

CHAPTER ONE

I was the last to travel through the hole between worlds, and when I arrived, I filled it in behind me. The children who opened the aperture believe they undid their night's work by closing their book of magic, as if something begun with an ancient dance and a song could be stopped so easily. They were wrong.

On that night, I had been sitting on my green hill by the river of time, feasting on the meat of a deer older than white man's language. A ripping sound, like some shredded heavy cloth, and then the hole burst into being, glowing like a star. I shielded my eyes. The children's song floated through, faint at first, then louder, like the approach of war parties. Shadows danced in circles, spirits perhaps, and then the starlight flared, and the opening churned and swirled—a nexus. Beasts from other worlds appeared and vanished, leaping or being sucked into the land where the children sang. I had encountered these creatures or their kin on my journeys across the omniverse. Some were gentle, some dangerous. Some could devour a civilization, a world, a whole plane. Many, many more were drawn to the light as fire lures certain insects. I knew that, in moments, those beings would reach the nexus and cross over. But still I sat, for this event concerned me not at all. Hardly the first time some brash fool had doomed its fellows.

Then the song's words grew louder, and I recognized the language. Not mine or that of the humans I once walked among, but the tongue of that people's great enemy. The singers came from my native land, or one very like it on the sidereal chain. A pup from an infinite litter that was itself only one of a limitless species. The omniverse was deep and wide and always growing. Even such as I could never see it all.

But *that* world. Its people. Maybe even *my* world and not one of its reflections.

I would not let them die in the mouths of monsters and mad gods. Some other way, yes, as all things must die. But not that way.

And so I hurled myself through, knocking aside the horrors that had not yet passed over. I landed in a tiny lodge filled with trinkets and tools—bladed weapons white people used to tame the land, boxes full of memories. On the ground lay children dressed in long, coarse garments. Two slept. The rest stared into the starlight they had summoned, shielding their eyes. Their terror struck me like a demon wind. In the middle of the lodge, their book lay open, a line of sheer power connecting its pages to the bottomless gap in the fabric of being.

I opened my mouth and spat out half my heart. As the children struggled, I threw it into their aperture, where it grew and grew until it squeezed the killing light out of this reality, diverting that world-crushing power to the end of the sky.

Then, darkness.

One of the lodge's walls had been destroyed from the inside. Splinters and dust lay everywhere. A great force had burst through. One of my fellow travelers.

The children still lay at my feet, dazzled and sluggish. Their raiment was strange, as if they had cut holes in blankets and wore them like skins. Even then, the smallest coals of power glowed inside them. They had taken their first steps down a hard trail from which they would likely not return. Though their book had closed when I destroyed the nexus, it emanated dark power in gusts both intermittent and rank. Where had children found such a tome? And how had no one taught them the sly ways written language can steal your life and send your tribe west into the sunset?

I stepped outside, each movement a war with myself. I had walked the paths between universes, but now, if I had brought a horse, I would

have ridden even those few steps. Vomiting out your heart leaves you weary, diminished.

The night air kissed my fur. The grass was cool under my feet. On the wind, an odor like burning hair, the scent of anger mixed with confusion—my fellow travelers.

I needed to see them. I became a falcon and soared high above the trees.

Riding the winds, I found another scent, like that of the kill a bear leaves half buried to season itself with decay. But where was the corpse? Those winds spoke of smoke-choked skies and melting ice, of herds and flocks hunted and butchered until not even the ghosts of their footprints remained, of fouled rivers and misshapen fish and thick forests cut down to the roots.

This *was* my homeland, where I had walked for centuries, tricking the First Peoples and fattening myself on the forest's plenty. But it was not the world as I had left it.

I flew higher, watching those that did not belong here. Each had already gone its own way, as if the presence of the others repelled it.

My eyes grew heavy. Sleep would come soon.

As the travelers moved beyond the borders of the village, I marked them. Down in the stone waterway beneath the city fled a Go'kan, a four-armed blood-drinker bigger than any bear. I knew him. A prince of his people, his name was Na'ul, which, in the Go'kan tongue, means Breaker of Bones. I once spent a few winters in his world, watching his race feed. He even tried to eat *me*, to his sorrow. Now I wished I had killed him instead of driving him away and moving on. Unchecked, he would purge his humiliation through inflicting destruction on my home world.

I could have tracked him and, even in my weakened state, killed him. But if I did that, I would have lost the other travelers. Who knew if I could find them again?

So weary. Perhaps I had given more than half my heart. Even for me, such matters leave much to chance.

Six trails led far away. Two rode the air, two the water, two the forest paths. As long as they did not threaten the land I once loved, I cared nothing for them.

Besides Na'ul's, two other sets of tracks ended nearby. One being had scurried through the human village and splashed into the river beyond its borders, nestling somewhere deep in the muddy bottom, its life force strong and steady like sleeper's breath. Perhaps it felt as I did. Or maybe this was its way. I had not seen its form, so I could not be sure, but evil dripped along the path it traveled like blood from a wounded deer. Hopefully, it would sleep forever. But I marked it anyway—its scent, its dread energy.

The other creature had risen from the children's lodge, growing as it flew. It came to rest deep in the woods between villages. I knew its form, its tribe. Once they roamed this world, this sky, like scaled hawks. Their breath laid waste to whole forests. Their claws could rend a horse or a bear to pieces with one slash. A more dangerous creature had seldom walked the earth. Still, she would likely keep to herself, if allowed. And, like me, she would soon need a long sleep. Her kind dreamed away the colder months.

Three travelers who seemed intent on dwelling here, at least for now. One certain threat, two more possibilities. Na'ul would wake first. His force seemed most vital that night, though he was by far the least of us.

I hoped he would keep. Sleep called to me, gentle but insistent.

I landed in the woods, far from every human village I could sense, and changed back to myself. Then I dug my burrow, crawled inside, and curled up, dreaming of the old days, of scampering amid trees and thickets and fields of sweet clover. Perhaps, before I left this world again, I might play tricks, as I was born to do, as I did for ages here in the place where people still told my stories.

They called me Rabbit. It was not the name I was born with, but it had always seemed as good as any.



Something woke me early—power rippling through the land like water from a dropped stone. Power that burned. The woods' inhabitants felt it, too, as they sense the storm before the lightning strikes. Their paws and hooves struck the ground above me, squirrel and deer and rabbit, a bobcat, boar. Wings beat the air. Insects scurried past. Even the worms fled in their slow, slow manner.

My heart was not yet whole, but another traveler had awakened. Or returned.

I crawled from my burrow and stood, the pulses from the west lapping against me. I closed my eyes and sniffed the air.

Na'ul. Of course.

But not only him. I sensed others, their essences as red as blood where Na'ul's was bright blue, like his skin. The children had discovered their powers, though those energies were still aborning, the merest spark that might grow into an unimaginable fire, power to rend the heavens, to raze the earth.

My eyes can see far along the curve of the land, through the spaces between worlds, but too many objects lay between me and the others. My ears hear more than I sometimes wish—from that battle, roars like a great cat's, splashes, shouts in the odd blunt language of the white men who drove my people west. The odor of burning flesh filled the night.

Against the flow of fleeing animals, I scampered to the village, following the power surges until I found those young warriors charging their adversary, circling him in a death dance of their own making.

Na'ul, prince of the Go'kan, even larger than I remembered.

The children felt unlike any beings I had encountered in my ageless life. Their human selves had mixed with something strange, like the