

**Awakening**  
**The Twins of Saranthium Book One**  
**by Lara Morgan**

**The city of Salmut, Saranthium**

Shaan jerked awake, her breath coming fast and sharp; she'd been dreaming of fire and death again.

Rolling onto her back, she stared at the cracks in the ceiling. It was just after dawn and already the heat and humidity were building. Sweat covered her limbs, making the bedclothes stick, and in a fit of irritation she kicked them to the end of the bed, running unsteady hands through her short, dark hair.

The dream had been more vivid this time and unwelcome images crowded back. Burning flesh, screams, fire devouring the strange city and that voice following, tormenting her. She shivered. She could still hear his sibilant whisper.

Outside, a refuse collector clattered down the street making her start. Annoyed, she pushed the remnants of the dream away. What good did it do to dwell on it when she had troubles enough already. Getting out of bed, she crossed to the window and pushed open the wooden shutters. The stench of rotted cargo and damp wafted up from the street two stories below and, with a grimace, she lifted her head to try and catch a fresh breeze.

The sky was washed pink with the dawn. Beyond the flat topped roofs of the city, the warehouses and jetties of the Great Port jutted out into the dark water of the bay. The massive main pier was like a stone arm pointing to the rim of the world and the sea a sheet of dark silk. The ships at anchor barely moved in the low swell.

She looked to the mass of whitewashed buildings that sprawled across the red cliff at the opposite end of the bay. The yards, home to the serpents and their riders. She bit her lip her insides churning. The riders' trials were only two

months away. Would yesterday's mistake go against her? Would he remember it?

She should have been dreaming of that rather than a burning city. Failure at the trials would mean another two years of cleaning up after the sons and daughters of the city's elite who practically had their rider positions handed to them. Fail the trials and all her effort would be for nothing.

She leaned on the windowsill, the splintered wood scraping her skin. Sept Leader Balkis had barely noticed her before, now there was no doubt he'd remember her. Thinking of the way he'd looked at her made Shaan feel ill. She'd given him a real blade instead of a blunted sword. The Fledgling rider he'd been training had needed seven stitches in his thigh. It was the dreams, the lack of sleep. If she hadn't been so tired it wouldn't have happened.

She needed every advantage she could get to win a place as a Fledgling, and irritating the man who could decide her fate was not going to help. Balkis was the youngest person to make sept leader in more years than she could count, and she had to draw his ire. She stared at the yards as though she could sear his brain with her look. *Choose me, she thought, choose me.*

A far ranging fishing boat, its sails bright white against the red cliffs, tacked slowly in toward the jetties distracting her and she watched it for a while and then suddenly swore as she remembered she'd promised to get some fish for Torg that morning.

With a groan, she pulled a sleeveless, green dress over her head and shoving her feet into sandals, stepped out into the narrow hallway, fastening a wide belt around her waist as she went.

'Tuon! Tuon, wake up.' She called down the corridor and knocked loudly on a door at the end. Without waiting for a reply she pushed it open and stuck her head in.

'Tuon, you awake?'

The room was twice as large as her own. In the far corner a woman was lying diagonally across a wide bed, the sheet pulled up over her head. Only her pink toes were visible, poking out from under the crumpled sheets.

'Tuon, wake up.' She let the door bang against the wall.

A tousled blonde head appeared from under the sheets followed by a hand, which flung a pillow in her direction. 'Leave me be.'

Shaan watched as the feather-filled sack hit the doorframe.

'You'll have to aim better than that.' She strode across the room and stood over her, hands on her hips. 'Come on, I have to go fishing. Come with me for a swim, it'll wash some of that stink off you.'

But Tuon didn't move and Shaan looked down at her in irritation then stooped and ripped the sheet off. 'Come on, dung worms move faster than you!'

'Aah, all right!' Tuon rolled over and blinked, leisurely rubbing her naked belly. 'I see yesterday's mishap is going to make you pleasant company.'

Blonde and all curves, Tuon was a favourite with the sailors who came to the Red Pepino. Her skin was pale compared to Shaan's, she was a head taller and ten years older and was the closest thing Shaan had to family.

Shaan wrinkled her nose, ignoring her comment. 'Goddess, it's stuffy in here!' She went to the window and opened it with a bang. 'Why don't you air it out sometimes?'

'Well, aren't we in a fine mood today.' Tuon hoisted herself up to a sitting position. 'It's a good thing Torg doesn't have you making coin for him on your back, looking like that you'd earn him less than a street boy.'

'As if I'd let some sweaty, stinking pig of a sailor mount me.' Shaan flicked at a sliver of flaking paint with her fingernail.

'Is that right? But you're not above lifting a purse or two from them.'

'So what?' Shaan shrugged. 'They were drunk and stupid, it served them right.' She picked at more paint, choosing not to notice the eyebrow Tuon was raising at her. She must be losing her touch if Tuon had seen her. When she'd run

with the street packs she could lift a purse from a merchant in a crowded market and no one would suspect a thing. Not that she did that anymore.

‘Torg won’t be happy if he finds out,’ Tuon said. ‘It makes it harder for the customers to pay his girls – me included.’

‘Yeah, well,’ Shaan shrugged, glancing at her, ‘that sailor was too drunk to get it up anyway.’

Tuon’s eyes narrowed. ‘You only steal when there’s something wrong. What is it? You not sleeping again, or are you still worrying yourself over that sept leader?’

‘I’m not worried.’ Shaan flicked paint at a cart trundling past below.

‘No, of course not.’ Tuon crossed her arms over her bare breasts. ‘Getting shouted at by the man who could decide your fate at the trials is nothing, happens every day. And of course,’ she gave her a knowing look, ‘it doesn’t help that that man is also outrageously pretty.’

‘And knows it,’ Shaan snorted.

‘Don’t they all,’ Tuon said dryly. ‘But still, a sept leader . . .’

‘Is hardly going to look twice at a worker,’ Shaan interrupted her. ‘Not that I want him to.’

‘I wasn’t suggesting you did.’ She gave her a penetrating look and Shaan felt a touch of heat rise in her cheeks. ‘I was going to say,’ Tuon continued, ‘that a sept leader being angry at me, if I was the one who wanted to be a rider, would make me worry. Or is there something else that’s making you spit like a cat caught in a trap?’

Shaan looked away to stare out of the window. ‘I’m just tired. I have to report to the yards to help serve the mid-meal as well as get some fish for Torg, so if you’re going to come with me then get up, or I’ll just go alone.’

Tuon didn’t move. ‘Have that dream again, did you?’

Shaan leaned back against the window frame, looking at her in frustration.

‘You better tell me, ’cause you know I’ll get it out of you.’

Tuon's blue gaze pinned her to the sill. Shaan tried to stare back but she was too weary to keep it up. 'All right!' she sighed. 'Yes, it's the goddess-cursed dream again.'

'And there was nothing different this time?'

'No, nothing different. There was the burning city and people and . . .' she hesitated. She didn't want to talk about it. She didn't want to think about how real it had felt; the smoke filling her lungs, the pungent smell of singed flesh and the voice. 'It was just a dream, Tuon. The same one I've been having for weeks. The same one you've heard about over and over.'

'Just a dream?'

Shaan pushed a hand through her hair, regretting she'd said anything. 'Yes, just a dream. It was nothing. It doesn't matter.' She flapped the front of her dress against her skin. 'Come on, it's getting hotter. Let's just go.'

But Tuon didn't move. 'You have to go to a dream seer, Shaan. These dreams, these nightmares, are becoming more frequent. You should see someone. Maybe even Morfessa.'

'The Guardian's Advisor?' Shaan almost laughed.

'He's the best dream seer in the city.'

'No. And anyway, I've no coin and I hardly think Morfessa would see just anyone. I'm a yard worker, a nobody.'

'I'll pay for it,' Tuon insisted. 'You should see someone. These dreams must mean something, they . . .'

'They mean nothing; it's just the heat. Come on and get dressed I have to get this fish.'

Tuon sighed. 'All right, all right, pass me my clothes.'

Thankful she had backed down, Shaan retrieved a blue dress embroidered with flowers from the cupboard. But Tuon looked up at her as she took it. 'Promise me, Shaan, that you will at least think about consulting a seer. Will you do that?'

'All right!'

Satisfied, Tuon dressed quickly and they clattered down the stairs together. In the kitchen, the Red Pepino's owner, Torg Fairwind, was energetically punching and kneading bread dough, his bald head covered with a kerchief. A thick ring of gold hanging from the top of his right ear glinted as he moved.

He grinned as the girls entered the room, his teeth white against the blackness of his skin. 'Morning.'

Both women recoiled from the heat coming from the stove.

'What are you doing?' Tuon gasped, fanning her face. 'There are bread makers for that you know!'

'Yes, but I don't trust 'em.' He slapped a large lump of dough onto the table. 'No one makes bread like Torg.' He winked at them and punched the dough so hard the table wobbled.

'You off for my fish?' He looked at Shaan and she nodded.

'Just getting my gear.'

'Good. And make sure you have yourself a good wash. I can smell the stink of last night's wine on you! You know, if you washed your hair and put meat on those bones, you could make a little more coin, just like Tuon.'

'No thanks,' Shaan scowled. 'I'd rather stick my head in that oven.' She picked her fish bag off the hook near the back door. 'Come on Tuon.'

The sound of Torg chuckling and the steady thump of the dough followed them as they crossed the courtyard and went out through the back gates.

The streets were mostly empty and the walk through the usually crowded seafarers' quarter was easy going, but as they neared the market square, the streets became busier. Shouts of stallholders calling out their wares came from ahead and carts loaded with vegetables trundled past pulled by snorting muthu.

The market was in a huge square, surrounded on all sides by tall buildings of commerce, eateries and kaf houses. A ring of carts and makeshift stalls filled the open central area, the goods shielded from the sun by multi-coloured cloths strung up on poles. In the middle was a shady garden and water fountain.

The scene was chaotic and familiar, but Shaan felt a touch of uneasiness in the air as she and Tuon wound their way through the maze. People were not as raucous as usual. Vendors huddled together in groups, frowns on their faces, casting nervous glances at the cloudless sky and muttering to one another, and buyers picked half-heartedly through the goods, their haggling muted and lacklustre.

‘Wonder what’s got into everybody,’ Shaan said.

Tuon glanced at her. ‘Haven’t you heard the rumours?’

‘What, of rogue serpents attacking villages? Of course.’ Shaan shrugged. ‘But it can’t be anything more than troublemakers telling tales.’

Tuon frowned at her. ‘Why would anyone lie about that?’

‘I don’t know. But serpents don’t kill people, Tuon. They made a pact long ago to protect us. Besides, I haven’t heard of any of the serpents here in Salmut doing anything and, working in the yards, I think I’d be one of the first to know.’

Tuon gave her a dark look. ‘As if they’d tell a worker what was going on. And you know that the histories say the first warning of His return is the serpents changing. We would be better off to take heed of any warnings than dismiss them. If the Fallen one were to return . . .’

‘The skies would be painted black with despair,’ Shaan interrupted. ‘I know the words of the Foundation Scroll as well as anyone.’

But Tuon was not going to be put off. ‘It also says,’ she continued, ‘that serpents turning on humans would be one of the first signs of His return. And the rumours say it is serpents that attacked those villages in the north.’ She frowned and picked up a length of maroon silk from a nearby stall then tossed it back down. ‘I think it would be prudent to heed any warning signs, that’s all.’

‘There’s no proof it was serpents,’ Shaan said. ‘It’s probably Scanorians.’

‘Scanorians are just dirty little cave dwellers, Shaan. They don’t eat people. They say there were bodies half eaten and others ripped apart. Whole villages were burned to the ground.’

Shaan shook her head. She'd heard the rumours as well, but the serpents were their protectors, their allies. It didn't make sense and she was surprised Tuon was taking the talk so seriously. Usually she was the first to dismiss anything she didn't know for herself to be true. It wasn't like her. The possibility that the attacks might herald the Fallen's return was not something she, or anyone, wanted to believe. He was a legend, a myth, a monster of children's nightmares. To spread rumours about him coming back was . . . She shook her head and pushed the thought of it firmly to the back of her mind, not wanting to dwell on it anymore. She had enough problems already.

Her stomach rumbled as they passed a fruit seller setting up her stall. 'I'm hungry, did you bring any coin?' she asked, stepping over a box of carefully wrapped apples.

'No. Whoops!' Tuon grabbed for her hand as she almost tripped over another box of fruit a young boy had suddenly shoved into her path.

'Hey, you two!' A huge woman in a flowing red dress was making her way toward them. 'What do you think you're doing? Get away from my fruit. You ruin it and you'll be paying for it with your skinny bones!'

Feeling suddenly reckless, Shaan bent down and pretended to fiddle with her sandal, glancing up at Tuon with a grin. It was an age-old thief's trick and it only took her a moment to snatch the fruit.

'Stop it!' Tuon gripped her arm. 'She looks big enough to throw us both in a refuse cart.' She tugged at her elbow, pulling her away.

'Oh, come on! That fat sea cow would never catch us.' Shaan followed Tuon at a jog, deftly lifting some hot morsels off a tray of pastries as a man carried it past her.

'Here,' she caught up and handed her a pastry then pulled the apples from the front of her dress. 'We'll eat the evidence.'

Tuon shook her head with a smile. 'You are a thief, Shaan.' She looked back to see that the large woman's way had been blocked by a couple of fighting boys. 'But you are a lucky one.'

The woman glared at them over the heads of the boys, but could not get past and, flinging a few choice insults at them, she turned and went back to her stall. Catching Tuon's eye, Shaan laughed and they pushed further into the maze of stalls until they reached the gardens, stopping under the shade of some trees by the fountain to eat the food. In the centre of the bubbling pool was a statue of a naked woman holding a fish and, on the far side, partly obscured by the statue, three richly dressed men were talking, their heads close together. Standing near them, a tall man in a black leather jerkin with a sword at his waist watched the area around them with a keen gaze. His skin was tanned and dark hair hung to his shoulders, a day or two of beard growth shadowing his jaw.

Shaan's stomach dropped when she saw him and she quickly averted her eyes and kneeled by the fountain, sluicing water over her face, feeling him scrutinising them. Tuon gave a sharp intake of breath as she kneeled next to her. Men like him made them both nervous. The black jerkin marked him as a member of the Faithful, the city's band of elite armsmen.

He was the wrong kind of person to notice you, worse than the city guards by a long stretch. It was said the Hunters of the Faithful could track and capture anyone or anything, and the Seducers could turn your mind to their will. They were the most powerful and most feared of Salmut's law keepers, the Guardian's chosen warriors, charged with keeping watch against the Fallen's return.

Shaan kept her head down and wondered what such a man was doing in this part of the city. She risked a glance through dripping eyes and saw that he was now deep in conversation with the others. She gave a sigh of relief and stared down into the shallow pond, drawing circles in the water and chewing on the pastry. Beside her, Tuon sipped from her cupped hands then sat up on the lip of the fountain, her back rigid with tension.

Shaan watched a leaf sink in the water. The market used to be one of her favourite spots to work when she'd run with the street packs. Easy pickings with so many distracted by the hustle and bustle. Before the Crooked Man took over anyway, she thought sourly. She was lucky she'd gotten out of the packs before

he took all of them 'under his wing', as he put it. She looked sideways at Tuon. She'd had a run-in of some kind with him. It was the reason she'd come to work at the Red Pepino, arriving not long after Shaan herself. But she never talked about it. She wished she would tell her; how bad could it be?

Shaan played with the leaf. 'Why won't you ever tell me what the Crooked Man did to you?' she said quietly, glancing up at her.

Tuon looked at her, her face pinched. 'For the same reason you don't talk about your time running with the street packs, or your dead mother,' she replied curtly. 'It's over. Finished. There's little point in recounting it, so stop asking.'

Shaan pulled her hands out of the water and perched on the edge of the fountain. 'Sorry,' she said.

Tuon only shook her head, still staring out at the market and sighed. 'It's not your fault.'

Shaan looked away, following her gaze, watching a vendor threading meat onto sticks. Something was bothering Tuon. She was never that curt and she especially never mentioned Shaan's dead mother so bluntly. She knew it hurt her to be reminded of the woman who had loved the drug crist more than her own daughter. She'd died of the addiction when Shaan was just five, leaving her to the street packs, the legion of orphaned children that thieved to survive.

Shaan rubbed at a ragged nail on her right thumb. She barely remembered her mother. She recalled red hair and pale brown eyes in a thin face. Shaan's eyes were such a dark blue they seemed almost purple. Indigo she'd called them in her lucid moments.

'Shaan,' Tuon's voice brought her back. 'Think too much on the past and it will drown you. Didn't you say you had fish to catch?' She raised an eyebrow.

Shaan took a deep breath, feeling weary. 'Yes, in a moment.'

Tuon shook her head, but Shaan couldn't muster the energy to get up. The fish would still be there in an hour.

Behind them, men's voices were rising and falling beneath the sound of the water. They sounded fractious and she turned a little to watch them from the corner of her eye.

Tuon suddenly elbowed her in the side and hissed, 'Don't look at them!'

'Ow!' Shaan glared at her. 'I wasn't.'

'You were! Men like that are dangerous. And if they found out you'd overheard anything, how do you think they'd react?'

'They wouldn't know. I didn't spend six years on the streets without learning something.'

'One of them is of the Faithful,' Tuon snapped.

'I noticed.'

'Then you should also know he's very high ranking. Dangerous.'

'How do you know?' Shaan frowned at her. There was nothing on his jerkin to claim rank.

'I just do,' Tuon said.

'How?'

But her face closed up and she looked away, smoothing her skirt. 'Don't mess with them. It's not worth it.' She rose. 'Come on, you've got fish to catch.' And she started to walk away.

Shaan watched her for a moment before rising to follow. She was acting very strangely of late. She glanced sideways at her face as they walked. Tuon had been both mother and sister to her since she was eleven, but lately she'd been distant and had taken to staring pensively into space, a frown often between her brows.

A shadow passed over and Shaan looked up to see a purple and gold serpent angling in from the west. It was very close to the city. Too close. She stopped, pulling Tuon to a halt beside her.

'It's flying very low,' she said.

'What?' Tuon still sounded irritated.

'It's too low,' she repeated. 'Look.' She pointed upwards.

The serpent was coming closer and closer, its great wings tilted down toward them. It was so close Shaan could see the rider and hear the rushing air beneath the beast's wings. An acrid, sharp scent rode on the wind, like oil burnt to black in a pan.

Her heart pounded as she stared up at it. Riders never brought their serpents this close to the city. Around them other people had also stopped talking and were looking up at the beast as it came lower and lower. It dropped down toward them like a stone thrown by the gods. Its hide gleamed in the sunlight and as Shaan squinted up at it, a strange numbness came over her. She watched its tail unfurling behind it like a pennant in the sky as it streaked down upon them and, without knowing why, lifted a hand to it, stretching her fingers upward.

Suddenly it shrieked, a long, low screech that lifted the hairs on the back of her neck.

'It's attacking!' Someone shouted, and the market erupted in panic. People ran for cover, pushing each other aside as they tried to reach the safety of the surrounding buildings. But few were fast enough and the serpent fell upon them in a hiss of wind and clash of talons, like knives scraping on rock.

'Shaan!' Tuon grabbed her arm dragging her back toward the garden, pulling her down as they went. Stumbling, her knees skinned as she hit the paving. All around was screaming and panic as people threw themselves to the ground or under carts. Dazed, Shaan rolled on her side and saw the man in black running, his face grim, staring beyond her. She followed his gaze to see the serpent swoop down and across the middle of the square. Sparks flew as the barbs on its tail scraped stone. Its wings, spread full, shattered carts and awnings, crushing the people beneath and knocking down a muthu fleeing in terror. The wind of its passing smelled of smoulder and ash.

It passed by them so close, Shaan saw its rider, his face full of fear as the beast rampaged beyond his control. For a moment he looked straight back at her and

then he was gone as with another shriek, the serpent soared up and winged away to the east.