sun-sages on the eastern side of the ritual floor. To their right were the sun-scribes. To the left were the martial bladetalons.

Stragglers trickled in, hoping no one would notice. Someone would. Someone always did. They would feel the fire touch of Rukhmar's Tail when the exile ritual was over.

Iskar searched the crowd for any sign of Viryx but saw none. He was still angry at her, still furious about her selfishness... but also concerned. Was she so foolish as to miss

the exile? He didn't think her obsession was that extreme. He was beginning to regret not checking in on her.

A hush fell over the Adherents as High Sage Zelkyr arrived. He was adorned in brilliant ceremonial garb, silver bands of sharp-edged armor that curved around his shoulders. Atop his head, he wore a crown of jagged metal shaped like elongated talons.

Zelkyr marched forward, the Talon of Rukhmar clutched in his right hand. Gold thread wrapped around the shaft of the long staff, which was also decorated with gems the color of a clear blue sky. Topping the weapon was a curved stone blade. It was a holy relic from ancient times, said to have been made from Rukhmar's own quills and talons.

The high sage stopped before the heretic. Ikiss, still wearing his blinding hood, looked much thinner than the last time Iskar had seen him. Patches of his feathers were missing, as if he had torn them out. The once-brilliant red of his plumage had faded to a muddy crimson.

"Behold!" The high sage raised his arms.

Outside, the sun was starting to rise. Light cascaded through a yellow-tinted crystal dome built into the top of the Grand Spire. Gold rays shimmered across the polished brass and copper surfaces in the chamber. Before long, everything in view seemed to glow with Rukhmar's light.

"Dawn has come," the high sage continued. "Rukhmar has returned for another day, just as she has always promised she would. Her light will grace the skies and shield us from the dark. All that she asks in return, all that she has ever asked, is for us to embrace her will. And yet, here stands one who has turned his back on her. He was a friend to some of you. A teacher. A member of our own order. His name is Ikiss, and he bears the curse of the Outcasts."

A low warble rose from the other Adherents. Iskar looked through the crowd again for Viryx.

*Where are you?*

The high sage raised his voice to silence the Adherents. "Let this be a reminder that we must remain vigilant, for the curse can sink its talons into even the greatest among us. Ikiss, who once held so much promise, has conspired with the Outcasts to tear Rukhmar's gifts from us and leave in his wake only shadow and despair. I wonder, then... what need does he have of wings if he has shut his eyes to Rukhmar's light? What need does he have of wings if he would rather walk the mud among his ground-dwelling allies than soar her glorious skies?"

The high sage approached the heretic, signaling to the nearby bladetalons. They stepped back, pulling tight on the chains connected to Ikiss, forcing his hands out to the sides, palms up. Ikiss's crimson wings stretched out beneath his arms, his feathers almost touching the ground.

"He has no need of his wings, for he is no longer a child of our most precious and benevolent god." High Sage Zelkyr raised the Talon of Rukhmar. He positioned the weapon's curved blade near the heretic's armpit. Slowly, Zelkyr slid the Talon of Rukhmar along the underside of Ikiss's arm, stopping at the inner edge of the wing.

Then with one practiced stroke, he swiped with the blade across the length of Ikiss's arm. The Talon ripped through feathers, skin, and bone alike. Blood spurted across the floor, pooling in its intricate crystal and stone designs. The heretic's wing fell limp to the ground.

Despite the metal ring binding the heretic's beak shut, Iskar could hear muffled screams.

The high sage's eyes drifted over the Adherents, and for a moment, they settled on Iskar.

"This is the fate that awaits all who turn away from Rukhmar," Zelkyr said.

Then he began his work on the heretic's remaining wing.

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Veil Akraz.

Viryx crept through the forest surrounding the village. She wore a thick gray robe, something she had brought from Skyreach. A necessary precaution, she had convinced herself. She had not been followed—not to her knowledge, at least. But she was not going to take any chances.

That was why she had chosen to visit Veil Akraz during the exiling ceremony. Right now, the high sage was severing Ikiss's wings. Soon, the bladetalons would carry him from Skyreach and cast him to the ground, where he could then live among the Outcasts. The Adherents would remain in the Grand Spire, celebrating Rukhmar's greatness well into the night.

Viryx kept her head low as she continued through the woods. She moved from shadow to shadow, avoiding groups of Outcasts that milled about. She saw more than she had the first time she'd come to the village. Back then, her focus had been on following Ikiss. She had ignored much of her surroundings.

Now she took in everything. A stench like mildew and rot choked the air in the village. The Outcasts hobbled about, bodies disfigured by the curse. Everything about them was perverse in some way. Obscene. Viryx felt ill from watching them go about their lives.

She found the hut she'd tracked Ikiss to, the one with the small scrolls dangling from the entrance. She watched for any sign of Outcasts. When she saw none, she moved inside the dilapidated dwelling.



No one was there. Woven baskets shaped like teardrops, filled with moldy tomes and scrolls, swayed from the wooden rafters.

"Hello?" Viryx said.

Nothing.

What was it she'd heard Ikiss say? *Shadows draw near... Shadows abound...*

"Shadows gather..." she spoke softly into the empty hut.

Thick smoke coiled in the air in front of her, coalescing into the silhouette of an Outcast. The shadowy form clarified, became tangible. Before her eyes, Reshad appeared, the tiny red kaliri perched on his shoulder.

"... when the raven swallows the day," Reshad said. "And who might you be?"

"One of my kind came here to retrieve a scroll. I am here in his stead." Viryx stepped close to the misbegotten arakkoa, pulling back the hood of her cloak and raising the feathers on her head to intimidate him. "Where is it?"

"Ah, you were the one following him," Reshad replied. The casual, almost mocking tone in his voice grated on Viryx. "What makes you think I would give the scroll to you?"

In the space of a single breath, Viryx drew the bone dagger from her belt and thrust it against the Outcast's neck. "I can be quite persuasive. And I—"

She stopped speaking, feeling something sharp digging into her chest. Viryx looked down. Reshad had a small black dagger, hooked like a kaliri talon, pressed against her.

"I may be a scholar, but that doesn't mean I'm a fool," Reshad said.

"Perhaps not." Viryx slowly reached out toward the kaliri chick with her free hand. She grasped it. "But I must ask you to lower your blade and give me what I want."

Viryx squeezed the kaliri. The bird chirped in pain, thrashing helplessly in her palm.

"Enough! Enough!" Reshad withdrew his dagger. "I was merely verifying your intentions. If I thought you an enemy, I would not have shown myself. You spoke the correct words."

Viryx released the kaliri. She pulled her dagger away but kept it in hand. "What do the words mean?"

"They are part of a lullaby, from a time before... the divide." Reshad spread his arms, gazing at his surroundings. "Before the curse, when the arakkoa were something more. When they were wiser." He dug into his tattered robes and withdrew a roll of old

parchment. A leather sheath, dyed purple, covered the paper. "With this, perhaps that time can come again."

Viryx took the scroll. She turned it in her hand, examining the faded runes scrawled across the sheath.

"I doubt that you were truly a friend of the other arakkoa who came here. But the fact that you are here, that you would risk exile, tells me enough. You are a truth seeker. In these times, it is so rare to find one from up in the spires," Reshad said. "That scroll can change everything. Bring us together again."

*"Bring us together again." Was this fool really thinking—*

A chorus of sharp screeches from outside broke Viryx's line of thought. She left the hut, tucking the scroll into her belt. Outcasts were fleeing in all directions. Overhead, something large scrambled through the crimson- and green-leaved canopy.

Something with wings.

Viryx cursed, shedding her disguise so she could stretch her wings. She flew over the huts of Veil Akraz. She landed without grace on a tree just beyond the village, scattering a dozen kaliri that had been preening themselves among the branches.

Before Viryx could take wing again, a hand clawed at her arm. She whirled, knocking her attacker away while at the same time summoning a ball of Rukhmar's fire in her palm.

Then she saw him. *Iskar*.

Her clutch brother stared at her, arms splayed wide, grasping tree branches to steady himself. "You should not be here!" His attention shifted to the scroll tucked into her belt. "Is that what you risked so much for? What is it, then?"

"I'm... I'm not sure yet." As Viryx spoke, the rush of excitement she had been feeling ebbed. Fear and disgust took its place. She realized how foolish she sounded—how foolish she'd been.

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Only when they had returned to Skyreach and reached the safety of Viryx's roost did they dare open the scroll. In the light of a solar orb, they read over the old parchment. It was a compilation of many ancient documents. The largest portion dealt with Terokk and his daughter, Lithic.

It was a markedly different version of events from the one Iskar and his kind had learned growing up, the one depicted in the archives and in other official writings. For starters, none of the histories he had seen had ever mentioned that Terokk had a daughter. In this version, he had not been a tyrant but a glorious king. A kindhearted and brave ruler.

The Adherents of Rukhmar had held a great deal of respect during that era, but they had lusted for more power and prestige.

And only one thing had stood in their way: Terokk.

"The Adherents overthrew the king to achieve their goals. They apprehended him, Lithic, and the king's closest allies. They dropped them from the sky into the pools of Sethekk Hollow..." Viryx read aloud.

*Sethekk Hollow?* Iskar knew of that place. It was forbidden. A swampy mire east of Skyreach that, according to the Adherents, was steeped in shadow. Legends said that the malevolent god Sethe, the enemy of Rukhmar, had died there in ages past, tainting the land with his blood.

"Without her wings to keep her aloft, Lithic did not survive. The fall shattered her bones. Terokk, however, did survive," Viryx continued. "Upon touching the cursed waters of the hollow, he contracted the... the Curse of Sethe. The waters—that is the source of the affliction."

"That is the source..." The strength seeped away from Iskar's body. Was this true? Could it be true? The elders had taught him that the curse was the result of falling from Rukhmar's grace—the result of disobedience, among other things. It was something brought about by one's own weakness, not by an outside force. But this document said its

source was the waters in Sethekk Hollow. That meant anyone, regardless of their virtues, could fall victim.

It meant that everything Iskar knew was a lie.

"The curse addled Terokk's mind, and he began to wither away," Viryx said. "The same fate befell many of his followers, whom the Adherents also expelled from Skyreach. They became Outcasts. With Terokk gone, the Adherents gained complete control over the arakkoa."

Viryx set the scroll on the reading table.

"All this time..." A cold anger welled up in Iskar. He had lived his whole life under the belief that if he maintained his faith, if he observed every law, he would be free of the curse. All of the punishments he had endured to prove his devotion, all the torment and hardship he had suffered... What had everything been for?

"We don't know if any of this is true," Viryx said. "You said the same thing yesterday. How do we know the Outcasts didn't fabricate this to manipulate us?"

"We don't know," Iskar said.

But he would find out. If this document existed, if it was genuine, there would be others. Apocrypha, hidden away in the heart of the Grand Spire. Scrolls and histories lost to time, concealed by the elders. Clues. Secrets. Truths.

"But if it is true," he continued, "then this will change Skyreach forever."

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Viryx paced to her window. Dozens of kaliri swooped through the night sky outside. They cawed and screeched, landing on natural rock ledges along the spire. Beyond, the terraces of Skyreach glowed in the light of solar orbs. Viryx was, in that moment, taken with its beauty.

"We must destroy it," she said, turning to Iskar.

"Destroy it?" Her clutch brother stared at her in disbelief. "We must hide it somewhere."

"This could ruin everything. It is too dangerous to keep around," Viryx countered as she moved toward the scroll.

Iskar did the same, slamming down his hand on the parchment. "If this is true, it means we've been living a lie. Isn't that important to you? You went through all this trouble to get it; you risked everything, and now you want to destroy it?"

"What I did was foolish. The mystery... it just consumed me." She grasped one edge of the scroll's wooden roller and pulled. Iskar pressed his hand down, holding the paper in place. "Forget about this. Please."

"Forget about this?" Iskar's voice was shrill. With his free hand, he gripped the other end of the wooden roller. "How could I forget about this?"

"Because it doesn't matter." Viryx tightened her hold. "Even if it is true, it doesn't matter..."

She thought then of Veil Akraz and the Outcasts. So much filth and decay. So much hopelessness. She tried to imagine a world where her kind lived with the lesser arakkoa as equals. Every image she conjured in her mind's eye left her feeling disgusted.

Skyreach was powerful and glorious. To change it, to mend ties with the Outcasts, would destroy everything she knew. Despite all the tedious rules she had come to loathe as an Adherent, all the meaningless study and rituals, she did not want to lose her way of life.

What else in the world would ever compare to it?

"You did not walk among the Outcasts as I did." Viryx pulled on the scroll. She was stronger than Iskar, and she could see her clutch brother struggling to maintain his grip. "If you had, you wouldn't be entertaining this thought. If keeping Skyreach as it is means upholding this lie, then it's worth it."



With a final tug, Viryx ripped the scroll from Iskar's hands. Her clutch brother tumbled to the ground. Viryx summoned a wisp of Rukhmar's fire in her palm, igniting the scroll. Tendrils of flame licked up around the edges of the old, tattered paper.

"*Hrreeek!* No!" Iskar lunged forward, swiping at Viryx with his hand. She blocked the attack with her forearm and struck Iskar across the side of the head. He sank to the floor.

As the fire consumed the scroll, embers and ash rained down around Iskar. On his knees, he scooped the ashes into his hands. "How could you do this?"

"It is for the good of the arakkoa," Viryx said, turning back to the window of her roost. "It—"

Her breath caught in her throat. A handful of kaliri were perched outside both windows. They sat there, completely silent, watching her through the cloudy glass.

*Odd.* She had never seen them so focused. Viryx's stomach twisted with icy apprehension.

Something large bashed into the door of her roost. Once... twice...

On the third time, the door burst off of its hinges, crashing to the floor. Two bladetalons poured into the room, wingblades at the ready, followed by High Sage Zelkyr.

"For the good of the arakkoa," the voice of Rukhmar said. "Indeed."

Viryx took a step back, startled. Then she bowed her head. "High... High Sage..."

"Always a curious one, weren't you?" Zelkyr said. He motioned toward Iskar. "Bind him."

One of the bladetalons sprang forward. He shoved a blinding hood over Iskar and then locked his beak shut with a metal ring. Iskar did not make a sound, nor did he fight back.

Viryx summoned the courage to speak. "He is not to blame. He—"

"I know what he did. And I know what you did." Zelkyr flung open Viryx's window. He reached toward the group of kaliri perched outside. The high sage stroked the feathers of one bird. It cooed softly.

"I have been watching," Zelkyr continued. "To see through the eyes of the kaliri is a rare skill, but I find it so very useful from time to time. You would be surprised what some of our kind say and do when they think they are alone."

"And you let us go on like this?" Viryx asked, a flicker of anger burning away her fear.

"It is only natural to pursue a mystery. The question is what you do with the knowledge you discover. That is what defines you. Those of us who rise through the ranks of the Adherents are burdened with many truths. Many secrets. Only the wise can keep them concealed for the good of the arakkoa."

Zelkyr shooed the kaliri away. They took off into the night sky. "I believe that you have that same wisdom. You have the potential to become something great within our order."

Viryx wasn't sure how to feel. Was she meant to be thankful? At a time like this?

"But there is that matter of your restlessness. Your penchant for rebellion." The high sage placed a hand on her shoulder. "Fortunately, there are... ways to correct such flaws."

The other bladetalon gripped Viryx's arm from behind, twisting it back. Needles of pain stabbed through her skin, shooting up her neck. Out of instinct, she struggled, but it was in vain.

"I have always been too lenient with you, and for that I apologize. Perhaps if I had been stricter, it would not have come to this. But I want you to know that everything I do now, I do because I admire you... because I have faith in what you can one day become."

Viryx screamed as the bladetalon slipped a blinding hood over her eyes.

Darkness swallowed her world.

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Viryx did not know how long she had spent in the darkness. Days... weeks... a lifetime.

The truth was she did not care. She only wanted it to end.

Mercifully, it did. Someone pulled the blinding hood from her head. She found herself face to face with the high sage. Viryx said nothing as he gently helped her to her feet and then led her through a winding catacomb somewhere beneath the Grand Spire.

"Do you know why I made Iskar your clutch brother?" the high sage asked.

Viryx's time in the darkness had muddled her senses. It took her a moment to understand the words. She tried to reply, but all that escaped her beak was a low moan.

"I knew he would never really learn from you," the high sage continued. "I thought watching over him would teach you some responsibility. Perhaps it did, in a roundabout way. Your decision to burn the scroll was wise. It was *responsible*."

She followed the high sage into the main chamber of the Grand Spire. Rays of light flooded through the crystal dome in the roof. Viryx arched her back and sighed in relief as the light washed over her, warming her body.

More than food or water, she had desired this. *Light.*

She found herself reaching up to the light, wanting nothing more than to touch it, to hold it. There wasn't enough in the room to satisfy her. There would never be enough, not in all the days of her life.

"But I realize now that responsibility was not the thing you needed to learn," the high sage said. "What you truly needed was to understand the meaning of consequence."

The words pulled Viryx out of her euphoric stupor. She noticed the three arakkoa standing in the middle of the chamber. Two bladetalons flanked Iskar, holding him by chains that shackled his wrists. His beak was still bound shut with a metal ring, but the warriors had removed the blinding hood, allowing Viryx to see him—and him to see her.

The high sage passed the Talon of Rukhmar to Viryx and then stepped back. She weighed the sacred artifact in her hands and looked about the room.

No one else was present to watch. This was not like the other banishment ceremonies. This was something far more private, far more secret.

"Will you live in light or shadow?" the high sage spoke softly behind her.

Viryx stepped forward, staff in hand. Iskar stared back at her. He did not move. He did not make a sound. His eyes held not a trace of fear. Only anger, cold and brittle.

She placed the blade under his outstretched right arm.

And she made her choice.

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*A brief silence passed after Reshad finished his tale.*

*The other Outcast rose from the tree stump, stretching his crooked back as best as he could.*

*"I've never heard that story about Iskar. He always was born into the lowest rung of society."*

*"I imagine it is not a tale he enjoys telling. And, as you know, he is somewhat partial to lies,"*

*Reshad said. He got to his feet as well. His joints popped from sitting idle for too long.*

These old bones...

*The high arakkoa remained perched on the fallen tree. Reshad allowed him time to reflect on things—on a story of the leader he had once sworn to serve until the end of his days.*

*Reshad thought back to when he had met Viryx in Veil Akraz. If only I had known at that time what she would become. With a single thrust of my dagger, I could have saved so many lives...*

*Of course, it was foolish to think that. He hadn't known that Viryx would become the high sage of Skyreach. He hadn't known that her obsession with Apexis technology would drive the high arakkoa to build weapons like that false sun atop their city. And he hadn't known that Viryx would give the order to turn it on the Outcasts, to burn them from the surface of the world.*

*Viryx and her closest followers were dead now, but they had represented all that was wrong in the world. High arakkoa obsessed with the light of the sun, lost to fanaticism.*

*Reshad had to remind himself that the Outcasts were not blameless, though. They had found refuge in a different set of extremes. They had become obsessed with the shadows, buried in shame and self-loathing.*

*Shadows gather when the raven swallows the day. Burning sky is extinguished as black wings fold gently about the heavens. Rest, my children, rest. For even the sun must sleep.*

*The ancient arakkoa had known that having light and dark in equal measure was natural. Only together would the Outcasts and their winged cousins succeed.*

*Now, finally Reshad's kind was realizing that.*

*Most of them, at least. He wasn't sure if some—like Iskar—had seen reason.*

*Iskar's life, much like Viryx's, had changed after he discovered the truth about Terokk.*

*Although crippled and exiled, he had risen through the ranks of the Outcasts and become their leader. In recent years, Reshad had sensed something dark growing in Iskar. A quiet longing for vengeance and power. Perhaps it had been born during those final days in Skyreach.*

*Had Iskar woken up like the two arakkoa in Reshad's presence? Had he put the past to rest in favor of a new future? Or was he still trapped in the old way, still stumbling through shadow?*

*"Reshad!" A high arakkoa alighted near the storyteller, a panicked look in his eye. "We found the scouts sent to find Iskar. They are dead."*

*"Dead?" the elder arakkoa asked.*

*"Killed. Raaaak. By Iskar. Others are continuing the search for him," the messenger said.*

*The storyteller sat back down on the charred tree stump. Idly, he upended the pouch of seeds and nuts and spilled the contents across the ground.*

*Percy cocked his head in confusion. He looked up at Reshad as if expecting some kind of trick.*



*"Eat up, eat up." Reshad gestured to the food. Such glorious things were to come for his people, he knew, but it was not yet time to celebrate. There was work to be done, remnants of the past to overcome. "You will need your strength in the days ahead. We all will..."*