

*"I have seen Their Divine Plan."*

—The Codex of Jasal the Great

The flat, brown ribbon of the Garnath River stretched ahead of Mirana. Leaden clouds butted their heads against one another as the hot breath of the wind blew the heat from the far western plains. Now and then, fat, cold drops of rain spattered on her skin.

She tried to rein in Ashtar, but the scent of water drove him forward. He stopped only when he stood in the middle of the river. She plunged into the water, as eager as the horse to slake her thirst.

Sevendays without rain had turned the wide, pounding river into a shallow creek. She drank the warm, muddy water anyway, grimacing at the grit sliding down her throat.

Mirana waded across to the far riverbank. Leagues of open country and another river lay between her and the mouth of the Darbinh Pass and Trak-Calan province. She stretched weary muscles as she turned east. Should she backtrack and cut through the jungle toward Salmasalar? She could take a boat to Yalahn. She would lose time getting to the port city, but once she set sail, it might save her sevendays.

And that would be exactly what Tetric would expect her to do. He could be waiting there for her. And he would never let her leave him a second time.

The quest to find the last missing page of Jasal's Codex had turned into a race. He would try to get the Trak-Calan keep excerpt before she did. She clawed her fingers through her hair, catching them on the knots tied by the wind of her ride. Overhead, a hawk cried. It dove like an arrow toward the water and winged upward at the last moment, a fish held in its talons. Her stomach rumbled.

She had finished what scraps of waybread remained in her saddlebags days ago. She bit her lip. How could she hunt without a bow or arrows? She could use her amulet, but she'd probably end up turning her dinner to ash. The reality of her situation sank in. She could push herself a little while longer, even calling on her Healing Aspect, but at some point, she had to get some nourishment. She could not waste the time hunting. Then again, she had to eat if she was ever going to make it through Trak-Calan province's mountain to Caladazh.

"Bloody hell."

Mirana picked up a piece of driftwood from the pebbly shore. The silty water obscured the river bottom, but if a hawk could find a fish, she should be able to sense one with the Aspects. She hunted well enough. How much harder could fishing be?

She whistled to Ashtar. He ignored her, munching eagerly on the brown, brittle scrub weeds that poked up through the stones of the riverbank. The poor beast was just as hungry as she was.

Mirana patted the horse's flank and rummaged through her saddlebag, pulling out a leather stay from her pectoral armor. She smiled and quickly tied her belt knife to the end of the driftwood to make a spear.

It turned out fishing *was* a lot harder.

Her prey eluded her every attempt to spear them, riled and wary from the bloodhawk. She stood back and paused in her useless splashing. She frowned. "Well, if you want a fish, think like a fish."

Mirana calmed her mind and slowed her heart's pounding from exertion and the anticipation of food. She closed her eyes. Almost immediately, warmth spread across her chest to her shoulders and arms. The primitive minds of fish and dozens of other creatures touched her consciousness. Startled, her eyes snapped open. Jasal's diamond amulet glowed, pulsing with an inner light as her Aspects meshed with it seamlessly.

Giddy laughter bubbled up from her empty belly. "This is almost too easy."

She spoke too soon.

Five more fruitless—or rather, *fishless*—attempts left her soaked and her stomach burning with hunger.

“Think, Mirana.” She could now sense where the fish were, but they darted away with each stab of her spear. “Think!”

The fish swam away because they sensed a predator. How could she trick them into thinking she was—her stomach growled—well, *food*?

She grinned. Centering herself once again, she merged her Aspects with the amulet while opening herself to U’Nehil. With the technique of mirroring her life’s essence with that of the life she sensed around herself, she radiated the persona of a worm.

Several fish slowed their movements, swimming lazily once more through the murky water. One floated closer with the river current. Another swam even closer, determined not to lose its meal to its fellow schoolmate. It opened its wide mouth to gulp down a worm—

“Aha!”

Wriggling at the end of her makeshift spear were two fat river trout.

“You can keep your grass, Ashtar!” She brandished the trout by their tails at the copper-colored warhorse.

Mirana tromped from the stream and shook her wet hair out of her eyes. She had been so focused on fishing that she hadn’t noticed the rain now pouring down from thick, dark clouds. No fire would last in this downpour. Then she smiled. No ordinary fire could be ignited in the rain, that was true. But she had an amulet now. She didn’t need a blazing bonfire, just enough amulet fire to cook her fish.

Mirana knelt on the shore and removed the long knife from the stick. Slitting open one of the river trout, she groaned and turned away. “Ugh. And I thought rabbit innards were bad.” She tossed the entrails into the water while Ashtar happily nosed the scrub. Could people eat grass like horses?

“Quartermaster Lasen’s cod was very good. And I ate snake. This can’t be worse than that.” She had an amulet but not the quartermaster’s seasoned broth and spices. Or his cooking skills.

She centered herself and opened her Aspects to the diamond. The crystal bonded with her with alarming swiftness. The Defending Aspect shot forth from her and through the amulet toward one of the trout.

And completely incinerated it.

“Seriously?” Mirana squeezed her eyes shut, her head swimming from the exertion. Fine. She’d eat the other one raw.

She took a few breaths and popped a piece of the fish into her mouth.

Raw fish was indeed worse than snake. By far.

She gagged. Bitter as gall with a sickening sweetness like that of fetid eggs, it tasted beyond repulsive. She tried to swallow without tasting as the trout morsel slid down her throat like mucus. She retched again. Maybe she had fouled it in the way she disemboweled it? Nothing that horrible could be remotely edible. She forced two more bites down. It was the most hideous thing she had ever eaten, but it would keep her alive. She had wasted enough time on this nonsense.

“That’s enough dinner for now, *Ēi cara*.” Mirana clicked her tongue, calling the horse to her.

Holding the remaining trout with one hand, she grabbed a stirrup with the other to pull herself up. She steadied herself against Ashtar until the dizziness passed.

“What to do with you?” she said to the trout. Maybe it would stop raining soon and she could build a proper fire. And eat proper food. And find a way to make Tetric see reason. And save Kinderra.

At that moment, her stomach demanded she save philosophical questions of salvation for another time. She forced down another bite of fish. It wasn’t any better the second time.

Mirana gazed north; the distant mountains of Trak-Calan were lost in the mist. “Why do I feel like the closer we get to Caladazh, the further from the end of our quest we become?”

Ashtar sputtered and tossed his head.

“You choose *this* to agree with me on?” She patted her mount’s thick neck and kissed him. “You worthless, wonderful beast.” She wrapped the remaining trout in some plant leaves that grew near the water’s edge and stowed it in a saddle bag.

Mirana swung up into the saddle and galloped north, surrounded by heavy rain, thick mud, clinging questions, and equally cloying answers.