



## *The Great Drift*

### Part 1

By Maia Jacomus

Color - it was the only indication that morning had come. And even then, the colors were dulled with the grey of eternal shade.

Stretch of Shadow was a world apart, a nation of marshland seeping like moss over the southwest niche of the Sea of Grass. The arrangement of vine-entangled trees bogged in the mud, water, and reeds omitted any opportunity for direct sunlight.

Of course, winter left little distinction between night and day. With the thick fog that filled the air, barely anything could be seen at all. For some years, the fog of winter enchanted Luka. They were a challenge. While others diminished their impulse for travel, she traveled more during winter than any other season, bending her ear to the voices around her to identify her neighbors solely by their words, finding the bakery not by its painted wooden sign, but by its smell, testing her agility in anticipating someone's approach before they emerged from the fog. But now, at age eighteen, she was entirely disenchanted. The fog was no longer a shroud of mystery to be mastered; she knew every path, every person, and every mosquito trap. She could mark the exact departure time of any given person from his house, as well as his entire daily route, and his return home.

So it was that Luka's mind became inclined toward thoughts of the Great Drift. As the winter fogs began to dissipate, all the youth of the town at once were enlightened with the same thought and made preparations. Her older brother Rurik, who had declined the Great Drift in his eighteenth year, was now desperate for the change at age twenty-one. They would take the trip together, leaving behind their parents, their older brother, and their younger sister.

"Let's take a houseboat!" Luka suggested.

Rurik was not even out of bed. His face was planted into the pillow, his arms dangling off the edges of the bed.

Furrowing her brow, Luka prodded his shoulder. "Rurik!"

He mumbled incoherently and swatted her away.

"Hmph." Without any warning, she nonchalantly sat onto his back.

He coughed and rose his head. "Get off," he groaned.

She smiled in satisfaction, rose off his back, then knelt beside the bed to meet his eyes.





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“I want to take a houseboat for the Great Drift.”

“Luka, those things are so tacky. They’re always chartered to drag you around to every sightseeing spot - I just want to get there.”

“But I want to see all the sights.”

“So you take a houseboat, and I’ll take my own boat.”

“I want you to come with; I want us to end up at the same place.”

Rurik plopped his face back into the pillow, emitting a heavy sigh. He then rolled onto his side and said, “Yes, fine. We’ll take a houseboat. But *I* get to pick which one.”

In a deliberately annoying singsong voice Luka said, “Thank you, dear brother,” and planted a kiss on his cheek.

He smirked with a slight chuckle. “Oh, just get out of here, would you?”

She barely made it to the door when his pillow struck her head.



Stepping outside, the damp chill of the fog instantly clung to Luka like a second skin. And yet the fog was thinning - she could see. She could see almost the whole neighborhood of stilted houses, shops, and plazas connected with sturdy wooden bridges, the people traversing to and fro through the morning air with their families and wheelbarrows. She could also see that more people were braving the use of their boats, now able to see any obstacles that sat in their path. As she was setting foot out of the house, her four-year-old sister poked her head out of the door, startling her.

“What’s a drift?” asked the little girl. “Dam says you’re going on a drift. And Sire said that Rurik is going, too.”

“The Great Drift, Tisa. It’s when spring comes, and everyone who wants to move to a new home does so, all at the same time.”

“You’re going to a new home?” Tisa whined. “But why?”

Luka took her little sister by the hand to bring her along as she walked down the path to the bridge. “Because I’d like to see new things and meet new people. My whole life, I’ve never left this neighborhood—nobody ever leaves, and nobody new ever comes. That’s what the Great Drift is all about.”



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Tisa looked pensive for a moment, her brow deeply furrowed, her lips pursed. “Does that mean I get our room all for myself?”

Luka laughed. “I’ll miss you too, tadpole.”

As they crossed the bridge to the merchant boardwalk, she could see that the natural flow was disturbed. The baker was not preparing to cross the bridge with his wheelbarrow of deliveries as he usually would be at that time. A few more steps yielded the peculiar absence of the seamstress who always embroidered at the chair just inside the front window of her home. For a moment, she stopped walking, and did not notice Tisa tugging at her hand to continue.

“Something’s...” Luka murmured, staring at the vacant window.

She was about to knock on the seamstress’s door when she heard a commotion coming from down the path. With a firm grip on her little sister’s hand, Luka hurried to see what was going on. The baker’s wheelbarrow had tipped over, and many of his baked goods had been spilled onto the wooden planks. Both he and the seamstress were arguing with a third person, someone who was clearly an outsider - she had golden-brown skin, a clear distinction from the pallor of all who were native to Stretch of Shadow. Her red hair was falling out of the bun she had constructed atop her head, and her cheeks were flushed with pink, appearing as though she had been engaged in a struggle.

“I saw the whole thing!” the seamstress declared. “She looked toward your wheelbarrow, and it tipped over, then the bread floated over to her, and she took it - she’s of the Tizqar!”

“Thief!” the baker shouted, pointing his large finger at the outsider.

“I did *not* steal it!” the young woman insisted. “I saw it fall from your cart, so I was returning it to you!”

The three were attracting a crowd, including Luka and Tisa.

“I was just reading on the public pillar about how crime is on the rise,” the baker said, grabbing hold of the outsider’s arm, “and she’s proof of it!”

With a sneer, the outsider yanked her arm out of his grip and met his eyes with anger. “You’ve got your bread back, so leave me alone!” Shoving the baker aside, she bolted off in Luka’s direction.

“Stop her!” the baker shouted. “She must be brought to the guardsmen!”

Luka stared at the outsider as she came her way, frozen in place by the determination in her dark eyes. She at first planted her feet deliberately to the spot, deciding to stop her by any



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means. But at the last moment, she dodged aside, pulling Tisa with her, and let the outsider charge by.

“Why did you do that, Luka?” the seamstress asked. “You let her get away!”

Luka did not want to confess her fear in confronting an outsider of unknown danger, so had some difficulty stuttering out an excuse. Meanwhile, Tisa released her sister’s hand and darted off for the outsider.

“I’ll help!” she declared.

“No, Tisa, don’t!” Luka ran after her, catching her just before she could turn into the alleyway between the plant nursery and the house of imports. The outsider leaned back against the shop wall and pulled a small box from her pocket. Inside, Luka could see a pale yellow powder, which the outsider dabbed her finger and thumb in, then held the fingers to her nose to snort up.

“What’s...?” Tisa began.

But she was startled into silence when the outsider suddenly whipped her head in their direction, her eyes wide. She lashed out toward them, but only caught the air. Muttering a curse, she tugged at her gloves to make certain they were securely on, then darted off across the bridge and out of sight.

“What was she smelling?” Tisa asked.

Luka took a moment to form a reply suitable for the four-year-old. “It’s something that makes people feel good, but it’s bad for their health - like chewing herbs.”

Tisa tilted her head. “She didn’t look like she was feeling good.”

“Just forget about it. Come on.”

Finally on their proper way again, they crossed the merchant’s boardwalk, then along another bridge, and arrived at the wharf house. Tisa took a moment to stand near the edge where, just a ladder’s climb below, was the wharf with an impressive assortment of wood-boats and reed-boats docked. Luka left her to admire them while she went inside the wharf house to ask the wharf warden about the choices of houseboats departing for the Great Drift.

*The Croc* was the largest houseboat, as it had the longest route of tours and sites to stop for along the way, ending up at the northernmost city of the Stretch. *The Gator* was the smallest houseboat, and the one with the shortest route, its berth no more than twenty miles away from Luka’s home of Lagun. There were two houseboats of medium size and route that



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she thought her brother would likely choose from, and so she wrote down the facts of them both, and returned to Rurik for a decision. She was thrilled when he chose *The Heron*, the one of the two houseboats which had Sunray as one of the points of interest. Sunray was the one spot in the entire Stretch through which the sun shined directly down, uncluttered, and Luka had always been interested in seeing it. Moreover, the city that *The Heron* berthed at was Alkat, where the Shamaness lived, and Luka had always wanted to meet the leader of the Stretch.

Luka had been eager to meet the Shamaness since she was three years old and first heard the tale of how the Stretch came to be. The tale began with a fisherman named Erginon who, while fishing along the Cold River, discovered the vast, shadowy marshland. While none others saw its potential, Erginon could feel an abundance of thriving Spirits, and so was convinced that it would make a good home for those in the Sea of Grass who felt persecuted by the sun's scorching heat. He became the first Shaman at only eighteen years old, and this tradition was carried on in a dynasty of youth - when the Shamaneir became eighteen years old, he or she took reign as Shaman over the Stretch. Their current leader, Shamaness Sarvyva, had only been ruling for a year, and she already demonstrated a keener sense of the Spirits than any other before her. Luka was determined that such a historic figure would not escape her acknowledgement.

Rurik confessed to the same curiosity in meeting Shamaness Sarvyva, though not out of admiration. He was among those skeptics who believed it impossible that a commoner - or descendent of a commoner - could possess Spirit Mastery abilities. In light of this difference of opinion, Luka and Rurik made a bet. While they were each paying for their own ticket for the houseboat, whoever won would receive a reimbursement from the other.

The night before the Great Drift, the whole city of Lagun - as did every city of the Stretch - hosted a departure celebration. While many took this as an opportunity to visit neighbors for the last time, Luka spent the entire celebration playing games with her sire, dam, little sister Tisa, and older brother Petar. However bored she was of Lagun, especially her neighborhood, she knew that she would miss her family. And yet, one of things she was most excited about in moving to a new home was establishing herself as herself. In Lagun, she was Luka, daughter of Isay and Gala, sister of Tisa, Rurik, and Petar. In Alkat, she would be Luka - only Luka, self-defined - and she was anxious to find out what that would be like.





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The family's favorite event of the celebration was the dance, when the air was so alive it seemed everyone could feel the Spirits around them. Everyone everywhere gathered on the boardwalks to dance to the music playing from bands that were stationed every five blocks. The most highly favored spot for dancing was on the bridges, where every step echoed from one neighborhood to the next. Torches were lit with special powders that made the flames burn various colors. People would pluck a hair from their head to burn in the colorful fires as an offering of good faith to the Spirits. Some young men who had decided to go on the Great Drift would shave their heads bald and burn all of their hair in torches throughout the whole neighborhood - for some, it was a purgation; for most, it was simply a release. In general, it was considered to be good luck to have one such bald young man on each houseboat, and Rurik had volunteered to be the one for *The Heron*. Their dam scolded him for being ridiculous, but their sire confessed to having done the same when he had gone on the Great Drift.

In the midst of the dancing, the band music, and the laughter and chatter of all the city culminating into an infectious roar of jubilation, Luka noticed something amiss. She was dancing in front of her home, when she pulled her short, black hair away from her eyes and noticed the outsider - the same young woman proclaimed to be a thief - lurking in the darker shadows between their house and their neighbor's house. In the darkness of the evening, she would not have recognized her were it not for her bright red hair which, though dimmed in the darkness, was still discernable. Luka's dancing slowed as she nervously contemplated what she should do - alarm everyone to the outsider's presence, or let her be? She could hardly tell what the woman's actions were, only able to make out a silhouette, but it appeared as though she was once again snorting whatever sort of drug it was she had contained in the box.

Suddenly, the outsider shifted position, and the door to the neighbor's house slowly opened of its own accord. The outsider sprang out of the alleyway and into the open door.

"Thief!" Luka declared. But through the din, no one heard her. For a moment, she stood still in fear. But as she stood, the anger at her neighborhood being trespassed upon by a thieving outsider built up inside her, finally giving her the courage to dash forward into the house herself.

She could not believe what she saw - it was proof that anyone who practiced a Gift should not indulge in narcotics. A vase and an imported candlestick heirloom were floating five feet up in the air. The outsider had both her hands on the candlestick, and by her groans,





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sounded as though she was straining to keep hold of it. The wildness in her eyes made Luka inch back slowly.

“Get that!” the outsider barked, seeing Luka standing in the doorway.

Luka noticed the vase sauntering toward the door. She reached out to grab it, but it dodged her attempt. Refusing to be won over, she took hold of it just before it crossed the threshold. But it felt stuck in the air, as no matter how she pulled, it remained where it was. A sudden sting in her left hand caused her to shriek and release the vase. With a cry, the outsider spun around, and was then able to pull the candlestick toward herself, placing it back where it belonged. Her gloved hand balled into a fist, and she raised it up as she crossed into the kitchen to the back window. She flicked her fist out the window and muttered something as she slammed the window shut.

“Where’d it go?” she asked Luka as she returned to the common room.

“It...Out the...” Luka was too astonished to speak.

Someone from the dance spotted the outsider in the doorway and shouted “Thief!” above the clamor. After a temperamental stomp of her foot, the outsider took off out of the house and, with too many crowds on the boardwalk, went down the ladder to the water below, disappearing into the reeds.

Luka reported to her neighbors what she had seen and apologized for not being able to retrieve their vase. They did not blame her at all, but said some hateful comments regarding the outsider. Many of their words escaped her attention as she became fixated on the spot of her hand that still stung: there were teeth marks.



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