

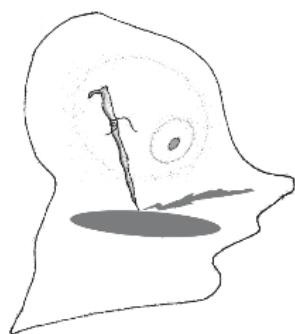


DRAGONLESS

- Book Two -

THE ROOTS OF THE DRAGON'S PAW

Festim Famelarti



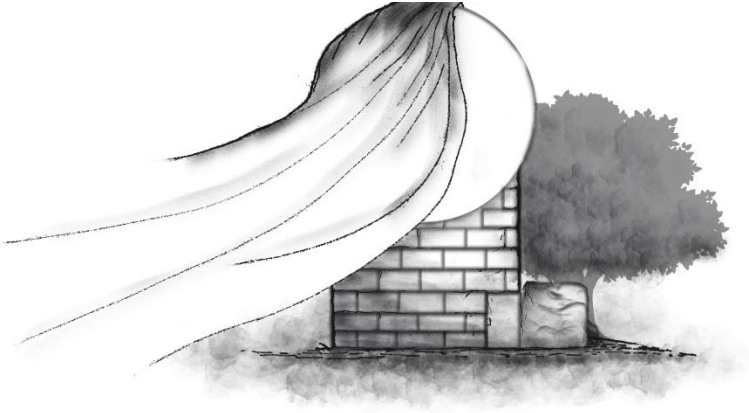
LOKE publishing house

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For my mother **Qamile**,

who taught me how to cook the meal of the heart.

- Chapter One -
- THE SHROUDED SHRINE -



"Everything that happened It feels like it's a granted desire; a wish I prayed for, speaking the name of the lake, but thinking of Valsina..." explained Guri, his eyes bulged, staring outside of the window.

"What was your wish?" asked Grandma.

"To keep the lake warm forever!"

"If you feel like a wish has been granted, then let it be that way." ended Granny with a big, bright smile.

"Yes, I want that, because I feel freed knowing that a wish has been granted, but last night I had this nightmare. I walked through the narrows; I pushed them sideways, making it easier for me to go through. There were torches on each side, all the way to the darkness. But I grasped the fire with my bear hands, and I extinguished it. I kept moving and pushing, but the hall was endless, and I couldn't ever reach complete darkness. Then I moved, and the torches hovered over my head and became one, became a star, a sun, that scorches. I looked

down and I found myself in a deserted town. My hands were blighted, smoked. I saw around myself roofless buildings, but they didn't cast shadows where I could hide. I placed my hand before my eyes, and only my hand could cast that shadow I was seeking. I fell on my knees, looked down, and a dark shadow hovered over me. I felt some breeze; it gave me a sense of tranquility. I looked over my head and I saw the same shadow that haunted me, Valsina, Spiral. Deep down, I hated the fact that this shadow cast the shade I have been seeking.

'Let me be your vail under the scorching sun,' howled the shadow. *'Let me be your guide in the shadow,'* the shadow encircled me like a net that traps fish in it.

'No. I don't need you,' I shouted. *'Stay away.'*

The shadow touched my shoulder. I turned around in fear, trying to elbow the thing that touched me. *'Stay back.'*

'Don't worry. I'm not touching you.'

'Nooo...'

'Let me just be in your presence,' whispered the shadow.

I held a fire in my hand and spun it all around myself. *'Be gone.'* I shouted.

The shadow bellowed and flew away. I found myself in the temple in front of the chalice, and I saw the dark shadow flying over the peak of the mountain and down on the sunrise side of the mountain. I stood on my feet, I ran and pierced the mountain, and I found myself in the house. Granny, you were there, but you were taken by the hollow in the middle of the living room. Only your head and right arm were still outside of the hollow. But you didn't seek for help; you only said to me *'Don't extinguish that fire.'* I looked back and I saw Valsina standing on the balcony. I looked back, and you were gone, swallowed by the hollow. What had I done? I thought about Valsina, and as I turned my head towards her, the dark shadow consumed her in a blink of an eye, and I woke up."

“First, your childish nightmares and mistakes will never hurt Granny; don’t you ever fear that,” said Granny and offered him a plate with food and placed a cup of goat’s milk on the table. “Eat, everything will be alright,” said Granny and swallowed on her dry throat before she continued, “Second, don’t let your feeling of guilt mingle with the will of the Hy.” Granny picked up the book that was on the table in front of Guri. “Oh, you are reading ‘The Conjurers of the Dreams,’” said Granny and chuckled.

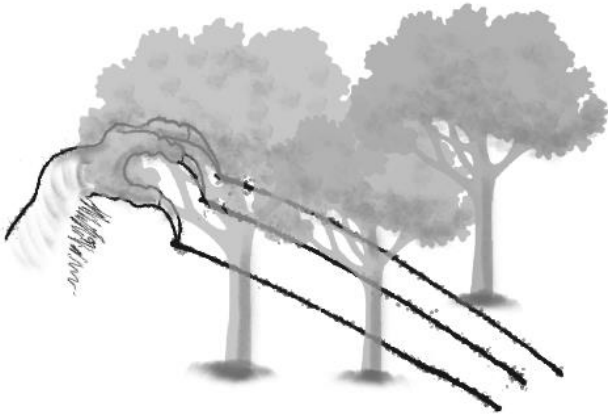
“Yeah, I thought it might help me with the interpretation of my sleepusions,” said Guri, and bowed his head, and pulled the plate closer to him.

Granny stared at her nephew for a while, then, as in alright moment, she said, “Anyway, the caravan is waiting for you to go in the city.”

Guri raised his head and looked at his grandma, “Nana Loke! You make the best food ever.”

Nana Loke chuckled and ruffled his hair. “May the food be health and love.”

- Chapter Two -
- TRACES OF LIFE -



- 1 -

Granny pulled a carrot out of the ground, shook it to remove the soil, and then tossed it into a bag full of carrots. She opened another empty bag and walked a few men down the field. Lifting her head, she looked around, but her vision was blurry in the distance. However, she noticed a change in the field. She walked further and as her vision got clearer, she saw on the field a line going diagonally and towards the forest. Approaching the line, she realized it was, in fact, animal tracks. They had damaged the plants where they had stomped but hadn't eaten any. She turned her head back, and tried to follow the traces and it seemed like they came from behind the mountain. "Something must have scared them," she thought to herself and crouched to fetch more carrots.

"Look what I found!" a kid's feet mingled, and he fell on his butt as he turned around to show his friend the thing he had found. His plis flew from his head and rolled into the bush behind his back.

"Ouch... Are you alright?" said the other kid and hurried to help his friend. He stretched his arm to help him get up.

The first kid grabbed his friend's arm and stood up. "I'm alright," he said "Look, it is a trace of something."

"What is it?"

"It's like a paw, but way bigger than my foot," he explained, and placed his foot in the middle of a trace which resembled a claw of an unknown beast.

"Wow." Wondered the other kid and looked about, "Look, the traces are going that way, through the bush and into the narrow." He walked towards the bush to retrieve the plis. He stretched his hand to fetch the plis, but right before he reached it, a claw of hyena stepped over the plis and gnarled exposing its fangs.

The kid instinctively frowned and took a few steps back as his eyes bulged. "A monster!" he yelled and ran back into the city. The other kid followed his friend as he too had seen the claw of the monster.

The two made their way to a tent in the market. They both dashed inside; The first kid stuttered "Fa, fa, father!"

The sound of flute playing somewhere in the back filled the tent. It was a sound that filled your heart with melancholy. The father, who was a fortuneteller, raised his left eyebrow and his left eye grew weirdly as he was looking on the palm of a costumer.

"A monster out there!" the kid yelled.

The father tilted his head, glancing at the kid over the costumer's shoulder. "I'm busy kid."

"Father, I swear. The monsters are here. It's not safe out there," the kid insisted.

"It's way too early for the monsters," said the fortuneteller dismissively.

The customer, who had a cloak over his head as if he didn't want to be seen in the fortuneteller's tent, turned his head back to look at the kids.

"Yes, uncle Fatemsusi," the other kid spoke with a quivering voice. "The monsters, we, we found traces out there."

Fatemsusi slowly let go of the costumer's palm, he turned towards the candle that was on his right side and extinguished the fire by pressing it with his middle finger. "I'm gonna give you a Ruby stone, which is a power stone. It is deeply rooted to the earth and to the mother ground," Fatemsusi told the customer, then he looked under the table and pressed something there. A small shelf clinked and popped out. He pulled the shelf ever so slightly and from there he fetched the Ruby. "It is going to cost you 340 gold spirits."

The customer pulled out a pouch of gold from within his cloak, he placed the gold on the table, took the Ruby, and stood up.

"When you feel on low energy, recharge the Ruby with the power of the sun and the darkness of the moon," Fatemsusi advised as he gently petted the costumer on his right left shoulder.

The customer nodded and walked outside.

"Rob!" Fatemsusi called his helper. The music playing in the back stopped. "Come stay here, I need to check on these kids."

From behind the tent a woman holding a flute on her right hand walked in "I'm here. You go."

"Come with me, kids."

"I'm not coming, uncle. I'll stay here in the house. It's safe here."

"Alright, you stay here." Fatemsusi agreed, grabbing the cloak, and walked outside.

His son led Fatemsusi to the traces he had found. When they reached the street where they had found the trace, his son hid behind Fatemsusi and clunk behind his cloak.

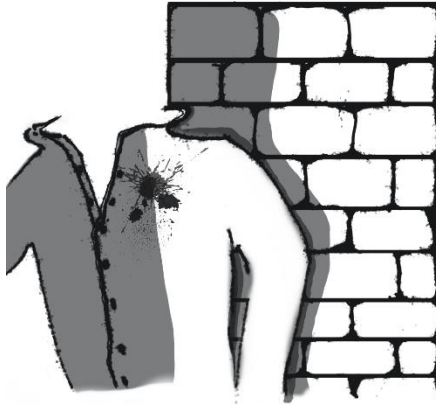
"Over there, father," the kid said pointing at the bush while still hiding behind his father's cloak. "It took my plis," the kid ended with a whimper.

Fatemsusi saw the traces his son mentioned. He walked near the trace. He crouched and gazed upon it, he stood up, and took a few steps towards the bush. There lay the plis, dirty with three distinguishing cuts. Fatemsusi's eyes dilated; he frowned, took a deep breath, and cautiously approached the bush. He picked up the plis and peered into the dark narrow. "Son, these aren't just traces; this is a path."

"A path!?" the kid mumbled.

"These creatures have made their secret path into the city."

- Chapter Three -
- STAINS ON THE SHIRT -



A night before traces.

“Try this.” said Valsina and handed a piece of cake to Guri.

Guri grabbed the cake with his left hand, wrapped with cloth, then he bit into it and as he chewed, he said “It’s soooo delicious.”

“Told you,” she cheered and mushed a piece of cake on his nose.

Guri attempted to frown, but the cake had already adhered to his nose.

In joy and laughter, Valsina ran through a crowd of people.

Guri chased after her scarlet scarf waving behind.

People danced on the streets. You could find music and entertainment in every corner of the city of the Forest. A firework blasted in the starlight sky and stole everyone’s attention. “Fireworks,” cheered Valsina in happiness.

Guri’s eyes bulged. She grabbed his hand and turned into a narrow alley, pulling him behind. “Quick, this way,” she said.

Guri ran after her.

They entered a darker dead-end narrow. "Here is a ladder," she said, "You go first."

Guri put his foot on the ladder and halted. "You never told me how you and the Lion soul became friends?"

"You can tame a lion, but not a cackle of hyenas," replied Valsina. "Climb now. The fireworks don't last long."

Guri climbed the tall ladder that took them to the top of a three-floor building. However, while climbing, he thought about many things he had desired and failed to accomplish all of them. But if he had only one desire like a lion soul, perhaps he could have tamed it. He made it onto the terrace. The city of the Forest looked glorious from there. Guri's jaw had dropped in awe. Valsina came behind him. "You see. It's magical," she said with delight. "Sit here on the ledge." She sat on the ledge and Guri did the same.

The fireworks exploded for quite some time. Guri turned his head over his shoulder and looked at Valsina, "Thank you."

"You are welcome," she replied and turned her head towards Guri, "I told you; we are going to have so much fun."

Guri gazed into Valsina's eyes as they were sparking with joy and reflecting the fireworks in the sky. 'Sometimes I wonder if her soul knows what I had chosen then?! Whether she will ever know the truth or not, I know one truth. The moment she came back to life, I understood that the day the dragon flashed before my eyes, I was not thrown back on the sunrise side of the mountain by the force of Dragon's fall, but by the weakness of its stand.'

The fireworks ended. Valsina looked into Guri's eyes. "Speaking of never telling," said Valsina, "You never told me how Spiral did die?"

Guri bowed his head. "When the invisible borders vanished, Spiral said that she needed to find a shrine that can finally rest in peace."

"Do you think she has found it already?"

"I'm sure she did," ended Guri, raised his head ever so gently and locked eyes with Valsina.

"Oh, by the way," said Valsina, "I almost forgot..." and removed her scarlet scarf from her neck and handed it to Guri "I made this for you."

"Really?"

"Yes, It's a gift. I knitted myself."

"Thank you. That's impressive," said Guri, and bowed his head as he felt embarrassed because that gift reminded him of not finishing the scarf, he had started knitting for Valsina a long time ago.

A cackle of hyenas had made their way onto the roof. Valsina stood first on her feet, then Guri stood up and took a step before her, shielding Valsina. He pinned his heels on the roof. The shard on his left arm unfolded and extended over his hand. He scanned the hyenas, targeting their positions, and stormed them. In an explosion of a firework, Guri slew three hyenas that had made their way onto that roof.

"Look, there are more," exhaled Valsina, "They are in every roof."

They both looked around, and on each roof, they saw red eyes gazing at them.

"We must run," said Guri.

Valsina and Guri fought their way out through the roofs of the city. Guri had slain dozens of hyenas and they had made it to a balcony of a high tower, where they thought that the danger had been gone. The pale moon's light washed Guri's face, his

right palm went instinctively over his eyebrows, casting a shadow over his eyes. A stain on his white shirt could be noticed even under the shadow of his arm.

"Are you alright?" asked Valsina as she kept her gaze on the bloody shard on Guri's arm.

"I'm alright," he said. "What about you? I didn't let them near you," he ended, and the shard folded back over his arm.

"I'm alright," she responded, then raised her head, and looked at the stain on Guri's shirt. "You got a stain on your shirt."

Guri looked down on his shirt and pressed the stain with the tip of his left fingers and it seemed like it was dirt mixed with blight. "It's nothing," he said, and as he raised his head up while still holding his right hand over his eyes.

In that very moment, far in the distance, a firework exploded; and ever so gently, Valsina reached with her right palm towards Guri's stain, and in that very beat of a heart, Guri felt like Spiral's paw extended out of Valsina's arm and reached for his heart. Guri frowned and with his right hand, grabbed Valsina's wrist and pushed it sideways, blocking her from touching his chest. The pale moon's light brought Guri's face on the spotlight again.

"I just wanted to look at that stain," chuckled Valsina as her eyes narrowed "I can wash it if you want?"

Slowly, he let go of her wrist. He bowed his head; he couldn't tell her what vision flashed before his eyes. *'What if I called out Spiral, and it escaped her body? What if she knows the truth?'* he thought to himself. "I'm sorry. I just, after fighting those hyenas, I thought I saw one behind you," mumbled his reason Guri, while looking down.

"That's alright," said Valsina. "We should go home."

"Yeah, sure." agreed Guri and his right palm again went before his face, casting a shadow over his eyes.

They climbed down the balcony and made their way through a crowd of people.

"I have a question," said Guri. "Did you have any sleepulsion?"

"Yeah, but I don't remember," answered Valsina. "Why are you asking?"

"You know, Granny says that sleepulsions tell the future, so I thought you might have had a sleepulsion so we could have avoided the hyenas."

"It was fuzzy, cloudy. I really don't remember. What about you, did you have any sleepulsion?"

"No," quickly answered Guri, even before she finished her question.

"I have a question," said Valsina and quickened her steps, catching up with Guri.

"Sure."

"You said that it was the fairy who gave you the mask to communicate with the spirits and monsters?"

"The fairy?" questioned Guri.

"Yes."

"The fairy of the dreams?" questioned Guri again as if he didn't know what Valsina was talking about.

"No, you know what I'm talking about, the fairy of the dead city. You said that she gave you the mask?!"

"Yes, indeed," answered Guri, without even turning his head slightly back.

"I once asked Spiral why the fairy would do you a favor and grant you with the mask so you could hear Spiral talking, and you never answered that?!"

"Spiral never told me that you asked that question," answered Guri and continued walking through the crowd.

"And why would you think that the fairy would do you such a favor?"

Guri quickened his steps. "I thought Spiral and fairy knew each other and I was just helping them help us."

"It doesn't make sense," said Valsina and stopped.

'I know it doesn't make sense, but if you knew that I was forced to wear that mask by a serpent, you would forcefully remove that mask from my face, and you would try to find a way out without it.'

"I don't know what to say," replied Guri, and stopped and for the first time since they had climbed down, he looked behind and saw Valsina... alone, far in the distance, standing amongst the moving crowd.

