

THE DRAGON STAR

REALMS OF SHADOW AND GRACE

PARTS 1–3 OF 7 FROM VOLUME ONE

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OVERTURE



SUNSET SWALLOWS the sun as darkness devours the land, night chasing day chasing night in an eternal cycle forever racing across continents and oceans again and again and again. This endless war of light and dark rolls over realms of shadow and grace, lands separated by wide waters to distance their respective peoples.

Onaia.

A world of seven known realms. One sits bound in ice and inaccessible. The second is denied to all by powers unimaginable. Five more realms are each populated by vastly different peoples.

The Iron Realm.

A landmass of human dominions — nations at war and peace or plotting and praying for one or the other or more of the same.

The Tanshen Dominion.

At war with its northern sister nation for decades in dispute of theological and political practicalities, its capital of Tsee-Kaanlin sits in the southern region not far from the coast. The palace of Zhan Taujin Letan-Nin resides at the city's center.

In a room in a library in that palace sits a man of early years dressed in the black silk robes of a palace philosopher.

Shadows and dust. Lamplight and camphor fumes.

The man looks around the ill-kempt study and thinks: *The old man never did learn to clean after himself. All those hours making it tidy, and now it is a grime-tomb of old books and loose paper.*

The man sees something in the lamplight. Something on the book-strewn desk.

What is that?

The man leans closer.

Odd. No dust on this one.

The man picks up a thin, leather-bound volume with a clean cover. He opens it and flips through a few pages.

The man frowns. Licks his lips.

What is this?

The man turns the pages to the front of the notebook. Reads on. Scratches his head. Bites his tongue. Rubs his chin.

This can't be real. Can't be true. But it's in my uncle's hand. Twenty years ago by the dates. Not these. These notes on the side are new. What do the heretics have to do with anything?

The man sits in the musty cushions of the chair, head in hands, as he continues to read.

What does it mean? Can it be real? Could my uncle have been right? Why didn't he tell me of his suspicions before he died? He never trusted me.

The man closes the book.

What do I do with this? Who can I show it to that will believe me? The high priest is mentioned in the notes. I could take it to him if he were not missing. He and that little tahneff and her lovely tutor. There must be someone I can show it to who won't try to kill me for its contents.

The man leans back in the chair and stares up through the small window at the sister moons.

There is one person I can show it to who won't kill me. Who will even reward me. Yes. That is what I will do.

The man smiles and holds the notebook tightly in his hands.



EPISODE ONE



THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

NIGHT SKY. Stars blazing in coal-black emptiness. Celestial magnificence.

The heavenly firmament dimmed by an unexpected light. Brilliance and beauty. A new star. Brighter than all others.

Sunrise and footsteps. Boots and bare feet treading the dust of a winding road. Thousands of eyes cast toward the horizon, following a beacon of boundless radiance.

Saltwater waves lapping against barnacled hulls.

Sand and forest and ice-clear skies melting in rain. Rainbows rising over weathered stone, splintered with time, yet retaining shape and form and function.

Clouds painting the sky in a sinuous spiral.

A woman standing atop a temple dais. Below, thousands kneeling.

A voice resounding with otherworldly power — speaking in every attendant ear.

“I am the new goddess come to release you.”

Lee-Nin woke from the dream, heart thundering within her chest. She clasped her free hand to her mouth to silence her quickening breath.

The dream. The dream had filled her sleep. Moments of unconsciousness she could ill afford.

She glanced around, eyes straining in the cloud-covered blackness of the night. She listened intently — tree branches clattered in the mild breeze, crickets sang their simple song, and somewhere nearby, the gurgle of moving water echoed through the forest.

Bark biting into her back, she sighed as she relaxed against the trunk of the sheltering tree. Her arm still clutched the slumbering girl to her chest, the child’s gentle exhalations wafting against the back of her wrist.

Sao-Tauna slept, momentarily oblivious to the danger enveloping her life. Does she dream? Lee-Nin wondered. Did the sleeping girl also behold visions of the new god? She brushed a stray hair from the girl’s face as she pondered the dream.

Why had it come to her now? Now, after so long without any dreams. A dream that came unbidden to many others for months. The palace staff had whispered recitations of the dream even under threat of punishment. From all accounts, carried through the iron gates by tradesmen and traders and local townsfolk, the visions came nightly to thousands throughout the dominion. Rumors circulated that the dream also haunted the sleep of those in neighboring dominions.

Forbidding discussion of the dream only ensured more spoke of it — in secret. The zhan of the Tanshen Dominion held considerable power over the lives of his subjects, but his will could not extend to their dormant minds. People feared what they could not understand, and no royal explanation accounted for the phenomenon of a single dream inhabiting thousands and thousands of people's sleep simultaneously each night. How could people not speak of a dream they shared with others? How could they not wonder at its source? How could they not dread its import? How could they not suspect that the god who spoke to them in the dream might be real?

Even the threat, and the occasional example, of beheading could not still their tongues. The zhan and the priests might have declared the dream a blasphemy, but too many dreamers walked the land to make enforcing a ban on discussion a possibility. And despite protestations to the contrary, no one believed the palace councilors and the temple hierarchy to be immune from a dream that afflicted peasants and farmers and tanners and brew-wives in equal measure.

Not equivalent in the sense that the dream came to all people, but that it came to persons of all stations. Not everyone's nights beheld visions of a sacrilegious new god. Only three in ten saw the dream when they closed their eyes for the night. But that number had grown from one in a hundred, and all expected it to climb with each passing evening. Lee-Nin should have suspected the dream would come, but as her god, the true god of her heart, seemed so far from her, she had not anticipated any other god to attempt a lodging there.

Might the dream be a sign? What could it mean? Why did it come now when she faced such danger, when the child in her arms depended upon her for protection? The wardens had said they would kill her — murder a child thought too threatening to allow to live. How might a seven-year-old girl threaten the Tanshen Dominion?

Lee-Nin stroked Sao-Tauna's cheek. The girl wrinkled her nose and shifted in her sleep. Lee-Nin took a deep breath, emotion welling up to choke her throat and involuntarily clench the fingers of her free hand.

It didn't matter why the tahn wanted Sao-Tauna dead. It didn't matter how far they had to go to outrun the wardens sent to slay the girl. Lee-Nin would protect Sao-Tauna regardless of the requirements or the costs. It seemed improbable, but she had accomplished other impossible tasks. She would realize this responsibility, irrespective of the risks.

Lee-Nin turned her head to the sound of a snapping twig, carried on the wind. The dull ring of muffled metal followed, the familiar slap of leathered steel against men's thighs. The soft snuffling of dogs with their noses close to the ground reached her ears as well.

She shook the girl gently, placing her fingers across the child's lips to stifle any possible utterance of alarm. Sao-Tauna opened her eyes, wide and instantly awake, so unlike the normal groggy rousing of a child. Sao-Tauna rarely behaved like other children. Lee-Nin never concerned herself with the reasons — she only cared for the girl.

"The wardens are coming again." Lee-Nin held up Sao-Tauna to whisper in her ear, and the girl threw her slender arms around Lee-Nin's neck.

Sao-Tauna said nothing, nodding her head in mute acceptance. She seldom spoke, but it did not escape Lee-Nin's notice that in the days since their flight began, the girl had not uttered a single

word. Lee-Nin stood silently and held the girl in one arm as she clutched the folds of her dress with her free hand, holding them up to avoid dragging the ground and leaving even more of a trail for her adversaries to follow.

She turned away from the sounds of the approaching men, stealthily picking a path through low-hanging branches toward another noise, one she hoped might provide the means of eluding their pursuers, if only temporarily. She ducked the knotted arm of a tree and followed the sound of flowing water.

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

STONE-SHARPENED STEEL bit into oak, the log halves falling from the tree stump as the sound of the splitting rolled across the gently swaying, dew-stained stalks of barley. The cloud-draped night sky provided little light to illuminate the small farmhouse by the field and the man who stood chopping wood in the darkness.

Sha-Kutan placed another log on the weathered stump and hefted the well-worn ax handle above his shoulder. He did not need light to see the timber. He sensed the placement of the firewood without benefit of sight. He knew the ax blade would slide deep into its fibrous flesh with the same certainty he perceived his breath gliding in and out of his lungs while silently reciting the mantra of Kana Joshi, bestower of peaceful minds.

“My mind is a clear sky — a brilliant sun blazing — illuminating All.”

The ash wood handle of the ax slid through the crook of his palm, guiding the edge of the metal head effortlessly through the air, the blade singing softly on its way toward its inevitable destination — a terminus it did not meet.

The ax blade hovered a fraction of a finger’s width above the rough-cut edge of the log, its descent arrested in a moment by the powerful arms of the man wielding it. Sha-Kutan slowly lowered the ax to the damp grass surrounding his feet.

He turned and looked into the blackness of the night, perceiving the imperceptible with senses extending beyond the fivefold physical conduits of human apprehension. Someone walked in the woods bordering the fields. More than one person. One closer than the others. No, two. A woman and a child. A girl. And many behind them. Men. In pursuit.

They come this way.

They cannot come here.

They come this way, nonetheless.

What will we do?

We could hide.

Yes. Hide until they pass.

But why do they pursue the woman?

We cannot become entangled.

No. No, we must not become entangled.

We should hide.

Yes. Conceal ourselves and let them pass.

And if they find us?

Then we should pray.

Yes, we should pray. Pray that we will not need to kill them.

Sha-Kutan flipped the ax handle up to fall against the tightly wound muscles of his shoulder, looking once more toward the interlopers rapidly approaching his home — his sanctuary against the past. Where might he hide that no one would find him? Years and years had passed as he attempted to answer that question, and there he stood, waiting for strangers to infect his solitude.

He walked away from the small farmhouse and its adjacent barn, carrying the ax with him, hoping against all hope that he would not find need of it that night.

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

TATTERED CLOTH rippled across the surface of the water, slow cross currents twisting it to sink and rise and descend again. Lee-Nin held Sao-Tauna above the thigh-high river, letting the folds of her dress billow out behind her, hoping the fabric would help dampen the sound of their passing through the gently flowing water.

She walked as quickly as possible, reaching her feet out cautiously with each step to avoid rocks and other obstacles along the river bottom. To her great relief, the slender forest tributary meandered between the trees in sharp and unpredictable turns, making it harder for her pursuers to see her when they inevitably followed her trail to the water's edge. She wanted to put as much distance between where she entered the river and her exit as possible. As she pushed through the bone-chilling waters, she considered her options.

She had not always been good at seeing possibilities and quickly planning how to utilize circumstances to her advantage, but she had honed those skills through repeated use since reaching adulthood. After a certain age, she had found that she could always think her way out of a problematic situation, often while events arose around her. She would do the same with this series of particular predicaments. She would reason out a path to safety for herself and Sao-Tauna. And, if necessary, for the girl alone.

Coming around a curve in the river, she saw what she needed. The riverbank had so far been either too steep or too rocky to leave the water safely. Climbing the pitched earth of the angled river's edge required grasping branches that would no doubt break and announce her passage to her pursuers. Likewise, stepping from the water to the bare stone would leave behind a puddle clearly visible even in the dim light of the cloudy night. A moss-covered outcropping of rock, like the one she steered toward, would sop up the water as she departed the river and conceal her new direction of flight.

She sat Sao-Tauna on the moss coating the flat boulder along the riverside and hauled herself out of the water. She took Sao-Tauna's hand and guided the girl into the dense trees of the forest. She walked several paces before pausing to wring the water from her dress. It took precious moments they needed for fleeing, but it lightened her load considerably and made movement between the forest vegetation easier. She wished she had time to take off her boots and empty the water slogging in them, but she could easily live with this discomfort — she had, after all, lived for more than a week with the pinch of footwear fashioned more for palace halls than open ground.

She hefted Sao-Tauna back into her arms and began walking as silently as possible through the maze of trees, trying to use the edge of her vision to better navigate in the inky darkness beneath the canopy of leaves. She hoped the gloom slowed down the wardens even as she prayed that the river proved a lasting distraction to their tracking hounds.

“The river bought us some time.” She did not try to deceive herself that she spoke to comfort Sao-Tauna. She knew she needed the words even more than the girl. “With luck, we might lose them tonight.” She considered the likelihood of this possibility and the number of times she had entertained it over the course of the past week. “At least for a day or so.”

She could not keep running, or if she were to continue running, she needed to run faster. She might lose the wardens for a few hours, or a day, but they always returned to her trail. She needed to think further ahead to get farther afield. Maybe she could double back to the river and follow it in hopes of finding a boat or a raft, something that could carry her faster than her feet might allow. A wagon maybe. She might hitch a ride with a farmer or a merchant and try to outpace her pursuers. She had a pretty smile and felt convinced she could charm her way into a wagon ride to the nearest village or town, but to gain more distance, she would need to hire transport, and for that, she needed currency.

Having left the palace in haste, she had barely escaped with the dress around her waist and the coins in her hidden pocket. Fortunately, she had planned ahead enough to have a hidden pocket with gold coins, wrapped in cloth to silence their presence. Unfortunately, the coins had never been intended to provide more than a day or two of emergency currency, enough to allow her to make her way to a more significant stash of reserves. Her escape from the palace with Sao-Tauna had necessitated a different path of departure than her contingencies had allowed for. While she had foreseen the possibility of fleeing the palace, she had never envisioned doing so with someone else in tow, particularly not a small girl whose life had been forfeit for unknown reasons.

She needed to find some coin to hire transportation. Which meant she needed to steal it. And it was easier to steal coins than horses. *Much easier*, she remembered. She would not make that mistake again.

Her thoughts of escape so consumed her mind that she did not notice stepping from the forest’s edge until she stood in the small field of grain beyond it. *Barley*, she thought, absently rubbing the seeds of a nearby stalk between her thumb and forefinger.

The clouds briefly parted, allowing the light of the larger half-moon to illuminate the field and a small farmhouse with a barn at its far side. A path cut through the field not far from where they stood, running from the forest’s edge to the yard beside the house. Sao-Tauna raised her finger to point at the farmhouse as the clouds once more extinguished the moon.

“Yes, I see,” Lee-Nin said. “They might have food.”

And coins, she thought as she hastened toward the path revealed moments before in the brief flash of moonlight.

Lee-Nin followed the thin dirt trail up the middle of the tract of grain, running as fast as she could. Even in the dim light of the clouded moons, she and Sao-Tauna would be easily visible if the wardens were nearby in the woods. She reached the edge of the field a few moments later,

pausing as she stood in a yard of stone and dirt and patches of low grass. The farmhouse sat dark and silent.

How late was it? Had the owners gone to bed hours before or only just recently? Were they light sleepers or deep in unshakable slumber? Another question occurred to her — were they dreaming a dream of a new star and a new god?

If she announced herself, the occupants of the farmhouse might rise and light a lantern, a glow that would shine for many strides in every direction, giving a guiding lamp of curiosity to the pursuing wardens should they see it. Moreover, she would need to convince the farmers to help her with food and possibly a place to shelter. An easier option existed.

With Sao-Tauna clinging tightly to her neck, Lee-Nin edged around the yard, stopping outside the door to the barn. Twice the size of the house with a wide door, the barn smelled, even from outside, of hay and animals. She cracked the door open and peered inside. Her eyes could adjust no further to the darkness, the interior of the barn a black pool of mystery. She listened for signs that might indicate a horse. Against her better judgment, and her still stinging recollections of past follies, she acknowledged that in this circumstance, it might be easier to steal a horse than to enter a sleeping farmer's home and rob it of coins, surely hidden to protect against just such an invasion.

Lee-Nin pulled the door wider still and stepped across the threshold. The familiar grunting of a sow came to her ears. With the door nearly wide open, the shadows within the barn began to take shape, revealing three large pigs, a handful of chickens stirring to cluck, and a lean-looking goat, but no horse. She closed the door to the barn and turned to the farmhouse with a sigh. Did she risk the time and consequences of failure to rob the sleeping farmers, or did she press her slender advantage and try to find the road that must lead from the farm to the nearest town? Towns thrived on trade, and to make purchase of passage, she needed something to exchange, preferably shiny metal pressed into small disks and embossed with the zhan's visage. The house might also have food.

Lee-Nin hitched Sao-Tauna higher on her hip and crossed the yard, considering how best to burgle the farmers she assumed lay asleep within the log-walled house. A low porch of weathered wood sat outside the entrance to the farmhouse. It moaned against her weight as she stepped across it. She froze, listening for sounds from inside the house. Hearing none, she raised her hand to the door and pressed gently. She feared the door might be locked, but it swung open, the metal hinges making a low rasping sound.

She opened the door as wide as she dared, hoping the shadows would announce their true natures as had happened in the barn. She waited and listened, turning her head, straining to see or hear what might awaken to confront her. She heard no snoring, nor even gentle breathing beyond the shallow breaths of Sao-Tauna in her arms. She stepped into the house, the floorboards squealing under her weight.

Lee-Nin stopped again — waiting.

Nothing moved. No one woke.

She allowed the hope flowering in her breast to blossom for a moment before nipping it with the hard blade of experience. The farmhouse might be empty, but that did not mean dangers did not await her within its walls.

She closed the door and put Sao-Tauna down, knowing the girl would not move without explicit instruction to do so. Lee-Nin fumbled in the darkness to close the shutters of the only two windows and searched with slowly moving outstretched hands to find a lantern. A flint box rested on the table beside the oil lamp, and it took her only a few moments to strike a spark and bring a flame to the wick.

With a dull orange glow illuminating the little one-room house, she surveyed her surroundings and formulated a plan. The home had no inner walls, although several support beams holding up the rafters divided the interior into clear living spaces. A simple kitchen with a few pots and pans sat near the fireplace. A sleeping space and a bed with a lumpy mattress lay opposite the cooking area. A threadbare blanket curled off the bed and onto the floor. A long oak table filled the center of the dwelling, apparently used for eating and woodwork. A small stack of books sat at one end near a lone chair. Against her will, she found herself examining the books as she held the lantern high.

Her eyes hovered on the cover of the top book. She recognized the language as Mumtiba, although she could not read it. The embossed wheel with twelve spokes above the words marked it as a Pashist text from Juparti. She could not remember why the wheel represented Pashism, but it did not matter. Holding such a book marked heresy in the Tanshen Dominion. Punishable by whipping and worse.

Who would leave such a thing sitting on their dining table? Lee-Nin wondered.

Someone who meant to return quickly, she admonished herself, setting the lamp on the table as she turned to inspect the rest of the house. Books had been her saviors more than once, but just then, she needed coins, not words. She also needed food. She saw a tall wooden pantry in the corner of the kitchen. They had no time to stop, but they could always eat while they ran.

But which took precedence, food or money? Would a farmer this poor even have a few coins to steal? And would he be home soon? She felt certain a single man lived in the house. It held no feminine touches that would be present regardless of the poverty of a farming couple.

A scuffing of leather against wood brought her attention back to the door where Sao-Tauna still stood, fidgeting slightly. The girl caught Lee-Nin's eye and pointed at the table, where a hard-looking half-round of dinbao, the Shen flatbread of wheat and oats, rested beside the books. Lee-Nin frowned. She'd been so distracted by the books that she hadn't even noticed the bread. She looked at Sao-Tauna and her frown deepened. When was the last time she had found food to feed the child? Dawn of that day? The day prior?

She took the scrap of bread and handed it to Sao-Tauna, pulling her from the door and placing the girl in the chair at the table while she began to rummage through the sparsely stocked pantry. She found a lump of cheese wrapped in molding cloth and a hunk of cured meat along with the remains of another flat loaf of dinbao. Not much, but more at once than their stomachs had seen in days. She swallowed the saliva suddenly pooling beneath her tongue as she placed the provisions

on the table and looked for a sack of some kind to carry them. She reconsidered her plan. She would give the house a quick tossing in search of hidden funds, but the stolen food already provided them a better bounty than they might have hoped for an hour ago.

Best to quickly clasp Father Fortune's surreptitious bounty and abscond before Mother Fate arrived with an offering of her own.

She winced at the unbidden and long-forgotten phrase, as well the memories that came with it. She found a small sack hanging from a hook on the wall and turned back to the table and Sao-Tauna just as the wood of the porch outside the door creaked with the weight of firmly planted feet. Lee-Nin dropped the sack and rushed to Sao-Tauna, pulling her from the chair even as she snatched a dull-looking meat knife from the table, turning sideways to brandish it as the door to the farmhouse swung open.

In the hazy, flickering glow of the lamplight stood the largest man she had ever seen, a good two heads taller than a normal Shen, his wide chest stretching the fabric of his faded shirt, his shoulders filling the doorframe. He kept his long black hair pulled back behind his neck and his beard shaved clean, exposing a misshapen face, marred even further by a scar across his right cheek. In his powerful arms, he held a massive ax, the handle as long as his thigh, the metal head at least five hands wide.

His near-black eyes stared at Lee-Nin. She clutched Sao-Tauna tighter and raised her feeble blade.

The man's voice rasped and rumbled as it fell over his lips and into her ears.

"You should not be here."

THE FUGITIVES



ING-KU

THE DOGS sniffed the riverbank, running back and forth as they dug their noses into the soft loam along the water's edge, scampering over rocks and fallen tree trunks, tails wagging with excitement. Another dog did the same on the other side of the river. The warden in leather armor beside the dog looked back across the water to his companions and raised his arm with a fist, moving it from right to left in the silent signal for "no."

Ing-Ku, commander of fourth cadre of the Tanshen zhan's palace wardens, waved for his lone man across the river to return. He glanced both ways along the flowing water and frowned. His quarry continued to be more resourceful than expected. When he left the palace in pursuit of her and the child, he assumed he would return before nightfall. After ten days, when he felt certain he had run her to ground, the woman somehow happened upon a river and knew how to take advantage of the circumstance.

"Med-Gan." Ing-Ku turned from the river as he called to his second-in-command. The warden broke away from following the tracking dogs and walked toward Ing-Ku.

"Yes, Commander." Med-Gan straightened as he spoke, his full height putting him half a head taller than his commanding officer.

Ing-Ku looked up at the young warden and paused to examine him a moment before speaking. He noticed how the man always accentuated his height when standing near him. The man's body gestures implied this as a sign of respect, but the look in his eyes spoke to other reasons. Ing-Ku did not especially like his second-in-command, but he had been assigned the man by his high commander, and he always did his best with the weapons provided him. This particular weapon thought itself sharp and deadly. Tall, strong, quick with a blade, it suspected itself dangerous. Ing-Ku, however, knew otherwise. This weapon was dull, rusted, and forged of weak metal. The son of a powerful court councilor, Med-Gan had never earned a position, never struggled to accomplish a goal, but instead found all doors opened for him, all hardships borne by others, all attainments granted as a right rather than a reward. Such tempering made for soft steel.

"Take half of the company and follow the river east," Ing-Ku said. "A dog on either side. I will pursue in the opposite direction."

"Yes, Commander." Med-Gan visibly struggled to contain the smile that strove to break across his face.

“One of us will find her.” Ing-Ku locked eyes with his junior officer. “If it is you, do not hesitate to follow your orders. Kill the girl on sight.”

“Yes, Commander.” Med-Gan nodded as he spoke.

“The girl is more dangerous than you know,” Ing-Ku continued. “Use arrows if you can. Take her from a distance. If you must close on her, do so with stealth and attack without warning.”

“I understand, Commander.”

Ing-Ku very much doubted the young man understood at all. He hoped, for the sake of the dominion more than the callow soldier before him, that Med-Gan would not hesitate to follow his orders. Although the tahn had not explained his orders, he had been very insistent about the danger his daughter represented and the need for her swift death.

“What about the woman?” Med-Gan asked.

Ing-Ku continued to stare at Med-Gan as he considered this question. The woman intrigued him. How had she eluded him for so long? Where had she learned such skills? Was she what she appeared to be, or was her role in the events of the past week more complicated than anyone suspected? Her death had been ordained when she fled with the girl, but he felt an unshakable desire to question her. To learn the truth of her nature and her actions.

“Bring her to me. Alive.” Ing-Ku nodded to the young officer and walked away.

As he gathered half of the small contingent of wardens to accompany him along the western run of the river, he hoped he would be the one to find the girl and the woman. He held a not irrational fear that if his overly ambitious and inexperienced sub-commander came across the females first, he would lose more than one of his men that night.

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

THE SCENT of fear and exhaustion mingled with the odor of desperation and anger. Another aroma filled the air. What was it? Gratitude? Relief?

Sha-Kutan swung the door closed behind his back as he stepped into his small house. He looked at the woman holding the girl on the far side of the table. The blade in her hand wavered where she brandished it against him.

“We were hungry,” the woman said, her eyes fixed on the ax resting across his right shoulder. “We only wanted some food. We’ll go. We mean you no harm.”

“You could not harm me.”

Sha-Kutan continued to stare at the woman and girl, wondering if he had made a mistake, if he had set himself on the wrong path. He had stood at the edge of the woods and waited, sensing the woman and girl as they approached, seeing them emerge from the tree line and follow the trail across the field. He had cursed his reticence to buy a horse or a mule when the woman examined the barn. She surely would have mounted a horse and fled.

When she entered the house, he had pondered what to do. Let her steal food and escape? This seemed the best course of action. The men pursuing her would find the farm soon, see evidence of her theft, and follow her, leaving him once more in peace.

But how far could they flee with the men so close on their trail? How much longer could they run before exhaustion rendered flight impossible? *The Book of Golden Words* says, “*Our door must always be open to the weary traveler, our larder a provision for those in need. Only by seeing the lost and outcast as our own can our hearts divine the essence of the Divine.*”

The words of his faith tore at him, urging him to action, but it was the girl who had brought him from his hidden vantage among the leaves and branches. Clinging to the woman’s neck, too tired for walking, the girl looked over the woman’s shoulder, out across the yard and through the darkness and into Sha-Kutan’s eyes. The girl had held that stare, watching Sha-Kutan as he watched her — while the woman carried her first to the barn and then into the house.

Who was the girl? How had she seen him? Who was the woman to her? Why did the men hunt them? Should he risk his hard-fought safety to learn these answers? Could he follow the edicts of his faith and his curiosity?

He would find out.

Sha-Kutan lowered the ax head to the floor and leaned the handle against the wall. The woman relaxed slightly.

“Eat.” Sha-Kutan gestured to the modest provisions stacked on the table and the lone chair beside the woman.

Best to say little.

Yes. Let her tell her story.

The woman slowly sat in the chair, the girl in her lap. She lowered the meat knife to the table, leaving it within easy reach. She tore a hunk from the hard, flat loaf of dinbao and handed it to the girl. The girl mutely accepted the bread and began to gnaw on the thin crust as the woman used the blade to slice free a chunk of dried meat.

Sha-Kutan stared at the woman and girl as they ate in silence. The woman did not look at him directly, but she kept him in the corner of her eyes, her hand never straying far from the blade. He crossed to a low table by the window and retrieved a clay pitcher of water and a dented pewter cup. He poured the water into the cup and sat them both on the table beside the woman and girl.

The woman glanced at him as he stepped across the small space and lowered himself to the edge of the bed. She shifted in her chair to keep him in view as she handed the cup of water to the girl. The girl emptied the cup in a long gulp, holding it up as a signal for more. The woman poured more water into the cup, and the girl offered it up to her instead of drinking it. The woman accepted the cup and took a long sip before placing it on the table and cutting a large slice of cheese that she split in half to share with the girl.

Saying nothing may be too little.

And we have too little time.

“Why do the men hunt you?” Sha-Kutan asked.

The woman’s head snapped toward the door, and her hand reached for the knife. She clenched the hilt of the blade and then looked back to Sha-Kutan.

“How do you know about the men following us?” the woman asked.

“The same way I knew you were headed toward my farm.”

The woman frowned and squinted at Sha-Kutan, clearly unhappy with such a vague answer.

“Do they wish to harm you?” Sha-Kutan asked.

“Yes,” the woman answered.

“Why?”

The woman put down the meat knife, wiped the grease from her lips with the back of her hand, and took a sip of water before speaking.

“My husband died. Killed in the war. A border skirmish with the Daeshen army. He had defied his family to marry me. His father sits on the Inner Council. Mine sold cloth in the bazaar. His family tolerated me because he gave them no choice. As the only child, he could not easily be disinherited. After my husband’s death, his mother fell ill with grief. His father did not wait long after her passing to take a new and younger wife. She bore him a child. A boy. An heir. He then had the courts declare my marriage to his son void and my daughter named a sacrilege. He is an

influential man with powerful allies. The soldiers he sends to hunt us will kill me and my daughter if they catch us. I'm sorry we broke into your home. We have not eaten in days."

The woman took another sip of water.

A tragic story.

A story woven of lies.

Why would she lie?

What does she hide?

There was one truth in her tale.

Yes. The men will kill her and the child if they find them.

"We will go." The woman tightened her arm around the girl and placed the palm of her free hand on the table to help her stand.

"They are too close," Sha-Kutan said. "And you are too weak. They will find you."

"How close?" The woman looked at the door and licked her lips.

"Close enough."

The girl did not turn to the door. Her eyes held Sha-Kutan's, staring at him with a look of curious expectancy. It unsettled him, and few things disconcerted Sha-Kutan.

Why does the girl stare at us so?

She is a danger, but I do not know how.

Maybe this is why they are hunted.

A dangerous child?

A child in danger?

What should we do?

We can hold them and turn them over to the soldiers.

Yes. The soldiers will leave them.

And we will be safe again.

And they will kill the girl.

And they will kill the woman.

After they have raped her.

We could...

Yes. We could...

The woman had joined the girl in staring at Sha-Kutan. He did not remember standing, but the motion must have brought the woman's attention. Her eyes darted to the door and back to Sha-Kutan, her hand blindly searching out the hilt of the meat knife.

"They will kill you if you run," Sha-Kutan said. "I can hide you until they pass."

The woman glanced again at the door, her face a mixture of relief and fear and confusion. The girl had not altered her focus. A thin smile filled her lips as she continued to stare at Sha-Kutan. He found the smile more disquieting than the stare. No one ever smiled at Sha-Kutan.

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

SLOE-BLACK EYES opened to crow-black night. Lips parted as lungs panted, and the back of a slender hand wiped a sweat-slicked brow.

Junari, the Prophet, the First Dreamer, the Mother Shepherd, sat up in the darkness of her small tent, pulled the threadbare blanket from her shoulders, and breathed deeply, hoping to calm the pounding in her chest.

The dream always left her in this state — mouth dry, heart hammering, gasping for air, soaked with sweat. She tugged at the front of her white linen shift, the damp fabric clinging to her chest. She tied her hair back with a leather thong. Rising to her knees, she drew back the flap of the tent and crawled out into the cool night air, the pale light of the sister moons infusing the thin clouds above with a milky luminescence.

Junari wiggled her toes in the dew-slicked grass beneath her feet in silent delight. Beside her tent stood a man and a woman, keeping watch, standing guard over the Prophet and her dreams, long, thin blades hanging from their belts. She nodded to them, and they returned the gesture. They were accustomed to her nocturnal wanderings. Jupiterus and Kantula. The first two who volunteered to protect her. Insisted, really. She did not fear her followers, but the dreams preceded her arrival across the land, and those who did not dream of the new goddess often grew angry at the appearance of her pilgrims.

Junari walked away from the tent, the guards following several paces behind her. She strolled between row after row of sleeping men and women and children. Faithful dreamers who had left their homes and towns and lives to become pilgrims in search of a new faith in a new god, trailing after a prophet they trusted implicitly. Trusted because she appeared to them in their dreams each night. The same dreams that showed them walking across the land, sailing over the Zha Ocean, and rebuilding a forgotten temple crumbling to dust in the Forbidden Realm.

The rows of sleeping pilgrims radiated out in a spiral from her tent at the center. They did this each night in imitation of the many spiral images in the dreams. She had not asked for the tent, but her closest adviser, Raedalus, insisted upon it. He had explained that while she did not want to view herself as any more special than the men and women flocking to follow her, those men and women desired to see her as separate and removed. Approachable, human, but more important than themselves. They placed their hopes and fears and faith in her. She could not sleep among

them as family. She needed to be present, but apart. A leader to be followed, not a confidant to be questioned.

This defined the problem — the real reason she woke each night in a sweat. No one questioned her. Not the pilgrims. Not Raedalus. Not even old Taksati, her aged but indefatigable servant for the past twenty years. Taksati, who had always challenged her in private, probing her decisions through the deceptive form of simple queries, offering advice based on the experience of decades of service in the temple. Not even Taksati inquired about Junari's choices as she led the pilgrims toward a future glimpsed nightly in their collective dreams.

In the absence of others to question her, Junari questioned herself — doubts gripping her mind to whisper uncertainties in her ears. How did she know her actions were those intended by her new god? How could she be certain her proclamations bore the approval of this mysterious deity? How could she be the vessel for this glorious goddess working wonders in the world? How could she, who had lost her faith entirely, who had spent years pantomiming the beliefs of her younger days, imitating the import of the rites and rituals of a Pashist priest — how could *she* be the one chosen by the Goddess to lead her people?

But the Goddess had selected her. When the dream first came to her, she ignored it, assuming it to be a fantasy of her desires for fulfillment. Then it came again. Night after night. So many nights that she began to wonder if she had gone mad — if her loss of faith in the Pashist pantheon of gods and goddesses had pushed her into a mind-fever of delusion. Then Taksati had confided in her. She, too, saw visions of a new goddess as she dreamt. And in those dreams, Junari led a procession of pilgrims to an ancient temple in the Forbidden Realm.

She found this impossible to believe as more than a coincidence. She imaged that she spoke in her sleep and Taksati overheard, incorporating Junari's phantasmal night notions into her own sleep-rendered stories. Then Raedalus came to her with his confession — he, too, dreamed of her each night. Then others in the temple. A handful at first. Then came the tales, brought by traders and penitent travelers to the temple's blessing pools, telling of people across the Juparti Dominion dreaming the same dream. A dream where a Pashist woman priest led them to their salvation through a new female god.

As the dreams spread, and rumors of dreamers in other dominions reached the temple, the quadrad of high priests who administered the earthly actions of her Pashist sect demanded an explanation and summoned her at dawn for questioning.

NINE MONTHS AGO

JUNARI FOLLOWED the senior cleric, a man she had known for years, but whose name would not come to her tongue. Vaporous, ungraspable fears clouded her mind, making common tasks seem impossible — like remembering a man's name.

She focused on the hem of his robes to still her thoughts, trying to calm her breathing. Every breath intended to bring equanimity only carried more apprehension and doubt. The very air of the temple gardens they walked through seemed heavy with a cloying anxiety. Rose bushes spoke to

her of heresy and the punishment for usurping the high priests' place in the inner order of the faith. Blossoms of the tinnat tree whispered the names of the false prophets denounced throughout Pashist history. Even the grass mumbled of excommunication and divine censure.

By the time the old cleric guided her through the long, stone passage to the quadrad's council chambers, her thoughts buzzed and rattled — a nest of wasps fallen from the branch and looking to sting. As she entered to stand before the four tanjari, the high priests, she felt the wasps migrate downward, leaving her stomach queasy, but her mind empty — a hollow and deserted hive. The quadrad's inner chamber held four large, darkly stained wooden chairs, a contrast to the brightly polished white marble of the walls. Two tall windows let the dim dawn light into the room, oil lamps studding the support columns and complementing the illumination. Across the curved dome of the ceiling, painted gods and goddesses of the Pashist pantheon frolicked in a heavenly garden of glowing trees and luminescent ponds.

Two men and two women comprised the quadrad, as custom dictated since the first Pashist council more than four thousand years ago. All four had seen at least sixty summers and had held every position within the hierarchy of the temple, from kitchen servant to meditative monk or nun, to pastoral guide and teacher, as the requirements of their office demanded. The eldest tanjari, Garonthus, a stern man of seventy-five with piercing blue eyes and mirthless lips, sat beside the youngest, Vadee, a woman of sixty, who still held the voluptuous beauty of her youth, her dark black skin full and fleshy, her face filled with open wonder and easy joy. The third tanjari looked concerned, staring at Junari with worried eyes, a frown creasing the loose folds of his chestnut flesh. Kananthus had been a member of the quadrad the longest and always took the most cautious stance on any quadrad rulings. The final tanjari, Pagistaa, entered the room from the back door behind the raised seats of her companions. She seemed angered, barely glancing at Junari while taking her seat. She brushed the thick mane of gray hair back from her narrow eyes and settled in her chair. Surprisingly, she voided the customary introductory prayers and began the interview without preamble.

"What have you done now?" Tanjari Pagistaa appeared to be restraining herself from shouting. "And how have you accomplished it?"

Junari's wasps stung at her gut. Pagistaa had been her prefect, one of her mentors. Her demeanor did not suggest she would give Junari any preferential treatment. If her former mentor turned against her, what hope did she have of facing the other quadrad members? The tanjaries stared at her, awaiting an answer. She forced herself to speak words, any words.

"I have done nothing." Junari tugged at the sleeves of her robes, pulling them down, self-conscious, as always, of the scarred, pink flesh of her forearms. No need to remind the council of that incident.

"Explain the dreams." Tanjari Garonthus leaned forward in his chair.

"I cannot explain the dreams." Junari rubbed her hands across her priestly robes to absorb the sweat dampening her palms.

"Is this some manner of The Sight?" Tanjari Vadee asked, her big eyes seeming almost cheerful with her question.

“Are you a seer in secret?” Tanjari Garonthus asked. “Have you spread the dreams with an unknown aspect of The Sight?”

“I am no seer,” Junari replied.

While Pashists did not fear The Sight, and certain sects openly cultivated its development and use, the power emanating from the ability to bend reality to one’s will still left many people uncomfortable around those who possessed such an endowment. Pagistaa held The Sight, in a limited fashion. Although Junari studied the sacred texts, and once apprenticed under Pagistaa, she never found herself gifted in that manner.

“I can vouch that the girl does not possess The Sight.” Tanjari Pagistaa frowned.

Even though Junari had recently passed her fortieth year, Pagistaa still referred to her as “girl”. It irked Junari in that moment more than usual. She chided herself for becoming distracted by petty indignities and tried to make her mind attend to the proceedings.

“Unless she has developed it late in life.” Tanjari Pagistaa’s gaze pierced into Junari as though testing her for truth. “Regardless, she could not manage the skill to accomplish this.”

“How, then?” Tanjari Garonthus directed the question to Junari.

“I do not know.” Junari took a deep breath and stepped closer to the quadrad. She would master her fears by sharing them with her superiors. “The dreams frighten me. I don’t know where they come from or how so many people might dream the same dream each night. I do not understand why I am in the dreams. They call me to actions I dread to take. You ask from where the dreams emanate and how. I believe they are the work of this new and nameless goddess. And I fear she wants me to be her prophet.”

“Do you wish to be a prophet?” Tanjari Pagistaa asked.

“No.” Junari’s voice and hands trembled with her words.

“You may have no choice.” Tanjari Pagistaa’s face filled with sudden compassion, and Junari wished she could go to her mentor and seek the comforting motherly embrace of the priest’s arms as she had done so many times as a young novice.

“Sight by Divine intervention.” All eyes turned to Tanjari Kananthus as he spoke for the first time. He had lost the cloud of agitation that clung to him earlier and appeared calm, even happy. A light smile touched his lips. “Maybe this new goddess gives her the dream, and the power to share it with others, even if she is unaware of doing so.”

“Perhaps,” Tanjari Vadee said.

“And possibly, it will remain a mystery,” Tanjari Garonthus added.

“How we came to these circumstances is not as important as what we do about them.” Tanjari Pagistaa folded her hands in her lap.

“Send her away.” Tanjari Kananthus raised his eyes to the mural of the many Pashist gods painted across the ceiling. The wasps in Junari’s stomach buzzed and stung once more.

“Banishment seems ill-suited to the predicament before us.” Tanjari Pagistaa’s tone sounded defensive, and Junari began to hope that her mentor might defend her.

“Not banishment,” Tanjari Kananthus clarified. “Pilgrimage.”

“Explain.” Tanjari Garonthus turned to his fellow quadrad member.

“My meaning is simple,” Tanjari Kananthus replied. “If this new goddess is truly coming forth into the world, granting the same dream to thousands, beckoning them to the Forbidden Realm, naming our priest Junari as their leader, then she must follow this calling, for it is hers and hers alone to fulfill.”

“You believe we should send her to this new god with our blessing?” Tanjari Vadee sounded amused, but not disturbed, by the notion.

“Yes,” Tanjari Kananthus said. “I myself have had this dream. I have seen what she is to do. While I am too old to follow her, I believe we must encourage her to realize her divinely ordained destiny. No gods of the Pashist pantheon have ever spoken so clearly. We cannot say how this new god will join her fellow divine beings, but possibly, her coming will inspire more to step forward.”

The other members of the quadrad said nothing, each considering in silence the words of their colleague. Junari, too, pondered Tanjari Kananthus’s words and their import. He believed that the new goddess calling to people across the dominion would become yet another Pashist god, potentially taking her place as the 109th official deity of the religion.

The wasps in Junari’s stomach fell still. They seemed to die and crumble to ash, blowing away with each deep breath, replaced by a fire rising up from her belly along her spine and through the crown of her head.

Junari saw clearly for the first time. The high priests of the quadrad would send her away. She would lead a pilgrimage of dreamers to the Forbidden Realm where she would rebuild a long-forgotten temple to welcome her new goddess. But this goddess who called her to step onto the path of a prophet would never be like the ever-silent gods and goddesses of the Pashist faith. The birth of a new goddess required a new religion.

And Junari would be its founder.

The heat and light blazing through her faded as Junari collapsed, fainting and falling to the floor, her mentor and spiritual guide, Tanjari Pagistaa rushing from her chair to catch the unconscious prophet.

THE PRESENT

JUNARI STOOD among her sleeping pilgrims, each dreaming the same dream, and looked down at her hands. She felt them trembling, although she could barely see them in the clouded light of the night sky.

How could she live up to the demands of that calling? How could she forge a new religion? How could she lead these pilgrims she walked past as they slept? There were no sacred texts to study for guidance. Who would write the new scriptures for the new goddess? Would Junari achieve this as well? Would her words, spoken and written, be the basis for priests and believers to fashion their lives for centuries to come? How could a faithless priest leading a band of dreamers through the wilderness presume to create such a legacy?

No. No, this untruth would not stand before her doubts. She had found her faith again. Her misgivings applied only to herself and her abilities to fulfill the desires of her goddess. In her

goddess, she had not merely faith, but knowledge. No conspiracy of seers could manage to collectively use The Sight necessary to invade the dreams of so many men and women throughout the Iron Realm. Such power could only emanate from a god. Her god. The nameless goddess of her dreams made real.

Junari stepped past the last row of sleeping pilgrims dozing beside the lane. She stared down the road, dimly illuminated beneath the clouds that blocked the double moons. The Old Border Road, called by many the Truce Road, the Peace Path, the Middle Way, a road that cut right along the boundary between the Daeshen and Tanshen Dominions. A wonder of custom more than diplomacy, the Old Border Road represented the lone sanctuary in the twenty-year war between the two nations. It also provided the only means of safe transit from the Juparti Dominion for Pashists and peoples of other faiths who wished to cross to the coast and the free city of Tanjii. A city where a leader of pilgrims might hope to find ships willing to carry her and her flock to the shores of the Forbidden Realm.

Of course, the Old Border Road did not always prove a safe method of travel. There were bandits who raided small parties, and militias composed of Kam-Djen fanatics from both dominions adjoining the road. Militias who sought to kill the dreaming heretics crossing their lands.

As though accustomed to pulling reality into solidity from the effervescence of her thoughts, Junari did not need to wonder at the source and cause of the woman's scream that suddenly cut the crisp, night air.

Kam-Djen fanatics had found her band of apostate pilgrims.

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

STALE DUST and clinging cobwebs settled down around Lee-Nin's face as she tried to still her breathing and unwind the vise of fear clasp ing her chest. Sao-Tauna held her hand, squeezing tightly, panting in quick, short breaths. The girl had never liked confined spaces. Lee-Nin hoped Sao-Tauna would not scream out in terror as she had once done when a closet door accidentally closed, trapping her in darkness for a moment.

Lee-Nin slowly raised her free hand to pull a cobweb from her brow, ignoring the bite of a spider on her neck. She and Sao-Tauna stood side by side in the dark and musty gap between the false back wall of the small farmhouse and the real wall. She had lurched in surprise when the massive, ugly man suddenly rose from the bed and went to the far wall. Her first fear had been that the man might try to capture them and hold them for a possible reward. She had gasped as he pulled at a log in a short section of the wall and it swung inward by the width of six hands. He had gestured her and Sao-Tauna to stand in the hidden space beside a leather satchel and a dust-caked sword in its sheath.

"Quiet," had been all the man said before pushing the wall closed again, sealing them up like mummies from one of the stories she often read Sao-Tauna before bedtime.

Whether by serendipity or extraordinary forethought, a small crack in the mason's clay between the logs of the false wall sat right before her left eye, giving her a surreptitious, if limited, view of the house and its owner.

Who is this man? Lee-Nin wondered. What farmer has a false wall with a sword hidden inside? How did he know they were coming? How did he know the wardens hounding them were close? Had he seen them? Had he heard them before entering the house? Did he have The Sight? Was he a seer hiding his blasphemy on a farm far from town? The Pashist book on his table spoke to his sacrilegious views. How deep did his heresy extend? What other forbidden books sat stacked on his table? She had been so intent on keeping her eyes on him that she had not even thought to glance at their titles.

Lee-Nin watched through the crack in the wall as the man put the food away and sat down at the table facing the door. He pulled the lantern close as he took one of the offensive tomes from the top of the pile and opened it.

What was he doing? Should he not pretend to be asleep? Should he not hide the books? The wardens had other business that night, but they would not hesitate to carry out the law as they saw fit.

She strained her neck in the tight space to look over her shoulder and down at Sao-Tauna. The girl stood with her eyes closed, her breath still coming in short gasps. Lee-Nin hoped the logs of the false wall insulated the sound of the girl's breathing from the room beyond.

Such a strange child. Not at all like her siblings. Unlike any child Lee-Nin had ever encountered. She had been such since her birth seven years prior, shortly after the beginning of Lee-Nin's appointment as tutor to her brothers.

She had loved teaching the children writing and history and simple maths. Kal-Tan, the eldest boy, inquisitive and challenging, with a quick mind that rarely found easy focus. And his younger brother Tagu-Kan, a sweet-natured boy who always did as told and always admitted his mischief. And then Sao-Tauna. As unlike her brothers as stone to water. Quiet, passive, often unresponsive, but deeply observant and able to remember nearly all she saw or heard. A child who signaled her difference as readily as a herald might announce the entrance of a high councilor.

Why would anyone wish to kill such a child? Lee-Nin pondered this question again, as she had almost every hour since learning of the danger to the girl's life.

TEN DAYS PRIOR

THE TEETH of the comb caught and held in the tangle of rich, black hair. Lee-Nin tugged with the carved bone implement.

"Ouch."

"I don't know how your hair gets so tangled."

"Ouch."

"I comb it twice a day."

"Ouch."

"You hardly leave the living chambers and the gardens, so I don't see where you get a mouse nest like this in your hair."

"Mouse? In my hair?"

Lee-Nin laughed and patted Sao-Tauna's head.

"Not a real mouse. It was a phrase of speaking. A way of describing something."

"Oh." Sao-Tauna sounded sad. "I like mice."

"Yes, I remember the one you put in my pocket for safekeeping."

"Wan-Nuno." Sao-Tauna's face brightened ever so slightly.

"Must you name all of the inhabitants of the palace?"

"Ja-Na was going to eat him."

"Ja-Na? The black cat with the white feet?"

"Ja-Na likes mice." Sao-Tauna sounded somewhat sad again. "How can we both like mice, yet I don't want to eat one?"

“Words are subtle things.” Lee-Nin finished smoothing Sao-Tauna’s hair and slipped the comb into an outer pocket of her dress. The girl rarely spoke so much, and only in Lee-Nin’s company. They stood on a balcony of the tahn’s private chambers. Technically, they should not have been there. Only the royal staff had permission to enter the high family’s private chambers. However, Sao-Tauna loved that particular balcony, as it afforded an unobstructed view of a nest of black eagles perched in the tallest tree of the palace gardens. While Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi disapproved of the impropriety, Tahneff Pai-Neguha made special dispensation for her only daughter and the family tutor who doted upon the child.

Lee-Nin reached out her hand to point at the nest, to ask, as she often did, for Sao-Tauna to describe the difference from the prior day — a game they played with things and people around the palace. As she stretched her finger out, she heard the door of the inner chamber open. The balcony stood outside the tahn’s seldom used private library — another reason Lee-Nin loved to frequent the space.

She brought her finger to her lips and caught Sao-Tauna’s eye. She pulled the girl back against the wall as the door within closed. A voice she recognized as belonging to Tahn Lin-Pi said something she could not make out. Her heartbeat quickened. The tahn would be angered to find her and Sao-Tauna on the balcony, regardless of the permissions his wife had extended. Should she reveal herself now and suffer the consequences, or should she hide and hope Tahn Lin-Pi possessed no desire to watch eagles’ nests from the balcony?

As Lee-Nin swallowed back her fear and made to step around the corner to reveal her presence, she heard another voice she knew.

“You have my deepest apologies, my tahn, but I thought it best to speak where others could not ... misunderstand.”

Lee-Nin had heard that voice on a few rare occasions. It belonged to High Priest Bihn-Fan.

“We will not be disturbed here,” Tahn Lin-Pi said.

A pause fell over the conversation within the library. Lee-Nin could not risk exposing herself now. Not in front of the high priest. She also could not be caught listening to a conversation between the high priest and the tahn. The former might cause her to lose her station, while the latter ensured she would forfeit her head.

“You have concluded your investigation,” Tahn Lin-Pi said.

“Yes, my tahn,” High Priest Bihn-Fan replied.

“And your conclusion?”

“Our worst fears are realized, my tahn.”

“You are certain?”

“Without doubt or suspicion of doubt, my tahn.”

“What must be done?”

“There is only one course of action that ensures the safety of the dominion, my tahn.”

“There must be another way.”

“I wish there was, my tahn. I truly do.”

“Could you be mistaken?”

“You have seen the ... phenomenon yourself, my tahn.”

“I have seen something, yes. A fluttered imagining, perhaps.”

“It is not your imagination, my tahn. Nor mine.”

“We could wait. See if it occurs again.”

“To wait would be to invite our own destruction, my tahn. Your uncle died from meddling with such dark forces twenty years ago.”

“You need not remind me of the mistakes of my family.” The tahn’s tone took a suddenly ominous color.

“My apologies, my tahn. I wish no offense. My only desire is the protection of the dominion and the royal family.”

“All except one member of the royal family.”

“A regrettable necessity, my tahn.”

“Killing my daughter is more than a regrettable necessity, Bihn-Fan.”

Lee-Nin nearly gasped aloud as the import of the preceding conversation washed across her mind in sudden, icy clarity.

“No words will soften nor diminish the darkness of the deed, my tahn.” The high priest’s voice sounded soft and pleading. “The deed must be done, nonetheless.”

“You are certain Sao-Tauna must die?”

“As certain as I am of standing in this room with you, my tahn.”

No more words came from within the library for a time. The tahn seemed to consider the final verdict on his daughter’s life, handed down in light of mysterious yet damning evidence. Lee-Nin looked at Sao-Tauna. The girl stared back up, her face a mask of solemn astonishment. She clearly understood the meaning behind her father’s words. Lee-Nin placed her arm around the girl’s shoulder and pulled her close.

“If it must be, it must be,” Tahn Lin-Pi said. “My daughter will die to protect the dominion.”

“I know a man who can assist us, my tahn.”

“No.” The tahn’s voice sounded hard, like breaking rocks. “If it must be, it will be by my hand.”

“As you wish, my tahn.”

“May Ni-Kam-Djen forgive me and protect us all.”

“Now and forever,” the high priest added.

THE PRESENT

LEE-NIN SHUDDERED at the memory of the eavesdropped words, once more trying to tease out their meaning, attempting to fathom what a girl of seven summers could have done to warrant a death sentence from her father, and why the high priest of the Tanshen Dominion would be involved in determining her guilt or innocence.

It made no more sense now than ever. Sao-Tauna did not exhibit the behavior of a typical child, and everyone understood her to be special. But special how? The high priest claimed to have

seen her do something, but what? And what could it be that endangered the dominion and required her death?

She asked these questions of Tahneff Pai-Neguha when she told Sao-Tauna's mother what she had overheard. The tahneff did not answer the questions, for she did not believe Lee-Nin's story. Instead, the tahneff called the palace guardians, who promptly carried Lee-Nin to a cell in the lower jails. She sat in that cell for hours, barely able to breathe, possessed by the thought that Sao-Tauna might already be dead. When the door to the dank, cramped chamber opened, she had expected to see more guards, no doubt ready to haul her off to her own hastily arranged demise.

The door swung wide to reveal Sao-Tauna, standing in the same dress Lee-Nin had slid over her head earlier that day, her small, slender fingers outstretched and beckoning.

As they ran through the palace halls, sneaking out the back gate and disappearing into the crowds of the city surrounding the palace, Lee-Nin had repeatedly asked Sao-Tauna what transpired. Had her father tried to kill her? Had someone else? How had she located Lee-Nin? How had she found the keys to open the cell door? Where had the guards gone?

Sao-Tauna answered none of these queries, nor any others. She had not spoken since talking of cats and mice on the palace balcony. Something had happened to push the normally reticent child to utter unbending muteness. Lee-Nin did her best to try and comfort Sao-Tauna, but the girl seemed impassive to the world around her.

Lee-Nin had used the few gold coins buttoned into the secret pocket of her dress to buy food and provisions and passage in a merchant's wagon from the city to the countryside. But her coins had been meant to help one alone flee, not two. And they had been intended to give her time to get to her larger stash, which they could not afford the time to do while fleeing the city. After a few days, they had made their way to a small town in the countryside where word of events in the palace arrived before them via horse-backed travelers. Details were few, and often fabricated, but it seemed High Priest Bihn-Fan had disappeared. Stories varied. Some suggested that Ni-Kam-Djen had taken the valuable priest to his bosom; others declared the aged priest had been kidnapped by the Daeshen Dominion as leverage in the twenty-year war between the two nations. No one mentioned Tahn Lin-Pi's daughter having gone missing. No one suggested that the palace wardens might be looking for her.

Lee-Nin presumed the palace would declare that she had kidnapped the girl and set the entire country looking for her. They had not. They had sent two hands of palace wardens to hunt her and the child in secrecy. Why in secrecy?

The sound of a dog's low bark and the weight of many boots on the creaky boards outside the door of the farmhouse brought Lee-Nin out of the twisting corridors of her mind and to the present. She squeezed Sao-Tauna's hand tighter and placed her eye closer to the tiny hole in the false wall.

The door to the house crashed open as two wardens rushed in, swords drawn, curses on their lips, their eyes searching the one-room home and coming to rest on the large, ugly farmer. Outside the door, the two dogs stuck their tails between their legs and whimpered as they scampered away from the house.

Another soldier pushed his way between the first two, leveling the tip of his sword at the farmer's massive, disfigured head.

"Where are the woman and the girl?" the warden said. The insignia on his chest marked him as a sub-commander of the palace wardens, the zhan's elite guardians.

The homely farmer stared down the blade at the soldier.

"Gone," the man said.

Lee-Nin realized then the large man's gambit. It also occurred to her that she did not even know his name.

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

DREAMS OF stars and oceans and millennia-old ruins gave way to cries and shouts and screams of pain and fear.

Raedalus opened his eyes, confused, unsure if the night visions continued in a new and horrible fashion, or if the shadowed commotion around him represented reality. The scream of a woman a dozen paces away woke him fully and brought him from beneath his sleeping blanket and to his feet.

The Mother Shepherd!

He stood and turned, trying to understand the events transpiring throughout the camp as he searched for Junari, the guardian of his and his fellow dreamers' collective destiny. Men and women ran past, some yelling, others pointing, while more still sat on the ground, trying to pull themselves from sleep. He saw Junari's tent in the center of the chaos. With the night guards absent, he knew the tent to be empty. Probably on one of her nightly walks again. Walking to where? He looked around the camp.

A flash of metal in the moonlight caught his attention. A man in a worn leather jerkin swung a curved sword at one of the dreamers — a husband protecting his wife and small son. The blade tore through the dreamer's stomach, his inner flesh falling into his hands. As the dreamer fell to the ground, his wife screamed and embraced him, pulling her son beneath a protective arm.

"Blasphemers!" the man with the sword shouted in the Shen language. He stepped forward to the crouching woman as she held her dying husband and her crying son. "We'll purge ya heretics from the land."

Raedalus looked to his feet, found what he remembered moving as he had lain down to sleep, picked it up, and hurled it with all his might. The fist-sized stone struck the swordsman in the side of the head, sending him to his knees, the sword falling from his hand. Raedalus ran toward the swordsman. The woman grabbed the rock from where it had bounced to the ground and hefted it high in her arm, bringing it crashing into the swordsman's head. He crumpled sideways and fell still. The woman hit him in the head again. And again. Then she cast the rock aside and turned to her husband, holding his head as he clasped at his stomach, trying to keep his insides from filling the grass. Their child, a boy of five or so, wailed in shock and terror.

Raedalus picked up the sword and grasped it unsteadily in his hand. He had never held a sword. He had been raised in the temple. An orphan at age five, the priests had taken him in and

brought him up as one of their own until he grew old enough to *become* one of their own. Novices trained to be priests, and priests trained to serve the gods with prayers and rituals and meditations. He had no preparation for wielding a sword. But the men attacking them — one of the militant bands roaming the roads — would not know of his inexperience. He silently called on his nameless goddess to fill him with the courage to face the militiamen assaulting their camp.

“If he can move, get him to the woods, to safety,” Raedalus spoke to the woman, shouting to be heard over the din of the pitched battle and senseless slaughter around them.

Looking up, he searched again for any sign of Junari. Pilgrims clustered together in small groups, seeking protection in numbers — numbers that held no weapons beyond a few short knives and an occasional rock. There appeared to be at least twenty militiamen attacking the camp. The pilgrims could not stand their ground against men with steel. They would be felled like winter wheat at early harvest.

“To the trees!” Raedalus shouted as he ran, coaxing the pilgrims to flee from the low grass where they had lain dreaming of their goddess beside the road and to seek refuge in the dense forest nearby. Several of the pilgrims already ran for the tree line, turning to encourage their companions to follow them.

One of the militiamen hacked at a woman running for wooded sanctuary, cutting her down with a slice across her back. As she collapsed in a piercing scream of agony, Raedalus raised his blade in both hands and swung it with all his strength, striking the militiaman in the same manner that had felled the woman. Raedalus stopped and looked at the militiaman near his feet. Blood gurgled from the man’s lips as he tried to reach around his back to the gash across his spine. The man’s legs trembled and urine stained his breeches.

Raedalus watched as the man died. As a Pashist priest, he had sworn vows to cherish and protect all life as sacred. He abstained from the meat of animals except when necessary and even said prayers when unable to avoid killing insects. He shunned violence in all forms at all times. And now he had killed a man. He thought he should feel something tragic, a great remorse. He looked from the dead militiaman and into the lifeless eyes of the woman in the bloody grass. Raedalus did not experience remorse. Nor shame. Nor anger. Nor even satisfaction.

He felt fear.

Fear that if pious rage turned to violence could so swiftly snuff out a life, at a future time, the taking of lives might prove all too easy and acceptable. What would this mean? What might this change in him?

He shook these thoughts and concerns from his head and returned his eyes to scanning the campsite for signs of Junari. If they had killed her, what then? How could the pilgrims fulfill the promise of the new goddess’s dream?

White flashed between running pilgrims and the flickering reflection of steel blades. Junari’s nightclothes. Raedalus ran toward the Mother Shepherd, dodging pilgrims, exhorting them to flee to the forest and hide, and knocking aside the sword thrust of a passing militiaman. Junari also ran. Her bare feet pounded across the matted meadow toward a clump of ten pilgrims huddled together as four militiamen taunted them, poking them with the tips of their swords.

“Squeal, heathen!” a militiaman shouted.

“Cry for yer false god to protect ya!” another yelled.

“Stop!”

Junari’s voice carried above the cacophony of the campsite, drawing the militiamen’s eyes to her as she slid to a halt in the blood-slicked grass. She stood between the pilgrims and militiamen, her arms outstretched in petition.

Raedalus yelled out, meaning to call attention away from his mistress, to launch himself in attack at the men she confronted. One of his feet caught in the crook of the arm of a fallen and motionless pilgrim, sending him sprawling to the ground, the hilt of his sword jamming into his gut, the air rushing from his lungs. He looked up, trying to catch his wind and pull himself to his feet, watching as Junari faced the militiamen, open handed and defenseless.

“We mean no harm,” Junari shouted in broken Shen at the blood-splattered men. “We are pilgrims. We walk in peace.”

“That’s her,” one of the men sneered. “That’s the filthy bitch herself.”

“Kill her and the vermin’ll stop comin’ to our lands,” another man said as he raised his sword above his head.

Raedalus called out as he struggled to stand. His arms moved like damp cloths as he hefted the sword to his shoulder. He stared as Junari, arms still outstretched, watched the sword blade swinging toward her head. He heard her speak, her voice ringing clear, seeming to whisper in his ear even as it boomed above the chaotic din around them.

“Protect us, Goddess Moaratana!”

Blue-white brilliance filled the night, searing the eyes of all around as the air exploded and the earth trembled. Lightning flowed from the clouded night sky — a rivulet of liquid light reaching down to strike the sword of the militiaman in mid-swing, sending him hurtling backward, where he collided with one of his companions.

Raedalus had no time to wonder at Junari’s naming of the previously nameless goddess, nor the import of the translation from the ancient Mumtiba language giving her name the meaning of *Dragon Star* — these things came to him later — he could only stare in wonder as Junari shouted again.

“Protect us, Goddess Moaratana!”

Brilliant, jagged strings of light descended in an instant to strike at the swords in the hands of the militiamen attacking the pilgrims throughout the campsite. The men screamed and smoked and crumpled to the ground as they died.

Raedalus stood, dizzy from the lightning, his eyes adjusting to the darkness, gaping in amazement at Junari. She lowered her arms and apprised the dead men spread around her, shaking her head, whether in anger or sorrow, Raedalus could not tell.

“A miracle,” a woman in the group of pilgrims behind Junari said aloud. “A miracle of the Goddess.”

Junari turned to the pilgrims, a weary yet compassionate smile across her lips.

“Yes. A miracle.”

“You called down lightning,” one of the men said.

“No, I called on the Goddess,” Junari corrected the man. “As we all must call on her now.” She turned around and raised her voice again, shouting to the entire camp. “Help our people. Tend to the wounded. We must bury our dead. We leave at sunrise.”

The pilgrims dispersed under Junari’s patient gaze. When she seemed satisfied the pilgrims were in motion, she turned and walked to Raedalus.

“It is fortunate our goddess knows you from our enemies.” Junari glanced at the sword still in Raedalus’s hand.

“I...” Raedalus looked at the sword as well, amazed still by what he had done with it and by the fact that it had been the only blade untouched by the lightning.

“Keep it. Learn to use it. We will have need of it again, I fear.” Junari sighed as she surveyed the wreckage of lives scattered across the once peaceful camp.

“Yes, Mother Shepherd.” He nodded his head and gripped the sword tighter.

Raedalus followed her eyes and looked over the dead and wounded. So much change in such a short span of time. So much death. One life ended by his own hands.

“Come.” Junari started walking toward an injured woman still holding her young daughter. “We have much to do before dawn.”

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

WAVES LAPPED gently against the rock-strewn beach, a ceaseless rhythm of liquid undulation. Near the water, two forms lay in repose. An old man, salt-silver hair and beard trimmed close to the dark skin of his cheeks, snored lightly beneath the folds of a crow-black cloak. Beside him curled a boy of ten, his face layered with days of dirt concealing brown flesh. A tattered shirt and stained trousers clothed his frail frame. Above the man and boy, below the twin moons, a star, new to the night sky, shone in silent coral incandescence.

The boy stirred in his sleep, his eyes fluttering at the edge of consciousness. One eye came fully open. Then the next. The boy gasped and sat up, his eyes darting about, coming to rest on the old man, then turning back to the ocean before rising to the sky and locking on that singular point of red flame above.

Hashel climbed to his feet, eyes wide, his chest heaving with excitement and fear. The star. The star from the dream. How could that be? Did he still sleep? Did he dream of rousing from the dream only to still stand in a dream? This happened sometimes, waking from a pleasant dream into a nightmare, before finally opening his eyes to the real world.

A dream explained the ocean. How did he awaken next to an ocean? He and the old man had bedded down in the middle of a field far from any coast. Or was the old man a seer? Had he transported them with The Sight to some ocean shore while Hashel slept? Was that even possible?

The old man had built a fire from twigs and dried grass, and they had feasted on a rabbit that happened to run into a nearby tree and broke its neck. It had been his first real meal in days. As he chewed the succulent meat, he had said a silent prayer of thanks to Nag Mot Gioth, the Mother Creator and Nag Pat Gioth, the Father Destroyer, for helping his path to cross the old man's earlier that day.

But had meeting the old man been a blessing? Or did the old man represent a new sign of danger? His life held too many dangers. An image of his mother and father and sister, faces filled with terror, blossomed in his mind. Hashel closed his eyes, panting as his slender body shook in the pale light of the double moons.

He opened his eyes and ran to the ocean, splashing into the shallow waves, his thin leather boots filling with seawater — salt liquid that matched the tears cutting canyons through the dirt caking his cheeks. Hashel knelt and dipped his face into the cool water, rubbing away the memories, cleansing flesh and mind with each immersion. He ran his damp fingers through his

dust-matted hair. He glanced back at the old man and then kicked off his loose-fitting boots, pulled off his shirt, set down the small dagger he carried at his waist, cast away his trousers, and sank into the next wave, diving under and pushing out a few feet from shore. He stood, water near his chest, feet squirming into the soft sand below, and scrubbed his arms and legs, repeatedly dunking his head beneath the surface, massaging the filth from his long, black locks. Weeks had passed since his last bath. Back before...

He scrubbed harder, focusing on freeing himself from the grime of the road and the ditches where he had been hiding and sleeping. Satisfied he had cleaned himself as well as possible, he returned to shore and crouched to wash his shirt and trousers in the shallows, dark clouds from dusty travel billowing out from the cloth to stain the shore-foam brown beneath the moonlight. His arms shivered as he worked, the cool air prickling his wet skin. He ignored it. He had been far colder in past days.

After wringing out his clothes, he dressed again, brushing sand from his feet before sliding them back into his wet boots. He stood on the beach, staring up at the newborn star, feeling better than he remembered for a long time.

He did not know what the crimson star meant. He should follow it; he knew that. He should follow the dream. But should he follow the old man? Would the old man pursue the dream? Did the old man even dream of the star as so many did? Would it be safe to travel with him? Hashel understood the old man could not protect him. He had learned too well that no one could really defend him. But the old man would be company. And companionship would be good on the road.

He made his decision more through action of body than conscious thought, walking back from the shoreline and lying down near the old man, watching his narrow chest rise and fall in the rhythm of sleep. He wondered what the old man's name might be. He had never said during the day. Hashel found it hard to keep thinking of him as *the old man*. If they were to travel together, it would be better to have a name to think of him by. He decided he would think of the man as Ondromead until he learned otherwise. He did not know where that name came from. He did not remember ever hearing it before.

Hashel stared up at the newest celestial body in the night sky for a moment, and then he closed his eyes and fell into a deep and peaceful sleep free of questions about dreams and stars and his new companion and where he might awaken next.

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

THE BLADE dug into the soft meat of the pine table, vibrating as it stood alone, the tremors of its impact causing the flame of the lantern to flicker.

A soldier leaned against the table and spat his words at Sha-Kutan.

“Where are they?”

Sha-Kutan stared at the blade lodged in the table.

“I told you. Gone.”

The soldier snatched his dagger from the table. Two men behind him still held their swords drawn, wide, curved, double-edged blades glinting in the lantern light. Two more men outside the house did the same.

“Gone where?”

“Back along the path to the woods.” Sha-Kutan looked into the young soldier’s eyes. Even seated, his face sat nearly level with the man’s head.

Whatever happens, we should not stand.

No. If they are intimidated, they will be foolish.

This one may be foolish no matter what we do.

If we appear meek, that may make him more comfortable.

Sha-Kutan looked away from the commanding soldier, turning his eyes toward the book still in his hands.

“How long ago did they leave?” The soldier leaned farther over the table.

“Not long. A quarter candle. No more.” Sha-Kutan kept his eyes cast down, his nose wrinkling involuntarily at the soldier’s breath. It stank of stale wine and rotted meat. The man himself smelled of arrogance and anger and pride.

“Do you have a cellar?” The soldier looked around the small one-room farmhouse.

“In the barn.” Sha-Kutan gestured with his chin to indicate the location.

The soldier looked to his men outside the house.

“Take a dog and search the barn.”

One of the men pulled a still-whimpering dog away from the house. The other dog cowered behind the remaining soldier.

The dogs are always smarter than the men.

Unfortunately.

The soldier returned his concentration to Sha-Kutan.

“What did they tell you?”

“They said they were hungry. I gave them food. Then they left.”

The soldier walked around the table, standing behind Sha-Kutan, peering into the shadows of the house as though he might find his quarry lurking in a dark corner.

“Did they say where they were going?”

“No. They asked about nearby towns. There are none.” Sha-Kutan could sense the man behind him. Knew how far away he stood. Knew how long it would take to stand and grab him by the throat.

To control the mind is essential.

Yes.

They do not need to die. Everyone can live this night.

Yes. Life is sacred. To be preserved at all costs.

The Book of Light says, “*All things are one thing living through each other. To kill another is to murder part of oneself.*”

The metal-studded glove of the soldier’s hand smacked against the back of Sha-Kutan’s head, cracking loudly in the silence of the house. He dropped the book and placed his hands on the table.

Do not rise.

No. To rise would lead to ... unpleasantness.

“I asked you a question, you dimwitted dirt grubber.” The soldier spat his words in Sha-Kutan’s ear. “Did the woman tell you why we are chasing them?”

“Yes.” Sha-Kutan struggled to keep his voice acquiescent, straining to filter out the emotions desiring expression. “She said her dead husband’s father wished to kill her and the child. To maintain the purity of the family line.”

“She has no husband.” The soldier seemed to speak more to himself than anyone in the room, as though trying to tease out the truth of a mystery that eluded him. “And the girl is not hers.”

One of the soldiers outside appeared in the doorway, dragging a dog on a rope behind him. “Nothing in the barn, sir. Barely has a cellar. More like a hole in the ground.”

Sha-Kutan looked between the faces of the soldiers, his gaze coming to rest on their leader.

“Peasants.” The commanding soldier spat on the floor. “Drag those lazy mutts in here. Maybe they can get a better scent.”

If the dogs search the house, they will smell the woman and girl.

The dogs will not enter as long as we are present.

Their fear may provoke suspicion.

Sha-Kutan reached for the book as the soldier walked around the table, moving quickly to draw attention, fumbling to grasp at the pages, sending the book sliding across the soup-stained boards.

“What’s this?” The soldier snatched the book from the table and examined the title. Behind him, the dogs pulled at their ropes, tails tight under their bellies, refusing to enter the house. The soldier seemed to forget about the dogs as he poked the book with his finger.

“A Pashist wheel.” The soldier sneered. “That’s a Pashist book.” He turned to glare at Sha-Kutan. “A heretic book.”

“It was my father’s,” Sha-Kutan said. “I keep it for memory’s sake.”

“You were reading it.” The soldier slammed the book down on the table as he walked back around to stand behind Sha-Kutan.

We must turn their attention to us.

That seems done.

We must distract them. Make them punish us. Forget about the dogs and the house.

“This book is a sacrilege.” The soldier leaned down to once more shout in Sha-Kutan’s ear. “The Kam-Djen priests are clear. There is only one god. Only Ni-Kam-Djen. To worship a false god is an abomination.”

“It is merely a book.” Sha-Kutan stared down at his hands, trying to feign fear in his voice.

“One you were reading!” The soldier’s arm arced down, stabbing his dagger through the cover of the book, deep into its pages.

“No,” Sha-Kutan said, struggling to hold his hands in place where they gripped the table, slowly denting the wood as he stared at the knife blade protruding from his book. “No. I cannot read. I look at the markings. It eases my mind.”

“So you’re too simple to be a heretic. Is that your claim?” The soldier grabbed the book and pulled his blade free.

“Yes,” Sha-Kutan said.

“Liar!” The soldier smashed the book into the side of Sha-Kutan’s head.

The table wood cracked under the force of Sha-Kutan’s fingers as he willed himself not to raise his hands.

We must not defend ourselves.

He stabbed the book.

We must protect the woman and child.

“Do you know what the punishment for heresy is?” The soldier grabbed Sha-Kutan by the hair, meaning to pull his head back. Sha-Kutan’s head did not move under the strain against his long hair.

Weakness. We must display weakness.

Weakness only encourages the wicked.

The soldier yanked at his hair again and Sha-Kutan relented, tilting his head back to look into the soldier’s face.

The soldier’s men, clearly unnerved by the sudden shift in the night’s events, shuffled uneasily by the door. The two men outside drew closer. The dogs pulled at their ropes, imploring their masters with low yelps to leave the house and run far away.

“I asked you a question, you mindless drooler.” The soldier shouted his words, spittle flicking out to splatter Sha-Kutan’s face.

Inner calm. Still the mind. Peace before anger. Anger clouds the mind.

Yes. Anger clouds the mind.

“No,” Sha-Kutan said. “I do not know the punishment.”

“Fifty lashes,” the soldier said. “But I could kill you and Ni-Kam-Djen would rejoice.” The soldier pressed the blade of his dagger to Sha-Kutan’s throat, the slender edge of the steel pressing into flesh, blood welling up beneath it.

Breathe in the light of love; breathe out the darkness of anger.

Yes. Love before anger.

“Sir.” One of the soldiers near the door stepped forward. “The fugitives, sir.” The words seemed vaguely phrased to allow his commander to reach a conclusion on his own that might redirect the men’s efforts.

The soldier continued to stare down into Sha-Kutan’s eyes, openly struggling to control his anger and indignation. After a moment, the soldier removed his blade from Sha-Kutan’s neck. He gave Sha-Kutan’s hair one last tug and then stepped away.

“If I had the time, I would tie you to a fencepost and lash you myself.” The soldier spat again, this time striking Sha-Kutan on the ear.

Patience. Patience sees purely.

Yes. In The Golden Path of Radiance, it says, “Patience is courage masked.”

Yes. Anger is for cowards.

“I may not have time to whip you, but I can still strap you to a fencepost and let you bake in the sun for a few days until someone finds you. I’m sure someone will come for you in a day or two. You have neighbors who visit, don’t you?” The soldier’s grin sat lopsided on his unshaven face. He pointed toward Sha-Kutan as he spoke to his men. “Find some rope and take this halfwit heretic outside and tie him to a post.”

Patience wins.

Yes. Patience.

When they are gone, the woman can free us.

We can free ourselves.

“And drag those mongrels in here and see if they can catch a clearer scent.” The soldier grabbed hold of Sha-Kutan’s shirt collar and pulled, meaning to haul him to his feet. Sha-Kutan did not move.

If the dogs enter, they will find the woman and child.

Then we must kill the soldiers.

We could fight them or show them our essence. Scare them off.

They would return with more men. And we would have to kill all of them.

“Get up or I’ll run you through where you sit.” The commanding soldier drew his sword and leveled the blade at Sha-Kutan.

They are men, sacred living beings deserving of life.

And they will kill the woman and the girl.

There are too many to kill with our hands.

“Do you hear me, stone brain?” The tip of the soldier’s blade dug into Sha-Kutan’s shoulder. Sha-Kutan did not flinch.

“Please go.” Sha-Kutan stared at the soldier, his voice low and filled with urgency.

The two soldiers by the door stepped forward as they raised their swords, their faces filled with trepidation. The men outside released the ropes holding the dogs and crowded into the small house. The dogs scampered away, watching from behind a tree in the yard.

If we kill them in this way, She will sense it and She will come.

We could give them the woman and girl, and they will go away.

And they will kill an innocent child and the woman who protects her.

“Move!” The soldier stabbed the tip of his sword deep into the flesh of Sha-Kutan’s arm. Sha-Kutan remained motionless.

The only way we can kill them is the way that will reveal us to Her.

And She will hunt us once more.

After so many years of peace.

“If you will not stand, you can sit here forever.” The soldier raised his sword, making to swing its edge at Sha-Kutan’s neck.

All our choices lead to death.

We cannot escape what we are.

As the soldier flexed his arm, putting his sword in motion, the flame of the lamp fluttered and guttered out, plunging the house into deep shadow. A darkness blacker than oblivion, colder than the grave, spread across the men, chilling their hearts, filling their minds with dread beyond expression.

The soldier’s blade stopped abruptly, as though striking rock without sound. The sword flew from his suddenly shaking hand and clattered on the floor.

Sha-Kutan finally stood — and death enveloped the room.

THE FUGITIVES



OGTANKAA

NIGHT JAYS called their mating songs across the marshlands, the bright light of the twin moons painting in pale gray the packed dirt and worn down stones of the elevated road cutting through the watery plains.

A lone woman stood in the middle of the lane. The hunter. She raised the eyes of her dark-skinned face toward the glowing orbs in the starry heavens above. Two moons, white and cratered from ancient cosmic battles. Sister celestial bodies traveling through the sky, never touching, yet always within sight of each other around the curve of the night horizon, always showing the same faces to the world below them.

The big sister hid perfectly behind an index finger upstretched at arm's length while her smaller sibling barely peeked around the edges of the smallest fingertip at such a distance. A child's game. Hiding the moons. The Yiityoth tribe of the Kytain Dominion called them sisters, hiding from brother sun. The mountain peoples of the northern Nevaeo Dominion named them Lanut and Lanua, illicit lovers banished to the night sky, forever forbidden to embrace. The fishing folk of the Punderese Coast said nightly prayers to the twin guardians of the sky, Kanma and Kanmathus, beseeching the night gods for blessings to protect them in their slumber.

The hunter, Ogtankaa, had spoken with all these peoples and many more across the Iron Realm, traveling from dominion to dominion, from lowlands to mountains, villages to cities, deserts to ocean isles. For nearly twenty years, she crossed the land, asking simple questions, listening to rumors and long-told tales, waiting to uncover a hint of a trail, searching for a sign, hoping for a signal.

When the moment came, it almost passed without awareness. It had been so long since she felt the once-familiar tremor in the field of life, that discordant vibration in the substance of reality, that she nearly missed it. It lasted only a few seconds, then passed. A momentary lapse of her prey's long maintained restraint.

Ogtankaa always knew it to be a matter of time before her prey revealed itself through a reawakening of its nature. It could not be avoided.

We are what we are and we do what we do because we are what we are.

She had heard an old tribal shaman woman utter those words years ago. They held true for Ogtankaa as well. She possessed an essence as constrained and defined as that of her prey. And she would fulfill her destiny as always — she would hunt.

She looked down from the sister moons, her face turning toward the direction she now knew would lead her to her prey. Her prey would flee. Would try again to hide, but Ogtankaa swore to herself that she would not lose the trail again. Not after so long.

Where has it been hiding?

What will it look like now?

And what will it call itself?

More importantly, why has it been silent so long?

So consumed had she become in thoughts of her prey that it took a moment to notice something other than the sister moons shining bright in the night sky. A new star, unseen in all her years of travel, blazed in copper-tinted brilliance, heralding the direction of her prey.

Had she believed in such things, she would have considered it a blessing or an omen, and she might have said a prayer of thanksgiving. She believed in neither.

Ogtankaa began walking, following the new star westward toward the conclusion of her long quest.

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

CRICKETS CHIRPED their simple delight in the darkness of the forest along the Old Border Road. Moths and mosquitoes circled the campfires burning back the last hours of the night. Junari walked along the edge of the road toward the line of pilgrims congregating before a row of fresh graves, each marked by a patch of rich, black soil and a short branch of leaves thrust into the freshly turned earth above the heads of the deceased who would now lie forever beneath the ground. Women's wails of grief clung to the moist air as the sobs of children echoed in between the silent trees. Men, too, shed tears, wiping their eyes with the backs of their hands and trying not to meet one another's shame-filled glances. She saw Raedalus standing beside Taksati, their hands clasped respectfully at their waists. Junari did not understand how the oldest pilgrim had survived, but she could not measure her gratitude for that fact. Nor could she imagine leading this pilgrimage without her truest servant and most trusted confidant.

Of the nearly two hundred who spread out to sleep beneath the stars after sunset, fewer than a hundred and fifty remained, fifteen of them wounded so badly that they would need to be carried in the horse-drawn carts normally reserved for hauling food and supplies. They lost thirty-three men, twenty-two women, and eight children. She had lost them. Junari. The Mother Shepherd had led her flock to slaughter. Only the grace and compassion of the Goddess had saved them. The pilgrims had offered their gratitude as she helped dig the graves and prepare the dead and tend to the wounded. They thanked her for saving them and their wives and husbands and daughters and sons. She blessed them each, knowing she had done nothing. She had begged — petitioned the Goddess in a moment of fear and panic, presuming she would be dead before the words passed her lips.

But she had not died. The Goddess had provided the most tangible confirmation yet of her existence. Proof to destroy all doubts. Evidence to replace faith with certainty. And all that had been required was to ask. Why then had Junari not asked sooner? Why had she waited until her own life faced the blade to implore the Goddess for assistance? Was it because only in that moment of terror attendant to imminent death that she finally opened her heart and mind to true belief? If she had prayed to Moaratana when the first cry pierced the night air, these good people whose graves she stood before would still be alive. She could have saved them. Instead, her lack of conviction had assured their deaths.

Junari stared at the eastern horizon, wondering how many hours remained until the sun crested the edge of the world. Raedalus had suggested awaiting dawn before beginning the brief memorial, but Junari wanted to have the caravan of pilgrims on the road and away from the graves of the dead by sunrise. They had a hard road ahead. Best to bear their sorrow with them rather than let it weigh them down to immobility. She took a deep breath and looked into the faces of the people she had failed. They stared back at her with wonder and adoration and a hint of fear. They did not blame her for her hesitancy or weakness of devotion. They saw her as the embodiment of their newly named goddess. Moaratana's earthly vessel and prophet.

Junari considered that name. *Dragon Star*. She had spoken it in a moment of fear, without thought. What did it mean to name a god in the absence of consideration? Had her goddess placed that name in her mind? Had Junari chosen the name, or had she merely uttered the consonants and vowels whispered to her by her divine patron?

Did names make meaning, or did meaning give rise to names? Did it matter? She was Junari, Mother Shepherd, the Dreaming Prophet, and first worshiper of Moaratana, the Dragon Star, the Goddess of the Forbidden Realm, and she had a funeral to conduct.

"This night of tears stabs at my heart." Tears fell hot against her cheeks, and Junari ignored the impulse to wipe them away. Better they were acid to burn her face and mark her failure. She could not hide them from her pilgrims. As always, she spoke Juparti tinged Mumtiba, the pilgrims in the crowd translating to their companions who spoke Shen and Easad.

"We have lost many brothers and sisters and little ones this night. They will never see the ocean waves or the far shores of the Forbidden Realm. They will not bend their backs to help rebuild the fallen temple of our dreams. But they will be with us. They will watch over us. They will give us strength when we feel weak. They will grace us with courage when we are filled with fear. They will remind us of our promises and our oaths when we forget our purpose. And they will welcome us when we, too, pass through the slender veil between this world and the next. Until that day, we will love them and remember them and honor the sacrifice they offered of themselves for us this night — this night of tears."

Junari did not know what doctrine the new religion might eventually hold for those who died, but she did not concern herself with theology that morning. Pashists believed in a soul born again and again into new bodies and new lives, while Kamites and the Tot Giothians believed in an everlasting life of pain or pleasure in a world beyond our own, but she did not worry what to believe of an afterlife. She knew in her heart that her goddess would protect her in this life and whatever might come once she died. And she believed the same for those who lay dead in the ground before her.

"Moaratana." Junari took a moment to let the name be whispered and repeated among the mourners. "Goddess Moaratana defended us this night, and I assure you that she will shelter our loved ones in death. She is benevolent and loving, but she is fierce and powerful, and those who seek to harm us will feel her wrath."

She gestured across the road to the twenty-one shallow graves, each marked with a small rock at the head of the deceased. Many of the pilgrims had wanted to abandon the bodies of the

militiamen or burn them, but Junari cautioned them to respect the dead, even one's dead enemies. The militiamen's swords now rested in the hands of the pilgrims they had intended to kill. There would be others who wished to prematurely end their pilgrimage, and they needed to learn to defend themselves from such attacks. They had been lucky so far, encountering only small bands of militiamen and bandits, both usually turned away by the large number of pilgrims they faced. She should have predicted that her flock would eventually encounter a bigger pack of wolves. Another failure.

"We leave our dead here as we march forward, but we will carry them with every step." She hoped the words she offered provided some small comfort to assuage the grief gripping every person she saw before her. There were other words one customarily offered to the dead. Prayers of safe passage and fortunate return. She could not use those prayers. Not with a new god and a new religion. She raised her hands to her chest, interlocking her fingers, and bowed her head.

"Moaratana, bless us in our time of sorrow. We have given our loved ones to the earth. Hold them in your bosom as we carry them in our memories. Comfort and protect them until we are reunited. Bless us with the solace of your grace and merciful compassion. Anaha, Ahana."

Junari did not know if ending the prayer with the traditional Pashist approbation would be appropriate, but when the congregation of pilgrims repeated it in unison, she accepted it as right and proper. As the last echoes of the ancient Pashist meditative mantra faded, another noise replaced it. Gasps of wonder and guttural sounds of surprise spread among the pilgrims in a pulsing wave. Hands went up to cover hearts and fingers pointed to the sky. Junari turned with trepidation, wondering what fresh turmoil she might face.

As cheers and chants of the Goddess's name rose up behind her, Junari stared at the brilliant crimson star blazing between parted clouds in the dark western horizon. The newly birthed celestial orb hung above the Old Border Road, a beacon to guide the dreamers of all lands to their far-off destiny. A sign of their goddess's power and commitment to her faithful. A challenge to all those who disbelieved and abused her followers. A gift to bind each new believer to her prophet.

Tears once again stung Junari's cheeks and, once more, she ignored them, her lips breaking out in a smile as her mouth tasted the salty blessings of the joy overflowing her heart. The Goddess Moaratana called to her, and Junari longed to meet her.

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

THE DARKNESS held no shadows, only sounds — the cries of men dying.

Lee-Nin squeezed Sao-Tauna's hand where they stood behind the false wall of the farmhouse. She wanted to whisper words of comfort, but could not make her throat form the tones. The dread of utter blackness and the feeling of the walls pressed close around her amplified the terror arising from the noise of the fight taking place mere paces away.

She had gasped as the warden swung his sword at the farmer's neck, certain she would be heard, knowing the farmer would be killed. Then the lamp went out, and the screams began. How could the ugly farmer have survived the inevitable blow of the blade to his neck? How could he defeat five armed wardens even if the sword missed him? The farmer's enormous size gave him an advantage, but not seated. He might have grabbed the meat knife from the table to defend himself, but such a small blade against swords portended a quick death.

The cries of the wardens became fewer and then ceased. Only moments had passed since the lamp failed. How did it flutter out? A breeze from the open door? Could the farmer have blown it out?

Flame danced along oiled cotton as the lamplight filled the room beyond the crack in the wall before Lee-Nin's eyes. An inky blackness — a living slate-colored cloud — seemed to hover around the flame, momentarily blocking its radiance. Then the lamp glow revealed the aftermath of the previous darkened seconds.

The farmer stood beside the table, his fingers pressed to the cover of the book he had been reading. The wardens lay dead on the floor around him. Two bled from wounds — their own swords protruding from their chests. One leaned against the wall, his neck at an unnatural angle. Another lay at the farmer's feet, his head bent backward to touch his heels. The leader, the one who had interrogated the farmer, lay across the table, his head hanging over the edge of the wood, unbloodied, undamaged, but his eyes empty of life.

Sweat dripped from Lee-Nin's scalp to run along her neck and down between her shoulder blades. Her heart seemed frozen in her chest, her breath trapped in her lungs. How could one man, no matter how large, do such deadly damage and suffer no wounds?

As though hearing her thoughts, the farmer turned toward the false wall, seeming to look Lee-Nin in the eye. She pulled her face back from the crack in the wall, blinking to clear her mind. She

looked at Sao-Tauna, noticing for the first time that the girl's breathing had returned to normal. She softened her grip on the child's hand, realizing she had been crushing her tiny fingers.

She heard footsteps come closer to the false wall. A moment later, the logs before her slid outward. The farmer's head filled the opening.

"They are dead. I will need your help."

He turned and walked back toward the table. Lee-Nin took a deep breath to calm her fears, exhaling quickly as Sao-Tauna pulled her by the hand into the lamplight.

The farmer stood near the door with two dead wardens draped over his shoulders, bearing the weight as though he carried sacks of wool. One of the bodies he held had been the leader of the wardens.

"How many more hunt you?" the farmer asked.

Lee-Nin swallowed, her throat dry.

"I don't know. Another hand at least. If they had been close enough to count, we would be dead."

The farmer grunted as he looked between Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna.

"I will put the bodies in the cellar in the barn. Pack all the food you can find."

The farmer turned sideways, carrying his burden through the doorframe and into the night. The sound of the dogs' whining grew quieter as they ran from the farmer.

Lee-Nin guided Sao-Tauna to the bed and released her hand to sit her on the edge of the mattress. It smelled, oddly, of lavender and mint.

"Stay here."

Sao-Tauna nodded, her face calm, her eyes showing a simmering excitement.

Lee-Nin walked around the dead wardens and retrieved the small sack she had been planning to use to rob the farmer of his food not so long ago. Now she stuffed the thin burlap bag with food at the same man's behest. He had saved them. Somehow. And now he sent them away with food for their journey. She imagined the other wardens following their companions to the farmhouse and meeting the same fate. Her and Sao-Tauna's future now seemed like one they might live to witness.

But why did the farmer do such a thing? Why did he risk his life to save a stranger and a child? And how? How had he killed the wardens? Did he possess The Sight? Did this explain why he lived so far from others in solitude?

She stuffed the bag with leftover dinbao and dried meat and a small round of hard cheese as she tried to forget her questions. She closed the sack with a string she found hanging on the wall and looked around for anything else she might use. Then she took the meat knife from the table and slid it into the crook of one of her boots. As she stood up, the farmer came into the room.

"Take this." He handed her a clay jug with a cork stuffed in the opening. The reek of sow-fat lamp oil curled her nose. "Pour it over the blood and light it on fire. Douse the flames with a blanket from the bed."

The farmer hefted two more bodies to his shoulders.

“Why?” Lee-Nin held the jug of oil and stared at a pool of blood where one of the wardens had died with a sword through his chest.

“It will disguise what happened. And confuse the dogs.” The farmer again walked into the cool night air.

Lee-Nin glanced at Sao-Tauna before uncorking the jug and pouring lamp oil over the bloodstained floorboards. She held two pieces of splint wood from the tinderbox on the windowsill in the flame of the lamp before tossing them in the puddles on the floor. She watched the fire lap up the blood, the heat first congealing the liquid, then turning it to pasty, black ash. As the fire spread beyond the bloodstains to clean boards, she turned to the bed, finding Sao-Tauna holding a thin woolen blanket. She thanked the girl and unfurled the bedcover, laying it flat on the floor and stomping it with her feet to extinguish the flames.

As she bent to grab the blanket, she caught the still-open eyes of the final dead warden, leaning against the wall. His face looked frozen in surprised terror. A face he would wear now for all eternity, if the writings of the Prophet Lan-Tau were to be believed.

Hearing the farmer approach, she stood up, folding the singed blanket in neat squares. The farmer gave Lee-Nin and the blanket a quizzical glance before picking up the body of the final warden and slinging it over his shoulder. He extended his hand toward Lee-Nin. She looked at his hand, uncertain for a moment, then passed him the blanket. He said nothing, carrying the final dead warden out into the darkness.

Lee-Nin stood looking through the doorway, out into the black, seemingly impenetrable night. Had it been so dark when she and Sao-Tauna fled through the woods? Was it only the difference in light that blinded her to the night, the lantern’s glow making the world beyond the tiny farmhouse appear immersed in the blackest of molasses? For a moment, the desire to stay in the house overwhelmed her. She had been running for so long. Long before that eavesdropped conversation on the balcony. Long before the palace. As long as she could remember, she had been fleeing or desiring to flee or planning an escape. Even secure in her position in the palace, she kept coins sewn into her clothes, a bag of necessities packed in her room, a stash of valuables hidden beyond the palace walls. The ache and weariness of running weighed at her bones, pulling her down, her legs sagging with the load.

As Sao-Tauna’s tiny fingers enclosed her own, she shook off the melancholy mood that afflicted her so suddenly. Where was the farmer? Should she wait? Should she thank him? Or should they flee again before he returned from hiding the bodies?

As she made her decision and stepped toward the blackness beyond the doorframe, the farmer walked in, brushing past her without a word. He carried a large burlap harvest bag with a strap, half filled with what could be rocks, or apples, or potatoes, slung over his shirtless back. He must have discarded his bloodied clothing with the bodies. Lee-Nin could not help noticing the scars that marked his well-muscled back and chest — white-red lines mapping the history of a violent past. What farmer had such scars? He opened a wooden trunk near the bed and pulled another shirt over his head. Then he removed a long dagger from the trunk and slid it between his belt and trousers.

She watched as he went to the false wall at the back of the room and retrieved the dust-covered sword and the small leather satchel Lee-Nin had stood beside in silence for so many long minutes. He wiped the cobwebs from the sheath and satchel with a rag from his pocket and then slid them both into the harvest sack, pulling the opening closed with a drawstring. He tossed the rag into the hiding space and pushed the fake wall back into place. When he turned around, Lee-Nin stood in the doorway facing him, sack of food in her free hand, her voice quiet but firm.

“Thank you. For helping us.”

The farmer nodded but said nothing.

“You saved our lives, but if we do not leave now, your actions will have been wasted.”

The farmer nodded again.

“When the others come, what will you do?” Lee-Nin could not say why she asked this question. She did not know the farmer, but he had helped spare her life. A part of her wanted assurance that he would be safe. Another part of her knew that the real danger awaited the approaching wardens, not the tree-sized farmer with the scarred face and body.

“I will not be here when they arrive.” The farmer crossed the room to stand beside the table.

Lee-Nin considered the farmer’s words. This explained the sack and the sword then. The farmer would flee as well. This came as good news. Two trails might split the pursuing wardens even further.

“We seek a road toward the nearest town if you could point us in that direction.”

The farmer picked up his ruined book from the table, examining the hole through the cover and inner pages.

“The road lies behind us.” The farmer gestured with his thumb. “An hour’s walk. The town is two days to the east.”

“Thank you. Again.” Lee-Nin made to turn and leave, but curiosity and practicality stayed her feet. “Which way will you go?”

The farmer looked at her with a moment of surprise, as though realizing for the first time that he had been speaking a foreign language during their exchanges and she understood little of what he intended to convey.

“Toward the road and the town.” The farmer closed the cover of the heretic text and clasped it between his hands. “I flee with you.”

THE FUGITIVES



ING-KU

ING-KU STOOD between the small farmhouse and the barn, looking out over the field of spring barley, watching a ruby glittering between parting veils of wispy vapor in an ink-black sky. The new star filled him with unease. He had heard of the dreams, and even heard a few people foolish enough to admit to having them. At least until the punishment for the dreams became known. The dreams had not come to him. He hoped they would not. His devotion to Ni-Kam-Djen surpassed even his dedication to the zhan, *may he live forever*, and the Tanshen Dominion he ruled, *may it flourish and defeat its enemies*.

How a seven-year-old girl could be an enemy of the dominion, he could not fathom. However, he did not question it. He had his orders, given to him from Zhan Taujin Letan-Nin's brother, Tahn Lin-Pi. *Unnatural. A danger to all*. The words the tahn used to describe his daughter.

The woman, the child's tutor, seemed more dangerous to Ing-Ku. How had she escaped the prison cell and fled the palace without drawing attention? How had she gotten out of the capital city of Tsee-Kaanlin so quickly? Where had she come by the coin to pay for food and transport? What tutor knew how to do such things? Was she a spy of the Daeshen Dominion? He would ask the woman these questions. When he found her and the child. Finding them, however, once again proved a more difficult task than he had assumed.

Discovering the farmhouse took hours. Hours he did not have. After proving to himself that he followed the wrong half of the river, he had turned his dogs and men back the other direction. Fortunately, his second-in-command had followed procedure and marked the spot of their departure from the riverbank and into the woods. Similar markings led through the woods and to the farm. A farm that provided even more mysteries for an enigmatic mission:

His second-in-command and four other wardens piled dead in a root cellar in the barn. The house reeking of lamp oil. No one in sight. The scent of the woman and girl leading only from the forest and fields to the barn and house, but nowhere else. A third scent, probably a farmer's, found everywhere, leading everywhere — to the fields, to the woods, to who knew where. The dead sub-commander's two dogs missing entirely. The farmhouse presented too many conundrums.

Who had killed his men? The farmer? What farmer could kill an entire hand of trained and tested wardens? He had seen those same five men fight odds three times their own number and emerge with only minor wounds. Had the woman followed the path back to the woods? Had Ing-Ku and the dogs been so intent on following his sub-commander's markings that they missed her

new trail? Too many questions with no clear means of discerning answers. The appearance of the new star in the night sky seemed a worrisome omen when added to the puzzle of the farm and the disappearance of the woman and child and the unknown farmer.

His men stood around him, staring at the star in silence, awaiting their orders. Four men, two dogs, three days' provisions, and a dwindling supply of coins in his pouch — this comprised his advantages in the pursuit of the fugitives. He possessed one more asset — instinct. He turned to his new sub-commander.

“Are you certain the farmer's scent is more recent on that path behind the house?”

“As certain as I can be.” The newly promoted warden shrugged his shoulders. “There are a few new scents and the dogs can only tell me so much. The scent on the path behind the house is recent, but the dogs don't seem to want to follow it.”

“That's good enough.” Ing-Ku turned his back on the new star. “We follow this farmer. If they aren't with him, he'll know where they went.”

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

SLIPPED FEET preceded the hem of a royal-blue silk nightgown across a polished marble floor out onto the smooth clay tiles of a balcony. A man of thirty-three years gripped the carved stone railing, leaning out to look over the palace gardens, his close-shaved head and angular face tilting skyward, his eyes glaring at the impudent scarlet drop of light shining beneath the sister moons.

High Tahn Tin-Tsu, heir to the ascendancy of the Daeshen Dominion, soon to be named zhan, grasped the edge of the balcony and gritted his teeth. A new star. A demon sign for certain. He knew the dreams to be a sign — a sign of wickedness, of a false temptress goddess's infection spreading among his people, leading them to abandon their faith and their own true god for a pilgrimage to a land that would surely kill them. He thought of these pilgrims as sheep gone astray in the fields, needing the hand of a good shepherd to guide them back to the flock. He did not consider himself to be the shepherd. Only Ni-Kam-Djen could lead those who had lost their devotion back into his embrace. Tin-Tsu would pray for them and try, as best as possible, to correct them in their foolish thoughts and actions.

Who, now, would pray for him? Who would correct the tahn who dreamed the pilgrim dream? Who would rectify his mind as he woke from that dream to see the star it foretold? Who would adjust his deeds should they alter in the face of the dream that plagued him? How dare he assume to lead a nation beset by decades of war and torn apart by rumors and dreams of a new god if he fell prey to the sickness of this dream himself? A zhan did not follow the furrows set before him. A zhan must fashion a fresh path through the world, a new imprint for others to pursue. This was what his father had always said.

Thinking of his father reminded Tin-Tsu of their last words so many years ago. Words that at the time appeared cruel, but now seemed loving, like the words of the Great Father himself.

“Do you know why I send you away?” His father, a powerfully built man, had held Tin-Tsu's shoulders firmly.

“I have shamed you and the faith.” Tin-Tsu had stared at his feet, unable to meet his father's eyes.

“Yes,” his father said. “But I send you away not to punish you, but to give you the chance to create a new path for your life, one far from the palace and your family and ... friends. You will make of yourself something else. Something purer.”

Seventeen years had passed since that chilly winter day. Seventeen years of prayer and training in the most remote mountain temple in the dominion. Seventeen years of trying to regain his father's respect, to forge a new path, to become pure in the eyes of Ni-Kam-Djen. Seventeen years of effort brought to futility by a dream.

No one besides his father knew the true reason for his banishment. To the palace and the dominion, he left to follow his long-stated desire to join the priesthood, and he had never returned because of his extraordinary devotion. This was true. While he longed to see his parents and brother and sister again, after a few years, he grew unable to imagine a life beyond the confines of the temple walls and the mountain valleys outside them. He had not even come home for his father's funeral, preferring to recite his prayers in private rather than participate in the public mourning.

His elder brother's death in battle, leading an offensive against the Tanshen apostates to the south, necessitated leaving behind all he knew and cherished to return to the world he had abandoned in his quest for purity. Now, here in the palace once more, surrounded by forgotten familiarity, he would need to abandon his vows to fulfill his familial duty. As the remaining male heir, he must claim the ascendancy and be named zhan of the Daeshen Dominion.

He, the man who had worked so long to purify his heart, would need to lead men into battle. He who had given his life to his god would be forced to reclaim that life and offer it up to his people. He who had been so devout to the ways of the temple would need to be equally ardent in learning the practices of the palace court. He who had dreamed the heretic dream would need to lead the cause against the new false god and her easily deluded pilgrims.

Tin-Tsu did not understand what the dream meant, nor the star, nor why his god allowed such things to occur in his earthly dominion, but he did know one thing he could do about it. He could turn to the refuge that had brought him so much solace in his years away from the palace.

Tin-Tsu bowed his head and recited the words that had filled so many of his waking hours over the years.

“Great Father, protect me all my day and through my night. Guide me in my thoughts, inspire me in my words, help me to fulfill the promise of my actions. Draw near to my loved ones. Shelter them in your arms. Cast away my enemies. Unburden me of my travails. Grant me strength to follow your path even when the way is clouded and unclear. I bind myself to you now and for always, Ni-Kam-Djen, Great Father, Guardian of the Innocent, Slayer of the Wicked, Ruler of All.”

Tin-Tsu opened his eyes, his heart lighter, his mind clearer. He now knew what he needed to do. Even if he did not know how, he would learn how, through the guidance of his god.

He bowed his head and closed his eyes again as he began to recite the words of the Protection Prayer once more, intending to pray until sunrise, as he had done for so many years in the temple.

“Great Father, protect me all my day and through my night...”

THE FUGITIVES



SAO-TAUNA

DRIED LEAVES from the previous autumn skittered across the packed and pockmarked dirt road, driven by the same strong wind gradually dissolving the clouds from the dark, night sky, the pale light of the setting twin moons growing dimmer with each footstep.

Sao-Tauna swayed in Lee-Nin's arms as she and the big man walked the narrow road. The big man had carried them both at first, for span after span until he sat them down on the road. He said it would help fool the dogs. Fooling dogs sounded good to Sao-Tauna, but Lee-Nin complained about not being a sack of radishes.

They walked the road for an unknown time. Sao-Tauna dozed often. Tired from the running. And everything else. More tired than the day she spent running through the palace halls trying to catch Ja-Na. The cat liked to eat mice, but he didn't like to be petted. She understood that. She did not enjoy being held either. But she did enjoy petting kitties. She found the purring of a cat helped make the world quiet. The world could get too noisy even when no one spoke. The cat gave her a scratch on her nose as punishment for petting him. Her father had laughed when her mother told him the story of the cat chase that day.

Her father.

She did not understand what had angered her father. She knew she did things others did not do. Or could not do. And she had sensed the need to tell no one — to do those things only when alone. And she thought she had been alone. But the wrinkly man must have seen her. She heard him tell Father.

She had not known it to be a deep wrongness. If she had realized, she would have ceased. Father could have asked her to stop. Instead, he had come with a knife...

Sao-Tauna frowned and squished that thought like an ugly, black bug beneath her heel.

Her mother had not even tried to...

Squish, squish, squish.

And the wrinkly man had held her...

Stomp, stomp, stomp!

Sao-Tauna bit her lip. Hard. Her eyes watered with the pain, but the dark thoughts receded — a sneaky cat darting into the shadows of the palace gardens.

Through her bleary eyes, she saw they were approaching a spot where another road crossed the one they traveled.

“Look.” Lee-Nin spoke next to Sao-Tauna’s ear, raising an arm to point upward.

Sao-Tauna followed the aim of Lee-Nin’s finger to watch as a cloud drifted apart in the sky opposite the steadily glowing sunrise. A reddish star shone brighter than any star she had ever seen. So bright, she wondered if it might not be a star, but rather the light of a giant glow-fly, hovering in the night air.

Then she remembered the dreams.

“I’ve seen that star.” Lee-Nin came to a stop.

“No one has seen that star before.” The big man looked upward. “It should not be there.”

“The dreams,” Lee-Nin said. “It’s the star from the dreams.”

The big man looked at Lee-Nin and then back to the star, but said nothing.

“Do you have the dreams?” Lee-Nin asked the big man.

The big man watched the star so long, Sao-Tauna assumed he would not answer.

“I do not often sleep.” The big man lowered his eyes but did not return them to Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna.

Sao-Tauna briefly considered that odd, but then she realized it made sense. The big man appeared to be merely a big man, but she knew otherwise. She could sense it. Like she sensed ... things.

She would not think such thoughts. Thinking them had led to the doing of things that resulted in Father’s knife and the wrinkly man’s screams and Lee-Nin helping her flee from the palace and the running and the dogs and the cold and the hunger and the wardens on the floor bent like broken sticks.

Squish, squish, squish.

“Why did you come with us?” Lee-Nin’s voice brought Sao-Tauna’s attention back from within her mind. Her guardian turned to face the big man. “I want to know now, before we go any farther.”

The big man looked down at Lee-Nin in silence. She stared back as she switched her hold of Sao-Tauna, using her other arm. The big man frowned.

“You are not the only one being hunted,” the big man finally said.

Sao-Tauna sensed Lee-Nin step back half a pace.

“Who is hunting you?” Lee-Nin asked.

“A lone woman hunts me,” the big man said.

“Why?”

“I have done things.”

Lee-Nin stared hard at the big man. Sao-Tauna felt glad Lee-Nin did not ask what things he had done.

“I don’t even know your name,” Lee-Nin said.

“Sha-Kutan,” the big man replied.

“I am Lee-Nin, and this is Sao-Tauna.”

“Why do the soldiers hunt you?”

“I have told you.”

“You do not have a dead husband.”

“No.”

Lee-Nin’s grip on Sao-Tauna tightened.

“Then why do they hunt you?” The big man continued to stare at Lee-Nin.

“They wish to kill Sao-Tauna.”

Sao-Tauna squirmed under the increased pressure of Lee-Nin’s arms, but her protector did not notice.

“Why?”

“I do not know.”

Sha-Kutan stood silent for a moment. “That is the truth.”

Lee-Nin eased her hold on Sao-Tauna as she turned back to the road and began walking once more.

“Which way should we go?” Lee-Nin asked, pointing to the crossing of roads ahead of them.

“Straight,” Sha-Kutan said. “Past the town. There is a forest where we can hide.”

“No.”

Lee-Nin stopped. Sha-Kutan halted as well. Both of them looked at Sao-Tauna.

“That way.” Sao-Tauna spoke for the first time since that afternoon on the balcony. The words felt strange on her tongue — a tart fruit stinging her mouth. She pointed along the road leading toward the west and the bright new star in the cloud-crossed night sky and forced herself to speak again. “Like the dreams.”

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

“I BIND myself to you now and for always, Ni-Kam-Djen, Great Father, Guardian of the Innocent, Slayer of the Wicked, Ruler of All.”

Tin-Tsu still prayed, hours after his first recitation, standing at the edge of the balcony, rocking gently with the rhythm of his words, the passion of his intent filling his voice as he whispered the ancient petition to The True God. As he took a breath to fill his lungs, preparing for the next iteration of the prayer, he heard something behind him.

Turning, Tin-Tsu looked into the shadows of his bedchamber. Someone had entered his private rooms. A servant? No, he counted the footsteps of four. Four men in soft-heeled boots. Four men who stepped toward the canopied bed in the corner of the room, their sword blades glinting in the pale moonlight that cascaded through the balcony door. The men would find the bed empty any moment. Then they would turn their attention to searching out the room’s occupant. They would see Tin-Tsu, his sapphire-tinted silk robe shimmering in the luminescence of the moons, calling their sharp blades to the terrace.

He understood the uselessness of crying out for the sentinels. The men in his room were dressed as palace sentinels. A jump from the balcony would lead to death or a leg-snapping fall. Only one path could be forged through the forest of potential hazards cast before him.

Tin-Tsu raised his voice and called out, *“Great Father, protect me all my day and through my night...”*

INTERLUDE



FOG-DAMP LEAVES bend branches down around two hooded figures standing beneath a tree in the palace gardens of the Tanshen capital city. A rakthor male and a human male stare at one another in the dim moonlight.

The rakthor extends a scaly hand holding a silk pouch, the jingle of coins ringing faintly in the darkened mist.

The human has proved unexpectedly useful, the rakthor thinks to himself.

Those snake eyes make me nervous, the human thinks. Hand me my money so I can be gone.

The rakthor drops the coin purse in the human's hand.

Pale fingers close around silk and metal.

"If you come across such information in the future, do not hesitate to contact me."

The human opens the coin purse. Smiles.

"As long as you pay this well, I won't."

The human nods to the rakthor and then turns and walks into the fog-shrouded garden paths.

The rakthor watches the human disappear into the vaporous night.

If what he has given me proves accurate, I will gladly pay for further confirmation.

The rakthor looks down at his hand, a slim stack of papers held between folded fingers.

Can it be confirmed? There is one of my people, formerly of my profession, who could help ascertain the truthfulness of the text. Ambassadors turned philosophers are rare. However, I have no knowledge of where she is and no means to contact her.

The rakthor slides the papers into a large inner pocket of his jacket.

There is another who can assist me. Of another people and another realm now residing in a different human dominion. Far to travel, but worth the distance if she can illuminate the authenticity of the text.

The rakthor turns and walks into the fog, swirls of fine water mist following in sinuous waves behind him.



EPISODE TWO



THE THRONE



TONKEN-WU

WOODEN HEELS clacked against marble, ringing and echoing along the stone halls, tapping out a constant cadence, keeping time with a peculiar pulse heard only in the warden's head — his own slow, strong heartbeat.

Sub-commander Tonken-Wu turned the corner of the palace hall and continued his determined, patient, solitary march. The floors he stalked did not sit empty, even at the late mid-moons hour. Servants sporadically ran along the hall, dashing from one room to another, working through the evening hours to prepare the palace for the coronation of the new zhan. Soldiers of the dominion and palace wardens walked quickly in single or, sometimes, double hands, going about their own preparations for the crowning of the newly returned high tahn. Occasionally, women slipped from sleeping chambers and hurried down the hall to the stairs leading to the lower levels. Tonken-Wu ignored them, pretending they did not exist, as though they were ghosts briefly wandering among the living. Better to pretend they were phantasms of the night rather than acknowledge that so many disreputable women walked the palace halls after dark indulging the weaknesses of so many of the lesser tahns, councilmembers, and statesmen come from around the dominion to witness the raising of the new zhan to the ascendancy.

Tonken-Wu turned another corner and frowned. A lone guard stood outside the high tahn's bedchambers. He had specifically given instructions that two sentinels should be with the high tahn at all times. He clenched his fists in anger at the failure of the sentinels. Their incompetence reflected his deficiency in supervision. A commander whose men did not follow orders had only himself to blame. Either he had not been clear in his instructions, or worse, he had failed in his duty by allowing derelict men to stand in the roster. He did not doubt that his commands had been coherent. At least one sentinel would be demoted to guardian before morning.

Tonken-Wu quickened his pace as he drew near the door of the tahn's chamber, his footsteps turning the eyes of the man he approached.

"Where is your fellow sentinel?" Tonken-Wu asked as he stopped.

The sentinel, an older man than he expected, looked to him with sullen eyes.

"He fell ill," the sentinel mumbled.

"Is he sending a replacement?" Tonken-Wu did not recognize the man, but there had been an influx of guards from other provinces in the last weeks leading up to the coronation. Possibly, he

had flipped a name and put a less experienced man on the tahn's watch. Another mistake for which he bore responsibility.

"Yes," the sentinel said, looking both ways along the hall.

Tonken-Wu ground his teeth. Only one option presented itself, even if it left him standing beneath his station.

"I will stand guard with you until the replacement arrives." Tonken-Wu tugged the hem of his warden's jacket to straighten the lines of the cloth across his shoulders. A warden needed to present the best face of the palace when on duty.

"That is unnecessary," the sentinel said between thin lips.

"It is prescribed by regulation." Tonken-Wu met the new sentinel's blank stare. "Perhaps you should spend more time reviewing the codex of palace protocol."

An unnamable thrill charged the air, not unlike the unseen vibrations that accompanied the buildup before a thunderstorm. A man of lesser training and skill might have missed it, might not have noticed the shift in the sentinel's weight, the sudden angle of the man's shoulders, the lean of his torso, the fire in his eyes.

Tonken-Wu blocked the man's knife blade by slamming his own curved wrist into the oncoming forearm, using his free hand to strike the man in the throat with bent knuckles. The man tried to stab again, but Tonken-Wu countered, using the man's energy to twist his wrist and dislodge the blade, clasp the hilt and thrusting it into the man's neck under his chin. Eyes wide in shock, the man slid down along the wall, his head bouncing on the marble floor, blood gurgling from his lips as he died.

Tonken-Wu pulled his sword free from the scabbard at his waist, kicked open the door, and stepped inside the high tahn's bedchamber. His eyes adjusted quickly to the moonlit room. Four men in sentinel uniforms turned as he entered, blades drawn. The high tahn stood in the doorway to the balcony, loudly intoning something Tonken-Wu recognized as a prayer but had no time to identify. One of the armed men pivoted and charged him while the other three rushed the defenseless tahn in his silken robes.

As Tonken-Wu closed in to engage the murderous impostor sentinel, he realized he had forgotten the most essential element of protocol for such an event — he had not called out to raise the alarm.

THE THRONE



UNKNOWN PERSON

THE SHADOWS of the room hid the man's face as he stepped near the window, moonlight unveiling his form but not his features. The window sat exactly opposite the high tahn's bedchamber across the palace garden courtyard. The man raised the tube of a near-glass to his right eye and adjusted the barrel to bring the terrace into focus.

The high tahn stood on the balcony, head bowed, lips moving as though speaking to another. Was someone else in the room? Had the high tahn invited one of the comfort-women into his bed? That seemed unlikely. The high tahn presented nothing but the face of piety. Unless that face concealed another behind it. No, the high tahn spoke to himself. No. He prayed. Yes. That made sense. And it would be appropriate.

The high tahn turned, seeming to hear something from within his chambers. The man adjusted the near-glass, his hands trembling slightly as he took a breath and straightened himself. Fools. Could they not move silently? He glimpsed the glint of steel reflecting in the moonlight through the circular aperture of the device in his hands. Four blades pointed at the balcony.

The high tahn stepped forward to stand in the doorway, blocking the man's view. That was odd. The man had expected the high tahn to cower on the balcony. Possibly to call out for help. One of the blades broke off from the others, and the tahn stepped through the doorway, disappearing into the darkness within the chamber.

Why would the high tahn step into the room? Why could only three blades be seen? The man brought his other hand up to steady the near-glass as he watched the glinting hints of those three blades dancing in the shadows of the high tahn's room. It would not take long. Seconds.

The moments dragged on. Darkness swallowed the blades as the men within moved deeper into the confines of the bedchamber. They returned shortly. The three blades continued to move. Then, an unexpected motion. A body fell near the threshold of the doorway. Not the high tahn's. The man at the window recognized the face on the dead body. He had hired the now-dead man. More seconds passed. Two blades flashed in the dim light. Then one.

The man held his breath, leaning against the side of the window to better hold the near-glass in place.

A man dressed in the uniform of the palace wardens stepped into the doorframe, a bloodied sword in his hands. The man at the window knew the warden. Sub-commander Tonken-Wu of the

palace guards. The bloodstained warden reached out and pulled the heavy curtains closed, ending the view of the events across the gardens.

Did the high tahn still live?

The presence of the palace warden implied as much.

The man stepped back from the window and collapsed the near-glass, gripping it tightly in his hands. The plan had failed. Five men to kill a high tahn and all were dead, or if not, he would make certain they were before they could be questioned by the palace wardens. The man sighed, an old Daeshen proverb coming to mind.

The corpses of catastrophe are strewed along the path to victory.

It did not matter how many corpses he must leave behind; he *would* kill the high tahn. The future of the Daeshen Dominion depended upon it.

THE THRONE



KAO-RHEE

SILK SLIPPERS slammed against marble as they ran, followed by two pairs of leather boots, hard heels cracking against mottled stone. Kao-Rhee, prime councilor to the Daeshen ascendancy, ran along the hall toward the high tahn's bedchamber, two young guardians close behind him.

Kao-Rhee brushed a hand through his thinning and disheveled hair. The guardians trailing him had woken him from sleep moments before, each babbling over the other about an attempted murder of the high tahn, of pools of blood, and night-slayers dressed as sentinels. He had asked if the tahn lived, and they had only nodded.

Kao-Rhee would have rushed after them in his nightclothes had not his ever-thoughtful wife handed him a robe. He tightened the silken belt around his waist as he approached the four sentinels standing watch outside the high tahn's bedchamber. Where had these men been when needed? How had night-slayers been able to enter the high tahn's chambers? How had the palace guard not prevented this? He would determine the answers to his questions and hold those responsible to account.

He saw a body near the door to the high tahn's room, a puddle of blood from the wound in the dead man's throat staining the marble floor. The hilt of a dagger still protruded from the man's neck. Kao-Rhee grimaced and braced for what he expected to see beyond the threshold.

The sentinels standing guard parted and opened the door to the bedchamber as he approached. A bright haze of light assaulted his vision and arrested his motion. The infrequent glow of the lanterns lining the palace halls had not prepared his eyes for the blazing light of the seven oil lamps lit around the sleeping chamber's perimeter. A wall of odor stabbed at his nostrils, and he raised his palm to cover his nose against the scent of blood and urine and feces. In all, four dead bodies littered the floor of the room, their bowels released with the untethering of their inner spark. Liquid continents of red-black blood congealed along the floor around the bodies, a strange map of death, inked in an intermittent hand.

Four living men occupied the room among the dead. The high tahn, Tin-Tsu, sat at the edge of his canopied bed. Blood soaked his gown where he held his abdomen. Cuts marked his forearms and hands. He looked weary, but very much alive. The tall and always worried-looking High Commander Nedag-Tong of the palace guards stood beside the bed. His sub-commander, Tonken-Wu, stood a respectful distance behind him. Blood caked the sub-commander's uniform, a still

oozing cut slicing down his right cheek. To the other side of the bed stood Tigan Rhog-Kan, his arms crossed over his bearlike chest.

“Are you wounded, my tahn?” Kao-Rhee bent briefly at the waist, executing the customary bow as he spoke.

“A cut in my side, some scratches to my arms. Nothing serious.” The high tahn gave a wan smile.

“Has the palace physician been sent for?” Kao-Rhee turned to the high commander.

“Yes,” the high commander replied. “A runner has been dispatched.”

“I inspected the wounds myself,” Tigan Rhog-Kan added. “The high tahn is in no danger.”

“What happened here?” Kao-Rhee cautiously stepped around a puddle of blood, directing his query to the warden commander.

“I was just explaining to the tigan what seems to have transpired.” High Commander Nedag-Tong clasped his hands behind his back.

Kao-Rhee noted the phrasing of the response. Nedag-Tong always couched his replies in ambiguity.

“Sub-commander Tonken-Wu saved my life.” high Tahn Tin-Tsu nodded toward the sub-commander.

Kao-Rhee examined the warden. The youngest ever promoted to sub-commander, if he remembered correctly. Efficient, if somewhat unimaginative. Kao-Rhee appraised the man as honest, possibly too much so.

“What happened?”

Sub-commander Tonken-Wu coughed quickly into his fist before speaking. He appeared nervous, likely at the prospect of explaining himself before his commander, the prime councilor, the tigan, and the high tahn.

“I was walking the halls, double-checking the duty postings, when I noticed only one sentinel outside the high tahn’s rooms. I questioned the man, and he attacked me. After killing him, I entered the bedchamber to find four more men with swords drawn.”

“I had been praying to Ni-Kam-Djen for protection, and the God of All sent me Sub-commander Tonken-Wu.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu reached out a hand to steady himself on the bedpost as he stood. The other men in the room reflexively bowed their heads.

“He bravely placed himself between me and the men come to murder me and killed them all.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu smiled approvingly at Tonken-Wu. “He is a most impressive swordsman.”

“Luck.” The sub-commander bowed his head again.

Kao-Rhee surveyed the room once more. Four dead night-slayers, all armed, and one more dead outside the door. Sub-commander Tonken-Wu had a reputation as an excellent swordsman, and this would extend it to legend. Were anyone to ever hear of it.

“The events of this night must remain with those of us in this room.” Kao-Rhee turned from the sub-commander to the high tahn. “Until we can uncover what vile forces put these murderous men in your chambers, my tahn, we must hold all knowledge of it tightly. Our adversaries will

take advantage even from the merest hint of a near successful regicide on the eve of your coronation.”

“The work of the heretic Tanshen usurper, no doubt.” Tigan Rhog-Kan scowled. “We should prepare a retaliation for the inevitable verdict against his treachery.”

“I agree on both points.” Commander Nedag-Tong glanced at the dead men. “I will have the guardians and sentinels attending now sequestered until the coronation is concluded. I will also have these bodies disposed of and the room locked until we find the Tanshen agents responsible for breaching the sanctity of the high tahn’s chambers.”

“It would help if our eager warden had left one of them alive to question.” Tigan Rhog-Kan frowned at Sub-commander Tonken-Wu.

“My apologies, Tigan.” Tonken-Wu bowed his head once more. “I was ... unskilled in my actions.”

“How did these men even come to be here?” the tigan’s eyes darted to High Commander Nedag-Tong with his query.

“I am afraid this is my responsibility as well,” the sub-commander said before his superior could reply. “The men the night-slayers posed as are missing. It is possible they are dead. It was my duty to make the watch roster in advance of the coronation. I should have placed more men at the high tahn’s door and at the cross halls. Had I done so, the night-slayers would have been discovered sooner and the high tahn might never have been in danger. I submit myself for discipline.”

Sub-commander Tonken-Wu lowered his head, his eyes locked on his feet. The young man’s sudden concessionary contrition left the others in silence. Kao-Rhee cleared his throat.

“Knowing who is responsible for the failure of the palace guards does not tell us anything about the men sent to kill the high tahn. The fact that you saved the life of the high tahn is commendable. However, by the admission of your own words, had you not failed in your duty, the high tahn would not have needed your personal protection.” Kao-Rhee looked to High Commander Nedag-Tong. “I will leave your punishment to your commander.”

“You will be demoted to junior guardian.” High Commander Nedag-Tong’s voice sounded stern.

Too stern to Kao-Rhee’s ears. The commander felt pleased, no doubt, to so swiftly have someone to fault for the night’s nearly calamitous fiasco. A blame that would not tarnish his own name.

“I’d have any soldier of mine whipped for such negligence,” Tigan Rhog-Kan spat.

“There will be no whipping,” High Tahn Tin-Tsu spoke loudly, bringing all eyes to his own, even those of Tonken-Wu. “Nor will the sub-commander be demoted. Until further notice, he will be my personal escort. He has proved himself exceptionally adept at protecting my person. He will accompany me at my discretion. Particularly today.”

“Are you certain this is a wise notion, my tahn?” Tigan Rhog-Kan said. “A man who has failed you once may fail you again.”

“This is not a notion, Tigan; this is my command.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu stood a little taller. Even in night slippers, he could look over the tigan’s head. “And he did not fail me. He saved my life.”

“Of course, my tahn.” Tigan Rhog-Kan lowered his eyes and his voice.

“It will be as you desire, my tahn.” Kao-Rhee noted how easily the high tahn, away for seventeen years from the palace and its subtle displays of power in search of advantage, managed to assert his authority with such ease. He had not expected it from a mendicant priest, even one of royal blood. Apparently, High Tahn Tin-Tsu had not forgotten all the lessons of his childhood. Kao-Rhee remembered offering some of those lessons himself to the soft-natured youth, tutoring him in the ways of statesmanship with his elder brother. While his brother, Fan-Mutig, had taken to the instructions of statecraft with enthusiasm, young Tin-Tsu had been recalcitrant, always more interested in poetry and the Kam-Djen scrolls than in the history of the realm and the means for its proper management. He wondered how the tahn had changed during his self-imposed exile. Could that once gentle boy have become a man hard enough to rule the dominion and defeat their enemies?

“There is much to do for the coronation, my tahn,” Kao-Rhee said. “Once the physician has examined your person, you may wish to rest before the day’s events overtake us with their inevitability.”

“I require little sleep,” High Tahn Tin-Tsu said. “And we have more to contend with than merely the coronation or murderers loose in the palace halls. Have you seen the sky?”

“The sky, my tahn?” Kao-Rhee had left his pillows and his wife to come directly to the high tahn’s bedchamber. While he had passed several windows, he had not thought to look through them.

The high tahn gestured toward Tonken-Wu. “Open the curtains.”

Tonken-Wu went to the balcony door and pulled back the drapes to reveal the night sky. A large red star sat above the rooftops beyond the palace gardens. Kao-Rhee had always thought of stars like holes in a blanket held up before the brilliant light of the sun. If the other stars were pinpricks, this star, this luminous nocturnal aberration, tore a rent in the fabric of the night.

Kao-Rhee recognized what the star implied. He had not had the dreams himself — a mind pure in the faith of Ni-Kam-Djen could not be swayed by the Dark Sight even in sleep — but he understood what its arrival portended for the future zhan and the dominion. It could not be coincidence the star arrived in the sky on the eve before the high tahn assumed the ascendancy.

“We must prepare for unprecedented chaos to attend the coronation,” Kao-Rhee said. “We must prepare wisely.”

THE CARNIVAL



LEOTIN

BLACK WINGS fluttered in the still night air, casting flickering moon shadows across the man's dark face and broad nose. He reached out his fingers and the night jay landed in his open palms. He held the bird in the crook of his arm, using both hands to remove a thin wooden tube strapped to the animal's right leg. He slid the bird into one of several small cages, the other confined night jays curiously watching their new companion. The man tossed a handful of dried corn into the cage, and the bird cackled quietly as it began to gorge itself on the grain. He scattered another handful between the remaining cages to keep the other birds quiet.

Leotin pulled the canvas cover down over the side of the wagon containing the birdcages. Ostensibly, the birds served as props in his magic acts, but they also fulfilled a more important purpose — they provided the means of communication with his master. He once thought of himself as a man who directed his actions as his own employer. That time, and all illusions of his status, had passed long ago.

He still did not understand how the birds always found him no matter how far he strayed across the realm. He suspected some manner of The Sight had changed the birds. The alternative, that The Sight had altered him in some dark way, making him a beacon to draw the avian messengers from across the sky, deeply unsettled him. He tried to ignore that notion. Regardless, beyond communicating his master's wishes and allowing him to report back his progress, the night jays represented an unshakable fact of his life — his master could find him anywhere.

Leotin wandered between the carnival wagons — tall, unsteady structures with long berths and curved wooden or canvas tops. He passed acrobats and actors, animal trainers and tent hands, all sleeping beneath the cloud-cloaked double moons. Dreaming, he supposed. Were they dreaming the same dream that had roused him from his repose in his private wagon? The dream that woke him every night. Were they dreaming of the Forbidden Realm and the new god?

Leotin had never believed in the gods. Any of the gods. Traveling as he did between the dominions and their different faiths confirmed the truth of his faithlessness. He believed in certainties. Money to pay his actors and carnival crew, and the sharp steel promised for his neck if he did not repay his debt to his master. Lack of faith did not mean utter faithlessness, however. He possessed great faith in the cruelty of human nature. He kept a trunk of religious texts and artifacts in his wagon, switching out their place of prominence as he crossed the borders from one dominion to another. His carnival crew all did the same, regardless of what gods they might or might not

worship. It reduced the need to fight or flee when confronted with the austere enforcement of religious purity by those who often accosted them in their travels.

He sought a spot between a stand of nearby trees, a tuft of land not visible by the crew, yet bathed in enough moonlight to read his master's latest missive. The carnival camp took longer to cross than in his childhood, when it belonged to his father. Back then, they were a traveling troupe of ten actors, performing *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*, the triumvirate of ancient plays from the time before the First Great Dominion spanned the entirety of the Iron Realm more than three thousand years ago. After his father's death, and with his mother's blessing, he grew the troupe to a full carnival, adding acts and attractions, increasing their draw and lengthening their stay in each town.

With an enlarged entourage came expanded costs. Debts that grew with bad weather and wars between nations. Eventually, these debts forced Leotin to seek the financial support of a patron. He found one. One who required more than entertainment in return for coin. One who ensured Leotin's indentured state and loyalty through a mixture of threat and the occasional display of Dark Sight. Leotin did not now need to worry as much about paying his actors and crew; he only needed to concern himself with pleasing his master, a situation he longed to reverse.

He approached the night guards at the edge of the caravan camp, the three outlanders, the yutan, the wyrin, and the roagg. The moon-walker, the night-cat, and the bear-man. If he could find a rakthor, a snake-man, he mused, he would have one of every breed of peoples on Onaia. Except an urris, of course. But no one of any repute had claimed to have seen an actual urris in hundreds of years. Their actions to enforce The Pact remained the sole evidence of their existence.

The three outlanders watched him as he walked away from the circle of wagons, but said nothing. He nodded to them and continued in silence. He felt bad for them. He sympathized with their plight. Spies who did not wish to spy. He understood that sentiment. It defined his own condition. As his master pointed out when becoming his lifelong patron, a carnival could cross borders during wars, enter castles and palaces, and perform outside temples. An observant carnival leader could learn a great deal by watching the royalty for whom he performed. Even more by bribing servants and merchant traders. Such information could be useful to the right person.

The three spies did not know he discerned their purpose in joining his carnival crew. They made excellent guards, and their act of martial prowess thrilled and impressed the crowds who came to see the three weird creatures from the other realms. Yeth, the yutan woman, tall with fair skin bordering on the albino, held a subtle mastery of her spear-tipped staff. Shifhuul, the wyrin, largely nocturnal by nature, two-thirds the height of a man, with an animal-like snout and a pelt of short black fur covering his body, proved a surprisingly acrobatic swordsman with his slender blade. And Tarak, the roagg, taller than even the yutan woman, wide like a bear, with a razor-toothed muzzle, a shaggy coat of fur, and two massive axes he wielded with the dexterity of a juggler. If nothing else, leaving them to guard the camp at night frightened off most potential bandits. There had been a time, not so many years ago, when the roads of Atheton were free of bandits, the dominion's army patrolling the main thoroughfares and protecting travelers. Most blamed the rise in lawlessness on deserters from the war between the neighboring Shen dominions

rather than a failing of the ruling Atheton tey. Of late, the blame also fell to rumors of a plague purging towns in the north. Regardless, those bandits who made the occasional error of thinking they had the three outlanders outnumbered rarely lived to make another mistake of any kind.

Leotin cast aside thoughts of the outlander spies, particularly the knowledge that if his own spying were ever to be discovered then he now had three perfectly acceptable marks to take the blame. He hated such thoughts. A man had to be hard to run a carnival and survive the roads between the dominions, but a man could still have honor. Unless, that is, he worked for a master who demanded secrecy and promised far greater punishments for being caught spying than might be found on the chopping blocks or in the jails of a royal palace. Punishments Leotin had seen once and wished he could erase from his mind.

He shook his head, clearing it of the worries that always arose from thoughts of his master. With his fingernail, he removed the tiny, wax covered cork stopper from the end of the slender message tube and carefully pulled the tightly rolled paper out into the moonlight. He unfurled the miniature scroll and scanned the strange script scrawled across the parchment surface. Words written in an ancient language. A language Leotin once struggled to learn. His master did not trust codes. Codes could be broken, but dead tongues held their secrets firm. To Leotin's knowledge, only he and his master knew how to read the symbols of the long-vanished Tinthar people of the Kytain Dominion. Ever the embodiment of unambiguity, his master's message held only four words.

Free city. Pilgrims. Now.

The "free city" could only be Tanjii, the independent city-state wedged between two mountain ranges along the coast at the terminus of the Old Border Road between the Daeshen and Tanshen dominions. The word "pilgrims" meant that his master's continued interest in the dreams of the new god demanded more edification. The word "now" closed out the winged dispatch. His master believed in haste — in obtaining information before potential rivals.

Leotin wondered at his master's sustained focus on the pilgrims and the dreams. All of his orders of late centered on them, whether gleaning reactions at castle courts and royal councils, or ferreting out the concerns of the priests of the various temples. The dreams terrified people. He doubted anything frightened his master. To his master, the dreams represented an opportunity to be exploited, as did the bands of pilgrims now crossing the land, heading for the western coast and eventually the Forbidden Realm. Pilgrims he would apparently soon join.

As he tore the paper of his master's message into tiny pieces and scattered them in the light breeze, he looked up into the cloud-patched night sky to admire the stars. He stood there a long time. As he watched the constellations slowly drifting across the canvas of the night, he wondered at their meaning. What were they? Why did they travel so? Were they worlds like his own? Were they suns, like the one now hiding beyond the horizon, distant and unreachable? Were they gods, sitting in judgment, interfering in the affairs of the beings below to amuse themselves? The dream showed a star. Each night, the same dream and the same star. What did it mean?

Leotin gasped as a cloud drifted across the sky and revealed a brilliant new light blooming among the familiar firmament of the heavens. A deep point of crimson luminescence outshining

all but the twin moons above it. A new star in the western sky, directly along the path to Tanjii and the Zha Ocean and beyond to the Forbidden Realm.

Claws of ice gripped his spine and made him shiver. He wiped the sudden sweat from his forehead with his now clammy hands. He could not slow the quickness of his breath. A new star. Just as the dream foretold.

Leotin stood and watched the newborn star, wondering if his master also gazed upon its brilliance and what the next dispatch carried by night jays would instruct.

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

THE LIGHT of the sun rose above the curve of the horizon, shining through the warped, centuries-old glass of the large eastern window of the Grand Hall, illuminating its interior in a golden glow before passing through the identical western portal and crossing the gardens beyond to warm the closed eyelids of High Tahn Tin-Tsu, the man destined to be zhan of the Daeshen Dominion by the time that same sun fled from the world and left it in darkness.

Tin-Tsu opened his eyes. He stood on a balcony similar to the one he had prayed upon a few hours prior. How strange the answer to his prayers. How unexpected. He touched his side where the palace physician's bandages wrapped his ribs. His flesh would be tender for days, and likely bleed again, but the old healer's hand had been just as steady with the needle and thread as when he had sewn Tin-Tsu's arm all those years ago as a child. More than anything, more than his mother's smiles and kisses, more than his sister's embrace, those stitches had made him feel at home again. A home much changed from the one he had left.

Seventeen years past, his father had been a zhan in his prime. Ten years later, he lay dead from an infected wound incurred from the rusted metal of a Tanshen soldier. His father had always insisted on being on the battlefield for a major conflict, to ensure the enemy felt not merely his army's might but the bite of his own blade. Tin-Tsu's brother, Fan-Mutig, had followed his father's example, dying from two well-aimed arrows in battle only months prior. A battle lost even as the troops lost their leader. Too many arrows and not enough cover. A defeat that Tin-Tsu only learned of when he had been summoned for the funeral. And the inevitable coronation. A crowning that he had been ignoring as best he could. He blinked against the light of the sun. He could continue to ignore the inescapable for a few more hours.

A knock came from within his private study. He did not reply, knowing who it was and that the man would enter without bidding.

"Come join me," Tin-Tsu said when the door to the study opened. A moment later, Sub-commander Tonken-Wu stood beside him, bowing briefly before staring out over the gardens.

"Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee has instructed me to inform you that the preparations for the coronation proceed without incident, my tahn." Tonken-Wu clasped his hands behind his back. "High Commander Nedag-Tong also wishes me to convey his assurances that the palace is secure and will remain so in all instances."

“Do you believe the palace is secure, Tonken-Wu?” Tin-Tsu did not look at the young warden.

Tonken-Wu hesitated before speaking.

“No, my tahn. I do not.”

“Why not?” Tin-Tsu breathed in the subtle scent of the flowers that opened to the light of the new day in the palace garden.

“If there can be one hand of night-slayers in the palace, there can be two.” Tonken-Wu appeared deeply concerned by the thought. “And it would take only a single man to poison a cup or cast an arrow.” He glanced around the gardens as though expecting the suggestion of his words to create reality at any moment.

“I agree.” Tin-Tsu savored the aroma of dew-drenched lilacs rising up with the sun-warmed air. “Do you accept my wise councilor’s assessment of the source of the attempt on my life?”

Tonken-Wu vacillated again before making his reply.

“No, my tahn.”

“Why not?” Tin-Tsu cocked his head at the warden.

“While it might make sense for the Tanshen usurper to try and end your life, he is not the only one who stands to gain from your death.” Tonken-Wu stared down at his feet.

“Explain.” Tin-Tsu returned his attention to the gardens as Tonken-Wu spoke.

“Your death would destabilize the court and the dominion, but not enough to allow the Tanshen an upper hand in the battlefield.” Tonken-Wu raised his eyes even as he lowered his voice, casting his gaze about the gardens and balconies. “We have rallied our best archers from the far reaches of the dominion to counter the type of assault that took your brother’s life. While your death could provide the Tanshen Dominion a political advantage, it would not assist them in prosecuting the war. It might even hinder them by rallying the nation in response to such a breach of decency. However, while your sister could assume the throne as guardian zhan for a future son, with no clear heir, several of the lesser tahns might see your passing as an opportunity to advance their own station through marriage. And then there is the prospect that a third, unknown party might wish you dead to further goals we can only guess at.”

“You seem to have given this great consideration.” Tin-Tsu smiled at the young warden’s assessment.

“It was a long walk from my chambers after changing clothes.” Tonken-Wu tugged at the cotton hem of his warden jacket.

“And why might my own people wish to see me dead?” Tin-Tsu did not wonder so much about the answer to this question, but he wanted to know how his new personal escort would reply.

“They fear you, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu spoke without reticence. “Your brother, may he walk forever in the Pure Lands, trained to rule the dominion from birth. You are a priest, trained to serve Ni-Kam-Djen. You have never led a council meeting. You have never stood on a battlefield. Never led an army. Never held...”

“Never held a sword.” Tin-Tsu lowered his voice as he finished the young warden’s sentence. “Remember this, Tonken-Wu. You will bear my blade for me. You will be my sword hand.”

“My tahn...” Tonken-Wu began, seeming uncertain how to proceed or what he wished to say. “In your bedchambers...”

“In my bedchambers, you saved my life by slaying my enemies,” Tin-Tsu said. “You have my unending gratitude.”

“Yes, my tahn,” Tonken-Wu replied.

“Do you know why I spared you punishment and requested you at my side?” Tin-Tsu asked.

“I...” Tonken-Wu looked down again to his feet. “No, my tahn. I failed you. Those men should never...”

“You did not fail me,” Tin-Tsu interrupted. “You have spared me in ways you cannot imagine. We will not speak of it again.”

“As you say, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu continued to ponder his boots.

“Why, of all the men in the castle, have I requested you to attend me?” Tin-Tsu lowered his voice again.

Tonken-Wu considered this question for a moment, raising his head as the answer filled his lips.

“Because I am the only one you are certain is not trying to kill you.”

“Just so.” Tin-Tsu nodded. “Now I need you to do your best to find out who is and to keep them from succeeding. Your commander will be investigating the events of last night, but as you say, I trust your assessment to be unbiased. Find out who the men in my room were. Enlist those you trust to help you in this hunt. Were the men sentinels? New recruits? Hired swords dressed to appear the part? How did they plan to flee the palace? Does anyone recognize them? Have they been seen recently, either together or alone, in the company of a second party?”

“You have given this great thought, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu adjusted the hem of his jacket again.

“As you said, it took you some time to arrive.” Tin-Tsu hoped his new personal warden would be as fastidious in investigating the thwarted murder as in the grooming of his uniform. “The men you put to this task should have no idea what they are probing or why. Set them like hounds in the field and let them bring back the fallen pheasant. You shall apply yourself to double checking all the contingencies for my safety during the coronation. It will be easier to kill me in a public place than in my bedchamber.”

“Yes, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu glanced again at the gardens. “You might wish to avoid the balconies for a time. Arrows are harder to see approaching than swords.”

“True.” Tin-Tsu glanced at the gardens. “Thankfully, some noise presages their arrival. Proceed with your preparations. I have prayers to make. Return before noon.”

“Yes, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu bowed and backed off the balcony, leaving the study as quietly as he had entered.

Tin-Tsu watched him go, then looked out over the trimmed grass and cultured flowers below, once more breathing in the calming medley of scents filling the air. His new personal warden had made a good point. A balcony offered a solid target for an archer, even from a great distance. He should forego this simple pleasure and postpone it until his safety could be better assured.

How long might that be? Possibly forever. There would always be someone now who wanted him resting in the palace mausoleum beside his father and brother. He had forgotten how dangerous palace life could be. As a child, the most he had ever worried about was falling from the poda tree in the garden. The branches of the tallest tree in the palace garden had called to him all through his youth. He looked to the tree, noting that its gnarled limbs seemed to reach even higher than when he had departed from the palace. It was said the poda tree would continue to grow, even incrementally, until either the weight of its own height and leaves brought it down, or the ax of a lumberman felled it.

He remembered other things associated with the tree, things he had spent years attempting to forget. At the base of the tree, near the waist-high roots, something beneath the branches caught his eye. Someone. A face, eyes raised toward him on the balcony. A face aged but known to him nonetheless. The face from his past that he could never disremember no matter how great his desire.

Could it truly be him, or did some fanciful vision conjured up by the memories of the poda tree plague Tin-Tsu's senses? How had he returned? Why? What did his presence mean?

Before Tin-Tsu could silently pose more questions, the man beneath the tree limbs turned and vanished into the foliage of the garden paths.

What could it all portend? The dream, the star, the men come to kill him, the young warden's arrival at the opportune moment, and now this face across the gardens, this face from his past come back to haunt him at a distance.

Tin-Tsu felt the prayer of protection on his tongue more than he heard the words he uttered, but he surrendered himself to them, regardless.

THE CARNIVAL



YETH

BLACK FLIES buzzed through the chill air. The light of the sun, not yet above the treetops, ate away the morning mist with a gradually increasing brightness and warmth.

Yeth Dan Yoth, once apprentice to the Prime Sight Master of the Supreme Yutan Pod, now secret scout and carnival attraction, waved her long, pale fingers over the bowl in her hand, shooing away a small but determined cloud of insects. She frowned as she spooned a mouthful of cooked oats past her teeth, trying to avoid her tongue as she swallowed.

Humans, Yeth thought. *Eating food for pack animals and delighting in the flavor*. She grimaced and took another bite, watching the satisfied looks on the human members of the carnival troupe as they collected their bowls of oat slop from the camp cook and devoured the mushy contents with great satisfaction, smiling and making moaning sounds of pleasure. She turned to her companions at her side, Tarak the roagg and Shifhuul the wyrin, both seated on the same fallen log as herself. Shifhuul stared at the bowl of oats in his hands, sniffing at it with his long snout, wincing in distaste. Tarak, in contrast, had already licked his first bowl clean and begun on his second. Carnival troupe members were normally each afforded the same portions of the meals, but Tarak's size granted him special consideration. He stood more than a head taller than Yeth, and she stood a head taller than most of the humans. Tarak needed more food than the others. She also suspected that the cook feared to refuse the massive roagg's request for second helpings.

"You going to eat that, or watch it dry and collect flies to season it?" Tarak nodded with his muzzle toward the bowl in Shifhuul's hands.

"I not like bad-bad horse grain often so." Shifhuul stirred the bowl of oat mash with his spoon, then grunted and took a bite.

Yeth hid a smile at the wyrin's mangled syntax of the human words. While the creature acted reasonably intelligent, it seemed incapable of mastering any language other than its own.

"Flies might improve the flavor." Yeth forced herself to eat another spoonful. She would need the sustenance for the day's long march. She and Tarak walked at the rear of the convoy of wagons and tethered animals and shuffling humans. Leotin, the carnival master, sat in the cart at the front of the line and preferred the troupe members most capable of wielding weapons to bring up the rear in case of ambush. Shifhuul always rode in the last wagon, dozing through much of the day. While Yeth and Tarak took turns sleeping through the night, Shifhuul's largely nocturnal nature left him awake for much of the duration of their nightly watch of the carnival campgrounds.

Yeth found herself surprised at how well the three of them worked together. She had not expected to find the company of a roagg and a wyrin to be enduring, much less enjoyable. She imagined they felt the same. The peoples of the various realms rarely interacted beyond the few merchant sailors who might trade at the docks among their respective coastal towns. The yutans of the Sky Realm, in particular, did not seek to involve themselves with the other peoples of Onaia. However, sharing the same mission helped the three share their days in harmony. It had been a struggle at first, their individual languages a barrier to conversation. Each spoke a little of the old Shen tongue of the Great Dominions that had once ruled the entire human Iron Realm. After joining the carnival, Yeth and Tarak's skill with the speech improved greatly. And even though they currently traveled in the Atheton Dominion, enough of the carnival folk spoke Shen to make communication possible, if sometimes blandly simplistic. She had also managed pick up enough of the Easad language of the Atheton and Nevaeo Dominions to follow conversations if not lead them.

Traveling with the carnival proved to be a boon of great fortune. The carnival folk all hailed from different dominions, spoke different languages, looked and acted differently from the peoples of the towns they encountered. With so much variation on display, the appearance of a yutan, a roagg, and a wyrin, while extraordinary, did not seem so unusual or frightening. It certainly made it easier for the three of them to stay alive in a hostile foreign land populated with a people plagued by dreams urging them to take to the roads in defiance of their rules and religious leaders.

Beside her, Shifhuul placed his spoon down and turned to Tarak.

"You hear?" Shifhuul sniffed the wind.

"Yes." Tarak turned his ears toward the trees lining the road where the carnival made camp. "Humans in the forest. Ten maybe."

"Ten and two." Shifhuul sat the bowl on the ground and rose to his feet, drawing his slender sword from the sheath at his waist.

Yeth and Tarak stood as well. The roagg hefted the two axes resting at his feet while she grabbed her spear from where it leaned against the log. She gestured to one of the nearby humans, a boy of fifteen, the animal tender, Donjeo.

She did not want to call out and give warning to whoever advanced toward them. She pointed to the forest and shook her spear. The boy stared blankly at her for a moment and then jumped as though poked by her weapon, the realization of her meaning breaking upon his mind. He ran toward another group of carnival folk, quietly alerting them that someone approached from the woods.

Yeth turned and stood to face the dense wall of forest trees with her companions. She could now hear the sounds of the humans approaching. They made more noise than she expected for a possible ambush.

"More militiamen?" Yeth asked Shifhuul.

"I not think." Shifhuul raised his snout and inhaled. "Smell no same."

"They smell unwashed." Tarak rubbed the black nose of his muzzle with the back of his massive, claw-tipped hand as though trying to wipe away the odor.

The leaves of the trees at the edge of the forest shook, and Yeth readied her spear. They had been attacked by bandits and harassed by militias repeatedly. Between the two, she hoped for the militia. As long as the carnival harbored no pilgrims, they generally lost interest, especially at the sight of Tarak and his twin axes.

Wide eyes and dirt-smudged faces emerged from the forest into the late morning light.

“Great goddess!” A woman in near rags shouted in Easad and stumbled backward, clutching a small boy in her arms.

“Goddess protect us!” A man carrying a large canvas pack on his shoulders held up his palms as though to defend himself with his open hands.

More humans stepped from the trees, each with frightened looks and raised arms. One man with gray hair stepped forward from the small crowd clinging to each other. He walked with the aid of a long branch to favor his left leg. Yeth noticed the carnival master, Leotin, step up beside her. He always made an appearance to assume his leadership once a potential threat had been deemed satisfactorily controlled. She rested the butt of her spear in the weeds at her feet. Shifhuul and Tarak lowered their weapons as well.

“Hello, friends.” Leotin said in Easad, casting his arms wide with dramatic flair. “What brings you from the forest this fine, bright morning?”

“Fear for our lives,” the gray-haired man said.

“The militia,” the woman with the child added.

“Dangerous times.” Leotin lowered his arms.

“We seek sanctuary in numbers.” The gray-haired man hobbled forward, leaning heavily on his walking stick.

“We are not a traveling refuge, I am afraid.” Leotin raised his open palms in a gesture of regret.

“Pilgrims have a duty to protect one another.” The man stopped and gripped his walking stick tightly.

A word from the man’s plea kindled a memory in Yeth’s mind.

“You have armed beasts to guard you,” the man with the canvas pack said, his eyes darting warily between Yeth, Shifhuul, and Tarak.

“We are a carnival, not a pilgrim band,” Leotin said. “We can offer you no shelter.”

“But we...”

“We should take them in.”

The new voice to join the discussion belonged to a young, pale-faced human woman named Palla. A merchant’s daughter from the Nevaeo Dominion, she acted in the carnival play and did magic tricks for the crowds before the performances. She often voiced her opinion when others remained obedient to Leotin’s decisions.

“We do have a duty.” Palla stepped up to stand beside Leotin. “We cannot abandon people to their deaths.”

Again, that word. The word that had haunted her these last months. The word that she had struggled against and abandoned, only to have it hunt her and claim her and set her upon the journey that brought her to where she stood.

EIGHT MONTHS AGO

“IT IS your duty.”

“It is my punishment.”

“The need to atone for the shame you have brought upon your family and your pod is not a punishment.”

Yeth looked away from Sight Master Lamna, her eyes fixing on a stone at her feet.

“It still seems like a punishment.”

Sight Master Lamna sighed, looking out at the waves of the ocean far below the cliff beneath their feet. Her former mentor stood half a head shorter than Yeth, advanced age stooping her shoulders and bending her back. Three times Yeth’s forty-five years, the elder yutan still commanded unquestionable respect from her onetime pupil. Yeth strove to imitate her former mentor’s motionlessness. Even after more than twenty years of study under the elder woman’s tutelage, she still felt like a novice in her presence, especially when being reprimanded.

“We must discover what these dreams mean and what the humans of the Iron Realm will do about them.” Sight Master Lamna folded her hands behind her back.

“And it is a convenient reason to banish me from our realm.” Yeth’s anger slowly replaced the discomfort of challenging her mentor.

“It is not banishment. You will return.” Sight Master Lamna looked down the side of the cliff face.

“Assuming I survive.” Yeth followed her mentor’s gaze.

“I have no doubt of that,” Sight Master Lamna said. “I would not send you if I thought you incapable of returning.”

“A pointless errand,” Yeth said. “Why does the Supreme Pod care what the humans dream?”

“Why do you assume that only humans have this dream?” Sight Master Lamna cocked an eye at Yeth.

Yeth did not respond to this question. She had not heard of yutans dreaming the human dream of a new god. Most yutans did not believe in gods the way humans did. Yutans worshiped the universe as the manifest body of a sentient divine being, but not one that acted in yutan affairs. The largest yutan sect, the Aasho, envisioned this divine being as existing in three aspects that they worshiped in the form of personified beings — not gods but facets of divine nature. *Onn* the force of creation, *Tam* the force that sustained all life and the universe, and *Kiv* the aspect of death and destruction that led back in the circle of existence to *Onn* and creation. What could it mean that yutan people dreamed of a human god?

“I did not know this,” Yeth finally said.

“There is much you do not know and much more that you refuse to accept.” Sight Master Lamna kicked a small stone and watched it fall toward the water. “You have disrupted the natural order. There are always consequences to our actions. This you know.”

Yeth winced as the ocean swallowed the plummeting stone with a nearly imperceptible splash. She felt like that small chunk of rock. Easily discarded, impossible to retrieve. Like her actions. Once taken, they could not be undone. The effects and consequences had to be lived with.

“You will meet two others. A roagg and wyrin. They will accompany you. Learn what you can and report back.” Sight Master Lamna handed Yeth a thick steel disc two fingers wide and a finger thick. “There are four coins cut from a single metal dowel. I will have one, as will the roagg and wyrin seers. You will report back to us every ten days.”

“And if I refuse?” Yeth considered the costs of accepting the pointless task and those of rejecting it. The Supreme Pod would do nothing regardless of what the dreams might mean or what the humans did about them. The yutans never involved themselves in the affairs of the other realms.

“Your refusal will result in actual banishment.” Sight Master Lamna’s voice sounded both hard and tender at the same time.

“Then I will take my family and leave.”

“Yours is the misconduct and yours will be the banishment, not your child or your former mate.”

Yeth’s hard anger shattered — sharp fragments transforming to fear and lodging themselves in her heart. Banished. Alone. Her choice had led to a reaction that demanded she make another choice. How could she make that choice?

“Do not think,” Sight Master Lamna said, seeming to hear Yeth’s silent question. “For once, simply obey.”

THE PRESENT

“WE CAN hide them among our people.” Palla gestured toward the camp. “There are few enough. They will blend in.”

“And when the next ragged band stumbles upon us looking to camouflage their true nature, what then?” Leotin still looked at the pilgrims, even though he spoke to Palla.

Yeth listened to the argument, curious of the eventual resolution. What choice would Leotin make? What did he see as his duty? She had made her choice to abandon her duty once. And she had later chosen to perform her duty because no other real choice existed for her. But did following her duty really change anything? If she survived this scouting mission in the human realm and managed to return home, would she truly be forgiven? And would that forgiveness entail allowing her to live the future she desired? Sight Master Lamna had implied such, but not explicitly so. Her mentor had never been one to make assurances she could not fulfill.

“Just for the day,” the man with the walking stick pleaded. “We’ll leave at the first town.”

Yeth looked away, once again powerless to affect change in her life, to drive the circumstances before her rather than be led by them. She squinted and frowned as she stared down the road in the direction they had traveled the prior day. A cloud of reddish dust rose in the air an hour's journey back along the lane.

“No time for arguing.” Yeth spoke to Leotin and the others as she pointed along the road. “Men on horses coming fast. At least ten. They’ll be here soon.”

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

INCENSE CLOAKED the air in a thin haze, sweet and earthy, yet not cloying. Tin-Tsu found the scent comforting. It reminded him of daily prayers in the mountain temple of Ten-Fan-Het. He would likely never see that spiritual sanctuary again — the aroma of the incense as close as he would come.

He knelt on a cushion, his head bowed down to touch the cold marble floor of the palace temple. Once the seat of the faith for all within the palace, the circular chamber and its tall stained-glass windows, had been permanently reserved to illuminate the prayers of the royal family and its guests for nearly a century. The large chamber held twelve massive stone columns to support the height of the domed ceiling and boasted a wide balcony encircling its circumference. While it once accommodated hundreds of worshipers in the past, now Tin-Tsu alone raised his head from the floor where he bent in supplication to his god. His eyes focused on the altar, an ornately carved marble edifice on a raised dais. A simple green silk banner draped the altar, a bowl of water with trimmed flower heads resting in the center of the fabric. Nine granite statues lined a recessed cavity behind the dais, each depicting one of Ni-Kam-Djen's prophets.

Prayer beads wrapped around Tin-Tsu's left hand. He rolled one from his thumb to his forefinger, counting the last of the eighty-one repetitions of the ancient twenty-one-line prayer. The monks of the Ten-Fan-Het temple had not taught him that prayer until three years after ascending from novice to priest. Not until he proved himself pure enough to carry the words within him. Reciting *The Prayer of Turning* needed to be earned. Not all priests were worthy to utter its lines. The high priest selected only those deemed most capable of fulfilling the duty of recitation.

His father sent him to the Ten-Fan-Het temple because it stood farthest from the capital in the most remote northern region of the Daeshen Dominion. The temple did not rest in that inaccessible mountain valley to keep the world at bay, but to keep the temple priests from the world. A little known sect lived within the temple, its members practicing their one ritual in secret. Those who passed the training and the choosing became reciters of *The Prayer of Turning*, twenty-one lines of holy scripture, the only remaining fragments of a nine-thousand-line prayer lost in the fog of antiquity — a dark echo of a forgotten world. The priests of the Djen-Kyru sect believed that the continual recitation of those twenty-one sacred lines kept the world turning, maintained the balance of good and evil, and were all that held darkness back from overwhelming the whole of Onaia. A

prayer recited constantly, one priest to the next, in a continuous petition of protection to Ni-Kam-Djen, The True God, for nearly three thousand years.

Tin-Tsu had been part of those millennia of unceasing prayer, reciting the words while counting repetitions against lapis lazuli beads held before his heart. He wondered if his own reiterations added to those of his brethren so far away in the mountains, or whether he had been forever severed from that lineage of prayer holders diligently keeping the world in balance through the embodiment of their faith. He would have liked to ask High Priest Toyan-Wen that question. He always enjoyed debating theology with the high priest. Their last conversation revolved less around matters of doctrine than the religious implications of his departure from the temple. He looked down at the prayer beads in his hand as he thought of that day.

FOUR WEEKS AGO

THE MOUNTAIN VALLEY rolled to the limits of sight, disappearing into the mist and curve of the horizon, a jagged blanket cast haphazardly over the sleeping form of Onaia. Tin-Tsu watched as a pair of eagles coasted through the air in an uninterpretable mating ritual, vanishing into the clouds, gray mist roiling with the passage of their wings. He stood atop the temple watchtower, his prayer beads clasped between his palms. High Priest Toyan-Wen stood beside him, hands resting on the crenellations of the tower parapet. Shorter than Tin-Tsu, his clean-shaven face displayed fewer wrinkles than one might expect for a man of eighty years.

“It pains me to be the one to bear you such terrible news.” High Priest Toyan-Wen sighed.

“It is comforting for the news to arrive from your lips, Shuna,” Tin-Tsu said, using the term of respect to name his high priest.

“When your father sent you to us seventeen years ago, I believed he wished to rid himself of you.” High Priest Toyan-Wen looked up to where the eagles reappeared between the clouds. “Many lesser tahns have done such over the years. Sending embarrassments and secrets far away from courtly sight. Better to bring shame upon a mountain temple than a royal house. Some of these boys and men you have known as your brothers, and it is obvious to all why they are here and that they suffer their exile with great indignity. You were different. You came to us with a fire in your breast, a passion for being a servant of Ni-Kam-Djen. That is why I feel such sadness. That a priest with so much ardor for our path should have his feet turned away from it by circumstance is a great tragedy.”

“I could refuse.” Tin-Tsu stared at the clouds, considering the idea. Could he abandon the duty thrust upon his shoulders by the simple fate of his birth? Could he not choose a different path and govern his own destiny?

“To do so would be an even greater misfortune than you leaving our sanctuary.” High Priest Toyan-Wen rubbed his hands together against the chill of the mountain air. Even midsummer brought little warmth to the temple, much less so a rainy, cloud-covered spring day.

“I do not understand.” Tin-Tsu turned his attention from the eagles to his mentor and spiritual guide.

“Your brother’s death, while a wound in the side of the dominion, and no doubt within your heart, is also a potential blessing,” High Priest Toyan-Wen said.

“How so?” Curiosity gripped Tin-Tsu’s mind, pushing away the sorrow that burned there since hearing the news of his brother’s passing moments prior. He had not seen his brother nor any of his family in seventeen years, yet still his heart stung and his eyes filled with tears remembering the boy he had known so long ago. He and his brother and sister were inseparable as children. The only time they spent apart was in their daily education, when he and his brother were taken to study statecraft with the prime councilor while his sister learned more feminine arts under the tutelage of their aunt.

Now, years later, upon learning of his death, Tin-Tsu pictured not a man fallen on the battlefield from an enemy’s arrow, but a boy of seventeen, the age of his brother when they last spoke. Fan-Mutig had wished him well, embracing him before his journey to the temple. They talked of his brother coming to visit — a mutual dream never realized. At first, letters from his family arrived, his brother in particular. This continued for years, but when Tin-Tsu failed to return for his father’s funeral five years prior, all communication from his family ceased. He still wrote but no replies made their way to him through the mountain passes. The march of seasons and the parade of years did not lessen his love for them, nor their power over his heart. He did not see how his brother’s death might be a blessing.

“Your brother’s passing changes the balance within the dominion in ways we have never known.” High Priest Toyan-Wen slid his hands beneath the folds of his robe. “As the sole male heir, you will assume the throne, a throne that has never held a priest of Ni-Kam-Djen. Not in all the history of the Daeshen Dominion. Not in all the years of the First, Second, or Third Great Dominions. You will be the first.”

“And the last,” Tin-Tsu said, “as I cannot marry and provide an heir.”

“There is nothing preventing you from taking a wife and having children beyond your vows.” High Priest Toyan-Wen’s voice sounded cautious. “I cannot tell you what choices to make in your new life, but many will attempt to do so. And they will commend you to the idea of wedding a woman. Most likely, the tahneff engaged to your brother this last year. You need to accept that you can no longer be a priest once you are the zhan. You may feel the need to break some of your vows. While you may forever remain a priest in your heart, you must choose wisely which vows you cannot maintain as zhan.”

“It is too much to consider so soon after the news of my brother’s death.” Tin-Tsu’s head churned with conflicting emotions. Anguish at his brother’s passing into the Pure Lands of Ni-Kam-Djen. Anger at being summoned away from his calling as a priest to assume a throne he did not want. Fear at leaving the familiarity of the temple walls for the ill-remembered halls of the palace. Like the time he tried to balance too many teacups on the wooden tray while serving the elder priests, he feared the emotions would spill from his grasp — fine porcelain shattering against hard stone.

“Unfortunately, I must weigh down your burden even further.” High Priest Toyan-Wen slipped a wrinkled brown hand from his robe to place it on Tin-Tsu’s shoulder. “You will leave for the palace once we step from this tower and you will never return. However, you will carry with you what you have learned here. You have gained great knowledge and more than a sliver of wisdom in these mountain halls. You will need all of it in your new role as leader of this nation. But you can be more than merely a zhan ruling a dominion. You can be a leader of hearts, a binder of faith. You can be the bridge that reunites the severed halves of our religion. You can bring the Daeshen and Tanshen Dominions together under one roof, beneath the dome of one temple. You can restore the faith to its origins and rekindle the glory of the Great Dominions, bringing the Iron Realm once more into accord with the ways and wishes of Ni-Kam-Djen.”

“How?” Tin-Tsu could not formulate clear thoughts in the wake of the words the high priest spoke.

“By claiming the opportunity Ni-Kam-Djen has blessed you with.” High Priest Toyan-Wen smiled.

Tin-Tsu wanted to smile, but did not. No one knew the true desires of The True God, and he sensed his path would not be clearly cut from stone like the steps leading up through the mountain to the temple gates. Shuna Toyan-Wen’s vision of the future stirred Tin-Tsu’s heart, but chilled it as well. How could he be two things at once — both priest and zhan? How could he do what others had not managed to accomplish for hundreds of years?

He would need to have faith.

THE PRESENT

TIN-TSU HAD faith. Faith that would not be shaken by dreams or a mysterious star or attempts to take his life. He had faith, and he knew by clinging to his faith, he would fulfill the desires of Ni-Kam-Djen.

He stood from the cushion, sliding the prayer beads into a pocket of his formal jacket. Looking up from the stone faces of the nine prophets, he saw a man standing on the balcony above him. The same man he had seen in the garden dressed in the same simple black robes. The man stared at Tin-Tsu, then glanced to the side and nodded to him before turning and disappearing into the halls beyond the balcony.

Appearing seemingly from nowhere, Tonken-Wu ran along the balcony and dashed after the man. Tin-Tsu found he needed to calm his breath and slow his heart. Tonken-Wu reappeared on the balcony, looked at Tin-Tsu, then ran down the nearby stairs to the lower level.

“My apologies, my tahn,” Tonken-Wu said as he approached. “The temple should have been empty. I do not know who that man is or how he managed to get in.”

“You need not worry about him,” Tin-Tsu said as he walked from the temple hall. “He is no threat to my life.”

“As you say, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu strode a respectful two steps behind his tahn.

Tin-Tsu had faith, but Ni-Kam-Djen often tested those with faith more than those who lacked it. What greater trial could there be than the reappearance of the man who had come twice now to watch him at a distance? He had spoken the truth when he told Tonken-Wu that the man posed no threat to his life. However, that did not mean the man would not prove a peril in other ways.

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

FEATHERS VIBRATED in the passing air, the hawk soaring above the field, wings spread wide, riding the currents and eddies of wind high above the ground. The hawk's eyes scanned the landscape and the roads crossing it. A man stood near the intersection of two dirt paths stretching among rippling grain. Beside him, a woman and girl sat in the narrow strip of grass between road and furrow.

The hawk tilted against the warm summer air, banking to scan along the road toward the midday sun. Dust tinged the horizon, packs of humans walking the lane, heading toward the crossing.

Sha-Kutan stood where the two trails met. He looked along the trail to the east, twin furrows dug deep by years of wagon wheels wobbling along the path. The woman, Lee-Nin, sat next to the girl, Sao-Tauna, sharing an apple they had plucked from a tree before passing from forest to field.

We should keep moving. Open spaces are danger.

The woman and girl are weak.

Should we leave them?

She will not expect us to be with others.

No.

"There are others approaching." Sha-Kutan pointed down the eastern path.

Lee-Nin stood and stared along the road.

"How many?" Lee-Nin squinted. She had not ceased questioning his ability to see and hear better than she could, but she had come to accept it.

"Twenty or more," Sha-Kutan said.

"Soldiers?" Lee-Nin's voice sounded anxious. Sha-Kutan noticed the shift in her scent as well.

"No," Sha-Kutan said.

"Star dreamers." Sao-Tauna stood up to look down the road, raising her small hand to shield her eyes.

"Pilgrims," Lee-Nin said with a nod.

Odd that she does not question how the child would know this.

Yes. Odd.

“We go with them.” Sao-Tauna stood on her tiptoes, trying to see the approaching band of pilgrims.

“No,” Lee-Nin said. “They travel west. We should head east. To Juparti or Punderra maybe.”

She comes from the east.

We cannot go that way.

“Follow the star dreamers.” Sao-Tauna stated this as a simple fact, obvious and inarguable.

The girl may be right.

More people will provide protection and cover.

“She is correct.” Sha-Kutan nodded toward Sao-Tauna. “We are safer with others. There is less chance of discovery.”

“That’s possible, I suppose.” Lee-Nin raised her fingers to her lips in thought. “We could pretend to be a family joining the pilgrimage.”

A family?

It might work.

A family?

“One family among many will be less likely to draw attention.” Lee-Nin turned to Sha-Kutan. “We draw too much attention by ourselves. You draw enough as it is. Can you stoop a bit? Hunch your shoulders? Try not to appear so ... massive?”

Stoop?

Hunch?

“No.” Sha-Kutan frowned, standing to his full height.

Lee-Nin looked up at him, her lips curled in annoyance. “Hmmm.”

“Here they come.” Sao-Tauna tapped her wrist against her thigh rhythmically as the heads of the first pilgrims crested the rise in the road.

“We pretend to be a family then.” Lee-Nin turned back to watch the approaching pilgrims.

Sao-Tauna raised her arms up to Sha-Kutan, staring at him placidly.

There is something strange about this child.

Quite strange.

“Up.” Sao-Tauna rocked on her heels as Lee-Nin looked on in cautious curiosity.

Up?

She will not likely follow stories of a large man who loves his daughter and wife.

Sha-Kutan bent down and scooped Sao-Tauna up in his arms. She gasped as he raised her to his shoulders.

“So high,” Sao-Tauna marveled as she looked down at Lee-Nin.

“If anything happens to her...” Lee-Nin left the remainder of her threat unspoken.

Sha-Kutan nodded to acknowledge her words and looked past Lee-Nin toward the east and the approaching humans.

Perhaps we should have stayed hidden in the woods.

Perhaps.

The pilgrim in the lead of the procession along the field trail raised his arm, waving in greeting.

Seated on Sha-Kutan's shoulders, her one arm wrapped around his neck, Sao-Tauna raised her free hand to wave back at the pilgrims. He marveled at the sensation of her small, warm hand against his skin, the heft of her on his shoulders, the smell of her dirty hair, the scent of joy radiating from her.

Perhaps we should have stopped hiding long ago.

Perhaps.

THE THRONE



KAO-RHEE

“UNWISE.”

The word rang and reverberated in the wood-paneled walls of the council chamber. Kao-Rhee watched from the far end of the long, well-polished pada wood table as High Tahn Tin-Tsu let the sound die before making his reply.

“How is patience unwise?”

Ten men sat around the table, the future zhan and his nine councilors. Nine to match the number of holy prophets. Kao-Rhee now wished he had limited the number to himself and Tigan Rhog-Kan. His thought had been to introduce the high tahn to the men charged with advising him when he assumed the ascendancy a few hours hence. He had intended the morning meeting to proceed into a discussion on state policy. He preferred, when possible, to limit such decisions to himself alone. Or at the least, present his desired course of action in private to the zhan. Tin-Tsu’s brother had been largely interested in the prosecution of the war with the Tanshen Dominion, the purview of Tigan Rhog-Kan, and so left the majority of domestic matters in Kao-Rhee’s hands, hands that had been carving the statue of state from the stone of adversity since before either brother’s birth.

Tigan Rhog-Kan clenched his jaw, seeming to swallow his initial, preferred response before making one tinged with even more guttural tones than his previous utterance.

“What may seem like patience to you, my tahn, will be taken as weakness by our enemies and perceived as an opportunity for further action.”

“We are not discussing our enemies meeting us on the battlefield; we are speaking of the people of our own dominion, my soon-to-be subjects, who have lost their way in darkness and need guidance to return to the path of light.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu folded his hands on the table.

“If I may, my tahn.” Kao-Rhee nodded toward the tigan. “I believe the tigan’s concerns are valid. While they may be your subjects by sunset, these so-called pilgrims have abandoned the faith that governs our land and turned to some heretic vision that infects their dreams. Without the militias to curtail them, they will upset, and quite possibly overturn, the balance of the dominion.”

“How weak is our argument for the path of Ni-Kam-Djen if we must enforce it with blades and the threat of death?” High Tahn Tin-Tsu stared across his fingertips at Kao-Rhee.

“I do not doubt, my tahn, that were you able to speak with them, you would convince them of their error and return them to the temples.” Kao-Rhee always found a bit of flattery helped in

persuading those reluctant to see things properly. “However, you cannot address them all, and they renounce their allegiance to the faith and the dominion with their actions.”

“They are leaving for the Forbidden Realm, you mean.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu nodded. “Then why not let them go?”

“Because we’ll have no soldiers left to fight the djen-forsaken war.” Tigan Rhog-Kan stirred uncomfortably in his seat. He appeared to remember protocol reluctantly. “My tahn.”

The tigan took another breath before continuing. “The dream may have seemed harmless when it touched only a few and they fled in the night, but from the best count we have, three in ten may have the dream and that includes our armies. At present, fewer than one in ten follow the false prophet. However, if a third of our forces were to march off at sunset to follow that new demon star in the night sky, we’d all be slaughtered in the next invasion of those Tanshen heathen bastards.”

“Yes. I see your concern.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu looked at his hands. “What has the Tanshen response been to the dreams and the pilgrims?”

“The same as ours, my tahn,” Kao-Rhee said.

Before he could amend his thought, one of the other councilmembers, the treasurer, Tapan-Lu, spoke. Fifty years old with a gray-black beard and an over-wide nose that matched his wide set eyes, he was the only ethnic tollith at the table. His grandfather immigrated north decades before the war, and while his ancestry still raised talk among the lesser tahns, Kao-Rhee had never had cause to question his loyalty, nor his financial acumen.

“They run them to ground and kill them the same as we do, or they catch them on the Old Border Road.” Tapan-Lu leaned forward, obviously intending to say more. “My tahn, the problem posed by the pilgrims is more than one of faith or armies; it is one of coin. We cannot afford to continue to pay militiamen to hunt the heretics while losing the revenue their taxes once provided.”

“Yes,” Tin-Tsu said. “I see your point. Without the coin from taxes, we cannot pay our armies. And without the men and women to work the forges and tend the crops, we cannot arm or feed our forces, much less the palace.”

“Exactly, my tahn.” Tapan-Lu looked pleased to have so easily impressed his concerns upon the future zhan.

Kao-Rhee appraised his high tahn and soon-to-be zhan in silence. Tin-Tsu had readily grasped a concept that had eluded his elder brother for weeks. That worried him for reasons he wished he did not have to contemplate. Another issue concerned him as well.

“We must also consider the implications of the Atheton pilgrims spreading the Living Death as they pass through our nation for the port of Tanjii.” Kao-Rhee had received new messages from his spies in the neighboring dominion late the previous night.

“The Living Death?” The high tahn’s voice rose in curiosity as he intoned the words.

Kao-Rhee noticed the other members of the council turn to him with concern in their eyes. The last outbreak of the strange plague a generation and a half ago decimated wide swaths the realm. Once infected, a person had only days before they became a mindless living corpse

wandering the countryside, with no purpose beyond spreading the disease to others. A new wave of contagion threatened more than merely the outcome of the war.

“Reports tell of several villages in Atheton being afflicted by the illness,” Kao-Rhee said. “The Atheton Teyett is concerned enough that she has ordered her armies to burn all of the infected and raze the towns and villages to ashes. If this vile infection were spread by Atheton pilgrims, my tahn, it would devastate the Daeshen Dominion and our hopes for a successful conclusion to the war.”

“Do you propose closing the border with Atheton?” High Tahn Tin-Tsu placed his hands flat on the table, his face tightening in concerned thought.

“No, my tahn.” Kao-Rhee straightened in his chair. “To close the border imperils trade with our neighbor and would be nearly as deleterious to the prosecution of the war as pestilent pilgrims. I suggest checkpoints at the borders, allowing only merchants and their goods to pass, holding them in quarantine for a few days to ensure they pose no threat. It will slow our supplies, but guarantee their eventual arrival. It will also stop the majority of heretic pilgrims from passing into our dominion. Although I am sure many will seek to traverse the border through forests and fields, these can be stopped from potentially spreading plague by the militias.”

“Sound advice.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu removed his hands from the table to place them in his lap.

“So you will support the militias in their cleansing of our own heretics and those who cross our borders, my tahn?” Tigan Rhog-Kan’s tone indicated his desired response.

“No.” High Tin-Tsu cast his gaze around the table, briefly catching each man’s eye. “If what you tell me is accurate, killing our pilgrims will only lead to our own deaths and the demise of the dominion. It may be three in ten today who have the dream, but it may be seven in ten tomorrow. Can we stop such a large number of our own people from leaving with the threat of slaughter? Might they not kill us as they flee to follow the false god of their deluded slumber? And if a quarantine is sufficient for Atheton merchants, it will surely suffice for Atheton pilgrims. While the Atheton Teyett may wish to rid her nation of the problem of her pilgrims, the Athetonions are an often duplicitous people. It is not difficult to imagine the Athetonions using the butchering of their people in our lands as a feigned excuse to seek redress for the death of their subjects. No, we must find another way, an option that preserves our advantage in soldiers for the next assault against the Tanshen Dominion and protects us from a possible plague from the east, all while allowing for those who have strayed from the path of Ni-Kam-Djen to return of their own choosing.”

“No one returns from the Forbidden Realm,” Tigan Rhog-Kan said.

“The tigan is correct,” Kao-Rhee said. “If we allow them to leave, they will die at sea or the urris will kill them. They will be dead either way.”

“There may be a middle path.” Tin-Tsu closed his eyes for a moment, as though trying to envision something never yet seen.

While Kao-Rhee admired the man’s tenacity in clinging to his principles and trying to find a workable method to enact them, he did not appreciate the sentiments themselves. If the dreaming

pilgrims were allowed to undermine the balance of the war, it meant the end of the Daeshen Dominion.

“We will release an edict in conjunction with the celebration of my ascendance to zhan of the dominion.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu opened his eyes, a light of fervor behind them.

Kao-Rhee noted the look in the high tahn’s eyes. He did not trust fervent men. They often acted not in their best interests, but in the interests of others, or in their own interest to the exclusion of all others. Zeal made a man unpredictable. One could not trust a man whose actions could not be predicted.

“The edict will proclaim that while the dreams and the pilgrimage are heresy, they will not be punished by death or persecution.” Tin-Tsu’s words held the room captive with their import. “Anyone who leaves to follow the pilgrim dream will forfeit all lands and possessions in doing so. Such lands and possessions will be divided among the faithful. Moreover, if any one person shall take to pilgrimage, their entire family, from fathers to brothers to cousins shall also lose their lands and possessions. The militias will no longer harass the pilgrims. They will enforce the edict. They will also enforce the quarantine along the border. The Atheton pilgrims will be allowed to pass if they prove themselves free of illness, but they will be required to pay a new tax to do so.”

The high tahn’s proposed edict left the councilors in perplexed silence. Kao-Rhee noted Tigan Rhog-Kan’s hands gripping the table edge, knuckles pale with exertion. He understood the tigan’s dismay. In the week since the high tahn’s arrival, their conversations had hinted at what Kao-Rhee considered an unhealthy idealism. The sort of passionate consideration well suited to the confines of a remote mountain temple, but ill-fitting a zhan ruling a dominion at war with its rival and neighbor, and threatened from within by heretics following a supernatural nocturnal missive from an unknown source.

The high tahn did not see how his edict, while conceived with the best of intentions, ultimately undermined his rule and unsettled the stability of the dominion. The zhan must command the lives of his subjects. He could not give them choices. If farmers and soldiers and merchants suddenly felt they could choose between alternatives in their lives, rather than obey the laws set before them, they would demand more choices. And if the lower tiered men were granted choices, then the greater tiered men, the lesser tahns, would soon insist on the right to govern the affairs of their provinces with a freer hand. And, inevitably, this would lead one or more tahns to the conclusion that they could *choose* to be zhan if they only fought hard enough. A struggle within the dominion for the seat of power would give the Tanshen usurper the opportunity to win the war decisively. And allowing apostates from the neighboring Atheton Dominion to avoid the checkpoints and wander through Daeshen lands, potentially spreading disease, posed an equal danger.

Kao-Rhee had hoped to act as the new zhan’s trusted adviser, guiding him as he had his father and brother. Kao-Rhee saw now, as he should have before, that High Tahn Tin-Tsu could not be counseled in the usual manner. He would try to set his own course as zhan, even when the entire council warned him against a particular path.

Kao-Rhee wondered if it would have been better for all if the high tahn had been greeted earlier that morning by Ni-Kam-Djen in the Pure Lands rather than by a young warden saving his

life. He wondered, moreover, if it might not be best to rectify that course of events and ensure the more desired outcome. He remembered the last words his father spoke to him. When Kao-Rhee had left to take a lowly position in the palace court, filled with ambition and fantasies of high attainment, his father, a wealthy lesser tahn from a southern fishing province, offered simple words of advice.

“Remember who you serve,” his father said. “You serve the dominion and the zhan. There may come a time when you must decide which one deserves your greater loyalty. One will not remember you, not care for you, while the other may love you and lavish you with rewards. One has lived for thousands of years because of good men, the other will rot in a palace tomb after a brief stay among us. Choose well.”

Kao-Rhee had never seen his father nor the estate again. His father fell sick that winter and did not recover. Kao-Rhee’s mother died shortly thereafter. He kept the estate, as it earned him a sizable annual income to supplement the stipend of his palace station, but could never bring himself to return to his childhood home. He often wondered if his father would have been proud of him. Would he be pleased by the action Kao-Rhee now vaguely considered?

“Let us turn to discussing the war.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu’s voice commanded the attention of those at the table once more. “Tigan Rhog-Kan, what is the status of the war, and when was our last assault?”

Kao-Rhee followed the conversation, but his previous thought refused to leave his mind. It bespoke a great desperation that a man who had, only hours before, sworn to uncover a plotted regicide might, not long after, consider the means of enacting his own such terrible plan.

THE CARNIVAL



SHIFHUUL

A STIFF breeze carried the dust kicked up by dozens of human feet and the hooves of pack animals and wagon wheels back along the caravan. The airborne earth clouded around Shifhuul and his companions, coating them in a thin layer of dust. He brushed the grime from the pelt of his arms and looked at his hands. Steady. They still shook occasionally, but nothing like those first weeks. Especially on the ship.

He coughed against the sting of dirt in his throat. He hated walking at the rear of the caravan on days when the wind blew wrong. At least the dust reduced the number of black tree-flies that normally harassed them as they traveled. Unfortunately, they marched at their normal shambling pace. They could not hope to outrun the militia that followed them. The best they could do would be to convince the men that a carnival posed no threat to their religious dispositions. Doing so depended upon the pilgrims blending in and appearing as part of the troupe.

He stared at the old man riding in the back of the wagon directly ahead with no small amount of resentment. The pilgrim who had appeared from the forest with his people got to ride in a wagon while Shifhuul walked. True, the man did limp on a walking stick and would have been too slow for the caravan, but Shifhuul still envied him. They had done so much walking in the last months. What he would not have done for a palanquin and four runners. Or his own wagon. Or a horse. A small horse, but a horse. What did the humans call them? Ponies? Yes, he would have loved a pony. Wyrins did not have horses in their lands. Smaller pack animals, to be sure, but horses were too large and intimidating for the wyrin folk. Ponies would fit in quite well. He could purchase a few and bring them back with him when he returned. Breed them for profit. That would undoubtedly displease his mother. Her seventh son a merchant of pack animals. Shifhuul smiled at the thought.

“Enjoying the walk?” Tarak’s deep voice rumbled from high above his head.

“Always enjoy I walk.” Shifhuul coughed again, covering his snout with his paw.

“I always enjoy walking,” Tarak corrected.

“Walking. Yes.” Shifhuul hated being tutored by Tarak in his words. He found it endlessly irritating that the lumbering beast had such a facility for languages. Wyrins had many tongues and Shifhuul proudly spoke one of them, the one that mattered. Learning a new language, especially one as foreign as those spoken by the humans, proved vexing in its difficulty. He did not like difficulty. He particularly did not appreciate being vexed.

“Leotin does not seem pleased with our new traveling companions.” Yeth, the yutan woman, walked on the other side of him. Somehow, he always ended up between them, looking like a pet the two giants had forgotten to leash. He hated that.

“He is concerned with the safety of his carnival,” Tarak said.

“I am surprised he allowed Palla to convince him to bring the pilgrims along,” Yeth said. “It means more mouths to feed and more people to protect.”

“I am surprised Shifhuul supported her.” Tarak looked down his long muzzle at the wyrin.

Shifhuul had broken with his custom and addressed Leotin and the group of humans. He preferred to speak among his fellow scouts. For some reason, his poor diction did not bother him as much in their company. The humans, however, tended to look upon him as though he were a dimwitted forest animal, and he despised that. When he saw an opportunity to advance his cause and hopefully bring it closer to conclusion, he forced himself to intercede. He had pleaded, in his halting use of the human Shen language, that they could not abandon the pilgrims to certain death at the hands of the militia. They had seen the corpses beside the road that spoke of the militiamen’s intolerance. How could they condemn these twelve people to die?

While Shifhuul did care what happened to the human pilgrims, with that part of him that cared at all for what befell humans in general, the larger part of him concerned itself with how to accomplish the ridiculous mission he had accepted as quickly as possible and return home.

“Bad him. Good us.” Shifhuul glanced behind to see that the column of dust representing the approach of the militia looked far closer than it had a few minutes prior. It would not be long before the militia overtook them.

“Ah. Yes. I see,” Yeth said. “Very cunning.”

“Yes,” Tarak added. “I should have seen your true purpose.”

His true purpose.

Shifhuul said nothing. The roagg’s words claimed hold of his mind and brought back thoughts he had hoped to bury like some ancestral relation entombed in the earth.

SIX MONTHS AGO

“YOU WILL do as requested.”

“It is not a request, and I will not obey.”

“You must regain your purpose.”

“You, Mother, of all people, should know I have never had a purpose.”

“Shahana and Whinara would disagree.”

Shifhuul said nothing in reply to his mother. He glared at her, anger and anguish fighting in his chest. He turned away and looked out over the balcony to the forest town below them. Their family home, the largest in the seaside forest town of Withanaal, spread across the branches of several trees. Wyrins did not clear woodlands to build their settlements the way peoples of other realms did. They preferred to construct their dwellings and places of congregation in harmony with

the forest. The scarcity of open plains in the Wood Realm made this manner of architecture a near necessity. Only a handful of valleys in the realm held grassland. While they might fell a tree to accommodate a roadway or a garden, they largely left them intact. They relied on fishing rather than herding to provide their meat, and cultivated groves and gardens for their fruits and vegetables.

Shifhuul looked at the town of treehouses clinging to the woodlands like a vast spider web draped across splintered branches. While the forest had a purpose gifted it by nature, the town seemed to complement that purpose and give it greater meaning. He had never felt himself to have a purpose, but the arrival of Shahana and Whinara in his life had blessed him with an ambition he had hitherto lacked and avoided discovering. Their loss left him bereft of any inclination to live, a forest consumed by flame, burned to ash, and turned desert in the wind. How could such a wyrin have a true purpose? Easier to find meaning in the sweet smoke of the loat seed. A pipe of mind-clouding seed oil offered no purpose, but it made a blissful, memory-numbing companion. He spent the vast portion of each day with that darkly seductive concubine of grief.

“You will go. There is no more to discuss.” His mother spoke from behind him. Shifhuul did not turn around.

“A convenient way to rid yourself of an inconvenient problem.” Shifhuul dug his claws into the stained wood of the balcony railing.

“While you have always been an inconvenience, and often an embarrassment, you have never been a problem,” his mother said.

Shifhuul still refused to look back, but he could imagine his mother stroking the gray fur of her chin and twitching her short whiskers the way she always did when annoyed.

“However, you will become a problem, to yourself most of all, if you continue to dishonor the memory of your mate and daughter.” His mother’s words stung — wasp needles digging past fur to pierce flesh, venom sinking into his blood, pumped to his heart.

“I will not be cast off on some foolish errand. I am a kello, not a forest scout.” Shifhuul’s voice trembled with anger at his mother and the remembrance of a deeper rage. “What does it matter that a few wyrins dream of a human god?”

“New things always require investigation,” his mother said. “Wyrins have never seen this.”

Wyrins did not believe in gods the way humans and other peoples did. They worshiped their fallen ancestors who protected them from wicked spirits and interceded to gain benefit from powerful, helpful spirits. Dreams of a human god spoke of an illness spreading among his people. Might traveling among them leave him bearing this sickness as well?

“What happens in the other realms is of little consequence to us,” Shifhuul said, trying to reassure himself of this common, long-held belief. “The urris assure that.”

“The urris have been silent for many years,” his mother said. “One cannot know their ways or their intentions. We must prepare ourselves in the event The Pact does not hold.”

“And you hope to prepare our people by sending me to live among the hairless savages.” Shifhuul grunted in disgust.

“There are other arrangements being made.” His mother’s voice sounded typically cryptic. As clan chief, her responsibilities were wide and varied, a fact she constantly impressed upon Shifhuul through a persistent silence about most of her obligations. “Your role is important but not essential.”

“You mean it will not worry you if I do not return.”

Shifhuul stared at the wyrin males and females walking along the paths between trees and homes and shops and store houses built atop the roots of the widest trunks. These people all seemed to possess a purpose. They moved as though animated by clear desires and explicit goals. His life had always seemed absent of such animation. Until Shahana. Until Whinara. They had unveiled something in him that he had believed nonexistent. A mythical temple hidden in an inaccessible jungle. Their deaths, and the manner of their passing, destroyed the thing they had revealed. A shattered ruin crumbling in vine-covered undergrowth.

“Whether you return is not what is of importance.” His mother’s voice sounded sad, something he rarely heard in her tone. “What is meaningful is what you attain in your absence. I should hope you will become someone Shahana and Whinara would have been proud of.”

Shifhuul did not answer. He heard his mother leave a moment later, abandoning him to the view of the town, the thoughts battling in his mind, and the pain in his heart. He did not look back to see his mother go. Did not call after her. Did not plead. Did not complain. Did not argue. Did not see his mother’s face again.

THE PRESENT

“WATCH OUT.”

Shifhuul looked up, jerking to a stop as he nearly walked into the back of the suddenly halted wagon.

“Why have we stopped?” The old man in the back of the wagon looked over Shifhuul’s shoulder. The old man spoke the Easad language of the Atheton dominion they traveled in, but Shifhuul understood enough to grasp the man’s query.

“No I know.” Shifhuul replied in Shen as he turned to follow the old man’s eyes.

“They will be on us any minute.” Yeth’s voice sounded nearly uninterested.

“Bad time for break.” Shifhuul looked around the edge of the wagon to see the front of the caravan stopped before a fork in the road. Leotin and Palla were openly arguing about which path to take.

“An opportunity.” Tarak walked around the side of the wagon, heading toward the front.

“He mean say tragedy, no?” Shifhuul looked up to Yeth as she watched Tarak through squinted eyes.

“I do not think so,” Yeth said. “I believe he has a plan.”

“No like roagg plans.” Shifhuul looked back again at the approaching militiamen. He saw them now. All on horses. More than twenty and all armed with swords. A few with bows.

He could probably kill two of the humans, taking advantage of his speed and dexterity, before one of them would wound or kill him. The roagg could kill at least five before the arrows would take him down. The yutan would be good for three. Possibly four. She had a knack for wielding her spear that surprised many a swordsman. If she were to use The Sight, she might be able to kill more, but the yutans rarely used The Sight in combat. As they fought no wars among themselves, they had little need to train for its use in battle. She could use The Sight to communicate with their respective leaders in the other realms, make a fire, or heal a wound, but seemingly little else of use. That would still leave ten or more militiamen to follow and attack the caravan. Plenty. Ten armed men would effortlessly slaughter forty carnival folk with nothing but meat knives and prop swords to defend themselves. The odds did not favor Shifhuul and his fellow scouts or the carnival and pilgrims.

He did not need to be told the roagg's plan to see that it could as easily become a misfortune rather than an opportunity.

THE THRONE



DJU-TESHA

SLENDER FINGERS entwined the digits of a meaty palm. After a moment, the larger hand reluctantly disengaged with a gentle shake.

“What is the matter, my love?”

“I have told you — we cannot be seen to exhibit affection where we might be noticed or overheard.”

“No one uses this place. Particularly not on the day of my brother’s coronation.”

High Tahneff Dju-Tesha, sister to High Tahn Tin-Tsu, stood beside Tigan Rhog-Kan on an enclosed balcony behind the palace library, slender columns supporting wide arches overlooking the verdant western gardens.

“Even today, especially today, we must be cautious.” Rhog-Kan smiled and whispered his following words: “My love.”

Dju-Tesha beamed back at him, a wave of warmth rising from her belly in a rush that left her cheeks hot. She always experienced a swell within at his declarations of affection. She looked up into his gentle eyes, her own eyes growing damp in response. What did he see that no other man had taken the time to find? At nearly twice her twenty-eight years, their difference in age did not concern her as much as it did him, for he somehow noticed her when all others thought her invisible. She had been a ghost, continually at the edge of things, haunting the library and the gardens, rarely perceived by those passing. He made her corporeal. His attention. His passion. His love.

“What troubles you?” Dju-Tesha asked again. She now read his face as easily as the books constantly in her hands. She had been reading a book when he spoke to her in the library that day, not so many months ago.

“What has troubled me all week.” Rhog-Kan shook his head. “Your brother.”

“What has he done now?” Dju-Tesha asked. Her mind tumbled in strange ways when she thought of her brother. Her only living brother. He had doted on her as a child, and it stunned her heart when he went away. She wrote to him regularly throughout the years, and he to her, but his failure to return upon their father’s death strained her feelings for him. She had been relieved when their mother forbid her from sending him any more communications.

“It is not what he has done but what he intends to do.” Rhog-Kan frowned and looked out to the flowers of the gardens. “And what I fear he will do in the future.”

“He is new to the palace and unschooled in the ways of state.” Dju-Tesha raised her hand to reach out to him, then lowered it with a glance down the hall. She so desired to touch him. Even if only her fingers upon his. She could not fathom how she had lived so long without touching another she cared for, without being touched in return. She did not think of herself as homely, but she understood that she did not attract men the way other women in the palace did. Her hair hung too thin on her head, her jaw sat too wide, her clothes fell too loosely on her frame. Her looks and her love of the library’s dusty shelves had likely been the reason neither her father nor her eldest brother ever tried to marry her off to a lesser tahn from the provinces to shore up political support for the palace. However, Tigan Rhog-Kan did not notice her defects, or did not consider them as such. He seemed to see something else in her.

“With your wise counsel, I believe he can be an excellent zhan,” Dju-Tesha said.

“He does not appear much interested in what I or the council advise.” Rhog-Kan turned away from the gardens to match Dju-Tesha’s gaze. “Perhaps he will respond better to the advice of a family member.”

“Do you mean it?” Dju-Tesha laughed with joy. She could not restrain herself, snatching his hand for a moment and squeezing it before releasing it once more.

“I did not think it proper to announce our intentions before the coronation,” Rhog-Kan said. “Questions of my lesser station and aspersions of my intentions will still plague us, but with your brother’s consent, all obstacles can be overcome.”

“I have no doubt my brother will approve.” Dju-Tesha placed her hand to her cheek, feeling the warmth of her face. “I am certain my mother will approve as well.”

“It might be best to speak with your mother first, before bringing the matter to your brother,” Rhog-Kan said.

“Yes, that would be wise.” Dju-Tesha considered this. “She will be so surprised.”

“No more surprised than I was to find the woman I would come to love sitting right beside me all along.” Rhog-Kan smiled wide, his voice raspy with emotion.

No one’s surprise could be deeper than Dju-Tesha’s. The prime tigan of the dominion had known her all her life. When his own wife died of fever twenty years ago, everyone assumed he would soon remarry. He never did, despite the attentions of many unbound women at court. When he had found her in the library, what she thought of as her own private dominion within the palace, the place she spent most of her time, she could not imagine why he stopped to speak with her. He said he wanted to read more about the wars of the Great Dominions and sought her opinion on the best books to assuage his interest. No one ever requested her view on anything, much less advice in reading the history of the realm. He could have spoken with the palace librarian, but he came to her.

She never asked him why, but a friendship developed in the days and weeks afterward as he frequently returned to borrow books under her guidance and later to discuss them with her. She had never been queried on her views of the many books she’d read. No one seemed to think of her much at all. One night, well beyond sunset, lamplight bathing them as they sat side by side at the long reading table by the main window, Rhog-Kan kissed her. She responded, much to his

astonishment as well as her own, not like the shy, wispy phantom of the library that most took her to be, but like the heroes of the stories she had read since childhood. While she devoured books of history and philosophy and religious commentary, she savored tales of adventure and romance. She had not pulled away from the kiss in fear or hesitancy; she had returned it with matched passion, holding his face in her inexperienced hands.

Her hands gained more familiarity over the ensuing weeks. Rarely visited by the palace inhabitants, and staffed infrequently by the librarian, the library offered a perfect place for their assignations, and unused and unseen reading rooms provided perfect seclusion for their passionate embraces. He complained, feebly, of the impropriety of their actions, blaming himself for their blasphemous indiscretion, but he continued to return to her whenever he could find time. Her seduction of him had been accomplished through instinct as she lacked all experience and skill, but the effect had been the same. He became hers and she his on the plush cushions lining the benches of a private reading room.

She wished she could embrace her lover now, desired so much to kiss him, to feel the strength of his arms, his flesh against hers as they stood in the open air alcove behind the library.

“After the coronation and the celebration.” The wave of heat rose within Dju-Tesha once more.

They spoke of a future together often. First, in ambiguous terms that each might deny held any real importance, and then later, with an explicitness that made clear their desire to stand man and wife before the world. He cautioned her against acting too soon after her elder brother’s death. Accusations of tier jumping would follow him as he joined the royal family. She ignored such concerns. Although she believed in some manner of divine action, she did not hold the stories of her faith to be absolute. While Ni-Kam-Djen might or might not exist, and he might or might not have cast all living things, like the clay vessels the ancient scriptures described, in various degrees of purity, tiers of life ranging from plants to animals to humans, she did not ascribe to the belief that certain people were naturally cast in greater or lesser quality than others. She certainly did not believe that women were cast of inferior clay compared their male companions and therefore stood on a lower tier in the world. She had only to look at the foolishness of men’s actions to see the ridiculousness of such a notion.

“I must go.” Rhog-Kan looked around quickly and then kissed her. She placed her hand on his neck and held him to her a moment longer before releasing him. “Soon.”

“Soon.” Dju-Tesha echoed as Rhog-Kan left her side and disappeared through a nearby doorway.

Soon they would announce their love to her family and the palace and the dominion. And then, when she could find time for them alone, she would make a more private announcement, one that she hoped would please him. One that altered the course of her life more than she had imagined possible only months ago. Uncertain at first, and unable to confide in anyone, she had consulted her closest friends, the books of the library. Tomes of medical philosophy. Their knowledge confirmed her intuition.

Dju-Tesha smiled as she watched a swallow perch on the branch of a nearby tree. Finally, she had determined a direction in her life. She had become more than a specter stalking the forest of the library bookshelves. She had become a woman. A woman in love. A woman making choices that defined her life. Choices with consequences. Consequences like carrying the prime tigan's child.

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

THE LATE morning songs of birds echoed over the ocean cove, a light mist rising from the still waters, coalescing into eddies of fluid air, dipping and climbing in the growing light of day. Ondromead scratched his beard and opened his eyes to see the boy still curled nearby, resting his head in the crook of his slender arm.

Ondromead?

The boy?

The old man sat up slowly, uncertain which oddity demanded his attention first.

Ondromead? Where had that name come from? He never thought of himself with a name. Never gave one to others that they might address him by it. Never spoke a name to those he encountered. How had this name come to his mind? Had some long-forgotten memory percolated up in his slumber? Had he dreamed the name? His dreams told of other peoples and lands and creatures he had never witnessed in his waking time. Might the name have come from there?

And the boy.

The boy still slept there beside him. What did it mean? He awoke each day to find himself in a different place from where he fell asleep the night before. Some mornings, he woke on the other side of a city. Other days, he woke on the opposite coast of the realm or in another realm altogether. He gave up wondering why after the first few centuries. It never changed, and he could not affect the phenomenon in any fashion. He could only accept it. But always, *always* he woke alone, no matter who or how many might have fallen to slumber near him. How had Hashel managed to accompany him?

Hashel?

Where did *that* name come from? The boy had not spoken the whole of the prior day. How had he come by that name for the lad? His dreams again?

Ondromead sighed. He needed a name to think of the boy by, and Hashel fit as well as any other. As he did with most things, he accepted it. He accepted the boy's presence as well. Why should he not? The lonely nature of his existence wearied him, and any small respite from it sparked a glimmer of happiness within his breast. Thousands of years alone left their mark upon his heart, a scar too deep to be salved by a few hours of company with strangers each day.

Ondromead stood up and stretched his stiff back, thankful for a slight change in his endless routine. Every morning, he awoke somewhere different, but not entirely new. After so many

thousands of years, he awoke in many of the same places repeatedly. He waited and watched. People passed around him and events transpired before his gaze. He selected the important things: the people, the words they spoke, the deeds they did, and faithfully recorded them in the black book with ink and quill. The black book that always held a clean page at the back. The bottle of ink that never ran dry. The quill that never needed sharpening.

Then he bedded down for the night, sometimes with others who spoke to him of their lives. Lives he recorded in his book. Then he awoke in a new place and repeated the process all over again. He could not change it. Could not alter the pattern. If he tried to stay awake all night, he inevitably blinked too long and found himself elsewhere. If he refused to write in the book, his hand cramped until the pain drove him to the quill. He could not even kill himself, wounds healing in minutes, falls from high walls and tall trees resulting only in momentary unconsciousness. Even burning did not work, the excruciating pain and inevitable darkness giving way to wakefulness in a new location with a healed, if old and weak, body. A body he did not remember growing old in. He remembered the first day, so many, many years ago, waking with the black book in hand beneath a tree with weeping branches beside a river outside a small town, but he recalled nothing before that moment.

A life lived in questions. Had he been cursed to walk the world by some cruel god he had offended in a life he could not recollect? What purpose did recording the events he witnessed serve? How could he awaken so far from where he fell asleep? How could the book always have a clean page after so many years? How could his coin purse always be full? What did it mean that the boy had traveled with him during the night?

As though responding to his thoughts, the boy opened his eyes, rubbing the sleep from them with his knuckles.

“Time to wake, Hashel,” Ondromead said.

Hashel looked at him quizzically and then nodded, sluggishly climbing to his feet.

“There will be a town nearby, or a village, or people of some sort, and we will find something to eat, and we will wait and watch and see what happens.”

Hashel nodded again.

Ondromead — he rather liked having a name — took the boy’s nod as agreement and led the way through the thick forest surrounding the ocean cove, toward whatever fate might await them for the day. He smiled as he looked down at the boy. It felt good to have a companion.

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

CRISP WHITE satin swished against a polished marble floor. Thin brown hands clasped before a slender waist.

“My condolences for your great sorrow, my tahn.”

Tin-Tsu nodded to the young woman bowing before him.

“We both share the same sorrow, Tahneff Rin-Lahee,” Tin-Tsu said. “I have lost a brother, and you a future husband. May we each find peace knowing he basks in the glorious love of Ni-Kam-Djen in the Pure Lands.”

“Yes, my tahn.” Rin-Lahee glanced to where Tin-Tsu’s mother stood to the far side of the tahn’s dressing room. The elder woman nodded nearly imperceptibly to the young woman. “You are very busy and I do not wish to abuse your precious time. I shall leave. May your ascendance be long and glorious.” She paused and turned to Tin-Tsu’s mother. “Thank you, Tahneff Pai-Nakee.”

Rin-Lahee bowed again to Tin-Tsu and his mother and departed the room. She had come to extend her grief at his brother’s passing. At the death of her intended husband. Or, just as probably, his mother wanted her to do so. He suspected the two desires to be inseparable on that point. Tin-Tsu watched her go, feeling sorry for the woman. Only twenty years old, she had been engaged to marry his brother for the past half year. The wedding had been postponed the prior month so Fan-Mutig could attend to the battle in the south. An engagement he did not return from, ending with finality his engagement to Rin-Lahee. Her father had intended to marry her off to the zhan to gain status within the palace hierarchy and to firm up support among the northern peoples for an endless war that so rarely affected them directly. Now she would likely be married off to the new zhan. Tin-Tsu assumed that to be his mother’s intention in bringing Rin-Lahee to see him minutes before his coronation. She had always possessed intentions for him as a child, even if he could not discern what they might be. He did not doubt she now had intentions for him as an adult and future ruler. He assumed his former mentor, High Priest Toyan-Wen, to have been correct in predicting her desires in this particular matter.

“A beautiful girl,” his mother said. She crossed the room and stood before him, adjusting the embroidered collar of his jacket.

“Yes, she will make some man a lovely wife.” Tin-Tsu could not resist letting his mother know he saw through her plans.

“No need to be obvious in your disdain,” his mother said.

“That is why you invited her here.” Tin-Tsu grimaced as his mother adjusted his hair.

“Stop fidgeting,” his mother said.

“I’m not a child.” Tin-Tsu pulled away as his mother lowered her hands.

“Not in appearance, only in action.” His mother crossed her arms, a gesture he recognized from childhood as being reserved for her displeasure.

“I am a priest, Mother.” Tin-Tsu did not feel prepared, emotionally or logically, to defend himself against his mother’s plans.

“You are a priest now. In a few hours, you will be the zhan of the Daeshen Dominion,” his mother said. “The first may not wed. The second must.”

“The swearing of new vows does not negate the old.” Tin-Tsu sensed heat rising in his cheeks and chided himself.

His mother walked to the window, looking away from him.

“You have not seen me in many years, and you were young when you left,” his mother said. “You may feel that you do not know me. That you cannot trust me.”

“You are my mother.” Tin-Tsu stared at the back of his mother’s blue silk dress. “I trust you without question, even if I question you.”

“Do you remember your grandmother?” his mother asked.

“Vaguely.” Tin-Tsu found an image of a thin-faced, gray-haired woman, lingering at the edge of his mind.

“Your great-grandmother grew up a fisherman’s daughter. Through her skill with words and numbers, she ended her life the wife of a prosperous merchant. She passed on her skill with words and people to her daughter, who rose from merchant’s child to the wife of a lesser tahn. She in turn crafted a future for her daughter, for me, marrying me to the man who would one day be zhan. From a girl pulling fish from the bottom of a boat to mother zhan in three births. That is quite an accomplishment for any family.”

“I know this story, Mother. The entire dominion knows this story.” His mother’s family’s humble origins still discomfited some members of the palace court even after decades, but such skillful tier jumping led the common people to admire and love her beyond measure.

“Yes, they know all about the line of politically cunning women crafting for themselves a better casting than granted by nature and their god.” His mother sighed. “What no one knows is how much I detest such manipulations and machinations. I have never enjoyed them and never excelled at them. Quite the reverse. I remember watching in amazement as my mother turned the intentions of some tahn toward exactly the direction she wished, simply by placing the right people to say the right things at the right times. People who wished to speak, not because she gave them words to say, which she sometimes did, but because they believed in what they said. That was how she got your father to propose marriage even when better candidates for his affection lined the palace halls. Fortunately, your father proved very adept at the skills I lacked, a fact that made my mother love him even as she reproved me.”

“Why do you tell me this, Mother?” Tin-Tsu did not see the purpose in his mother’s revelations.

“Simple, my son.” His mother walked from the window to face him again. “I wish to impress upon you that when I say you must marry young Rin-Lahee, I do not do so to antagonize you or interfere in your life, or in an attempt to shape your ascendancy. I explain these things so that it will be clear that if I, who holds so little interest in courtly games and conquests between nations, tell you that you must marry this girl, then hopefully, you will realize the gravity of my words.”

“Then tell me in simpler words,” Tin-Tsu said.

“The simple words are these,” his mother replied. “We need the Daeshen northerners to fund and fight the war we southerners will lose if they do not. Rin-Lahee’s family may not assure our success in bringing this long war to an end, but they will ensure it does not end with our deaths.”

“I see.” Tin-Tsu sighed. He did see. More than he wished. He had been plucked from the comforting cold stones of the mountain altars and prayer bells to lead a nation not merely at war with its neighbor, but in many ways, at war within itself. He thought again of High Priest Toyan-Wen’s advice before leaving the temple. “It seems I will need to find a way for my old vows to expand and encompass my new ones.”

“Hmm.” His mother stepped closer to study him. “I had expected that to be more ... enervating. Your father would be proud of your faith and your flexibility of nature.”

“My greatest desire was always to make him proud.” Tin-Tsu realized the deep truth of this sentiment only after it hung in the air between him and his mother.

“Really?” His mother frowned. “Is that why you did not return at his passing to the Pure Lands?”

The heat returned to Tin-Tsu’s cheeks again with twice the fire. He blinked, his mother’s question bringing back memories and emotions he had believed long since prayed into submission.

“I...” Tin-Tsu let that single syllable linger alone. He had conjured many reasons for not returning to the palace upon his father’s death. The distance involved. The time it would take. His duties at the temple. None held a shadow of truth. The source of his reticence lay sheltered from all examination, deep within his heart. That truth now leapt to his tongue even as he tried to once more hide it away.

“I could not face him even in death, for I had failed to become the man he wished of me.”

His mother’s brow curled at his words, then relaxed slowly as she stepped forward to take his hands in her own.

“He would have been proud of you, no matter what you think. He was always proud of you.”

Did his mother know why his father had sent him away, or did she believe, like all others, that he had left of his own volition to seek his vocation as a priest? He could not ask her, fearful that she did know, and that if she did not, he would need to tell her. Tin-Tsu sought to find a reply to his mother’s declaration of his father’s fidelity to his errant son. A knock at the door ended his search. A male servant poked his shaved head through the doorway.

“Your vestments have arrived, my tahn,” the servant said. “A priest is on his way with them now.”

“Send him in,” his mother told the servant. When the man had gone, she turned to Tin-Tsu. “I will leave you to your fellow priest. I’m sure you know how to dress yourself in vestments. I will see how your sister is progressing in taming that unruly tangle-wood she calls her hair.”

His mother kissed him on the cheek and departed the room, leaving him to wonder at the words he had spoken as much as those he had heard. He became so engrossed in reviewing this conversation and its implications that he barely noticed when the priest entered, bearing the vestment sash in his arms. Tin-Tsu gasped silently as he looked up, recognizing immediately the man’s face. The face he had seen so recently watching him from the palace gardens and the temple balcony.

THE CARNIVAL



TARAK

LILACS SCENTED the wind that carried the sound of approaching hoof beats. Tarak sniffed the air. He liked the smell. They did not have this flower in the Stone Realm. He wanted to pick the blossom up to inhale its fragrance more deeply, but he suspected the wyrin would mock him for it. For such a tiny creature, Shifhuul produced an exceptional quantity of annoyance. Like the junt beetle of the Brkknt Mountains that could shit four times its weight in a single day. Tarak had no one to blame but himself. If he hadn't spent so much time teaching Shifhuul to speak properly, the little wyrin might have been more silent.

"Time for to run still." Shifhuul's voice sounded oddly unconcerned with the approaching militia. His tail swished idly behind him.

"You wish to run toward the enemy?" Tarak looked down at Shifhuul in mock surprise.

"Not direction mean I." Shifhuul gave no evidence of intending to run.

Against all his talk of running and fleeing danger, Shifhuul always stood his ground. For reasons Tarak could not discern, the wyrin feigned fear and cravenness as though by rote, as if repeating lines from an ancient poem. But Shifhuul's words, however annoying, never seemed to match his actions. Tarak suspected the cause. The wyrin wished to die. Tarak could not guess why, but Shifhuul's actions, his fierceness in their confrontations with bandits, his disregard for his own safety, made it plain the wyrin did not wish to return home to his people. He often spoke of returning to his home realm and complained about the humans, but his deeds did not follow his speech. For this reason, Tarak had known the wyrin would support his plan, even as he grumbled about it.

The yutan, Yeth, had simply nodded when told of his intentions. Unlike Shifhuul, she clearly desired to return to her home, but she never ignored a challenge. She appeared unable to do so. She seemed to take the bandits and militias as a personal affront, as though her honor demanded she act against injustice. Tarak could identify with the yutan in this virtue.

Honor.

A word that haunted him for its loss and his quest to reclaim it.

SEVEN MONTHS AGO

“I MUST GO.”

“There are others lower in the tribe ladder who should beg to go in your stead.”

Tarak shook his head, the matted locks of his mane brushing his shoulders. He stared into Reeshka’s teary eyes and reached out to hold her. His mate turned from him and stalked from the tent. He growled and followed her, more frustrated with his own ineptitude at explaining himself than by her reaction.

He flipped the flap of the leather tent closed and trailed his mate away from the other shelters arranged in a circle on the wide mountain plateau. Ninety pointed keree made of bison hide wrapped around wooden posts surrounded a massive fire pit in three circles. Tarak followed Reeshka through the rings of keree, ignoring the looks of his tribe members, watching his mate’s back.

She left the campground and climbed the side of the mountain rising above the flat, rocky expanse of the plateau. He kept his distance. He knew from experience the danger of coming too close to her when she walked that way, feet planted firmly, as though stamping on something she wished to crush. Likely, she imagined his face as she stomped up the mountainside. He could not blame her.

Eventually, Reeshka halted her march on an outcropping of rock that overlooked the Valley of Jrak, green mountain hills rolling away into oblivion beneath the winter sun. She pulled a leather shawl close around her shoulders in the biting wind atop the mountain. Tarak shivered but ignored the cold. His own dense pelt of thick brown hair provided enough protection from the elements for the time being. He suspected her chill came not from the wind but from the icy pain his words had placed in her heart.

“How can you go to walk among the sheetoo after what they have done to us?” Reeshka did not turn to face him.

“I must.” Tarak stood beside her, keeping a distance intended to show contrition, paws at his sides as custom indicated.

“You choose to accept the elders’ commands. You choose to leave me.” She wiped at her eyes with the back of her paw.

“It is a matter of honor.” Tarak looked at his feet, feeling again the shame of his dishonor. “I must regain my standing in the tribe. I must reclaim my honor.”

“You have more honor than any roagg on the mountain.” Reeshka spat the words with anger. “You did the honorable thing.”

“I acted in anger and without thought.” Tarak sighed at the memory. “There is no honor in that.”

“I would have done the same.” Reeshka glanced at Tarak. He saw a hint of hope in the motion of her eyes.

“Then we would both need to reclaim our honor,” Tarak said.

“There must be another way.” Reeshka turned away again. “To go to the Iron Realm. To live beside the sheetoo. They will betray you. This is all they know.”

“I need not trust them,” Tarak said. “I need only learn the source of their dream and what it will cause them to do.”

“Sheetoo dreams of sheetoo gods.” Reeshka snorted with derision. “What can these things matter to us so far from their lands? The urris protect us. They have always enforced The Pact.”

“They shelter us from the threat of the other realms.” Tarak took a deep breath. “They do not shield us from the threats within our own realms.”

“How can these dreams be a threat?” Reeshka shook her head. “Dreams are but dreams. Guides to the realms of spirits and no more.”

“Roaggs have had this dream of the sheetoo god.” Tarak took another deep breath.

“What of it?” Reeshka said. “Our spirits will defend us from the new sheetoo god and all others, as they always have.”

“Not always,” Tarak said.

“That was before.” Reeshka sounded defensive. Her mother spoke the spirit chants. To criticize the spirits implied censure of the spirit talkers. “Before we won our freedom and earned the right to their protection.”

“Then sing the spirit chants for my protection, because I must go.” Tarak’s shoulders sagged against the weight of his words.

“Why?” Reeshka turned to him. “Why did the elders choose you? They would not choose someone who had dishonored the tribe.”

“They did not choose me.” Tarak breathed deep once more, his chest stinging like he had climbed the mountaintop and attempted to speak in the thin air close to the sky. “I asked to be chosen.”

“Why?” Reeshka looked pained, as though he intended to wound her with his decision.

“It is more than honor.” Tarak waited, hoping she would come to him, barely able to speak the truth that frightened him. “I must go. I have had the dreams. And they call to me.”

THE PRESENT

TARAK TOOK another deep breath of the lilacs still infusing the air and wondered if he would ever see Reeshka again. They had waited three months, following custom, before joining their lives in the binding ceremony. Then he had altered all their plans with a moment’s anger and mindlessness. Would he return to her? Or would she forever wonder if he continued to wander the Iron Realm, year after year, in a quest for the meaning of a dream he should never have dreamed. The dream that felt like eavesdropping on the slumbering spirit visions of another people. A dream that led him to stand in the road and face a pack of vile humans. Sheetoo who would happily kill him simply for being in the way.

“Stand aside ... creatures!”

The leader of the militia group sat on his horse, a length ahead of his companions as he reared his steed to a halt. The other militiamen tugged at the reins of their horses and bunched in the road,

four rows deep. Nearly all held their straight, double-edged swords drawn. Six men held nocked arrows in their long bows. Tarak had hoped to face ten humans and feared there might be fifteen. More than twenty confronted him and his fellow scouts. Too many.

Although he had known this moment to be inevitable, Tarak had not considered what to say. Shifhuul spared him worrying about it any longer.

“Run, goat raper. Run, maggot eater. Run, naked ape. Run or we kill you.” Shifhuul’s words echoed among the trees surrounding the fork in the road. The wyrin had little subtlety with the human language, but he managed to convey his meaning well enough.

“It speaks.” The leader of the militia looked horrified. “The creatures speak.”

“Dark demons called by the heretic god,” one of the militiamen said.

“False gods can call forth no demons,” the leader corrected the man, his tone pedantic.

“There are too many of them,” Yeth whispered over Shifhuul’s head.

“No enough to alive us take.” Shifhuul’s hand twitched where it rested on the hilt of his sheathed sword. “No pet in cage, I.”

“If you have gods to pray to, do so now.” Tarak made a silent plea to his spirit totems for protection and guidance. He wished he had taken the time to recite the spirit chants while waiting for the humans to arrive. He wanted to call the chants to frighten the hairless monsters away. Instead, he raised his voice to call to the leader of the militia.

“You seek the pilgrims?”

The leader of the militia grimaced, unsettled to hear the rasping growl of Tarak’s voice.

“Have you seen them?” the militia leader asked.

“Yes,” Tarak said. While he had no hope of surviving the inevitable battle that would consume the fork in the road, neither had he any desire for it to begin.

“Which way did they go?” the militia leader said.

“We cannot tell you that.” Tarak stared at the militia leader, hoping the man sensed the danger confronting him. The militias were used to attacking unarmed wayfarers, not experienced fighters.

“What concern are the heretics to three creatures from the other realms?” The militia leader sounded genuinely interested to know why Tarak and his companions might risk their lives for those of the pilgrims.

“We seek the answer to the question they pose.” Tarak saw no need for subterfuge if he might be dead soon.

“They pose no question.” The leader of the militia raised his voice. “They present only a threat. A threat to the people of The True God, Ni-Kam-Djen. Your foreign gods are as false as the heretic dreamers’ visions of a goddess. There is no goddess. There is only The True God. Only Ni-Kam-Djen. Now clear the road, vermin, or we will cut you down.”

“Do you not see that you will lose many men in order to pass us?” Tarak hoped reason might prevail. He heard the call of birds from the forest, likely disturbed by the shouting of the militia leader.

“We do not fear you,” the leader said, raising his sword, readying the signal to charge. “Ni-Kam-Djen protects us!”

“Look!”

One of the militiamen pointed to the sky, his hand shaking, his eyes wide. Above the forest at the fork in the road, a massive flock of birds circled. Black birds, ravens, hawks, robins, night jays, pinner sprites, and more and more. Tarak had never witnessed birds of different wing flocking together.

The cloud of forest fowl swirled in the sky, forming a circular vortex, a gap in the center, rising up far above the trees. The sight unnerved him, leaving him breathing as though dizzy from a long mountain run.

“Birds all wrong,” Shifhuul said beside him.

“Very wrong,” Yeth added.

“We may want to...” Tarak’s own words vanished in the sudden crushing wave of bird cries as the whirlpool of black in the sky became a funnel of darkness, plunging down to the ground, engulfing the militiamen in a windstorm of wings and slashing beaks and ripping claws.

Tarak watched on in stunned horror, the militiamen screaming, batting at the wing-black air with their swords, trying to run, the horses rearing up in fear. The screams of the sheetoo filled the woods, reverberating from the trees, shaking the branches. No matter how loud the cries became, no man escaped the pitch-dark wall of avian hell entrapping them.

Gradually, the death moans of the men faded away, the birds taking flight to the sky above and into the shadowed reaches of the forest. As the last man fell from his horse, sword bouncing away from his dead hand, the final bird, a wide-winged raven, flapped over the road and vanished beyond the treetops.

The men’s horses skittered and jumped in fear, but slowly realized that none of them had been wounded in the strange avian attack. A few poked their hooves at their former riders, but most appeared too dazed and frightened to move.

“Birds all wrong.” Shifhuul’s voice sounded strained. “But birds all good.”

“Did you use The Sight to do this?” Tarak looked to the yutan.

“I do not possess that kind of power.” Yeth leaned on her spear, shaking her head. “I do not understand.”

Tarak stared at the dead bodies of the militiamen, blood oozing from their empty eye sockets.

“It seems something answered our prayers.”

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

A NAME buried beneath the reaches of memory through years of effort. A name opening the past to the present, eliminating all intervening time in a single utterance. A name indelibly linked to a face. A face altered by age but still familiar to one who had known it so well so long ago. No wonder his mother did not recognize the man as she surely passed him in the hall. She would have known that smile. A smiling face that stood, against all reason and probability, before Tin-Tsu in his dressing chamber.

“You.”

“Me.” The man smiled wider, holding forth the coronation vestment sash.

“How do you to come to be here?” Tin-Tsu stood frozen, unable to move and barely able to think with the memories and emotions clouding his mind. He had spent years forgetting this man even lived.

“My sect chose me to attend the coronation. To bring you the official vestments.” The man looked down at the onyx-colored sash of silk in emphasis of his words.

“Sect?” Tin-Tsu found it hard to follow the man’s words, blending as they did with the words from his past, echoing down through the years to whisper in his ears.

“The Ghan-Dju sect.” The man smiled again. “The traditional keepers of the coronation antiquities. This sash, for instance, is over six hundred years old.”

“You are a priest?” Tin-Tsu blinked, trying to order his thoughts.

“You did not know?” The man frowned and glanced away. “I always assumed.”

“No. I did not know.” Tin-Tsu had never assumed. He had striven never to think the name, nor remember the face, nor wonder where the man might be.

“Ironic that we should both become priests.” The man smiled again, amusement battling with growing discomfort across the lean, angular features of his face. “Of course, soon, only one of us will remain a priest.”

“Why are you here?” Tin-Tsu focused his mind on the question necessary to the moment.

“I told you.” The man’s smile faltered. “I bring you the vestments.”

“Why you?” Tin-Tsu lowered his voice, daring himself not to look away from the man.

“I prayed to be selected as my sect’s emissary.” The man stepped closer. “Ni-Kam-Djen answered my prayers.”

Tin-Tsu struggled to keep his feet firmly in place, uncertain if they would step backward or rush forward of their own volition.

“I...” The wave of truth that had overwhelmed Tin-Tsu during his conversation with his mother resurged to engulf him. “I do not know what to say. Or what I feel.”

“You do not need to say or feel anything.” Sadness filled the man’s eyes as his smile faded completely. “An old friend comes to help you with your vestments on the day of your coronation.”

The man stepped forward, lifting the ancient silk sash and placing it over Tin-Tsu’s head, adjusting it on his shoulders. Tin-Tsu’s breath quickened at the touch. He looked into the man’s eyes and felt himself standing not in the palace dressing room at midday before his coronation, but beneath the night-shaded branches of the poda tree in the gardens, a boy of sixteen, facing another youth whose eyes glimmered in the moonlight. The same eyes seventeen years apart. The same face but older. The same name. And against all hope, all prayers and petitions across the intervening years — the same feelings.

“Tiang-Rhu.”

“I am called Bontin-Ning now.” Tiang-Rhu said, brushing imaginary dust from the sash. “In my sect, we are given new names for our new lives serving Ni-Kam-Djen.”

Tin-Tsu wondered at the name and the meaning. *Bright Star*. Could his appearance alongside that other bright star be mere coincidence? And if not, what meaning might such twinned events hold?

“How long are you here?” Tin-Tsu wanted to ask other questions, but this one seemed safest.

“I depart after the ceremony.” Tiang-Rhu’s smile returned, a tinge of sadness remaining. “My sect does not believe in the indulgence that accompanies celebrations.”

“I will not see you again?” The answer to this question concerned Tin-Tsu the most, for more reasons than he wished to consider.

“I think not.” Tiang-Rhu’s lips twitched with effort to maintain his smile as he stepped back a respectful distance. “A friendship that is improper for a young tahn of sixteen is unthinkable for a zhan.”

“Yes.” Tin-Tsu took a deep breath, fortifying himself for his words to come. “It was good of you to bring the vestments. And good to see you again.”

“It was good to see you as well, my tahn.” Tiang-Rhu bowed slightly.

Tin-Tsu opened his mouth to say something, words forever lost to the knock at the door and the sound of Tonken-Wu’s voice as he entered the room.

“The coronation is about to begin, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu noted Tiang-Rhu’s face but said nothing.

“Great blessings on this wondrous day, my tahn.” Tiang-Rhu bowed and walked swiftly past Tonken-Wu, out the door and beyond sight.

Tin-Tsu stood staring after Tiang-Rhu, wondering what his arrival meant in conjunction with so many other occurrences the past day. The dream, the star, the attackers in the night, the arrival of Tonken-Wu, and now the return of Tiang-Rhu. The ancient Kam-Djen philosophers had inveighed against the practice of reading portents from the signs and symbols of life, declaring that only Ni-Kam-Djen could truly know the meaning of any series of events. Not for the first time, and not for the same reason, Tin-Tsu wished he were not as devout in his beliefs.

“My tahn?” Tonken-Wu bowed his head. “Should I return in a few minutes?”

“No.” Tin-Tsu took a deep breath as he strode past Tonken-Wu for the door. “Let us see this through and have done with it.”

THE THRONE



RHOG-KAN

THE GRAND HALL. Two hundred strides long. Fifty strides wide and walls just as tall. Twenty-four massive columns the width of five men abreast, supported the arched ceiling. A polished marble floor in a simple pattern of black and white. More than enough room for the three thousand attendees of High Tahn Kon Tin-Tsu's coronation as zhan of the Daeshen Dominion.

Banners of silk in royal blue streamed down the sides of the supporting columns, the emblem of the dominion embroidered on a yellow circle at their heads — an endless knot of four sides with five rows apiece of a golden line folding back upon itself infinitely. A symbol representing the endless history and eternal future of the royal dominion, the true seat of all Great Dominions of the past and the Great Dominion to come. Each family house had its own emblem. The Kon family emblem, seen on a brooch on the high tahn's sister's breast, depicted a series of seven circles nested one within the other, representing the depth of the family's commitment to the dominion. While the family of the zhan might wear their house emblem, the newly raised zhan would henceforth only ever wear the sign of the Daeshen Dominion. An endless knot graced the back of the vestment sash hanging over High Tahn Tin-Tsu's shoulders as he walked down the aisle between the throngs of people standing respectfully to either side of the Grand Hall. Two palace wardens preceded him and two followed his echoing footsteps.

Tigan Rhog-Kan stood at the front of the room with the members of the High Council and the royal family, a station of privilege and rank. It provided him an excellent view of the proceedings. He could see High Tahn Tin-Tsu in profile as he came to stand before the high priest, the officiant of the ceremony to crown him zhan. He could see the future zhan's new personal escort, Sub-commander Tonken-Wu, standing a respectful distance behind the high tahn with the three wardens on duty. Rhog-Kan noticed more wardens stationed nearby, far more than usual. Enough to encircle the high tahn should a threat arise from the crowd. He saw even more guardians and sentinels posted along the narrow service balcony beneath the arched windows high above the floor. One man for each window, eyes trained not on the events below, but searching the crowd. It would be nearly impossible for a potential killer to take the high tahn's life before the crown rested on his head.

High Priest Tontee-Lee, a heavysset man in his sixties with a long beard that cascaded down the front of his red robes, intoned the first ancient ritual words of the coronation. Rhog-Kan let his

gaze fall where it had been longing to settle. With all eyes on the high priest and the high tahn, his could safely rest upon Dju-Tesha.

“Our forefathers of the dark ages tore themselves out of ignorance and barbarism to fashion the first dominion, and from its seed, nurtured it into the First Great Dominion.” The high priest’s powerful voice improbably filled the expanse of the Grand Hall. “Today, we accept the gift of this unbroken lineage and pass it on to future generations, embodied by this man as he accepts the mantle of zhan.”

The high priest’s words became a wall of sounds held at a distance as Rhog-Kan let the sight of Dju-Tesha fill his mind and thoughts. How had such a thing come to be? It seemed impossible. The series of utterances and actions that led to the state between them, the conditions that had arisen in his heart, all appeared so improbable, unimaginable even, before they suddenly existed. He had intended only to search the library books for a scrap of history that might illuminate the dominion’s current condition of war. Surely other zhans and tigans had faced situations that might reveal potential corollaries of action or wisdom he could benefit from. He knew the past of the Great Dominions as well as any soldier, but more than three thousand years of history meant much knowledge remained uncovered in the traditional training of a military leader.

He had found Dju-Tesha in a corner of the library, seated on a cushioned bench near the tall windows, a pile of books stacked around her as she read one in her hands. From the comfort and ease of her posture, she clearly spent a great deal of time there. The way the golden light of sunset struck her face and hair surprised him as it illuminated her beauty. He had always considered her a plain girl with the simple features of the common folk, like the fisherman’s daughter her great-grandmother had been. Her natural reticence and shyness heightened that opinion.

Maybe the light drew him to her in that moment. Maybe the visage of her sitting there pulled the words from his mouth. For whatever reason, he asked her if she knew of any books detailing long wars in the old dominions. She had looked up from her book, startled to find someone standing there. She appeared surprised that anyone might speak to her. Her reply began tentatively at first, as though she were unaccustomed to the sound of her own voice, but as she proceeded to answer his further questions, they sparked a flame within her. He could see it in her eyes. She spoke at length of various volumes littering the library shelves, of wars and tigans, of defeats and triumphs. Rhog-Kan stood stunned before her erudition and breadth of learning. He had never known her to speak more than two words aloud in the presence of others. Although she gave no outward evidence of such a condition, he had often considered her addle-minded. This torrent of reasoned verbosity revealed a sharpness of intellect he had rarely encountered.

In retrospect, Rhog-Kan realized, he might have fallen in love with her in that very first moment. Certainly, she stirred an interest in him he thought dead if not long dormant. The passing of his wife to the Pure Lands so many years ago left him with a wariness of heart. Love, once gifted, could be ripped away by fate and the often cruel hand of Ni-Kam-Djen. Such sorrow led men to act in error, and while the mistakes of a common man in grief might cause no harm, a leader of men in battle could not afford to endanger their lives with an unbalanced heart. He had

not appreciated, or had forgotten in the long years of emotional solitude, that love could also lead one to actions far more irrational and unbalancing than mournfulness.

“As this man before us completes the transformation from mere tahn to zhan, from one of many to one alone, we recite the names of those self-same singular men who preceded him since the dawn of the first dominion.” The high priest opened a large, black, leather-clad book and began to read a seemingly endless list of names.

The coronation of a zhan took even longer than a royal wedding. Rhog-Kan shifted where he stood, ignoring the ache in his aging knees. The reading of the names, if he remembered correctly from the coronation of Tin-Tsu’s brother, would take nearly half an hour. There were not so many zhans with long names or titles, but the great dominions, and especially the Third Great Dominion, had often been racked with regicide and battles between the tahns for power. Some zhans fulfilled their duty for only a few months, and in one case, for less than a day. Rhog-Kan considered it a perverted blessing that the dissolution of the Third Great Dominion of the Iron Realm had left at least one stable dominion to rise from its corpse. The Daeshen Dominion never suffered the internecine fights that plagued the Tanshen Dominion, or the series of rebellions that befell the Atheton Dominion.

Rhog-Kan looked again to Dju-Tesha and found the thoughts of politics and war and succession fading from his mind. She turned to look at him, caught his eye, smiled ever so slightly, then turned back to watch her brother as she listened to the list of names droning from the high priest’s lips.

“Yaol Hindo-Shan, Glorious Upholder, Keeper of the Seventh Flame of the Long Night. Kinish Jilado, Magnificent Maintainer, Hunter Beyond the High Mountains and Bringer of the White Heavens. Hu-Wan-Zi...”

A part of Rhog-Kan’s mind noted the Juparti name among the list of zhans and pondered how many years had passed since a heathen filled the great seat of governance. The rest of his attention rested with Dju-Tesha. How had she come to hold such sway over his heart and thoughts? How had she come to draw his desires so powerfully? Even now, two dozen paces separating them, he felt the physical connection to her body, how his flesh longed to touch hers, how his arms ached to embrace her.

He had chastised himself for the indiscretion and blasphemousness of their first pairing that late night among the red-and-black patterned cushions of the private reading room in the palace library. To bed the sister of the zhan, to claim her long-held virginity beyond the boundaries of marriage — these sacrileges demanded holy justice. He had sworn himself never to allow such an occurrence to repeat and had condemned himself for his weakness. He had declaimed his devotion to his god and made countless prayers in penitence.

Against all reason, he returned to the library the next night. He told himself, as his feet carried him there in a fog of conflicted feeling, that he approached her to apologize. To beg forgiveness. To declare his intention to abandon the affair. To reestablish propriety in their relations. To restore balance.

Dju-Tesha had laughed at him in that odd, singsong voice of hers. Then she had kissed him and demanded he break every vow he had woven around himself as protection from disobedience to the law and his faith. He fought her advances for a time, with futility and ever-lessening fortitude. His defenses collapsed against the onslaught of her kisses and her hands beneath his shirt.

His recriminations for his actions returned, as they did each night they met, growing weaker with every reiteration of his failings until, improbably, he came to see their stolen unions not as an affront to his god and the ascendancy, but as part of a divine plan previously hidden from his sight, but now revealed, like a spy's lemon-ink held up to the candlelight, a map of a future he had never dreamed possible, a continent of possibilities concealed from him until he felt the kiss of his beloved.

This conviction of divine purpose blossomed in his heart and mind as Dju-Tesha's elder brother fell in battle and the younger brother, the priest in self-imposed exile, returned to assume the ascendancy. Rhog-Kan watched Tin-Tsu listening to the names of his predecessors being read to him and remembered their first meeting upon his return to the palace. Even then, Rhog-Kan suspected the man would destroy the dominion. He talked like a priest and thought like a priest. Clearly, he would rule as a priest. With each passing day, the concern Rhog-Kan harbored grew and metastasized, taking shape first as an indecent notion, then a discomfiting thought.

He loved Dju-Tesha. If they announced their devotion and married, Rhog-Kan could potentially assume the ascendancy if something untoward befell her brother. Rhog-Kan would never become zhan, but his future wife would rule as guardian zhan until their first male progeny came of age and ascended to the throne. With Dju-Tesha's brilliance and his experience, they could together rule in such a fashion as to finally end the long war with the Tanshen Dominion. It might be years before such a happy happenstance befell Tin-Tsu, but men fell in battle every day, even leaders of nations, as his father and his elder brother had so unfortunately discovered. Both men had possessed every important quality Tin-Tsu lacked — knowledge of state and court, skill in commanding the battlefield, prowess in combat. How could a priest accustomed to prayers in mountain passes hope to lead a great nation, even with excellent counsel?

Rhog-Kan listened to the last of the names being read and remembered the council meeting earlier that day. A politically practiced priest who listened to his councilors might be able to lead a nation in war, but one who ignored all experience and advice to follow an inner apprehension of divine guidance would more likely lead the dominion to ruin.

“Kon Fan-Mutig, Fierce Protector, Slayer of the Eight Shadows of Night.” The high priest closed the massive book and raised his eyes to Tin-Tsu and the assembly of faces filling the Grand Hall. “Now we name our new zhan.”

The high priest turned to an acolyte holding a satin pillow of crimson red. Upon the pillow rested the crown of the Daeshen Dominion — a single, simple band of gold, two finger-widths in thickness. A heavy ornament of state, weighted to impress upon the wearer the burden of their station.

The high priest lifted the crown from the pillow, his hands sinking slightly at the sudden heaviness they held. He raised both hands high above his head.

“Kon Tin-Tsu, brother of Fan-Mutig, son of Fan-Tsee, I name you Zhan of the Dominion, Holy...”

A thunderous rumble ate the high priest’s words, filling the air and drawing all eyes upward. An explosion of sound wracked the room as the colossal granite columns of the Grand Hall shook and the marble of the floor rippled beneath thousands of feet. Above, the ceiling cracked and quaked, shattering stone to shards the size of men. The congregation of the coronation screamed and crouched and made to run.

Only three stood with mindful purpose.

Rhog-Kan saw from the upper edge of his vision a massive chunk of ceiling plummet to the ground. His feet, already in motion, carried him swiftly across the intervening paces, one thought possessing him — to protect the woman he loved. He threw his arms around Dju-Tesha and shielded her with his body from the falling stones even as Tin-Tsu raised his own arms and shouted to the sky, his voice fighting against the avalanche of stone roaring from above him. Beside the high tahn stood Tonken-Wu, eyes scanning the ceiling, his arms outstretched to push the tahn out of harm’s way.

“Protect us now, merciful Ni-Kam-Djen, in our time of need! Protect us now, merciful...”

Rhog-Kan held Dju-Tesha close, her eyes alight with terror, her hands clutching at him. He turned to Tin-Tsu, hearing the priest-zhan’s prayer for salvation, staring in horror and awe as an immense slab of stone crashed to the ground beside him. Hunks of ceiling smashed to the floor around the Grand Hall, the noise drowning out the cries of the people trapped beneath the hail of debris, billows of dust rising up to hide their panicked faces.

Finally, after moments, or an unmeasurable eternity of horror, the falling stones ceased and Tin-Tsu’s prayer ended.

Rhog-Kan listened as the screams and wails died down and slowly transformed to confused mumbles and then cries of joy. Rhog-Kan eased his grip on his beloved and blinked away the dust as the air gradually cleared to disclose a sight his mind could not fashion into sensible thought.

People stood around the Grand Hall, staring at one another, giant pieces of stone from the collapsed ceiling embedded in the marble floor between them. Although many were marked with small cuts and a few serious gashes, not a single piece of debris had struck even one of the people in the Grand Hall.

Slowly, inevitably, the thousands of eyes in the room fixed upon Tin-Tsu. Rhog-Kan held Dju-Tesha’s hand as he watched her brother stoop to pick up the fallen crown, handing it to the high priest. The high priest, his hands shaking, raised the crown once more above his head as he faced Tin-Tsu, voice quivering as he spoke.

“Kon Tin-Tsu, brother of Fan-Mutig, son of Fan-Tsee, I name you Zhan of the Dominion, Holy Protector, Vessel of The One God, Shield of Heaven.”

As the high priest lowered the crown to Tin-Tsu’s brow, the Grand Hall erupted in joyous shouts of praise and thanksgiving.

Zhan Tin-Tsu descended the steps before the dais, Tonken-Wu at his side, walking purposefully into the crowd, blessing men and women by placing the two primary fingers of his right hand to their foreheads, accepting their gratitude, giving all credit to his god, leaving those in his wake in stunned silence.

“It is a miracle.” Dju-Tesha’s voice roused Rhog-Kan to his senses.

“Yes. A miracle,” he replied.

A miracle that brought questions storming into Rhog-Kan’s mind.

How had a ceiling held aloft for millennia fallen at such an inopportune moment? Was this another attack on Tin-Tsu’s life, intended to end it before he rose to the ascendancy? Was The Sight involved? Had a seer been present in the room, working his or her dark will upon the stone of the ceiling to make it crumble?

How had everyone been spared? How could such a miracle take place? Had Ni-Kam-Djen protected the people at the behest of Tin-Tsu? Was he possessed of Sight by Divine Grace? Or could he instead be a seer in secret?

Might that not explain how he had escaped death the night before at the hands of four armed men? Could the young Sub-commander Tonken-Wu really have killed all of them? Or had there been another divine intervention? Why had Tin-Tsu not cried out on that balcony? Had prayers been on his lips that night as he stepped into the room to face the night-slayers? Did he have the favor and protection of Ni-Kam-Djen?

Another question burned in his mind, turning all others to ash and shining brightly in his inner consciousness — who else besides Rhog-Kan had attempted to kill the now crowned Zhan Tin-Tsu — and to what end?

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

“HERETICS!”

“Blasphemers!”

“The True God is the only god!”

“We don’t want yer filth here!”

“Someone should kill ya!”

“Hope the militia finds ya!”

A week-old tomato burst its thin skin against Raedalus’s chest, drenching him in rancid juice, the color of the smashed fruit similar to the tint of the sun as it sank toward the western horizon. Other vegetables soon followed. He sighed. The pilgrims of the star had come to expect this kind of welcome when passing through villages and towns along the Old Border Road. The people might not claim allegiance to either the Daeshen Dominion to the north or the Tanshen Dominion to the south, but they did openly proclaim their devotion to their god Ni-Kam-Djen regardless of the sectarian divisions between the two nations. He brushed the tomato pulp from his clothes, thankful the villagers had not started with rocks.

Normally, the pilgrims tried to pass through towns at night when the people slept and were less likely to cause problems. They received enough trouble from the hounding militias that followed them. Usually, the dream woke the potentially faithful during the pilgrims’ passage through their town and they came out to join the procession, quickly grabbing what they could from their homes for the journey ahead. They generally picked up three or four pilgrims in a village and ten or more in a small town.

This day, they had timed their journey wrong. Raedalus cursed himself for the poor planning. His poor planning. They should have marched a little faster. Or he should have halted the company when he saw they could not all pass through the town before sunset. While the majority of the pilgrims had already marched through the farming village an hour earlier, before most of its citizens returned from the fields for the day, a few of the slower pilgrims, those a bit older and weaker from the journey, had lingered, as they always did, too far behind the others.

Raedalus stayed with his new lagna. In the Pashist faith of the Juparti Dominion, the word indicated members of a spiritual community. The Mother Shepherd used the word to describe the entirety of her followers, the pilgrims of Moaratana. Raedalus thought of the word as describing a new family. He could not leave his new cousins and uncles and aunts to straggle behind on their

own when passing through danger. He led the small group of ten elderly men and women two abreast through the center of the small village.

“Keep walking, keep walking.” Raedalus took the hand of the woman at his side, her gray hair a stark contrast with her wrinkled, night-dark skin. He chided himself again. He should have found space for them on the wagons carrying the wounded from the previous night’s attack by militiamen. They had lost two wagons to fire, and the horses would have strained at the added weight, but he should have found a way to transport the weaker pilgrims. Or at the very least, he should have insisted that some of the men now armed with swords from the dead militiamen accompany him and his elderly charges. It reminded him of the time when, as a novice priest, he had been put in charge of meals for after the fire festival prayers and ended up providing stale rice and cold lamb because he had procrastinated in making the preparations. He hated that feeling of incompetence. Especially as it now put other’s lives at risk. And so soon after they had lost loved ones to violence.

The villagers continued to throw rotten fruits and vegetables. Something hard hit Raedalus’s shoulder. A beet or a rock — he could not tell. He briefly reconsidered his choice to ignore the advice of the Mother Shepherd to keep the sword he had used during the militia attack. He had no skill with a blade, and could not imagine using it on the villagers, but it might have frightened them into keeping their distance and granting easy passage to the elderly pilgrims.

The village consisted of twenty-odd houses built of mud bricks stacked around wooden frames and covered with a pale brown plaster. Thatched roofs protected all but one of the homes, which instead held planks of wood coated with a viscous black resin.

The villagers looked largely indistinguishable. Farmers and their families. Men and women in roughhewn clothes, barefoot children standing between them. They were good people, Raedalus reminded himself. People exactly like those who had joined the Mother Shepherd on the pilgrimage. The only difference lay in what they believed in their hearts to be true.

“Yer souls will turn to ash!”

“Ya’ll never enter the Pure Lands!”

Raedalus watched as three men stepped to block the road just before the last house of the village. So close. An elderly pilgrim bumped into his back. He ducked his head to dodge a rotten apple and looked over his shoulder. The villagers had surrounded them. His heart beat faster in his chest as his palms began to tingle.

“Should kill ya all!”

“Should burn ya on a pyre.”

Raedalus found himself possessed of an irrational urge to point out that even followers of the Kam-Djen faith regarded burning bodies on pyres as an act of respect for the dead. A stake in the ground or a fire pit were the traditional methods for killing heretics. He frowned at his distracted thought. His lack of focus had led him to this situation.

“We mean no one harm.” Raedalus shouted to be heard above the din of voices filling the air around him.

“False prophet and a false god!” One of the men blocking the road screamed at Raedalus, spittle spewing from his angry lips.

A multitude of potential theological positions skimmed across the surface of Raedalus’s mind. He ignored them all. One thing he had learned in his months of travel between the dominions — you could not argue theology with farm folk. Their concerns were immediate and practical, not theoretical or spiritual. They worried whether there would be enough rain or if an early frost would kill the crops, not whether the words of the fourth prophet superseded those of the second, or whether Pashist principles might be as valid as those of a Kamite. Their simple beliefs and present needs colored their perceptions. The only arguments that might sway them needed to address this same pragmatism. He spoke the Shen language with modest fluency. Better than many of the villagers apparently did. If he could talk to them in their own tongue, in their own manner, possibly he could turn their anger to curiosity.

“Do false gods seed dreams across the realm? Do false gods bring new stars to light in the night sky?” Raedalus pointed to the sky where the Goddess’s new star began to shine — a distant, luminous rose.

The villagers’ eyes followed his arm to the sky. A murmur ricocheted through the crowd. They had seen the star the night before, but only those among them who had the dreams would realize the importance of the new celestial ornament. Raedalus needed to speak to those villagers, the potential pilgrims, the ones too afraid of their neighbors to step forward and assist their fellow dreamers.

“You believe that there can only be one god, one true god.” Raedalus swallowed quickly, trying to give himself time to think of the right words to turn the situation to his advantage. Or at least give his fellow pilgrims who had passed through the village time to realize the stragglers were caught in a net of human suspicion. Time for the Mother Shepherd to come rescue them.

“We do not deny the existence of your god or any god, but we must trust what we see with our own eyes.” Raedalus turned as he spoke, trying look into the face of every villager. “We must believe our eyes that all see the same dream when we sleep each night. We must believe our eyes that see a new star brought forth in the night sky, just as our dreams foretold. We must believe in a god when we see her do these things.”

“Dark Sight of the blasphemers,” a heavysset village woman said. “Dark Sight ta tempt us away from Ni-Kam-Djen.”

“What seer could be powerful enough to cause so many to dream the same dream?” Raedalus replied. “What seer can place a new star in the heavens? You are farmers, are you not? When the spring frost comes late and yet spares your crops, do you not thank your god? When the summer cyclone rips through the forest yet leaps over your houses, do you not thank your god? When the winter snows bury your village, yet you all survive to the thaw of spring, do you not thank your god? How can you ask us to ignore our eyes when you so clearly trust your own?”

A few of the villagers muttered a confused and conflicted assent to Raedalus’s words. He knew his examples to be poor analogies to the actions of his goddess, as easily attributed to

coincidence as divine intervention, but he cared more in that moment for saving the lives of his fellow pilgrims than the theological purity of his argument.

“Some of you may have had the dreams and they may have frightened you.” Raedalus opened his hands in a gesture of calm and peace. “All of you have seen the star and it may terrify you. These are unsettling times, but you need not fear us. We do not wish to take away your god. We do not wish to take away your land or your homes. We wish only to follow our dreams and the star.”

“Ya takes our people,” a thin man with a metal tipped hayfork shouted from the back of the crowd. “Ya carry wives and husbands and children away. Ya sneak through in the night and grab ’em.”

“We take no one.” Raedalus raised his voice, indignant at the suggestion of kidnapping. “We do not ask people to follow us. We do not snatch them from their beds. The people from across the land who join our pilgrimage do so to follow their hearts.”

“The Dark Sight bitch tricks their minds,” the hayfork man said. “Makes ’em sees the things they see.”

“You see the star.” Raedalus pointed again. “Do you think this a trick? The Mother Shepherd is the vessel on Onaia of the Goddess. She is our protector and guide. She does not have The Sight and does not need it.”

Raedalus sensed the mood of the villagers beginning to shift again. The looks in their eyes transformed from curious back to scared and potentially violent. He needed to do more than merely pacify them. He said a quick, silent prayer to Moaratana, begging for guidance and protection. Then he turned to the villagers and appealed to them from his heart.

“Some of you have had the dream.” Raedalus looked around at the now familiar faces in the crowd. “I know this. Someone has had the dream in every town and hamlet we have passed through. Maybe only one of you. Maybe nearly all of you. But fear stops you from speaking out. Fear of what your wife or husband will say. Fear of what your friends and fellow farmers will do. Fear of what will happen. Fear the militias will come and the people you love and trust will turn you over to be killed or burned alive. And you should fear these things. I have seen these things. I have seen the pile of ashes and bones left when men and women and children are tied to trees and set aflame. I have seen militiamen slaughtering my friends and fellow pilgrims. And I have beheld my goddess’s vengeance. I have heard Junari, the Mother Shepherd, plead for protection from the Goddess, and I have witnessed fistfuls of lightning shatter the sky to destroy those who would butcher us. I have seen these things done by the Goddess’s hand and I am not afraid. These men and women with me are not afraid. Look at them. They are old, their muscles weak, their bones frail, yet they march toward the western ocean to follow the vision from their dreams and the call of their hearts. I tell you now, that if you have had the dream, if you feel the call to follow the Mother Shepherd, if that star in the sky speaks to your inner silent place, I tell you it will be safe to come with us. Release your fear. Embrace the Goddess. Believe your eyes.”

Raedalus held his breath and clasped the hand of the woman beside him, as much to comfort her as to still his shaking fingers. The village crowd had grown quiet at his words. He hoped they

proved powerful enough to sway a few of them to passivity and that these few might lead the others in releasing the pilgrims. His only other option would be to try and push past the men blocking the road and create a diversion that would allow the other pilgrims to run to safety. It did not seem a plausible plan.

“I got the dream.”

A soft voice whispered from the back of the crowd. Raedalus turned and followed the villagers’ eyes toward a young girl of fifteen or sixteen. She stood beside a large, bearded man with a sheep staff in his hand. The look of concern on his face as he stared at her pegged him as the girl’s father.

“Heretic.”

Raedalus did not know who uttered that word.

“I’m no heretic,” the girl said, more loudly and defiantly. “But I got the dream.”

“I got the dream, too,” the girl’s father said, placing his arm protectively around her.

“So does I,” an elderly woman said from the other side of the crowd. “And I’m too old to care who knows it. Burn me if ya like. If not, I goes with ’em.”

“I goes with ’em, too.” The girl looked up to her father as though asking permission.

“We both goes.” The father looked around, his eyes daring anyone to mention burning.

Two more, a young husband and wife, called out their admission of having the dream and their desire to join the pilgrims. Then three more after that. Eight in all. Too many for the other villagers to fight or intimidate.

Raedalus and his fellow pilgrims waited for the new sojourners to grab their things and join the small band. The other villagers dispersed to the edge of the road, a few calling out curses or spitting at the new pilgrims as they passed, while most watched in confused fear. Beyond the occasional neighbor begging the new pilgrims to stay, speaking of the Pure Lands and the loss of their souls, no one offered any significant interference.

Raedalus led the pilgrims, new and old, from the village and along the Old Border Road, smiling broadly. It had not been a wonder as dazzling as lightning striking down from the sky, but he felt his goddess had performed a small miracle through him, helping him speak the words that saved them and brought more believers into her care. The Mother Shepherd, his once fellow priest, now prophet and leader, would be proud, and he desired nothing so much, not even completing the journey to the Forbidden Realm, as to make Junari proud.

THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

THE SONGS of crickets and cicadas competed with plodding hooves and the churn of wagon wheels on hard-packed earth. The sounds of forest life grew louder as daylight ebbed from the world. Palla reached up a pale hand to smack a mosquito biting her neck beneath her mane of crimson hair. She walked at the end of the carnival caravan, alone, a sheathed sword strapped to her waist. Her right palm rested on the hilt of the blade, trying to project the proper authority, to give the impression of skill where none existed. She could no more wield a sword than shoe a horse. The sword did not even have an edge. A dull blade of thin steel, it served as a prop for the plays the carnival performed at the towns they stopped in. However, someone needed to be at the rear of the caravan to warn of the militia. She only hoped that if the militiamen did arrive, her performance did not require the impostor blade to be removed from its scabbard.

“Do you think your friends are dead?”

Palla turned her eyes to the old pilgrim riding in the back of the last wagon. He had remained silent these last few hours. Ever since the yutan, roagg, and wyrin chose to stay behind at the fork in the road. Leotin agreed to allow the pilgrims to remain with them for the night, taking the left fork, and hoping it led south to the Old Border Road. He insisted the pilgrims leave in the morning, which assumed the three outlanders managed to turn the militiamen away or convince them to follow the other fork in the road.

“They are not my friends.” Palla gave a glance over her shoulder. They were probably dead. It had been too long since the carnival caravan left them. She had seen them fight off bandits in the night, but a daylight battle between the three and a band of militiamen might not go as well. Even the giant roagg could be felled with an arrow to the head. She frowned at the thought.

“Why did they stay behind then?” The old man seemed confused.

“I am not certain.” Palla wondered about this as well.

“I am Jhanal,” the old man said.

“Palla.”

“You are from Nevaeo, no?” Jhanal asked.

“Yes,” Palla lied. She actually hailed from the Atheton Dominion, but she had spent the last year telling everyone that she was a merchant’s daughter from the Nevaeo Dominion. Both nations spoke the same language and held a similar ethnic composition. Only her accent would give her away. However, her knowledge of the various dialects and a natural facility for them left her well

suited to disguise her heritage. She could also choose to speak the Shen language with a Nevaeo accent.

“You come from Atheton though,” she said. “The eastern region.” She recognized his origins as much by his clothes as the inflection when speaking the Easad tongue.

“Yes.” Jhanal smiled. “We have been on the road for weeks. We started with only five from my village. At one time, we were as many as thirty. Then the bandits. Then the militia. The frightened townspeople. The farmer who offered us his barn, then locked the doors and set it aflame. We twelve are all that remain.”

“A hard journey.” Palla wondered why the pilgrims persevered. She experienced the dreams each night herself, but she possessed no desire to realize the visions or to die in the attempt to understand their meaning. She had no inclination to die at all. She glanced at the fake sword banging against her leg and reconsidered that thought.

“Why did you argue to let us join your carnival?” Jhanal asked.

“It is not my carnival.” Palla acknowledged to herself that she often acted as though the carnival belonged to her. Possibly because she had never felt so at home anywhere else. Leotin, for all his grouching about her interference, seemed to understand this, and often indulged her by leaving her in charge of various activities. Oddly, although she had only been traveling with the carnival for a year, this assumption of status did not bother her fellow performers. They saw her as a helpful balance to Leotin’s often single-minded focus on managing his coins.

“Why help us, then?” Jhanal frowned as though trying to work out the puzzle represented by the young woman walking behind him.

“It was the just thing to do.” Palla had no better explanation. She often found she did not fully understand why she did things until well afterward. The full truth of why she had abandoned her family and her responsibilities to hide in a traveling carnival did not dawn on her until after months on the road.

“How do you know the just thing to do?” Jhanal asked.

“I..” As Palla began to formulate an answer to a question she preferred not to be asked, the wagon with Jhanal came to a halt. Commands carried voice-to-voice back along the caravan announced the making of camp for the evening.

Palla took the diversion as an opportunity to evade Jhanal’s query, helping to arrange the animals and wagons and set up camp alongside the road. As the first flames from the campfires started to cast shadows among the trees of the quickly darkening forest, a call arose from the rear of the caravan. Horses approaching.

Palla ran to the rear of the campsite, standing at the edge of the firelight, looking into the darkness along the road, listening to the sound of hooves. She could not tell exactly how many, but at least fifteen horses approached. She began to make out their shapes in the dimming light. They appeared to have no riders, or the riders walked unseen beside them. She soon discerned that only three walked with the horses. One at eye level with the horse he led, one taller than a man, and one short and thin. The three outlanders each led a string of horses, one tied to the next, along the road and into camp.

The horses bore bundles. Swords hung in sacks on some; another carried bows and arrows. Other burdens consisted of what appeared to be packs of grain and foodstuffs. The outlanders had returned with the militia's arms and supplies.

The three outlanders came full into the firelight, halting the horses at the edge of the camp. Palla noticed the absence of wounds or blood on the three. No cuts, no bruises. No evidence of a fight. How did they manage to turn the militia away? Had they frightened them off? Bribed them somehow? She considered it possible, however unlikely, that the three might return, but to return with the spoils of battle and no sign of conflict did not make sense. Palla disliked it when the events of a story confused her.

"What happened?" Palla asked as she stepped up to the three outlanders.

"Birds," Shifhuul said, handing Palla the reins to the line of horses he held. "Birds happened."

"What does he mean?" Palla turned to Yeth. The yutan woman seemed caught up in her own thoughts. She looked at Palla as though only just realizing the human woman stood before her.

"I do not know. I do not understand what happened." Yeth dropped the reins she held to Donjeo, the boy who looked after the animals, and followed Shifhuul. Donjeo looked flushed and flustered. Palla had not seen him in hours. *Probably just woke from dozing in a wagon again*, Palla thought. The boy seemed to nap half the day when allowed.

"It looks to be a miracle." Jhanal stepped up to stand beside Palla.

"Where is the militia?" Leotin asked as he strode up to Tarak.

"Dead." Tarak patted the head of the horse he held.

"You killed them all?" Leotin's eyes went wide.

"We killed none." Tarak looked up to the sky.

Palla followed his gaze, stars beginning to glow against the ever-darkening night, one among them redder and brighter.

"How did they die?" She stepped closer to the roagg, her eyes narrowing. She loved a curious story. Mysterious and bizarre fables had been her favorite tales as a young girl, a preference that had not diminished with age.

"A flock of birds killed them," Tarak said. "But I do not know why."

"A miracle, then." Jhanal beamed in the flickering firelight. "The Goddess protects us."

"Possibly." Tarak lowered his gaze to Jhanal. "Or something else."

A chill ran through Palla. She had considered the dreams to be a coincidence of occurrences outside the circle of her small world. She dreamed the dream, knew others who did, found it amazing, but did not believe it to be more than a queerness infecting people's minds. Even a star appearing in the sky as seemed predicted by the dream might be merely chance. But a flock of birds somehow killing a militia presented a story of bewildering complexity. Could a new goddess have intervened to save the pilgrims and the carnival? Could some other entity have acted upon the world? Could one of the outlanders have The Sight?

Palla smiled as she led the horses to the camp. Her journey just became more interesting, and the truth that took so long for her to admit when she fled her family came back to her — more than anything, she wanted to live an interesting life — to be the hero of her own curious story.

THE THRONE



TONKEN-WU

“DISAPPEARED?”

“Yes, my zhan. Gone as though they never lived.”

Tonken-Wu stood alone with Zhan Kon Tin-Tsu in his private study. He watched as the newly crowned zhan considered his news. All his efforts to learn the identity of the men who attacked the zhan the night before proved unsuccessful. The men’s bodies no longer lay within the palace. Without corpses to provide faces, tracking down anyone who might have seen or known them became impossible. A review of the ranks of the guards and palace soldiers convinced him that the night-slayers’ origins resided outside the city walls. Probably hired swords from the militias, or even men who had breached the southern border with the Tanshen Dominion.

“And the ceiling in the Grand Hall?” Zhan Tin-Tsu stood looking at the painting of his father hanging above a fireplace in the study.

Tonken-Wu had seen the man at a distance years ago and the likeness struck him as eerily accurate. The painted man’s face held a not unexpected resemblance to the man staring so intently into its oil-on-canvas eyes.

“I do not know, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu bowed his head in shame. His continued failure appeared entirely lost upon the zhan. A less generous man would have cast him from his sight or thrown him into a prison cell by now. “There are no marks of foul play among the support columns, nor any evidence of such with the ribbing that held the ceiling stones in place. I have heard stories of a weapon possessed by the raktors that might have been able to accomplish such sudden destruction, but from all reports, that device is accompanied by great torrents of black smoke. I observed none as the ceiling fell. You were right about further attempts on your life.”

“The Sight, then.” Zhan Tin-Tsu turned from the painting and sighed. “Raise your head, Tonken-Wu. You have not failed me.”

“You have nearly been killed twice in the last day while in my presence, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu forced himself to raise his head, feeling shame at doing so.

“I have been saved twice in your presence.” Zhan Tin-Tsu smiled.

“Neither time with much assistance from me, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu found his voice growing tight at the memory of the previous night.

“I believe otherwise.” Zhan Tin-Tsu’s tone sounded cryptic. “You may leave me now. I have prayers to recite before I retire. Allow no one to disturb me.”

“Yes, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu bowed.

Zhan Tin-Tsu nodded and bade him good night.

Outside the zhan’s private study stood four wardens, handpicked men Tonken-Wu had either trained himself or trained alongside. Men he knew he could trust. Four more stood down the hall outside the zhan’s new sleeping chambers. Tonken-Wu saluted the men, who returned the gesture of his outstretched arm, a spear gripped in each man’s hand. A small, round shield rode each warden’s unencumbered forearm, a sword and dagger at their waist.

As Tonken-Wu walked the corridors of the palace back to his quarters near the kitchens and the servants’ wing, he pondered the zhan’s words before their parting. Why would the zhan consider Tonken-Wu in any way responsible for saving his life, particularly the previous night? He thought back to the moment he had kicked open the door to the then high tahn’s sleeping chamber.

THE NIGHT BEFORE

TONKEN-WU STOOD at the threshold of the room, four blades glimmering in the moonlight from beyond the outer doors. High Tahn Tin-Tsu walked through the doorway of the balcony, words tumbling from his lips — words Tonken-Wu recognized as the Protection Prayer of Ni-Kam-Djen. He and the high tahn would both need the protection of their god to survive this incursion of night-slayers.

One of the four soldiers silently rushed Tonken-Wu, blade singing through the still air. Tonken-Wu raised his own sword in defense, blocking the man’s attack. He kicked at the man’s legs and pressed his counter assault, the ring of steel on steel clanging through the halls outside the door.

The man he faced, turncoat sentinel or disguised night-slayer, possessed a deep experience with a blade. Fortunately for Tonken-Wu, so did he. Enough so that even as he traded sword swipes with the man before him, he could turn his concern to the unarmed high tahn facing three men closing quickly around him from all sides.

Tonken-Wu twisted to the side, his blade striking out behind the knee of the man he fought. The man collapsed backward even as Tonken-Wu fell on one knee and drove his blade through the gap under the arm of the man’s hard leather jerkin, past his ribs, and into his heart. The man twitched and died beside him, blood oozing from the wound, the man’s heart no longer providing the pressure that might have sent it spurting across Tonken-Wu’s chest.

Tonken-Wu rose to his feet, returning his attention to the high tahn, expecting to see him lying dead on the floor, blade protruding from his breast. Tonken-Wu blinked in the dim light of the room, uncertain if his eyes deceived him with some trick of shadows or whether what he witnessed could be real.

High Tahn Tin-Tsu had somehow moved past his attackers and deeper into the room. As one man rushed him, he stepped aside, sticking the man in the throat with his fingertips even as he

clasped the man's sword arm, using the momentum against his attacker. He twisted the man's wrist, relieving him of the sword, the blade whipping out to meet the next oncoming night-slayer's attack.

Tonken-Wu watched in silence for the few seconds that remained of the three night-slayers' lives. High Tahn Tin-Tsu moved with a grace and power that he had never witnessed. He had trained to fight two men and had done so on one occasion, but not men of the skill displayed by the three murderers. They were experienced in combat and fought with no regard for their honor. Yet, the high tahn moved among them as a tiger might stalk among a pack of wild dogs. As the men swung their swords, he had already departed the place the blades meant to strike, his own sharp steel flitting forth with a blinding speed and deadly accuracy. The first man he had disarmed threw a dagger at High Tahn Tin-Tsu, who dodged the blade and returned the gesture with a flying sword that struck through the astonished night-slayer's throat with a hollow, wet sound.

The remaining two men attacked as High Tahn Tin-Tsu rolled away across the floor, leaping up to pull the dagger from where it had lodged in the wood of the bedpost, flicking the short blade through the air as he spun from a sword edge. The dagger struck one man in the eye and the high tahn rushed to relieve him of his sword as he fell dead.

The last man looked at his fallen comrades, saw Tonken-Wu blocking the door, and growled as he charged. High Tahn Tin-Tsu closed the gap between himself and his attacker so swiftly, the other man barely had time to notice the movement before he realized a blade stuck through his heart. The man fell dead at the tahn's feet a moment later.

High Tahn Tin-Tsu turned to meet Tonken-Wu's wide-eyed stare with a calm gaze. A wave of fear momentarily struck upward from Tonken-Wu's stomach to make his hand tremble. He knew with a certainty beyond reasoned thought that if the high tahn considered him a threat, he would be dead before he could cry out his status as warden and friend rather than foe.

The high tahn nodded to the dead man at Tonken-Wu's feet.

"Thank you for sparing me from the need to kill all four of them." High Tahn Tin-Tsu stepped over the dead body and closed the door to the bedchamber. "Close the curtains."

Tonken-Wu blinked in confusion, his feet not receiving any instructions from his mind.

"The curtains." The high tahn gestured toward the balcony door. "Close them."

Tonken-Wu nodded and crossed the room to pull the curtains closed, casting the room into complete darkness. A moment later, a light flared as a flint spark lit the tip of a lantern wick. High Tahn Tin-Tsu sat the lamp down on a nearby table and approached Tonken-Wu.

"What is your name, warden?" The high tahn pulled the dagger from the dead night-slayer's throat.

"Sub-commander Tonken-Wu." Tonken-Wu strove to remember some aspect of protocol that might cover his current circumstances. "My tahn."

High Tahn Tin-Tsu took the edge of the dagger and sliced at his arms and face before pressing the tip of the blade into his side.

"My tahn?" Tonken-Wu felt as though in a dream, one odd and inexplicable occurrence falling upon the heels of the last unexplainable event.

“This is what happened, Sub-commander Tonken-Wu.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu grimaced as he removed the blade from his side. “You were in the halls ... Why were you in the halls?”

“I was checking the placement of the duty roster for the sentinels.” Tonken-Wu swallowed loudly.

“And you found a man outside my chambers who aroused your suspicion?” High Tahn Tin-Tsu asked.

“He attacked me,” Tonken-Wu said. “I killed him.”

“Then you saved me from killing two men this night.” The high tahn bowed his head. “This then is what happened: you saw the man outside, he attacked, and you killed him. When you entered, you saw these four men preparing to attack me. I hid under the bed, praying for protection, and you killed them all.”

“But you killed them, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu swallowed again as he tried to understand the tahn’s words. “How did you kill them all?”

“The man with the greater skill and training usually prevails.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu nodded toward Tonken-Wu. “This is why you were able to kill all the night-slayers. Your superior skill and training.”

“I do not understand, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu shook his head in confusion.

“It is simple,” High Tahn Tin-Tsu said. “Someone wishes me dead. If that someone knew me to be capable of killing three men while unarmed, can you imagine what lengths they might go to in attempting to kill me a second time?”

“Great lengths.” Tonken-Wu did not want to imagine what those lengths might be.

“Just so,” High Tahn Tin-Tsu said. “Therefore, you must take credit for killing these men while I must profess cowardice. We have little time. Someone will have heard the sword clashes ringing through the halls. When they come, you will tell them what happened.”

“Yes, my tahn.” Tonken-Wu nodded, numb with bewilderment.

“Good.” High Tahn Tin-Tsu sat on the edge of the bed, his face slowly taking on a look of fear and pain that remained as the first wardens burst through the door of the bedchamber.

THE PRESENT

TONKEN-WU LOOKED up from his feet to realize he had arrived at the door to his sleeping quarters. He had no clear recollection of walking through the palace to reach his room. He chided himself for failing to remain alert. Such a weakness for daydreaming while night-slayers stalked the palace halls could lead to his death, if not the death of the zhan.

That did not strike the bell of truth. The zhan would survive another encounter with night-slayers, while he might not. The zhan had, after all, saved thousands at the coronation as the Grand Hall collapsed down around them all. He would likely live through another attempt, even if it found its source in the wicked darkness of The Sight.

Tonken-Wu's hand hovered on the handle of the door. How had the zhan saved them that day? He could barely believe the man had slain the three men the night before; how had he stopped falling stone from killing himself and others? Did he have the ear of Ni-Kam-Djen? Where had he obtained the training that made him so deadly?

Too many questions surrounded the new zhan. Too many things Tonken-Wu did not know. However, there were two things he did know for certain — Zhan Tin-Tsu, Shield of Heaven, trusted him, and further, he would not fail his new master again.

THE SEER



KELLATRA

A CHILL night breeze carried the scents of dying hearth fires, horse droppings in the street, and early summer flowers from a box beneath the windowsill. Kellatra stood at the window of her bedchamber and breathed deeply, as much to take in the fragrances of the night air as to cleanse the palate of her mind. She appreciated the discordant combination of aromas. She considered them an immeasurable improvement over the odors that used to fill the air day and night before the town raised the taxes necessary to finally bury the refuse canals that ran alongside the streets. Her husband, Rankarus, had believed the expense to be a waste of time and coin. She had assured him that more sanitary roads meant a tidier inn, which translated into less work and more patrons and increased profit. Her predictions proved correct and, as usual, he now feigned support for the idea from the first.

She turned from the window to the sound of her husband's gentle snoring in the bed nearby. His arms stretched over his head, his mouth hanging open, he appeared oddly childlike, and she experienced an upwelling of emotion as she gazed at him. Ten years, two children, a bustling inn, and even when he looked foolish in sleep, she marveled at their love. No one had told her that this love might grow like an oak tree planted in their hearts, gaining strength and size with each passing year.

Rankarus snorted and rolled over as though responding to Kellatra's thoughts. She turned back to the street, jealous at her husband's easy slumber, wondering if she should wake him to see the new star shining above the rooftops of the small town. She had been dreaming of the star when she woke to see it in the sky outside the window. It frightened her, witnessing reality bending to the details of the dream. She wondered if Rankarus dreamed the dream. He said he did not. He called it a form of mob delusion, like people believing they saw monsters in the shadowed woods surrounding the town because others claimed to have seen the mysterious creatures lurking between the trees. She had shared her experience of the dream with him, but he seemed unconcerned. "Suggestion," he had said. She had heard others speak of the dream and had one similar herself. Nothing to cause worry. She worked too hard, was all. Then he had kissed her and taken her apron and made her play with the children for an hour while he tended to the patrons of the inn that day. She had not bothered telling him that the dream came every night. She pondered what other aspects of the dream would impinge upon the world in subsequent evenings.

Kellatra stared at the star again, squinting to see it more clearly, its brilliant blood-red hue set against a sea-wash of lesser lights, giving the night sky a mesmerizing quality. Her mind and senses expanded in a peaceful wave as she contemplated the new star. What could it mean? Could it be proof of this new god? Would the old gods also break their eternity of silence? As a devout Pashist, she had chosen her own personal deity among the pantheon as the focus of her daily worship. Some changed their primary god frequently, often with a life passage — as when transitioning from childhood to adulthood, or with marriage, or the birth of a child, or upon the death of a loved one — aligning themselves with the god most appropriate to their needs. Kellatra chose Dori, the goddess of justice, at the age of nine and had never reconsidered the decision. Might her goddess now be planning a similar move to express her will in the world? Would all the gods step forward now? These questions brought another to her mind. Might not even the god of the neighboring warring dominions arise to speak to his followers, urging them to once more conquer the realm and extinguish the other faiths in a new Great Dominion?

A more important question came to her: Why now? Thousands of years of silence and a god suddenly speaks to the world? What had changed? And in changing, what would continue to alter?

A soft whistle drew her attention from the heavens back to the street. A man in a long, gray cloak looked up at her from beneath her window. It took her a moment to shift her mind and recognize the face beneath the cowl. *Menanthus*. Her father's closest friend. She had not seen him since ... since a long time. Her heart beat faster at the sight of the salt-haired man. What could he be doing here in the town of Nahan Kana, in the Punderra Dominion, so far from the City of Leaves in the Juparti Dominion? How had he found her? He extended an arm, pointing around the back of the inn.

Kellatra glanced at Rankarus in the bed and hoped he would not wake. She grabbed a woolen blanket from a nearby chair and wrapped it around her shoulders before quietly slipping through the door of the bedroom and into the hall. Her bare feet made little noise along the old floorboards and the stairs to the ground floor. She walked in silence through the darkened main chamber of the inn, down the narrow passage leading to the kitchen, and past the counter and cutting boards to the back door. She lifted the door brace, her hand resting on the handle as she calmed her mind and sought a place of inner stillness ... in case.

When she opened the door, Menanthus stood before her. She had not seen him in more than ten years, but his face bespoke hardships that suggested twice that number had passed. He had possessed two ears when she saw him last. Now his head held only one. He shifted his stance in the moonlight, the new star above his gray cowl, the chickens in the nearby coop clucking at the disturbance of his arrival, the pigs in the pen grunting in their sleep.

"I am sorry." The old man's voice sounded weary and filled with regret.

"How did you find me?" Kellatra felt the urge to invite him in and offer him wine and a meal. She ignored it.

"Effort and luck." Menanthus glanced behind him to the empty alley at the back of the inn.

"Why have you sought me out?" Kellatra had hoped to never see this man again. Neither he nor anyone else from the time she had known him.

“I had no choice.” Menanthus licked his lips in obvious unease.

“We always have choices.” Kellatra heard the harshness in her voice, a part of her marveling at how long-dead emotions could so easily re-bloom in one’s heart with the bright light of memory and the water of regret.

“I had nowhere else to turn.” Menanthus looked behind his shoulder again. “And I have no time.” He pulled a leather-wrapped parcel from beneath the folds of his cloak. He extended the mysterious package toward Kellatra with shaking hands.

“What is it?” Kellatra did not raise her own hands to accept the object.

“Do not open it.” The bundle trembled in the old man’s grasp. “Do not show it to anyone. I will come back for it.”

“I want nothing to do with this.” Kellatra stepped back, grabbing the edge of the door, preparing to close it.

“I defended you.” Menanthus’s anger rose in his voice. “I was the only one to support you. Even your own father did not stand for you.”

Kellatra hesitated. The truth of the words gave her pause. She did owe him a debt. Possibly her life.

“How long?”

“A few days. No more.” Menanthus extended his hands again.

As Kellatra accepted the package into her palms, she realized the leather wrapping concealed a small wooden box.

“Thank you.” Menanthus nodded his gratitude and turned without another word, fleeing around the corner of the inn and back into the shadows of the night.

Kellatra stared after the man for a moment. Then she looked up and down the alley to reassure herself that none of her neighbors had risen from their beds to their windows, roused by voices in the night. She took one quick last look at the new star hovering above the awning of the adjacent house, then closed the door and leaned back against its black lacquered timbers. She held the leather-bound box away from her body as though it might attack her.

What was in the box that brought Menanthus out of the shadows of her past to her doorstep in the middle of the night? And could it be coincidence that both he and the star arrived on the same evening at nearly the same time? She wished she could run upstairs and rouse Rankarus, show him the box, and recount the cryptic conversation with the old man from her life before they met. But to do so meant telling him the truth. That, she could not do.

Instead, she opened the trap door to the root cellar, pausing with each squeal of the hinges. She lit a lantern that hung on the kitchen wall and carefully climbed down the ladder into the musty darkness. She hid the mysterious box beneath one of the slate stones lining the floor of the subterranean storeroom. Then she mounted the ladder out of the cellar, closed the hatch, blew out the lantern, wiped the dust from her bare feet with an old rag, returned upstairs to her room, and slid into bed beside her husband. She draped her arm around his midriff and listened to him snore, knowing she would never return to sleep that night, as much for the excitement the old man’s

arrival sent buzzing through her head, as for the fear that sleep would once more bring the dream and that waking again might summon more of that dream to life.

INTERLUDE



THE MIDDAY haze of cook fires and flame-filled rubbish bins cloaks the damp air above Kahara Nattaa, the City of Leaves, the heart of learning in the Juparti Dominion, and home to the Library of Mysteries.

Sunlight bends, cobalt and crimson, flowing through ancient warped windows to dance among shadowed shelves bending under the centuries of knowledge in the dust-tinted tomes weighing them down.

A rakthor male and a yutan female stare at each other across a private table in a secluded level of the library. A human male stands not far behind them, leaning against a stand of books, a long blade at his belt.

The yutan looks down at the contents of a leather folio.

“You can vouch for the origin?”

“Yes. Is it plausible?”

Not with any use of The Sight I have ever witnessed, but still, frighteningly possible, the yutan thinks to herself.

“Yes. Very much so.”

The rakthor considers the yutan. *The female appears nervous. Her breath quicker. This revelation frightens her. That is unsettling.*

“I may retain this copy?”

“As per our agreement.”

The rakthor stands.

“How will you proceed?”

The rakthor stares at the yutan a moment. *Why does she ask? Does she wonder what she herself should do with this knowledge?*

“I will advance this to my superiors on the Central Governing Committee.”

“And then?”

“And then they will decide what to do based on what they will then know.”

“Thank you for sharing this with me.”

“Thank you for your assistance with it.”

The rakthor bows slightly to the yutan and then walks from the room of books.

The yutan watches him go.

What will they do, the Reptile Realm? What will my people do? Who among them can I share confidence with? My Sight master is too old and infirm and disconnected from the politics of the

pods to be of use. My cousin, the scout, had a skilled master. Sight Master Lamna. Yes. I can take it to her.

The yutan closes the folio and stands, placing it in a leather satchel. She walks past the human male with a nod.

The human turns and follows her out of the library, smiling as he walks.

Whatever he gave her is worth more than she's payin' me to guard her. Enough, maybe, to pay my debt ta the wyrin.



EPISODE THREE



THE SEER



KELLATRA

VIBRANT WALLS of color lined the aisles of the market. Crates of blue-black plums sat next to baskets of sun-orange peppers, beside tables with shiny red apples, stacked alongside crisp-looking string beans of yellow and green. Kellatra's nose twitched as the wind shifted and brought the smell of freshly cut meat from the stall across the thoroughfare. She picked a handful of still-firm reddish potatoes left from last autumn's harvest, noting where their sprouts had recently been shaved free. She paid a young woman of no more than twenty, yet who looked twice her age, for the potatoes and tossed them in one of the baskets hanging from the crook of her arm.

She continued through the small market at the center of town, choosing the items that would later become the day's offerings for dinner at the inn. The largest town in the southern region of Punderra, Nahan Kana held a thriving market, but it could not compare to the bazaars of her childhood in Tajana, the capital city of the Juparti Dominion, or the arcades of her later youth in Kahara Nattaa, the City of Leaves. She had loved to spend hours walking among the walls of color. Full, ripe melons the color of night beside sun-yellow lemons. Tangerine-tinted scarves and emerald-tinged sashes next to statues of various gods and goddesses carved in cobalt-colored lapis. Steaming hot pies of spiced meat and tiny hard sweets that melted slowly in the mouth.

Thinking of the City of Leaves brought her mind to the reasons for her departure, which turned her thoughts to the unexpected arrival of Menanthus the night before. How did he find her? Why give her the package to keep for him? When would he return for it? Would she need to flee again? What could she tell Rankarus and the children if they needed to leave?

"I see you've managed to find the best of the market once again."

Kellatra smiled and turned to follow the voice that addressed her, seeing the wide nose and wider grin of the large, shaggy-haired man with the bush-beard standing behind her.

"Abananthus. How good to see you. You are just in time to be useful." Kellatra handed him one of the two baskets she carried.

"*Always helpful, always happy,*" Abananthus said. He collected aphorisms the way other men collected coins, and the Juparti saying described him exactly. He grinned and took the basket from Kellatra. Like her, he hailed originally from Juparti, starting as a merchant caravan guard before setting up a small shop in Nahan Kana selling trinkets. His shop failed, but he somehow opened another, selling teas and spices. He did not seem to be a very good merchant, but he had always been a trusted friend. Eight years ago, he had come to the defense of Jadaloo, one the serving girls

at the inn, when a drunken man accosted her. Since then, he took most of his evening meals at a table by the fireplace in the common room.

“What news today?” Kellatra asked as they walked together through the market. Abananthus always knew the latest gossip from around the town and the most current state of the long war in the neighboring dominions.

“Ah, the most curious news. Frightening actually. Saw it myself.” A shudder ran along Abananthus’s wide shoulders. “I was passing through Lana Square and I noticed a crowd gathered at the edge. You know where that alley cuts through to Tili Street and that warren of shacks in the Hovel? So I go to look, and for the first time, I’m not so pleased to see over the tops of everyone’s heads. In the alley stood a stone statue of a man, but not a statue. A man turned to stone. You could tell from the way he leaned against the wall, clutching at his chest, his face twisted, like in pain. I can only imagine the pain.” Abananthus shuddered again. “That’s Dark Sight, that. Dark and wicked. *The wicked walk where the good fail to tread*, they say. A man changed to stone. What was he doing there? And here’s the strange thing, the thing I noted. The man had lost an ear. But, the question is, did he lose the ear before he got himself turned to stone, or did the Dark Sight fiend who cast him in rock break the ear free afterward? Who would want a stone ear from a dead man? Very curious.”

“That is very curious.” Kellatra’s voice cracked as she spoke. She focused on her breathing, calming the sudden quickening of her lungs. She walked on, straining to maintain a steady pace as her legs yearned to race home toward the inn. A man turned to stone. A missing ear. It could only be Menanthus. What had he been doing? Who killed him? Who dared risk such a blatant use of Dark Sight in the Punderra Dominion? The penalties for using The Sight outside of the Keth councils were high. Could the Keth seers have been involved? What in the name of the Seven Goddesses had Menanthus gotten her involved in?

Kellatra engaged in a mindless conversation of banal trivialities as Abananthus walked her back to the inn. They dropped the provisions off with Taosee, the cook, and found Rankarus and the children in the kitchen. He had taken their son and daughter down to the river to catch fish for the evening meal at the inn. She always insisted they cut costs where possible and Rankarus loved to fish and the children loved the play with their father, so one act fulfilled everyone’s desires. And it regularly allowed Kellatra a few hours to herself to shop for supplies or deal with the accounting ledgers, an activity Rankarus loathed, thus his preference for minding the children.

Luntadus, her six-year-old son, proudly held up a large trout, a wide grin on his dirt-smudged face. “I caught the biggest fish. I’m a biggest fish catcher.”

“Actually, you’re the smallest fish catcher among us.” Rankarus chuckled as he grinned at Kellatra and kissed her in welcome.

“I’m very proud of you, regardless.” Kellatra took the fish from Luntadus and handed it to Taosee. She took a rag from the chopping table and wiped at Luntadus’s face. “Now how do you manage to get so dirty spending your day by the water?”

“He’s made of dirt.” Lantili frowned at her brother. Her dress remained spotless. In contrast to her brother, she rarely got messy no matter where she went. She handed two small fish to Taosee, who accepted them with a smile.

“Like the mud monster of the swamps!” Luntadus seemed all too pleased with the notion of being made of soil. “Can I be a mud monster?”

“You are not made of dirt, and you may not be a mud monster.” Kellatra spit on the rag and rubbed at an obstinate spot on her son’s face. He tried to wriggle away from her hands, but she held him firm.

“You’re a monster of a different sort.” Abananthus tousled the boy’s hair.

“Don’t know why you bother washing him.” Rankarus shook his head. “He’ll just be dirty again in five minutes.”

Kellatra sighed, realizing the boy was as clean as she could get him without immersion in water — and bathing cats proved easier than Luntadus. Lantili, however, always needed to be coaxed out of a bath. “Run along.”

“If I can’t be a mud monster, can I be a stone man?” Luntadus froze in place, arms outstretched at odd angles, his face contorted, eyes bulging.

“You’ve already got a stone brain.” Lantili tickled her brother, who made further, more exaggerated faces as he tried not to respond before bursting into laughter and chasing her around the kitchen chopping table.

“How many times must I say no running in my kitchen!” Taosee bellowed in mock anger at the children, shooing them out the door and down the hall to the main dining room.

“Stone man?” Kellatra turned to Rankarus, her stomach suddenly churning, her chest tight.

“Something we saw coming home.” Rankarus frowned. “A man turned to stone. I took the children away as soon as I understood what it was, but it was all they spoke of on the way back to the inn.”

“I saw it as well.” Abananthus rubbed his beard. “Wicked thing.”

“Some rogue priest turning The Sight on an enemy, no doubt,” Rankarus said. “The sort of thing you’d expect to see in Juparti, not in a sleepy Punderra town.”

“We should keep the children inside until the town targas find the culprit,” Kellatra said. The image of Luntadus motionless like stone would not leave her mind.

“Likely long gone by now, but not a bad idea.” Rankarus nodded his head in agreement. “They can help me clean.”

“I’ll keep an eye on them,” Abananthus said. “I enjoy watching people work when I have none to do myself.”

“I thought you had a shop to run.” Rankarus walked toward the hall.

“I hired a boy. Very bright. Hopefully not so bright as to steal, but bright enough to sweep the floors and keep the door open.” Abananthus followed Rankarus down the hall toward the main room and the sounds of the children still chasing one another around tables and chairs.

Kellatra watched them for a moment, trying to keep thoughts of stone men and stone children from her mind. She made an excuse to Taosee about checking supplies and descended the ladder

through the trapdoor into the root cellar. She moved a sack of rice and pulled away the loose slate beneath it.

She stared for a moment at the leather-wrapped box in the hole of the cellar floor, hesitating to touch it. Why did Menanthus leave it with her? Who killed him for it and why? Would they come looking for it? How much danger had she brought to her family's door? Did she really want to know what lay inside?

She reached down to lift the package out of its hiding place and sat it on her legs. Thin straps held sheets of leather in place around the box. She untied the straps and pulled the dried animal flesh away, revealing a black lacquered box devoid of markings. It held no keyhole and seemed intended only to protect its contents.

Kellatra took a deep breath as her hands rested on the smooth wood. A man from her past carried death to her family's home, and she blindly hid it beneath their floorboards. A woman with any sense would cast it at night into the river. A woman who loved her family would keep danger far away from them. But would casting the box away unopened eliminate the threat? Did Menanthus tell those who turned him to stone where he left the box and with whom? If he had, would they not have already arrived to claim it? Should she not try to learn what would be worth the risk of using such Dark Sight in a land known to whip unsanctified seers on stakes in public squares? Should she not know what jeopardy she and her family faced?

Kellatra frowned, knowing she could not answer her questions and realizing she would not leave the box unopened. She did not possess the sort of mind that could witness a mystery and simply turn aside from unraveling it, especially when it might threaten the lives of her husband and children.

Inside the box rested a simple, leather-bound book with thick pages. She picked the book up and held it in her hands, pausing a moment before opening it. Who would kill for a book? What book would be worth killing for?

She thumbed back the cover of the book to reveal the first page, and squinted in the dim light of the cellar as she held the aged parchment page up to her eyes. A hand-drawn sketch of a bizarre and fantastical plant filled the vellum sheet. A strange script, one she did not recognize, covered the page next to the drawing. She bit her lip, suspicion of the book's nature filling her bowels with a cold dread. In her studies, she had viewed samples of all the writings of all the peoples throughout the history of the Iron Realm. She had seen the scripts of people of the other realms as well. This language looked unique. Her fingers sweating and her heart pounding in her chest, Kellatra slowly paged through the manuscript. The indecipherable text, drawings, and watercolor paintings of unusual plants, fantastical creatures, and inexplicable landscapes continued sheet after aged sheet.

Her hands shaking, she closed the book. She swallowed, her mouth dry, her throat tight. She knew why someone had killed Menanthus. She had heard of the manuscript she held in her hands. Famous in arcane circles and variously assumed to be a legend or hoax, it had a name — *The Unseen Codex*. A book written in an indecipherable language describing an unknown world. She had studied for several years under a scholar who spent decades investigating the rumors of the codex. Some of those rumors suggested that the Academy's Library of Mysteries secretly housed

the only copy, hidden in the deepest of vaults. Neither she nor the scholar ever found proof of that rumor. She looked down to the proof that now rested in her hands.

Menanthus, or someone he knew, had stolen *The Unseen Codex* from the Library of the Academy of Sight, and someone else turned him to stone to claim it. Who? And why? It seemed unlikely the Academy Council would sanction the use of Dark Sight to retrieve a stolen book. Unless the book posed a danger to the academy itself. What threat could justify such extremes?

Kellatra looked down at the book in her hands — a mystery more intriguing than any she ever imagined. A cautious woman would burn it. A wise woman would pay someone to return it to the Academy of Sight and the Library of Mysteries. A prudent woman would do all she could to get it as far from herself and her family as possible.

Kellatra sat the book back in the box, closed the lid, tied the leather wrapping around it, placed it in the hole, slid the slate across the dirt opening, and dragged the bag of rice once more into place. Then she dusted off the folds of her dress, climbed the ladder to the kitchen, gave orders to the cook for the dinner meal, and went about the affairs of running a large inn.

She thought of the book the entire day, as she wiped down tables, served hot bowls of spiced fish stew, cups of wine, and rice cakes, all the while wishing she were a cautious, wise, and prudent woman, but knowing she never would be.

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

TINY FLECKS of cork bobbed in the gentle swell of wine created by the constant swirling motion of the clay cup. Abananthus slouched in his chair, the cup of wine in one hand, a book held open in the other, raised to discern the printed text by the light of the fading fire. He sat in his favorite chair in his favorite place doing his favorite thing.

He squinted at the book, his eyes straining, then sighed, closed it, and placed it on the table near the empty plate that held the bones of a finely seasoned trout. The fire had grown too dim, nearly down to coals. He eyed an oil lamp burning at a nearby table. He could move tables, but then he would not be in his favorite place. He could get up and take the lamp and bring it back, but then he would need to move. And he would need to move soon enough anyway.

A man of too much motion comes to a hard stop.

The common room of The Three Moons Inn sat empty save himself. Jadaloo, the serving girl, a slender lass with dimpled cheeks and bright eyes who always laughed at his obscure jokes, wiped down the ale counter at the back of the room. The night patrons, the regulars and those merely passing through, had all left. The guests, some staying in town to attend to their affairs and others too drunk to continue their journey, had all retired to their rooms upstairs. Kellatra tended to something in the back. Likely working over the inn's balance between coin on hand and coin owed. Rankarus left hours before, off to drink with a friend, he'd said.

A wise man drinks with others — for they may pay the brew mistress.

Abananthus looked around the empty inn and then down at his wine. He never considered himself a wise man. Happy, certainly. Wisdom, he found, generally required painful experience to be cultivated. He avoided painful experiences whenever possible. Wine had rarely been a painful experience. He took a long drink to finish the cup and licked his lips. Kellatra always served him his wine in a clay cup. They broke too easy in the tussle and bustle of an inn, but the pewter cups left a metallic tang on his tongue. She kept a clay mug behind the ale counter especially for him. Very sweet of her.

He had nearly worked up the will to push his chair back and rise to leave when the door to the inn opened, letting in the cool, fresh air of the early spring night. He had not realized how warm he'd become by the fire. A lone man crossed the room, weaving between the well-polished tables and the thick-legged chairs to stand near the ale counter.

“We’re closed for the night for food and drink, but you can still get a room if you like.” Jadaloo looked at the man and smiled.

Abananthus stroked his beard as he watched the man. Something about his profile seemed familiar. The nose? The brow?

“No drink and no room,” the man said. He glanced around the empty common chamber, his eyes pausing on Abananthus for a moment. “I’m looking for the mistress of the house.”

Abananthus put his chin in his hand as he stared at the man by the counter. He *had* seen him somewhere. Somewhere recently. A customer, perhaps?

“Kellatra?” Jadaloo said. “She’s in the back. I’ll go fetch her.” She smiled again and headed down the hall to the kitchen and the back room where her employer liked to work.

Abananthus looked away as the man turned back after Jadaloo’s departure. He pretended to find something fascinating at the bottom of his empty wine cup. Where had he seen the man? From the caravans all those years ago? Possibly. But it felt like only yesterday he’d glimpsed the man’s face.

He felt the man’s eyes leave him and he raised his own. The man looked down the back hall, turning the opposite direction as before, presenting Abananthus with a clear view of the other side of his face. Abananthus swallowed hard, feeling the wine begin to burn in his gut like acid. He knew now where he had seen the man and when. The last time he’d seen him, the man had looked the same but not similar. The last time Abananthus had seen the man with only one ear, he had been leaning against an alley wall, turned to stone by the Dark Sight of some fiend. Now he walked and breathed and talked — a living statue come to see Kellatra.

Abananthus shook his head. He hated moments like these, when his stomach churned and his heart raced, and he knew what must be done but hated to move to action.

A man who knows when to act is a man who lives to act again.

Abananthus grabbed the meat knife still by his empty plate and stood up to take action.

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

THINK-LIDDED EYES like scale-clad obsidian orbs stared up at the glowing garnet star, the newly attending member of the celestial congregation it so brightly outshone. The eyes blinked. Squinted, vertical irises expanding. Blinked again.

Sketkee lowered her gaze, sweeping her sight across the slumbering forms before her. She stood at the edge of a pilgrim camp. Twenty-seven people slept in or under wagons, on soft spots of grass along the roadside, or dozed while leaning against tree trunks. She and her traveling companion had made their nest for the night far from the others. While they tolerated her presence, it did no good to provoke their irrational fear through increased proximity. Even though she walked at the back of the pilgrim line and normally concealed her features beneath the cowl of a hooded cloak, she overheard the whispered names. *Reptile. Snake Demon. Lizard Woman.* They acknowledged her as a fellow pilgrim, but this did not mean they accepted her as a rakthor — a creature of greater height, strength, and intelligence, cloaked in a skin that all too closely resembled the slithering creatures their limited minds so mindlessly feared. While everyone in the Iron Realm had heard stories of the *lizard people* of the Sun Realm, few had ever seen or spoken to one. Doing so, Sketkee had found, did little to assuage their instinctual suspicions.

So, she stayed out of sight, but close enough to be considered one of the pilgrim band. It helped having a human companion. Her escort, Kadmallin, possessed a pleasant nature that put the other pilgrims at ease and mitigated the concerns they felt at having a near-mythical rakthor among them. Sketkee surmised that the appearance of the new star, as though pulled from the collective dreams of an alternate nocturnal world, would also help ease their acceptance of her presence. If a star could appear from dreams, why could not a lizard-like rakthor step from bedtime stories meant to terrify children and onto the road beside them to follow that same star toward the Forbidden Realm?

Why not, indeed? However, a more recent and pressing question consumed Sketkee's mind — how had she awoken from the very same dream to see the star it depicted? Rakthors did not dream. Images might arise during sleep, but not of any duration, and none that might be woven into the sleep-stories of human dreams. Moreover, and more importantly, rakthors did not believe in gods and goddesses and supernatural superstitions. Rakthors, and Sketkee especially, followed the Principles of Mind — with beliefs based in experience and clear, logical thought. Gods were

figments of human and other peoples' imaginations, without possible proof of tangible existence. Or so she had always surmised.

What did it mean, not only that she might dream this pilgrim night-tale of a bright new star, but that she should do so on the very evening a new heavenly body, so much like the one of the dream, suddenly adorned the sky? Coincidence provided the best explanation — the most logical conclusion. But might not a verdict of coincidence be a way of avoiding an uncomfortable truth? The Principles of Mind dictated that evidence be gathered to support or disclaim a supposition. She could not yet make a valid conclusion based on the limited facts at her disposal. She would have to live with a determination of inconclusiveness until learning more.

Sketkee heard a sound from behind and turned to see Kadmallin walking up to join her. Nearly fifty years of age, he still stood tall, with the lean and muscular build of a man half his years. His right hand rested on the hilt of one of the two swords that never left his belt nor his side. He took his responsibilities seriously, and his primary obligation entailed protecting Sketkee from danger. She had known him for twenty-four years and thirteen months as calculated by the Iron Realm calendar, and while many of his human charms entirely escaped her appreciation, she found his adherence to duty to be a refreshing aberration among his kind.

“New star,” Kadmallin said as he stepped up beside Sketkee.

“Yes.” She turned to look at the curious oddity of light once more, marveling as she always did at his need to state the obvious.

“What do you think it means?” Kadmallin rubbed his chin.

“I do not know.” Sketkee frowned at Kadmallin's seemingly instinctive ability to ask the questions she preferred to ignore. She posed one of her own to her companion. “Do you still have the dream?”

“Yes.” Kadmallin looked down from the sky. “Every night.”

“What do you think it means, the dream and the new star?” Sketkee turned to Kadmallin. She stood a good head and a half taller than the man.

“It frightens me.” Kadmallin glanced up to Sketkee's eyes and then to the camp of sleeping pilgrims.

Sketkee noted that, as usual, Kadmallin had replied to a request for thoughtful conjecture with an entirely useless emotive response. She decided then, while considering the star and the dreams, to finally confide in Kadmallin her reason for leaving her realm and hiring him to accompany her and join the pilgrim band. She had kept Kadmallin unaware of her true purpose, but she realized now, if something were to happen to her, it would be important for him to know their true goals, so he might either continue to attempt to accomplish them or find someone else qualified to do so.

Sketkee reached in the leather satchel she always wore and removed a sphere the size of a large fist wrapped in a simple black cloth. Kadmallin watched with open curiosity as she peeled away layers of woven cotton to reveal a perfectly round blue crystal that glittered in the moonlight. He leaned forward in silence, examining the glass globe more closely, his eyes going wide as he saw the movement within — a miniature night sky with thousands of gem-like gears undulating in a branching pattern of faintly glowing light.

“What is it?” Kadmallin reached out a tentative finger to momentarily touch the surface of the sphere.

“I suspect it is an ancient urris artifact. I believe it is a machine of some manner.” Sketkee wrapped the scraps of cloth around the crystal and slid it into her satchel.

“This is why we are following the pilgrims to the Forbidden Realm.” Kadmallin rubbed the stubble of his chin again.

“Yes.” Sketkee watched her companion, curious what his response might be. She wondered if she should have told him the true purpose for their travel sooner. She had intimated, although never outright lied, that she intended to follow the pilgrims so as to write a treatise on human religious migrations for her academy. She also debated whether to tell him how she came to possess the object. She should have known he would ask the question she did not wish to answer.

“Where did you get it?”

Sketkee hesitated.

“I stole it.”

“How did my life come to this?” Kadmallin sighed. “From commander of the palace targas in the Punderra capital to helping a rakthor thief follow a band of religious heretics across a land filled with bandits and militias in the hopes of crossing a hostile ocean to explore a realm from where no living soul has returned in thousands of years.” Kadmallin smiled suddenly. “At least the company is pleasant.”

Sketkee had not anticipated this response. A part of her found it unnerving that she should have so little success in predicting the behavior of her closest companion and oldest friend. The rest of her accepted his assessment and reiterated it.

“Yes,” Sketkee said, looking up to the strange new star once more. “The company is more than adequately pleasing.”

THE SEER



KELLATRA

“THANK YOU, Jadaloo.”

Kellatra closed the ledger book in which she had been writing and stood behind the desk in the small storeroom she used for her bookkeeping.

“You can turn in for the night.” Kellatra smoothed the wrinkles of her dress. “Look in on the little ones quickly if you don’t mind.”

“Of course, ma’am.” Jadaloo nodded and headed for the back stairs to the upper level where she slept in a converted attic. Kellatra frowned. Nine years and she still could not convince the girl to call her by her given name. Jadaloo had come to them looking for work when her parents died in her eleventh year, and she had been living with them ever since. Most days, she seemed more like an elder daughter than a serving girl. Kellatra wished her real children were half as well behaved as Jadaloo even half the time.

Kellatra walked down the hall, past the private dining cubbies, and into the common room. A man stood at the ale counter, his back to her. She saw Abananthus standing at the rear of the room before his favorite table. He looked concerned as he started around the table toward the ale counter. The man at the counter turned to face her, and she froze. The man who stared at her could not be the man he appeared to be.

“I have come for it.” Menanthus, or the man who looked like him, nodded toward her.

Kellatra swallowed, trying to still her suddenly pounding heart and calm her panicked mind. The man’s presence meant one thing.

“If you’ve come for my forgiveness, you have wasted your journey.” Kellatra wiped her sweating palms on the folds of her dress as she forced herself to step closer to the man who could not be Menanthus. She noticed Abananthus slowly approaching from behind the stranger.

“I have come for my package.” The man who was not Menanthus stepped around the corner of the ale counter.

“I don’t know how you found me again, but I have nothing for you, and I want nothing to do with you.” Kellatra knew she could only feign ignorance of the man’s intentions for so long. Eventually, she would need to do something. Likely something she had sworn to herself never to do again. She focused her thoughts and silently repeated the words she had once said so often so many years ago.

A clear mind sees the truth.

“Don’t tuss me about, girl.” The man came closer. “Give me the package I gave you.”

“You didn’t give me any package.” Kellatra found it easy to speak this lie, as it happened to be true. The man who had given her the package stood dead, turned to stone in an alley across town.

“I think you have made a mistake.” Abananthus stepped up beside the man who was not Menanthus. “She does not know what you speak of. I think it best you leave.” Abananthus placed his large palm on the man’s shoulder. Kellatra noticed his other hand concealed a table knife.

The man who was not Menanthus curled his lips in a snarl as he turned to Abananthus, thrusting his fist to the large man’s chest. Abananthus flew through the air and crashed against the wall, dangling with his feet above the ground, suspended by an invisible hand. He clutched at his neck, choked by unseen fingers.

A clear mind sees the truth.

Kellatra’s senses expanded as her focus narrowed. In a single moment, she felt her heart beating in her chest, heard Abananthus gasping for breath, sensed the cool air from an open window, smelled the scent of stale ale and chicken grease from the rag sitting on the counter, tasted the sourness of fear on her tongue, and saw past the appearance of the man who was not Menanthus to glimpse *the truth*. She perceived the eternal energy at the heart of all things, throbbing through all existence, manifesting as her body and mind, the men before her, the inn around her, the town beyond its walls, the whole of the world, and all the cosmos. Then she aligned her will and her desires with the energy of all things, making it unfold into a reality of her design.

Kellatra raised her hands and rotated them as though spinning the wheel of a butter churn. The man who was not Menanthus turned to look at her even as his body continued to face the opposite direction, the loud crack of bone and sinew filling the still air. Abananthus dropped to his feet, still holding his neck as he gasped for breath, his legs unsteady as he leaned against a nearby table. The man who was not Menanthus blinked at Kellatra in surprise, and then the life faded from his eyes and he collapsed to the floor, dead.

“Are you injured?” Kellatra stepped to Abananthus, helping him stay steady on his feet.

“What is that?” Abananthus pointed to the dead man in horror.

Kellatra turned to the body, watching as the open eyes faded from green to black, the brown skin turned pale white, and the features of the face softened into a nondescript mass that might have resembled anyone. Only the absent ear remained missing.

“A soul catcher.” Kellatra pulled Abananthus away from the strange corpse. “They don’t usually possess The Sight.”

“What you did...” Abananthus left the rest of his thought unspoken as he stared at her.

“You must never speak of what I did.” Kellatra held Abananthus’s hand and looked into his frightened eyes. “Especially not to Rankarus.”

Abananthus nodded in confused silence.

A piercing scream from the upper level of the inn raised Kellatra’s gaze. A second cry followed the first, louder and more terrifying. A man burst from the far hall above, flames

consuming his flesh and clothes, a human torch racing around the balcony, wailing in pain, the fire spreading to everything he touched, leaving a blazing trail behind him.

“The children!” Kellatra turned from Abananthus and raced for the stairwell even as the burning man fell over the balcony railing and crashed to the corner of the common room.

“Put that fire out!” Kellatra shouted to Abananthus as she raised the hem of her skirt and dashed up the stairs. Abananthus stared at the man in flames writhing on the floor, seeming uncertain what to do. She ignored him. She thought only of Lantili and Luntadus, her daughter and son. If someone had harmed her children, she would do more than break necks.

THE SEER



RANKARUS

A COIN spun in the air, twinkling in the double moonlight, arcing upward before falling back toward the ground. A hand snatched at the coin, fingers fumbling, the currency tumbling into the muddy street.

Rankarus cursed and laughed as he bent to pick up his coin from a shallow puddle of murky water. He wiped the coin on his pants leg and held it in his hand. *Best*, he thought. He doubted his fingers could untie the coin purse beneath his shirt. Too much to drink. And he hadn't even spent all his drinking money. He smiled and resumed his walk home, softly singing the tune of a drinking song, his free hand resting on the hilt of a short dagger, carried to ward off those who might see an easy mark in a drunken man wandering home.

Cups and dice and cats and mice.

Drink the wine and free the time.

Rankarus quietly whistled the rest of the tune as he walked the empty street. He had no desire to be that man who sang loudly in the night on his way home from drinking. Such men were an embarrassment to their kin. While he had no problem embarrassing himself, he never wished to embarrass his wife and children. People talked in a small town, and all they really had to talk about was the weather and the distant war and their neighbors. It passed the time. And while a man who came home drunk once a week attracted a few words, the men who drank to stupor more frequently gathered whispers around them like cloaks in the chill air. He did not wish to be the sort of man who caused women to murmur behind his wife's back. He'd heard enough harsh words said for other men.

The poor thing. He drinks away their savings.

What does she see in him to suffer so?

His gambling will put them in the street.

This last accusation he knew he would never hear, for he refused all requests to gamble. He simply had no knack for it the way Abananthus did. Rankarus always lost his bets, his dice never rolled right, and his cards always came up wrong. He had given up wondering why or fighting against it long ago. When men asked him to join their gambles, he declined. "What would my wife do to me if I came home having lost the inn?" he asked. "And what might she do to the man who had won it?" The men of the town all knew Kellatra, and no man of sense wished to cross a woman

of obviously greater sense, and no one in the town doubted his wife's good sense. Partly, he thought with a small flash of pride, because he gave them no good reason to do so.

That explained his drinking one night weekly at the inn across town rather than his own establishment. An innkeeper could not drink in his own house without losing the respect of his patrons. The regulars needed to see him as the voice of authority within his domain. He smiled to himself. No doubt they saw his wife as the voice of authority, and him as the voice of good cheer, but they respected him all the same. The travelers who stayed in their inn for the dark ale and clean sheets saw a family of Juparti immigrants who would not judge or gouge them for being from faraway towns or far off dominions.

A good life, Rankarus thought to himself. *A good life I have made.*

Blend in. Charm the locals until they think of you as one of their own. Stay out of trouble. Keep the wife in smiles and the children in laughter. A good life that foolish acts might bring to a close. He would allow himself a few cups of wine or ale once a week, but he would not permit himself to act the fool.

Rankarus smiled again as he turned the corner and saw his home. The Three Moons Inn. He had chosen that name. His wife thought it curious, but he had insisted it would bring them luck. And interest. "*What is the third moon?*" people would ask, pointing to the two in the night sky. Rankarus would look at them slyly and tap the side of his nose with a wink as though suggesting some secret that should not be spoken aloud. Over time, people created their own stories to explain the mysterious third moon. The inn had been called the Fallen Apple for a hundred years, but he had convinced Kellatra that new owners demanded a new name, which might bring new clientele. They had spent coin for a new sign, new mattresses, new sheets, new tables, and even new chairs. The investment devoured all their respective funds, but had also drawn them closer together. While they began as merely business partners, running a successful inn had led to other successful unions — just as Rankarus had planned.

He walked around the inn, past the small stable and vegetable garden, to the back door. Even with the lateness of the hour, he would not change his habit of entering from the back after drinking. One did not let one's guests see one inebriated if it could be avoided. It might give them the idea they could cheat the innkeeper. He opened the back door to the kitchen and found a man standing in the doorway to the hall across the room. The man turned to him as he entered.

"Sorry, friend, no meals after hours." Rankarus laughed aloud, hoping the fellow did not walk in his sleep. Guests sometimes did. Or claimed to have done when caught with a rice cake in their hands and crumbs on their lips. This man seemed awake. Rankarus looked in the man's eyes, noticing the glare of anger, sensing danger even before his wine-clouded mind recognized the sword sheathed at the man's waist.

Rankarus frowned. Thieves had tried to rob them over the years. A successful inn attracted the speculation of men with weak moral character. No thief faced him in the dim light of the moons seeping through the kitchen window. A thief would not carry a sword to rob an inn. Swords were fine weapons in wide spaces, but clumsy, loud, and harder to use in close quarters. Thieves preferred a knife for throwing or the longer blade of a dagger for near combat. Rankarus had always

been good at judging people, seeing who they were and what they wanted in a glance. Before him stood a killer who desired something Rankarus would not give him.

A scream carried down the hall from the other side of the inn. Another scream followed it — a loud wail of agony.

The man drew a slender, slightly curved sword, and Rankarus abandoned concerns of the man's motivations. Rankarus tugged at the short dagger at his waist and threw it in a single fluid motion. The man reeled back as the hilt of the dagger caught him in the nose. Rankarus cursed. He'd been aiming for the man's right eye. Too much wine and too little practice. He cursed again and jumped back as the man charged and swung the sword at his head.

Rankarus dodged around the large cooking table as he ducked the blade of the mysterious man. His fingers groped along the table in the dim light, searching for a weapon. He grabbed a pot and threw it, followed by a wooden dough roller, and then a clay bowl. Taosee never left the kitchen in an orderly fashion so one could find what one needed. Finally, his hand clasped a handle that seemed to have the right heft. Rankarus lunged forward and threw the cleaver in his hand, the blade making a soft, wet noise as it sank into the man's skull.

The man dropped his sword, moaned, and fell back dead, his heart continuing to force blood from the wound in wide arcs even as his eyes closed. The blood eased to a trickle as his chest ceased moving. Rankarus stared at the dead man for a moment, his senses overwhelmed. He had not experienced this feeling in a very long time. The thrill of being on the edge of death. It worried him that he missed it so.

Shaking off the distraction of his excitement, Rankarus pulled the cleaver from the dead man's forehead and raced along the hall to the common room and the screams that were just then dying away. He burst into the room, cleaver raised in his fist, blood dripping down the blade to cover his hand. The sight before him momentarily arrested his motion. Flames leapt around the room, crawling up the walls and dancing across the balcony of the upper floor. Smoke filled the air, curling in great whorls put in motion by the curtain Abananthus used to try and put out the flames eating at the black-charred skin of a man lying still on the floor. Another dead man lay by the ale counter, his face a pale imitation of all faces.

"What in the name of the Seven Goddesses is going on?" Rankarus shouted above the growing roar of the flames.

Abananthus turned, his eyes locking on the bloody cleaver in Rankarus's hand.

"I don't know." Abananthus wiped soot from his brow.

"Rankarus!"

Rankarus looked up to the sound of Kellatra's voice. She ran along the upper balcony toward the stairs, the children in her arms. Jadaloo ran behind her, pounding on doors, rousing the guests to flee the fire.

Rankarus dashed to the stairs, meeting Kellatra halfway down, taking the children from her arms. Lantili still looked groggy with sleep, but Luntadus appeared completely awake. The boy's eyes went wide at the sight of the blood-soaked cleaver in his father's hand.

"What happened?" Kellatra also stared at the blade.

“The kitchen.” Rankarus explained no more. “There are two dead men in the common room, one burned to death and the other with no face.”

“I know.” Kellatra ignored his stare. “Take the children outside. Jadaloo will get the guests out.” She rushed past him down the stairs.

“Where the hell are you going?” Rankarus shouted after his wife, fear, anger, and confusion and the remnants of the evening’s wine jumbling his thoughts.

“I need to get something from the cellar.” Kellatra ran through the hall toward the kitchen.

“Leave it,” Rankarus yelled as the first panicked guest pushed past him at the bottom of the stairs. “We can get it later.” He assumed she intended to retrieve their savings from beneath the stone floor in the cellar. A cellar only needed a stone floor if you wanted to hide something underneath it, a fact thieves always seemed unable to grasp. Rankarus and Kellatra would need the money to rebuild, but it could be pulled from the ashes later.

He frowned, uncertain what to do, whether to follow his wife, help evacuate the guests, or run the children to safety. Lantili’s cough at his chest made his decision.

“Leave that!” Rankarus dropped the cleaver and shouted to Abananthus, where the man still attempted to squelch the flames with what remained of the charred curtain. “Help Jadaloo get the guests out.”

Rankarus ran around the edge of the common room, holding Lantili and Luntadus close to his chest as he dashed through the main door, two guests in sleeping gowns running just behind him. He stood in the street, his children whimpering in his arms, as he watched the Three Moons Inn burn. People rushed screaming and yelling from the front door as the flames escaped the open windows and climbed the side of the wooden structure.

Abananthus stumbled from the inn, Jadaloo coughing as he held her under his massive arm.

“That’s all of them,” Abananthus said.

Rankarus quickly counted the heads around him in the street. Fifteen in all. Only one missing. Just as he handed his daughter to Jadaloo and his son to Abananthus, Kellatra came running around the side of the inn, her face smeared in soot, her hair slightly singed, a bag of coins in one hand and a leather-wrapped package tucked under her arm. He ran to her and threw his arms around her.

“What were you thinking?” Rankarus held Kellatra’s smoke-begrimed face in his hands. “We could have grabbed the coins later. They aren’t worth your life.”

She did not need to speak for him to know that she had not risked her life to gather their savings. He noted again the leather-bound package she carried. He remembered the two dead men in the common room, one burnt alive and the other seeming never to have been a man at all. And the man he had killed in the kitchen. These events added up to some total he could not calculate.

“What has happened?” Rankarus gripped Kellatra’s shoulders, searching her frightened eyes for some hope that the sum of his suspicions would not prove accurate.

“I made a mistake.” Tears etched jagged lines down her smoke-stained face as she looked up into his eyes, pleading forgiveness. “I made a mistake, and now we must flee for our lives.”

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

THE HORSE'S teeth bit into the apple, its rough tongue licking Kadmallin's hand. He petted the side of the beast's head and took another apple from the pocket of his trousers. As he fed the horse, he watched Sketkee sitting under a tree twenty paces away, the hood of her cloak pulled down to cover her face. She always meditated in the afternoon, saying it restored her thoughts to clarity. Kadmallin doubted her thoughts had even been "unclear".

The pilgrims had stopped for a short rest along the road, a chance to eat a brief meal, tend to the animals, and rub their weary feet. Most of the pilgrims did these things. A few others milled about in small groups, chatting among themselves. Kadmallin watched three such men as they talked in low voices and glanced over their shoulders to where Sketkee appeared to doze at the far edge of the camp. The three men were new to the band, having joined the prior day after meeting the pilgrims at a small stone bridge fording a narrow river. Newcomers were always skittish around the female raktbor, her appearance disturbing them. Scaled skin and vertical irises did that to humans. Most humans. Kadmallin had only ever been fascinated with Sketkee.

As her armed escort and supposed protector, most would have expected him to stay at her side day and night. Kadmallin, however, found it best to identify the threats one faced, rather than assume everyone posed a threat. Standing far from his employer and friend offered those who might wish her ill to believe they had chanced upon an opportunity to take actions spoken of in low tones and small groups. No matter what transpired while with the pilgrims, he could not allow anyone to pose a danger to Sketkee. He would fight any number of men to ensure that she did not need to defend herself. He had witnessed her raktbor way of combat and never wished to see such brutality again. The pilgrims would not wish to behold it either.

The three men turned to Sketkee as though having reached an agreement among themselves. As they walked toward her, Kadmallin moved to intercept them.

"Kinnao, friends." Kadmallin raised a hand and spoke the common Shen greeting as he walked to meet the men. They turned to him, but did not stop. The largest of them stood half a head taller than he did, and all three looked like they had seen a fight or two in a city tavern. He doubted they hailed from a small town as they claimed. The daggers they carried in their belts suggested a familiarity with weapons not found working in fields.

"I know you're curious, friends," Kadmallin said, smiling broadly as he moved to stand between Sketkee and the men, "but my companion is sleeping." He raised his open hands in

apparent apology. “Her kind need a great deal of rest.” In truth, her kind could go days without sleep and show little wear for it.

“Her kind?” the largest man sneered. “Her kind belong where they come from. Under rocks.”

Kadmallin sized the men up, judging in an instant their individual aggressiveness, strength, speed, and likely skill. Three men with knives posed little threat to a man in light armor with a sword. However, the pilgrims would surely turn sour if they watched him cutting down their newest members. He might be able to take them with empty-handed combat if there were only two of them, but the large one looked more than capable of tipping the balance in such a fight. He needed a different approach. What would Sketkee’s *rationality* suggest?

“We don’t like that thing travelin’ with us,” the shorter of the three men said, pointing in Sketkee’s direction. Kadmallin noticed the tattoo across the man’s inner forearm. A dagger with six stars. He did not know what it represented, but he suspected few farmers of the region would have the time or the interest in ornamenting their skin.

“We want it gone,” the large man said. “And we’ll get it gone if we needs to.”

“I am sorry to hear that, gentlemen.” Kadmallin lowered his arms. He saw clearly now the logical path. He only hoped he could convince the three men of its wisdom without needing to kill them.

“You’ll hear my fists aside yer head if ya don’t stand away.” The third man, hitherto silent, raised his fist in an angry gesture.

“Let us be honest, gentlemen.” Kadmallin looked each man in the eye, giving them a moment to appraise him as he had done them moments before. The large man blinked in recognition of something that escaped the other two. Kadmallin always found that true killers, men who had killed many times with great proficiency, tended to recognize one another’s natures when standing face to face.

“You three are no farmers.” Kadmallin raised his hands again in an open, explanatory gesture. It always helped to have one’s hands open and raised when facing a potential opponent if they suddenly moved to attack. “You are bandits. Probably what is left of a larger bandit group. Your fellow bandits were likely killed attacking some other pilgrim band, or unwisely provoking the ire of a militia. You lost your weapons, save your daggers, as you ran, but you three survived, and you decided to work your trade at the bridge where we met you. Thinking quickly, and realizing you three alone stood no chance of extorting a band of thirty or more, you claimed to be farmers, eager pilgrims setting off to join the first band you could find. No doubt you thought to rob people in their sleep and sneak off before dawn. Or maybe you hoped to find the weaknesses in the group and exploit them, or hold a hostage and demand ransom for your departure. Possibly take a few of the women with you to rape and kill and leave for the crows. But here is where your plan failed you. You had not expected to find an armed guard of a rakthor pilgrim. Armed men present problems. They kill people. And who among you wishes to be the one to die? Better to scare them off. Convince the rakthor woman and her guard to stay behind and join some other pilgrim band. Then you would be free to ply your trade in peace. Have I judged you aptly?”

Kadmallin looked between the men, searching their faces for signs his words had struck truth. He saw what he needed to see as their eyes glanced back toward the pilgrims and heard what he need know in their silence.

“I have a new plan for you.” Kadmallin patted a small pouch at his waist. It jingled with the weight of the coins within. “I will give you these silver coins, and you will take them and leave.”

“Why shouldn’t we just take the coins and take what else we want?” The smallest of the three took a half step forward. Kadmallin did not budge.

“The answer to that is simple.” Kadmallin smiled. “If you fail to take the coins, I will draw these swords and kill all three of you where you stand. My fellow pilgrims will be saddened by your loss, they may even ask us to leave their company, but you will be dead and I will still have my coins. It is a good plan. I have no need for these last pieces of silver as a pilgrim, and you clearly have need of them or you would not sit by bridges hoping to waylay passersby.” Kadmallin actually carried five times as much coin in gold sewn into the shirt beneath his leather and steel armor, and Sketkee’s coin pouch held twice as much again under her cloak.

The large man squinted at Kadmallin, his mouth twisting in a grimace before he held out his hand. Kadmallin untied the coin pouch from his belt and tossed it to the bandit. The large man snatched the leather pouch from the air and opened it, grunting with satisfaction as he saw its contents.

“Ya better hope ya never sees us again now ya gots no coin to buy us away.” The big man clutched the coin pouch in his hand and grinned, his teeth flashing yellow in the light.

“If we ever meet again, we will both follow a different plan, I think.” Kadmallin rested his hands on the hilts of the two swords at his waist to emphasize his words. He could only use one of the swords, but they would not know this.

The three bandits glared at him, but said nothing more as they turned and walked back down the road, headed no doubt to the small bridge in hopes of accosting some lone traveler. Kadmallin watched them go, wondering if he would indeed see them again. He did not like killing men, but he found that if he must do so, he preferred it to be men like the three bandits.

“That showed extraordinary powers of observation, logical deduction, and forward thinking.”

Kadmallin blinked, but arrested his body’s movement before he jumped. Sketkee moved with great stealth when she wished. He looked over to her.

“Must be all the time I spend with you, rubbing off on me.”

“I doubt it.” Sketkee stared after the three bandits. “I would have killed them. They will undoubtedly rob, rape, or kill others as they have done in the past.”

“You think I should have acted differently?” Kadmallin turned to Sketkee, worried he had made a mistake.

“No, not at all.” Sketkee looked at him, her scaled eyelids blinking slowly. “The logic of my actions and your actions need not be exclusive. This is why I pretended to be asleep. So I would have no excuse to kill them.”

Sketkee nodded in satisfaction at her thinking and walked back to the tree, hefting her pack upon her shoulders. Kadmallin watched her a moment before retrieving his own bag, preparing to

resume the protracted walk to the coast with the pilgrim band. As long as he and Sketkee continued to agree on who needed to be killed and why, he thought, they might survive the journey.

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

THE STARS faded from sight as the sun began to light the sky, the sister moons running to hide behind the curve of the world. Sunrise brought the chirps of birds and the calls of men and women throughout the pilgrim campsite. Dirt doused the night watch fires. Feedbags slipped over the necks of the horses. Cookware and sleeping rolls stacked the backs of wagons. By the time the sun crested the tops of the hills beside the road, wheels turned, hooves plodded, feet shuffled, and the pilgrim band made way again, heading for the coast, to follow the dream and the new star in hopes of meeting with their prophet and crossing the great Zha Ocean to the Forbidden Realm.

Abananthus swatted a deer fly at his neck and sniffed the crisp morning air. He loved the morning hours before the world fully woke and the heat of the day settled upon the land.

Morning prepares the blessings for the day to come.

He smiled and flicked the reins against the back of the horse drawing the open wagon he rode. Luntadus and Lantili still slept, each curled under an arm of the dozing Jadaloo, gently rocking in the back of the wagon. Kellatra walked ahead of the cart, speaking with one of the pilgrims, a woman who had joined the band the prior day. She always did this: interviewing the new arrivals, learning what they knew, what they had heard. She made it sound like idle curiosity to compare the experience of the dreams. It also gave her an opportunity to learn if anyone had heard of a woman and her family being sought for vague reasons.

Rankarus walked behind, chatting with a group of men, keeping them entertained with stories of life as a merchant woman's husband. They had become a family of merchants who sold their shop of dried goods and imported spices to travel the pilgrim path and see the destiny revealed in their dreams, a story that Rankarus told with great enthusiasm. Kellatra had at first cautioned him to curb his usual gregarious nature and to hide within the traveling tribe, but he had explained that the true art of hiding among strangers relied on becoming their friend. A friend, particularly a charming friend with a beautiful wife, two playful children, a lovely niece, and a helpful uncle, would seem like people worth protecting in the event someone arrived one day searching for the owner of an inn and her husband and children.

The story grew easier for everyone in the repeated telling, especially as they mostly allowed Rankarus to tell it. Convincing Luntadus and Lantili to follow the ruse had proved easier than Abananthus had suspected. However, the boy and girl were both still so traumatized by the events

of that night three weeks ago that they said little when spoken to by adults, and rarely mentioned their lives before the road when playing with the other pilgrim children.

The wagon tilted slightly as Jadaloo climbed from the back to sit on the driving bench beside Abananthus. Rankarus had purchased the wagon and horse the morning the inn burnt to the ground. He did not know how the couple had managed to salvage any coin from the inferno. It had probably been hidden with the book Kellatra had retrieved. He'd contributed his own savings from beneath the floorboards of his teashop to help pay for the expenses of their hastily arranged journey. He wondered what would happen to the shuttered shop in his absence.

"Today, you think?" Jadaloo stretched in the seat, working out the kinks of the long night in the wagon.

"I think so." Abananthus watched the backside of the horse, ignoring how tightly the girl's dress clung to her limbs as she moved. He'd been disregarding her attractiveness for years, but always found it more difficult when seated beside her. Odd, because he never thought of her in a romantic way. His thoughts usually noted that he might have had a daughter her age if his wife had not died. He had always wished for a daughter.

"Have you ever been?" Jadaloo asked, turning to grab an apple from a bag in the wagon. She offered it to him.

"Yes. Many times." Abananthus shook his head at the apple, and the girl bit into it. "It used to be part of the trade route I ran as a merchant guard. I visited once as a merchant myself, but the distance cut down the value of the trinkets I brought back and the journey didn't pay. I wandered closer to home after that."

"They say the trees are lovely." Jadaloo wiped apple juice from her chin with the back of her sleeve.

"The trees are merely trees," Abananthus said. "What makes the sight so intriguing is how they are placed to line the city streets and encircle the public squares. No other city does such a thing, bringing the forest into the town."

"You think she'll find who she needs?" Jadaloo gestured with her chin toward where Kellatra walked ahead of the wagon.

"I've never known her to fail at anything she sought to do." Abananthus watched Kellatra and hoped his words proved accurate. "*Put your faith in the one who has proved worthy of your faith in the past,*" he said.

"You think she'll really give it up?" Jadaloo turned to look at Abananthus, her eyes filled with worry.

"I don't honestly know." Abananthus wiped his brow, more to cover the unease aroused by the girl's question than to remove the dust of the road from his face. "*The sky is sun and moon and clouds and rain and stars while the mountain is the mountain,*" he quoted.

"I think you make those up." Jadaloo smiled. "That one makes no sense."

"The poet Galanoo Haas wrote that some two thousand years ago," Abananthus said. "It means some things change and some things do not. He was asking himself, am I like the mountain or am I like the sky?"

“You’re a mountain.” Jadaloo patted his arm. “Always dependable, you are.”

“I was the sky and became a mountain.” Abananthus fidgeted at the girl’s open affection. “You’re a bit of a mountain yourself, coming along on a journey like this.” Kellatra and Rankarus had tried to hand Jadaloo and the cook, Tausee, each a pouch of coins to travel to a nearby town for safety. Tausee took the coins, kissed Kellatra’s hands, and ran off into the night. Jadaloo refused. Their arrangement included room and board, she had said. With no inn and no beds, she’d settle for the back of the wagon.

“I owe her. And him. They’ve been more family to me than any family I ever had.” Jadaloo wiped at her eyes with her sleeve. Dust from the road. “Why’d you tag on? Not that I’m not glad you did. Good to have a face you can trust nearby.”

“The same reasons as you.” Abananthus glanced back at the still sleeping children in the back of the wagon. “You protect your family no matter what, even if they aren’t your blood.”

“Who said that one?” Jadaloo asked.

“Well, that one I did make up.” Abananthus laughed, his hearty voice finally rousing the dozing children to wakefulness.

In the late morning, they passed an old man and a boy sitting under the leaves of a tree, eating apples. The boy waved at every group of passing pilgrims. Most of the pilgrims waved back. Lantili and Luntadus waved to the boy, happy smiles on their faces. A few of the pilgrims called out for the man and boy to join them, but the old man shook his head. Abananthus felt he knew the man, had seen him somewhere, but could not place his face. Something about the man brought to mind his wife’s death. Had the man been present in the crowd? So many years had passed. Surely he would not look the same.

He let the thought fade as they continued beyond the man and boy, leaving them behind to whatever purpose they were set about that day. At midday, he gave the reins over to Jadaloo and stretched his legs, walking beside Rankarus for a time. Rankarus usually walked beside Kellatra, or sat with her in the wagon, but instead, he walked with the rope of an ox in his hand, guiding the animal along as it pulled one of the pilgrim band’s small carts.

Rankarus and his wife had not been happy these last weeks. The pilgrims would never have noticed, seeing only a cheerful, loving couple, but Abananthus had noted the small things that spoke to the rift between them. Hands not held after dinner. Kisses not traded in passing. The things he had seen them do without thought for over eight years. There were reasons for the distance between them, none of them good.

“Will you tell her?” Abananthus reached back to stroke the ox’s snout.

“Tell her what?” Rankarus gave the rope a tug as the ox slowed to lick at Abananthus’s salty palm.

“Why you are afraid to go to the City of Leaves.” Abananthus wiped his slobbered-on hand on his breeches.

“Why would I fear the City of Leaves?” Rankarus ran the fingers of his free hand through his hair in a carefree gesture.

“Why, indeed?” Abananthus reached down to snag a stray stalk of rye growing wild by the roadside, sliding the end between his lips to chew on it.

“We are heading to the City of Leaves.” Rankarus played with the end of the rope, wrapping it around his wrist.

“Closer every day.” Abananthus spoke around the stalk of rye as he chewed. He had always liked the flavor of the grass, savoring the bitterness on his tongue. “And every day, you become more ... unlike yourself.”

“I am myself. How could I be other than myself? You make no sense. As usual.” Rankarus grinned and reached up to pat Abananthus’s shoulder.

“*A man is as a man acts,*” Abananthus said.

“Now you make even less sense,” Rankarus said.

“Maybe so.” Abananthus shrugged. “She will learn what troubles you eventually. This business of the book distracts her now, but it will not do so forever.”

“She spends too much time with that book.” Rankarus kicked at a rock in the path.

Kellatra had pulled the book from its hiding place each night to examine its pages by lantern light in the wagon, out of sight of the other pilgrims.

“The book presents a problem,” Abananthus said. “You know how she is when faced with something she does not immediately grasp.”

“A short list of things.” Rankarus snorted in annoyance.

“She has a keen mind.” Abananthus looked to his friend. “Did you ever hear of another inn with so many books?”

“For the guests.” Rankarus laughed and shook his head. He looked skyward and sighed. “All gone now. Nothing but ash. All of it.”

“The inn, yes, but nothing else.” Abananthus pulled the stalk of rye from his mouth and cast it aside. He suddenly found the bitterness more than desired.

They walked in silence then, the conversations of fellow pilgrims, the squeak of the cart wheels, the heavy breathing of the ox, the clomp of hoof and foot along the packed dirt of the road filling the quiet between them. After a time, he patted Rankarus’s shoulder and wandered forward to walk beside Kellatra. They made idle conversation about the weather and the road and the pilgrims and the children until he could no longer avoid the topic he’d sworn not to mention.

“When are you going to tell him?” Abananthus’s shoulders sagged with his query.

“I can’t tell him.” Kellatra frowned up at him. “You know that.”

“What do you think he will do when he finds out?” Abananthus asked. “He will find out, you know, if he hasn’t guessed already. He’s not as dense as he pretends.”

“No. No, he’s not.” Kellatra crossed her arms with a sigh. “But he would not understand.”

“*A secret shared is a secret gained,*” Abananthus said.

“A secret shared is a marriage ended, you mean.” Kellatra sighed again.

“He will not leave you.” Abananthus filled his voice with certainty. “He loves you. No matter what you are. You have The Sight. We are in Juparti now. It is considered a blessing here.”

“I know how it is viewed in Juparti,” Kellatra said. “That is part of why I cannot tell him. If I do, then I must tell him the truth of why I fled to Punderra and hid as an innkeeper.”

“Why did you flee?” Abananthus had been considering what past events might have led Kellatra to hide her gift and leave her homeland. While her Juparti origins would have been curious, the Keth councils of Punderra would have welcomed her into their fold. The syncretic beliefs of the Keth religion made them more than willing to accept an adept with The Sight from other faiths and dominions. Instead, she had become an innkeeper and a wife and mother. She could not safely practice The Sight outside the Keth councils, but they had no prohibitions against marriage or children.

“Family difficulties.” Kellatra looked down to where her feet trampled the dust of the narrow road.

“Ah.” Abananthus had no idea what these difficulties might entail, but understood them to be great indeed if they could force a woman like Kellatra to abandon her homeland. “And you fear he will not appreciate these difficulties?”

“Exactly.” Kellatra did not look up from the road.

“Your husband is many things, some good, some bad, but he is not miserly, neither in coin nor in his love of you and your children. He will forgive you anything. Has he spoken a word against you for the loss of the inn?”

“No.” Kellatra lifted her eyes from her feet.

“Has he questioned you for keeping hold of a book that people would have killed you for?” Abananthus turned his head to watch Kellatra’s face.

“No.” Kellatra frowned up at the cloudless sky. “Strange that.”

“Has he criticized your plan to return the book to the Academy?” Abananthus asked. Kellatra had insisted that the friend who had left the book with her for safekeeping, the man named Menanthus, the man turned to stone, must have stolen it from one of the libraries of the Academy. Whoever wanted it, whoever risked sending a soul catcher to chase it down, would not leave anyone who had seen it alive. The only path to safety lay in returning the book to its owners.

“After his repeated suggestions to sell it or burn it, no. No, he has not.” Kellatra brushed her hair back from her face as a sudden breeze pushed her locks across her eyes.

“Then why do you think he will question you about this?”

Kellatra said nothing for a long while as she walked. Finally, she spoke a phrase he knew well.

“The road ahead is always unknown, but it can be traveled either alone or with others.” Kellatra turned her gaze to Abananthus’s eyes. “You said that the first day we met.”

“I remember.” Abananthus smiled at the memory. His first night in the inn, weary from travel and searching for a hot meal and a strong cup of wine. “I complained about the stew.”

“Not enough spice.” Kellatra laughed.

Abananthus chuckled. He liked his food with flavor and heat. The redder his face got, the more satisfying he proclaimed the meal.

“You should not wait until the waiting makes the task harder,” Abananthus said. “*A soup over salted is a soup thrown away.*”

Kellatra made to reply, but a loud murmur ran back along the caravan, silencing her words. Curious comments crescendoed among the pilgrims as the convoy crested the top of a rise in the road to reveal the next way station on the group’s journey.

Kahara Nattaa. The City of Leaves. Named not for the leaves of the thousands of trees that lined its major streets, but for the millions of pages of paper in the books of its libraries. The City of Leaves held more libraries than all the other cities of the Iron Realm combined. Poems and ballads told of more books lining the shelves of the City of Leaves than stars lining the heavens at night. The great Library of Mysteries sat in the middle of the Academy of Sight, the only nonreligious place for the study of The Sight in all the realm, and likely all the world. In this city, Kellatra would try to find the owners of the mysterious book.

Abananthus hoped she would find what she sought before the people who desired it tried to kill them all again.

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

DROPLETS OF rain fell to the ground under the inescapable draw of the force that held the world together, that pulled at every creature and every mountain, that drove the planets in the night sky and held the moons in orbit above Onaia. A gust of wind caught the smaller drops of water and cast them sideways through the gloom, splashing against Sketkee's face beneath the sloping cowl of her rain-drenched cloak. She and Kadmallin followed the pilgrims, walking through the late afternoon rain in hopes of finding a suitable campsite for the night. The forest lane so far proved too narrow for establishing a camp.

She wiped her cheeks, wondering if an increase in the pull of gravity might keep the rain from her face, or whether it would simply hasten the falling of the rain in general, only leaving her wetter. Another natural philosopher would have shunned her question. Philosophers did not suppose nonexistent circumstances; they studied those which lay before them unexplained. Sketkee corrected herself. While rakthor philosophers might not seek to uncover imagined unknowns, the philosophers of other peoples made great attempts to create rationalized explanations for things that had never happened. Possibly this explained their failure to establish essential truths that rakthor philosophers arrived at under observation and experiment — concepts like gravity.

Sketkee wiped her face again as the wind blew rain across her eyes. She looked at Kadmallin, walking beside her, water streaming off his wide-brimmed hat. He seemed displeased to be in the rain, but human states of mind were slippery things to assess. Often, she found herself wishing for a rakthor companion simply for the predictability of such company. Human *moods* could shift capriciously, turning from anger to joy to something undefinable in the length of time it took a bird to pass overhead. Not being oppressed by such mental conditions herself, she found them largely confusing and often useless. However, she did agree with his apparent displeasure at their condition of enhanced moisture. Rakthors did not commonly appreciate water unless consumed for sustenance. They preferred hot and dry weather; the hotter and the drier, the more preferable.

She had always wondered if it was a fortunate coincidence that of all the known realms rakthors made their home in Ranikttak, or the Sun Realm as humans called it, a land of arid plains and harsh climate. There were many philosophers of history among her people who suggested this circumstance owed more to the unknowable intentions of the urris than the fateful birth of the most ancient rakthor in that realm. The histories of all peoples, except the roaggs, spoke of an Origin

Time at a vague date in the distant past, but none with any clarity. Most implied some involvement of the urris. Only the most dim-minded of all the peoples could fail to see the oddly unnatural displacement of the greater animals between the realms. The rakthor, human, wyrin, yutan, and roagg all dispersed to separate continents across the oceans of Onaia. No lesser animals were so segregated among the realms. Nor were they banned from movement in mass numbers to foreign lands by the urris and The Pact.

“Could it get any wetter?” Kadmallin splashed through a puddle, seeming oblivious to the water it added to his boots.

Sketkee marveled anew at the human ability to ask questions with obvious answers. She had at first assumed it to be a cultural artifact used to create bonding through conversation, but of late, she had come to suspect a congenital deficiency of brain structure to be the culprit. She knew he expected a reply, and not wishing to create more need for useless discussion by encouraging his concern, she gave the only answer logically possible.

“Yes.”

Kadmallin grunted. Humans frequently made inarticulate noises to respond to statements, particularly those they did not appreciate. They walked on in sodden silence for several minutes until the need for conversing apparently overwhelmed Kadmallin’s better judgment.

“What do you think the crystal does?” Kadmallin slogged through another puddle, oblivious to the muck he sent flying across Sketkee’s cloak.

“The search for the answer to that question is the very reason for the existence of our journey.” Sketkee ignored the mud. Most rakthors preferred orderliness and cleanliness. She could brush away the remnants of the chaotic road once the rain had ceased.

“But you could speculate.” Kadmallin tilted his head toward her, a torrent of rain cascading from the awning provided by the rim of his hat.

“To speculate without facts is a fool’s endeavor.” Sketkee abhorred the human penchant for speculation in the absence of evidence. Tragedies rooted in baseless speculation littered their historical record.

“Hmmm.” Kadmallin walked again in silence for a time.

She watched him from the corner of her eye, seeing him tense as he mentally muddled through the situation, finally phrasing the source of his consternation.

“It definitely comes from the Forbidden Realm, though. Yes?” Kadmallin looked around as he spoke.

They traveled at the rear of the pilgrim line, but his well-honed habits took precedence, even when the possibility of being overheard seemed nonexistent. This facet of his nature proved exceedingly useful on several occasions and remained one of the primary reasons she sought his company and assistance in her quest.

“I am as certain as I can be, given the lack of any clear historical evidence.” Sketkee often wondered if she mistook the nature of the artifact and pursued an illusory goal. “Its mechanical sophistication suggests a refinement of technique far surpassing even the considerable talents of the great rakthor engineers of the Fifth Age.”

Most philosophers of rakthor history divided the procession of civilization into seven ages, a repeating cycle of advancement and collapse, some ages reaching higher than others. From the remaining historical accounts, the philosophers and engineers of the Fifth Age surpassed the accomplishments of all others. The present, Seventh Age, only a few hundred years in development, still paled in comparison to its predecessors.

“What will we do when we get there?” Kadmallin, much to Sketkee’s surprise, walked around a puddle. Apparently, his boots had reached the maximum level of saturation.

“I do not know. We will need to investigate that question as conditions for its revelation arise.” Sketkee squinted as the line of wagons and humans began to slow. It seemed the pilgrims at the head of the caravan had found a suitable site to make camp.

“Sounds as though you’ve set out to follow a hunch.” Kadmallin looked up at her, rain dripping from his smiling lips.

“I have assessed the probability of uncovering the nature and use of the artifact and pursued the rational course of action.” Sketkee ignored Kadmallin’s grunt of obvious amusement at her reply. Humans often liked to pretend their irrational and instinctual decisions coincided with sound processes of thought, especially in hindsight, when their *hunch* had not left them dead.

“Another one.” Kadmallin looked around the edge of the wagon stopped in the mud before them.

Sketkee followed him as he walked toward the front of the line, tromping through the slick mud as they passed pilgrims in twos and threes, in wagons and on foot. They came to the head of the caravan, stopping to take in the sight. Dead men and women, young and old, lay scattered across the road — apples fallen from the tree left to rot in the rain. The cindered remains of a wagon blocked the lane, the remnants of tents and various personal possessions littered the ground.

“Bandits,” Kadmallin said. “Again.”

Sketkee refrained from remarking on the unnecessary nature of his need to state self-evident facts. They had passed the graves and shattered campsites of three separate pilgrim bands on their journey. This made the fourth and the largest. At least thirty people lay dead. More, she noted, had been buried beside the road.

“They must have been driven off before they could finish their funeral rites.” Sketkee pointed to the rows of burial mounds aligned between two large trees.

“Our pilgrims will want to bury the dead and make camp for the night.” Kadmallin lowered his pack to the ground. “I’ll help. It might be best if you stayed shy of the place for a bit. I’m not certain how they would react to you touching their dead.”

“Based on past experience, I suspect the response would be unsettling for them.” Sketkee could not understand the human fascination with a body that ceased to function or had been forced into that state. They seemed incapable of separating the person from the body in their minds, even after the body had its head smashed in by a bandit’s ax. “I will set our tent by the tree line and await your arrival.”

Kadmallin set out to help the human pilgrims bury their dead predecessors along the road as Sketkee took his pack and walked to the edge of the woods, not too far from the road, but far

enough to provide an invisible boundary for her fellow travelers. After considerable trial and error, she had established this distance to be roughly twenty-three Sun Realm ganots. Any less and they observed her constantly, clearly fearing that her movements so close might portend an unexpected but long-suspected action of a nefarious nature. Any farther and they watched even more closely, apparently concerned she might disappear for unfathomable, and potentially dangerous, purposes.

She paced out a twenty-three long steps and set down the packs. The pilgrims had already begun to remove the bodies from the road. Surprisingly, for having no clear leader, they managed to regularly accomplish communal tasks with expedient efficiency. They attacked the task of burying the dead in the water-sopped mud with the same energy and organization they applied to setting up the camp in the downpour and preparing a cold meal without benefit of flame. Sketkee assembled her tent and climbed inside, out of the continual deluge. She removed the cloak and the satchel over her shoulder as she sat under the canopy of waxed canvas and lit a small lantern. Kadmallin would join her soon and bring her a plate of food.

While she waited, she took the opportunity to follow the urge she had ignored ever since Kadmallin broached the subject — she removed the artifact and held it in her hands. Kadmallin had been correct in his assessment of her actions. While rakhors typically did not speculate, finding the act irrational and counterproductive, she had certainly done so in regards to the crystalline object in her palms. She had abandoned thousands of years of rakhor custom and numerous ocuturies of directed breeding to act in a manner not unlike her human traveling companions might. Why had she done such a thing? Could she be mentally unsettled, one of the rare rakhors whose brain did not behave properly? She did not sense anything about her mental state that suggested her faculties were unwinding.

She ignored the questions surrounding the actions that resulted in her presence in a band of human pilgrims marching toward the coast and eventually a realm no people had set foot upon in thousands of years, focusing instead on the puzzle resting in her eight taloned fingers. What did it do? Why had it been constructed? How might it be made to function?

She considered these speculative questions long after she put the artifact away and Kadmallin arrived with food and the two settled in for the evening, waiting until the time to take their turns watching the camp through the night. She knew those questions would be with her until she reached the Forbidden Realm, and possibly long after, but she hoped she would find the answers worth the risks she had taken, as well as the risks she suspected she would take in the future.

THE SEER



KELLATRA

“I’LL GO with you, then.”

“I must go alone.”

“Who are you meeting?”

“It is better you do not know.”

“Some old lover, then. I promise I won’t be jealous.”

“Not an old lover.”

“An old teacher? From your days at the Academy?”

Kellatra sighed. She had dreaded the thought of this conversation for weeks, avoiding it with a hundred subtle and not-so-subtle diversions. Now that the moment had arrived when no more prevarication could be plied against Rankarus’s questions, she felt ill, palms sweating, stomach churning, head dizzy. She rubbed her hands along the skirt of her dress and took a deep breath.

She stood beside Rankarus on the rooftop of an inn, looking out over the City of Leaves as the sun fled past the horizon and the shadows crawled into the corners of the streets below. City lantern-men walked the lanes, gradually filling high hanging lanterns with oil and lighting them to chase the darkness back into the alleys. The buildings of Kahara Nattaa, the City of Leaves, were of brick and stone, standing between two and four stories tall with flat, red clay-tiled roofs. They had settled in an inn at the eastern edge of town, its roof giving them a perfect sunset view of the straight, tree-lined avenues crisscrossing the city — the grid of a koris game board laid out upon the earth. Like the ancient game of colored wooden or stone cubes, many larger edifices dotted the cityscape, some temples to the various Juparti gods, some merchant warehouses and storefronts, some the palaces of the royal and wealthy, but the city’s largest structures held libraries. The principal of these, the Library of Mysteries, rose up from the city center, behind the gated walls of the Academy of Sight. Kellatra had thought never to see the city again, nor the library where she once spent so much of her time.

“Why did you not tell me?” Rankarus watched her as she stared at the cityscape.

Kellatra continued to say nothing. They had come to the roof for privacy, so she could speak with him. She found now that she wished for the roar of a crowd, someplace her words might be lost and forgotten. The silence of the rooftop seemed to give each utterance greater import.

“You are a seer.” Rankarus took her hand. “Now it has been said, and you need not speak the words yourself.”

“How long have you known?” Kellatra swallowed the emotion threatening to choke her. The feeling sprang from Rankarus’s kindly voicing of her secret rather than the fact of it being revealed. It also came from the knowledge that one secret exposed would inevitably lead to others being unmasked.

“Since the night of the fire.” Rankarus visibly tensed at the memory. “How else would you know so much about the book? Where to take it. Who to see. Possibly if you had been a keeper at one of the libraries. But if you were, why would you not tell me? On the other hand, if you were a seer, living in Punderra, you might hide that fact. You are not built from religious bricks and would not fare well on a Keth council. You would tell no one.”

“No. I would not.” Kellatra felt the tug of his hand holding hers, pulling her to face him. She turned her body but looked away.

“Not even your husband. Not even the father of your children.” Rankarus’s voice sounded strained.

“No. Not even him.” Kellatra finally turned to look into her husband’s eyes. They seemed sad and somewhat wounded, contrasting with the usual charming smile across his lips.

“Well, you must have a good reason. You have reasons for everything you do.” Rankarus laughed, but his laughter did not fill the air the way it usually did, fading quickly and drifting off over the neighboring rooftops.

“I do.” Kellatra found the act of forming words a physical struggle, harder it seemed than giving birth to a child.

“And you will tell me one day.” Firmness filled Rankarus’s voice.

“I will.” Kellatra squeezed his hand, a wave a relief flooding through her. She would tell him. One day. When the proper time presented itself.

“But today, you will tell me who you intend to meet about returning the book to the Academy.” Certainty and annoyance colored Rankarus’s words. “This book endangers our lives, and you brought it to us. I have not raised my voice to accuse you of foolishness or carelessness, and I have followed you to this city against all better judgment, so you will tell me who you are going to meet.”

“I...” Kellatra looked away again. How much could she tell him? “I need to see my father.”

Rankarus stepped back, still holding her hand, but staring at her with grave curiosity.

“You said your father was dead.”

Kellatra bit her lip.

“I said my father died. I didn’t say he stayed dead.”

“How...” Rankarus began to ask. He frowned. “I do not understand.”

“He wasn’t dead long.” Kellatra fidgeted, clasping and unclasping the folds of her dress in the fingers of her free hand.

“So, you are a family of seers?” Rankarus looked off toward the city streets as though considering something.

“We were. My mother is dead. I have no siblings.” Kellatra turned away from Rankarus as well, happy for a respite from his searching eyes.

“And you have not seen your father since you left?” Rankarus asked.

“No.” Kellatra ignored the thought that came with that statement.

“And he can help you get the book returned to the library?” Rankarus rubbed his chin.

“He sits on the Academy High Council. He will know what to do with it.” Kellatra hoped this proved true. Hoped that he would listen to her story before doing what he had promised to do so many years ago.

“We could still try to sell it, you know.” Rankarus squinted at the setting sun. “I might know a few people in the city who would pay handsomely for such a rare book.”

“We can’t. It must go back to the library. It is the only way to be free of those who would kill to possess it.” Kellatra did not mention the other reason she wished to replace the cryptic book on the library shelves. She could not tell him *that* until she had told him many other things. Her plan hinged upon her father’s actions when they met.

“And you won’t let me go with you?” Rankarus turned back, frustration clouding his face.

“It’s not safe.” Kellatra bit her lip again, wishing she had thought to phrase her refusal better.

“Not safe?” Rankarus raised a curious eyebrow. “He is your father.”

“The situation is not easily explained,” Kellatra said.

“Take your time. I will listen closely.” Rankarus’s voice deepened as he spoke.

“I cannot explain. You must trust me.” Kellatra grimaced. The entire conversation headed toward dangerous terrain.

“Trust you?” Rankarus released her hand and crossed his arms as he glared at her, his voice passionate with anger. “You brought this thing to our home and kept it even when you knew it presented danger to us all. A danger that arrived and nearly killed our children. A danger that sent us scurrying like vermin from flames. Flames that burnt our lives to the ground. Did I not trust you through all of that? Did I not trust you when you said we must return the book to the library? Did I not trust you when you insisted on bringing the book to the City of Leaves yourself? It is not I who needs to learn trust. Did you trust me to tell me that a book people died for lay in our cellar? Did you trust me all those years to tell me your true nature? Do you trust me now to tell me what new danger you prepare to walk toward alone?”

“The children.” Kellatra wiped away the tears that had welled in her eyes with her husband’s words. “One of us must remain safe for the children’s sake.”

“How can your father be so dangerous?” Rankarus placed his hands on her shoulders, his eyes probing hers.

“At our last meeting, he tried to have me arrested.” Kellatra ignored the echo of her father’s words ringing down through the years and focused on Rankarus.

“Why would he threaten to arrest you?” Rankarus stepped closer, his face twisted in sudden concern.

“Because I was banished.” Kellatra held her breath, unable to say more, but knowing she had no choice.

“Why would you be banished?” Rankarus blinked in confusion.

“Because I did something forbidden.” Kellatra took a deep breath and ground her teeth, a mule refusing to march the last span of the trail.

“What...”

“I will return before the moons rise full.” She pushed his hands away from her shoulders and walked back to the hatch and ladder leading down to the upper floor of the inn. “Keep the children safe.”

“Kell...”

She risked a quick look at her husband’s forlorn face before hiking up the skirt of her dress and climbing down the ladder, out of sight of the man who would think she did not trust him. She cursed at herself, biting her lip until she tasted blood. She had always trusted Rankarus. She could not trust herself.

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

“KEEP DOWN.”

“How do you know he’s still there?”

“Quiet.”

“But how do you know?”

“Because I do.”

Sha-Kutan placed his hand on Lee-Nin’s shoulder to hold her down behind the wall of the barn they hid within, away from the open window. She glared at him.

“I will tell you when he is gone.” Sha-Kutan could sense the man clearly.

“How will you know?” Lee-Nin clutched a wide-eyed Sao-Tauna to her chest.

Sha-Kutan ignored Lee-Nin’s repeated question. If he did not answer, possibly she would cease to ask. He turned away from her and concentrated on the man in the street. The man she had recognized. The man who hunted the girl.

We should wait for him to check the barn and kill him.

We should flee through the back and leave him behind us.

To follow us again and find us again and be killed another day?

So we can confuse the trail and lose him for good.

The only way to lose him for good is if he is beneath the ground.

And the men who follow him?

A large party requires a large grave.

“Well?” Lee-Nin pushed his hand from her shoulder. Silence did not calm her concerns.

“He is entering the building across the street.” Sha-Kutan rose to confirm his sightless senses with his eyes. The man, the warden commander Lee-Nin had identified, walked through the door of an inn named the Red Crow.

Too hard to kill him and his men now.

We could wait.

We cannot.

They had hidden in the barn just after sunset, when she spotted the commander warden near the crowd of pilgrims they followed through the small town’s main street. They had been with the band for weeks, pretending to be a family following the new star, and had so far eluded the men who pursued them. The commander had not returned for more wardens as Sha-Kutan expected.

Instead, the man hunted them with only four men. Four men who now helped him search through the night-cloaked town for Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. They could not wait where they hid for much longer, or they would be found.

“We go now.” Sha-Kutan stood up, watching the inn to make sure the men did not return to the street. “If we leave through the back of the barn, we can cross the field and be in the woods before they leave the inn.”

“The pilgrims will notice us missing.” Lee-Nin placed her hand on the frame of the open window and pulled herself to her feet. “He’ll ask them about us.”

“Yes, but they will not know where we have gone. The commander and his men will need to start their search afresh.” Sha-Kutan turned and headed to the small door at the rear of the barn. He did not need to look over his shoulder to sense Lee-Nin and the girl following him.

They ran through a field of rye behind the small town, staying low to the ground, or as low as possible in Sha-Kutan’s case. When they entered the woods, they spent several minutes observing the town to make sure no one made to follow their path across the field.

“What about the dogs?” Lee-Nin pushed a branch aside to better see the field.

“The dogs will follow you. They will not follow me. They may go to the barn, but will not cross the field.” Sha-Kutan walked into the forest, heading south. They would need to find another road to travel.

“Why would the dogs not follow you?” Lee-Nin stalked after Sha-Kutan, Sao-Tauna’s hand in hers, the girl’s tiny legs rushing to keep pace.

Sha-Kutan sought for an answer that would not lead to more questions.

“They will not like the way I smell.”

“Something the dogs and I agree on.” Lee-Nin picked up Sao-Tauna as they trudged through the trees.

They walked in the night-veiled forest, trading sips from a water skin Sha-Kutan wore over his shoulder. Mercifully, to Sha-Kutan’s mind, Lee-Nin did not question their direction or intentions. After an hour, they reached the moonlit edge of a narrow road and stopped to eat a quick meal of dried meat and nuts, supplies Sha-Kutan had purchased in the town before Lee-Nin spotted the wardens pursuing her.

“Should we find another pilgrim band?” Lee-Nin broke a chunk of meat from the dried strip in her hand and gave it to Sao-Tauna. The child gnawed on it eagerly. “It might be safer to travel alone and stay out of sight.”

“We will be seen when we stop in towns for supplies or trade with farmers for food.” Sha-Kutan took a swig of water to wash down the dried beef clinging to the back of his throat. “We will be less noticed in a crowd.”

“We could enter towns only at night and steal the food we need.” Lee-Nin looked at the stick of dried meat in her hand as she spoke.

An odd suggestion for a woman of supposedly high birth.

Not for one who lies about who she is.

Sha-Kutan had queried Lee-Nin on several occasions over the past weeks about the true reasons the men hunted her and the girl, but she evaded his queries as he avoided hers. Sha-Kutan knew the men hunted the girl foremost among the two. He could not sense what made her unique, but her difference struck him plain as a fist to the face. The girl posed a danger to someone, and that person sent men to kill her. The more interesting question centered on why Lee-Nin would risk her life to save another woman's child.

"More important than how we travel is where." Sha-Kutan looked along the road as the moons rose toward their zenith in the sky. "Do we still head west to the coast as the pilgrims do?"

"Star people." Sao-Tauna pointed to the west.

The child spoke little and infrequently, but had no trouble making her desires known.

Do we continue to follow the whims of a child?

Are they merely whims?

Sha-Kutan exchanged a look of mutual resignation with Lee-Nin. They would proceed west, toward the coast.

The child's plan is still the best idea.

To follow a child's plan does not seem like a good idea.

They finished their meal and continued along the road for a few more hours. As the moons rose to their apex in the night sky and cast a hazy ivory hue over the fields and the nearby woods, they searched for a good place to bed down for the night. As they walked, Sha-Kutan's senses revealed someone ahead. Several men.

Coming around a slight bend, they saw a narrow stone bridge fording a wide stream, the light of the twin moons sparkling like liquid silver along its gently flowing surface. Three men sat on the stone walls of the bridge, drinking from clay jugs, watching them approach. A small fire burned in a pit to the side of the bridge.

"Pilgrims?" Lee-Nin sounded skeptical. "Bandits?"

"Stay here." Sha-Kutan dropped his sack from his shoulder and walked toward the bridge. As he neared the men, they hopped from the stone of the wall and stood across the entrance to the bridge. The largest of the three men, nearly as tall as Sha-Kutan himself, stood between the other two. They had short swords and long knives at their belts. The armaments looked well used, but the men wore them poorly.

"Kinnao there." The large man raised his hand as Sha-Kutan came within a few paces and stopped. "Evenin', traveler."

"What do you want?" Sha-Kutan looked between the three men. What he sensed and smelled of them told him what they desired — what such men always craved. He knew their kind well. He had been one of their kind once, long ago, and might still be were it not for a humble Pashist priest.

"What kinda greeting is that, friend?" The large man spread his hands. "We're fellow travelers offerin' a simple service."

"Ya pay ta cross the bridge." The man to the left coughed and spat something yellow and gelatinous to the ground.

“Ya don’t pays, ya don’t cross.” The third man, the shortest, puffed his chest out to emphasize his words and the threat implied by them.

“If you want to rob us, we have no coin.” Sha-Kutan looked at the large man, knowing him to be the leader, the one the others would follow. “If you wish to rape the woman and child, you will not. If you wish to kill me, you will not. If you wish to step aside and let us pass, you will be accommodated.”

“Who said aught ’bout murder and rape?” The big man stepped forward, hand on the hilt of his sword.

“I know what you are and what you do.” Sha-Kutan stood still as the man closed the gap between them. “I see you.”

“And I see you, and yer all alone, and ya got no sword.” The big man looked into Sha-Kutan’s eyes. “Ya think yer big, but I’s gutted men bigger than you.”

“So have I.” Sha-Kutan held the man’s gaze. “And far more than three.” But not without a sword, and his still rested in the canvas sack back with Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. Possibly he should have strapped it on. It might have dissuaded the men before him, or made killing them easier, if necessary.

“The wicked man’s life is as sacred as that of the saint. The saints knows this; the wicked do not.”

Jandu Laanta.

A wise man. Three unarmed is risky.

They could die another way.

And She would sense us yet again. And the woman and the girl would see.

They might leave then.

There are other paths that do not require death.

Yes.

“Ya gonna say somethin’? Ya gonna make a move? Or is ya gonna stand there and stare me ta death?” The big man grinned, his hand twitching on the sword hilt.

“I am going to show you something.” Sha-Kutan looked deep into the large man’s eyes, opening up a part inside himself, an inner door to a vast chamber, a minuscule filament of the essence within seeping out and touching the man before him, reaching into his mind, into the inner, ephemeral substance at the core of his being. The man gasped, his eyes going wide, his throat working to suck in breath that his frozen lungs could not obtain. He moaned, his eyes continuing to stare into Sha-Kutan’s, his body shaking, sweat breaking out across his forehead. The scent of urine and feces filled the air as the man stained his pants. The man’s companions screamed and ran across the bridge and into the woods.

Sha-Kutan broke the contact, closing the inner door once more, looking away while the man staggered back, mumbling and moaning as he turned and stumbled into the trees. Sha-Kutan watched the men go, crashing from branch to trunk, the sound of their flight growing ever more distant. He sensed others behind him but did not turn to them.

“Did they think you smelled bad?” Lee-Nin stepped beside him as she stared into the shadows of the woods.

“I asked them to leave.” Sha-Kutan turned away from the forest.

“You’re very persuasive.” Lee-Nin turned to follow his eyes.

“I spoke in a way they could easily understand.” Sha-Kutan looked to Sao-Tauna as the girl rested her head against Lee-Nin’s thigh, her eyes drooping with exhaustion. “We should camp here tonight.”

“What if those men come back?” Lee-Nin glanced again at the woods.

Sha-Kutan took the sack of their possessions from her shoulder, ignoring her question as he prepared a campsite for the night. Lee-Nin grunted at his silence, shaking her head as she moved to assist him while Sao-Tauna curled up to doze in the short grass beside the fire near the bridge.

Sha-Kutan gathered fallen branches to feed the fire, looking eastward as he carried them from the woods.

If She sensed it, She will prove harder to misdirect.

It was the right thing to do.

Yes. Odd that right things can cause so much concern and wrong things so little.

Not odd. Instructive.

Sha-Kutan nodded to himself as he placed a log on the fire. He lifted the sleeping form of Sao-Tauna and placed her nearer the flames. The summer nights could be cool. Lee-Nin sat to join him, and they apportioned their rations between them. The girl could eat when she awoke. They took their meal in silence, Lee-Nin frequently looking to the woods. The men did not return, and she and Sao-Tauna slept well that night.

THE SEER



KELLATRA

THE SOUNDS of iron horseshoes clattering against cobblestones echoed in the still night air. Kellatra waited for the horse to pass, keeping to the side of the street. Few people wandered this neighborhood so late, a distinct contrast to the three districts she had crossed to reach it — lanes filled with drunken men singing slurred songs and women of nocturnal employment calling to potential customers. The wealthy did not tolerate such occurrences in their streets, and the walled estates and tall houses with arched windows along the lane Kellatra walked belonged to the wealthiest of the citizens within the city.

As the horse trotted past, Kellatra jumped into an alleyway, quickening her pace as she darted into the shadows. In another part of the city, she might have worried for her safety, might have felt obliged to seek The Sight, but no one lurked in the corners to accost her. Those who contemplated such actions never considered performing them so close to the heart of the Academy, where any potential victim might possess the power to turn one's heart to ash within one's chest. Of course, members of the Academy were sworn to never employ deadly use of The Sight, even when their lives were at risk. This oath, however, remained largely unknown outside the higher ranks of the city's leaders. Thus the more dangerous citizens of the city were left to make assumptions about what would happen if they met a seer in a dark alley.

Kellatra pushed her memories of the oath she had spoken from her thoughts and hastened to the end of the alleyway, her hands thrust before her to warn of any impediment. The light from the still rising moons did not easily descend through the narrow walls of the alley to the paving stones. She tripped over something made of wood, which her feet could not identify. Stumbling forward in the dark, she cursed and slowed her pace, raising her hands before her again. A lantern would have been helpful, but would have called too much attention to her presence.

Finally, she reached the end of the alley, her palms bumping against moss-covered brick. She let her fingers guide her to the corner of the back wall, seeking out the once familiar drainpipe. Hands at either side of the clay and metal drain, she looked up, seeing the outline of it stretch along the wall, two stories up to the rooftop silhouetted by the starry night sky. She pulled the skirt of her dress up and tied it in a knot, freeing her legs from the folds of cloth. She took a deep breath. It had been many years since she had climbed this pipe. The last time had been her final night in the city. That time, it had been easier. She had been climbing down.

Kellatra clasped the sides of the drain and pulled herself up, her boot catching on the joints in the piping. She repeated this endeavor again and again until she stood atop the roof of the house. Hands on her thighs, she bent over to catch her breath. She did not remember the ascent being quite so taxing the last time she made the climb. Two children and the arrival of her middle years did not leave her better suited to scaling walls. She could have used The Sight to levitate up the side of the wall, but the bending of reality always possessed the potential to alert more sensitive seers to one's presence. Her father held a certain renown for his ability to discern the use of The Sight, thus the climb.

She walked quietly along the edge of the rooftop, crossing from one building to the next, then crouched to dash across the wide top of a wall that enclosed a manicured garden, trees thrusting their branches up above the rooftops. Finally, she came to the house she sought, bent to clasp a rain gutter, and laid down to dangle her legs off the lip of the roof until her feet found purchase on a balcony railing. Exhaling quickly, she let go of the gutter she clung to and dropped to the balcony floor, bending at the knees to cushion the fall and dampen the noise of her arrival. Standing, she looked around to ensure no one had seen her, then she grabbed the handle of the wood- and glass-framed door leading to the house. The handle did not budge.

Undaunted, she stepped to where a potted fern grew wild beside several troughs of weed-riddled flowers. She pushed her hand against the thick trunk of the tall plant, tilting the pot back at a slight angle, before reaching to retrieve a key from beneath the clay vessel. She tried the key in the lock of the door. It did not turn. She cursed and wiped her brow on the back of her sleeve. The lock had rusted shut, unused since her departure more than ten years previously.

She could try to force the key to move, or try to break the glass, or she could do what she would have once done without consideration. She could safely use The Sight to unlock the door. Such a small bending of reality would be unlikely to alert her father to her presence.

She had not refrained entirely from using The Sight after her banishment, but she had limited its use to circumstances where it seemed absolutely necessary. In Punderra, to use The Sight outside the Keth councils risked more than merely being revealed as a seer. The best she might have hoped for would have been a second banishment. She used The Sight only at times when bending reality to her will saved the course of her life from dire interruption. She never used it for petty reasons. Not to end a bad cold or mend a broken arm. Not to ease the minds of drunken, violent men to quick slumber. She had only used it when no other path proved possible. When her son had contracted a dangerous fever and lay moments from death. When thieves threatened her alone at night. When a soul catcher pretending to be an old friend showed up looking for a certain package.

She exhaled slowly, opening her mind to the truth behind all reality, the essence of all existence. This vision, this way of seeing, came easily enough. While she did not practice the use of The Sight, she had not abandoned cultivating the particular way of perceiving reality necessary for its implementation. If anything, it came more readily and she held it more deeply than she had on the night she last stood on the balcony ten years ago.

While people commonly referred to it as *The Sight*, the seeing of True Reality only completed the least essential aspect of the craft. Many could accomplish the mental training necessary to see the hidden world, the True Reality. Monks and mystics often obtained the perceptive stance of mind required, but they generally sought inner wisdom, insight to the subtle realms beyond thought, not mastery over the gross world of physical components. To attain this, to achieve The Sight in full, one needed to cultivate one's willpower. With the proper alignment of *will* and *sight*, a seer could influence the subtle and causal natures of reality, forcing them to shift in ways reflected in the gross, physical world. One could learn to see the True Reality and bend it to conform to one's desires.

Kellatra looked at the key in the lock of the door handle and intuited its nature more with her mind than her eyes and senses. She imagined the key turning smoothly, the gears of the lock uninhibited by rust and age, envisioned those gears working as they once had when first fashioned. Then she concentrated and insisted that the lock become as she envisioned it, that the truth of what she saw behind the lock's subtle existence conform with the vision of it in her mind. She witnessed reality bending, remaking itself, aligning with her demand.

She turned her fingers, and the key rotated in the lock, the handle turning in her palm. She removed the key, opened the door, and slid inside the room. She silently closed the door and waited for her eyes to adjust to the dimness. The light from the moons cascaded through the glass of the balcony door and windows to illuminate the opulent sleeping chamber. A dressing table with a large mirror stood beside a massive, canopied bed, across from a large fireplace. Couches sat beside full-sized dressing dolls, their bare wooden frames showing a thin layer of dust in the bluish double light of the moons.

Her room had not changed since she last stood on its thick carpets. Odd that her father had left it intact, as though she might return any night to lie once more upon the feathered mattress and silken sheets, an oddity that kindled a vague hope within Kellatra's heart. Surely the static state of the chamber implied some manner of longing on her father's part.

She chided herself for letting sentiment cloud her thinking in relation to her father. She had made that mistake once. More than once.

She crossed the floor and gently opened the door to the hall, looking both ways along the darkened corridor before easing through the doorway. She closed the door and walked quietly down the hall toward the stairs. It would do no good to search the upper rooms or her father's sleeping chamber. So early in the night, he undoubtedly still sat in his study, poring over some ancient tome, trying to elicit from its words meaning that he might master and turn to his own uses.

Kellatra descended the stairs curving down around the edge of the great hall, walking on the balls of her feet to keep the heels of her boots from clicking against the stone. At the bottom of the stairs, she turned left, down a wide hall, toward an open door. Flickering lamplight spilled into the hallway and pooled in undulating waves along the polished marble floor. At the door's edge, she paused, bracing herself for what came next. She had rehearsed the words repeatedly over the weeks of traveling with the pilgrim bands. Now these well-prepared arguments vanished one by one — ink magically evaporating from the page — vowels and consonants enunciated but lost in a

maelstrom of silence. Uncertain what to do, unsure what would happen, but knowing she could do nothing else, she stepped into the room.

TEN YEARS AGO

KELLATRA stepped into her father's study, the sound of her forceful footsteps running back along the stone floors and up along the marbled walls behind her. She spoke the first words before her feet crossed the threshold.

"How could you?"

Kellatra stopped in the center of the main rug, its geometric patterns forming a cage around her feet. Her father looked up from reading a book at his desk, the gentle glow of the lamplight softening the deep wrinkles of his face. With her mother's death, he had let his body return to its normal state. His eyes narrowed at her as he leaned back in his chair.

"You should be far away by now." Her father closed the book before him, but he did not stand.

"How could you betray her memory with your cowardice?" Kellatra clenched her fists but moved no closer to her father.

"You are the one who has betrayed her memory." Her father sat straighter in his chair, resting his hands on the tabletop.

"He killed her." Kellatra tried to calm her breathing, to pacify her anger.

"You believe that, but there was no evidence." Her father pressed on the table with his hands and pushed himself to his feet. "You took judgment into your own hands and violated the sacred oath of all seers. Your mother would never have condoned such a thing."

"He killed her." Kellatra swallowed back the emotions causing the bile to rise in her throat. "He confessed it to me."

"Under duress, no doubt." Her father shook his head slightly.

"No. He bragged about it. He believed himself untouchable. Beyond punishment."

"If that were true, why did you not approach the council?" Her father leaned on the table, suddenly seeming unsteady.

"To air a dispute of words? The word of a councilman against mine." Kellatra grunted in disgust. "He deserved justice, not accusations."

"Even if what you say is true, justice is not yours to dispense." Her father tapped the book on his desk with a finger. "We have laws and rules and oaths to guide us in our actions. You have abandoned everything your mother sought to establish and maintain."

"I have abandoned my oaths." Kellatra's voice rose with her anger. "You have abandoned your family."

"We are nothing but animals without the law." Her father stepped around the table. "The oaths protect us even when we have been wronged. They shield us from our own actions even as they guard us from the deeds of others."

“Your oaths did not defend Mother.” Kellatra resisted the twin urges surging within her — to turn and flee, and to beat her fists against her father’s chest.

“Your mother...”

A loud banging at the front door interrupted her father’s words.

“Who is that?” Kellatra turned to the sound of the metal knocker still clanging against the outer door.

“The council guards,” her father said. “I knew you could not resist coming back even after your banishment. Your anger has always made you predictable.”

Kellatra made to run for the entrance, thinking to escape into the hall before the servants answered the knocks still resounding upon the main house door. Her legs did not move, her arms hung frozen at her side. An invisible force held her still — a beetle suspended in resin.

“Do not do this.” Kellatra’s lips still functioned, even though her head could not turn. Her father stepped before her, his hand raised, his eyes squinting in concentration.

“The guards will take you, and you will be remanded to the Academy High Council for secondary judgment, having failed to abide by the sentence of your banishment.” Her father’s lips curled downward in sadness. “I take no pleasure in this, but you were afforded the lighter sentence of banishment, and you have ignored that punishment. There must be consequences.”

“They will kill me.” Kellatra stared into her father’s eyes.

“I know.” Her father’s hand wavered slightly as he struggled to keep his emotions in check.

The banging at the door stopped. The servants had been roused. It would not be long. Kellatra continued to stare into her father’s eyes, the eyes she had once looked into with love and respect and admiration. Now she saw only the sickness of self-righteousness, and it frightened her. He would sacrifice his own daughter to maintain his beliefs.

Kellatra could think of no parting words, no final declarations of anger or love or defiance. She opened her mind to The Sight and willed her father’s heart to stop. Unfamiliar with counter attacks to his use of The Sight, and anticipating no such lethal violence, her father did not know how to defend himself. He clutched at his chest and fell to his knees, gasping for breath.

His control over the forces of the universe ceased, and Kellatra’s body resumed its motion. She grabbed her father as his eyes rolled into the back of his head, guiding his body to the floor. The footsteps of the servants leading the guards through the house echoed down hallway outside the door. She placed her hand on her father’s chest, feeling its stillness and looking at his face — the beard that she had played with as a child, the lips that had kissed her mother for so many years, the eyes once bright with piercing intelligence, now closed forever. His betrayal stung almost as painfully as her mother’s death. He had rejected her in full. A daughter dead to him in all ways, and she had killed him. The tear striking the back of her hand focused her thoughts. She could not lose both her parents.

Still in the ecstatic embrace of The Sight, Kellatra willed her father’s heart to resume beating, looked at him one last time, then stood and fled from the room. She ran on her toes down the hall, her boots making little sound as she climbed the back stairs and rushed to her sleeping chamber. She heard the guards downstairs, shouting now. They had found her father unconscious in the

study. She did not bother to take anything, not even pausing for a last look around the room in which she had grown up. The council's banishment the day before had been intended to be carried out immediately. No provisions or personal effects were allowed. She had been escorted to the city limits and told never to return under threat of execution.

As she slipped through the door to the balcony and hoisted herself to the roof as she had done so many times in the past when sneaking out after hours to steal into one or more of the libraries she had been banned from, she paused for a moment to look out at the city. She would never see this again. Never walk the city streets. Never sit at the library tables reading books. Never see her father and friends and family.

She thought of these things, and the people never to be seen or heard or touched again, and felt no anger, no pain — only release.

THE PRESENT

KELLATRA CAME to a stop and stood in the same place on the same carpet where she had so many years ago. Her father looked up from several books spread across his desk, the angle of the lantern light showing the aging of his face, deep lines creasing his forehead.

"I..."

"You..."

Kellatra and her father stared at each other, their incomplete words eliciting a protracted silence that stretched on, heartbeat after heartbeat, breath after breath. Finally, Kellatra cleared her throat and relied on instinct to guide her speech.

"Hello, Father."

"You have returned." Her father frowned. "Unwise."

"My return is forced, not chosen." Kellatra noted her father's stillness behind his desk.

"You always blame others for the choices you make freely," her father said. "I see you have not altered in any significant fashion."

"I do not want to be here." Kellatra ground her teeth, trying to hold her growing anger in check.

"Then you will not kill me again?" Her father raised an eyebrow as he raised his chin.

"Hopefully not." Kellatra nearly sighed. She needed to forget the reasons she left and focus on the reason she had returned. "Menanthus came to see me."

"Really?" Her father squinted at her in the lantern light. "I wondered where he had gone. What did he want with you?"

"He gave me a package and asked me to keep it for him," Kellatra said. "Then someone turned him to stone."

"Turned to stone?" Her father fell back in his chair, his eyes blinking in shock. "Menanthus is dead?"

“Yes. Very much so.” A tinge of guilt struck Kellatra for so blandly stating the demise of her father’s oldest friend. “I would be as well had I not killed the soul catcher sent to impersonate him and collect the package.”

“Soul catcher?” Her father looked up, his face a mix of confusion and sorrow that rapidly transformed to curiosity and anger. “What package?”

“A book.” Kellatra paused before revealing more. “*The Unseen Codex.*”

“Impossible.” Her father shook his head. “*The Unseen Codex* is in the vault of the Library of Mysteries. I have seen it there myself.”

“Whatever book may rest there is not the codex.” Kellatra wondered how long the theft would have gone unnoticed.

“Where is it now?” her father asked.

“Here in the city,” Kellatra said. “Someplace safe.”

“You should not have returned.” Her father leaned forward in his chair to emphasize his words.

“The only way to make sure I and the people I care about are safe is to return the book to the Academy.” Kellatra stepped forward, feeling the need to explain herself.

“Banishment is banishment.” Her father stood up, seeming threatened by her sudden close proximity. “You should have sent word. Someone could have been dispatched to collect the book.”

“Not before I would have been dead.” Kellatra frowned in annoyance. Her father had changed even less than she expected. The time had come to put forward the true purpose of her homecoming. Had she merely wanted to return the book, she would have left it on her father’s desk while he slept. “I am returning the codex in exchange for the Academy High Council commuting my sentence.”

Her father laughed, his eyes filled with pity and repugnance.

“Impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible. A seer should know that.” Kellatra licked her lips to give pause before proceeding to plead her case before the only judge she had ever really acknowledged as having authority over her life. “The Academy High Council can overturn its judgment in acknowledgment of the service I have provided in returning an irreplaceable artifact into its care. No one need know of my return. I can work in secret within the libraries in the night hours.”

“Work?” Her father’s confusion returned. “What work?”

“Deciphering the language of the codex and learning its secrets.” Kellatra swallowed. She had finally spoken aloud her true desire. She wanted Rankarus and her children to be safe, and returning the book to the High Council would accomplish this, but another part of her longed to know the truth behind the mysteries of the codex. Not simply to assuage her curiosity; greater reasons motivated her need to understand the book.

“You were only banished to ensure your actions were never spoken of beyond the High Council.” Her father stalked to the fireplace, coals still glowing in its iron grate. “The leaders of this city and this nation must see our oaths as inviolable. Even the punishment of death would not

be enough to calm their fears of seers who can murder with a thought. Return the book and go. Bring it to me, and I will forget I have seen you.”

“Have you had the dream?” Kellatra’s only hope to make her father understand her motivations lay in revealing her suspicions.

“The dream?” Her father rubbed his hands together over the embers of the fire, seeking warmth that had long ago faded from the hearth. “What does the dream have to do with this?”

“The codex arrived in my life the same night the new star appeared in the sky.” Kellatra clasped her hands together to keep them from flailing about as her passion rose. Her father had always chided her for speaking with her hands rather than her mouth. “I do not believe that is a coincidence. The dreams I have had since suggest that the book and the star and the new god and the pilgrims are all somehow connected.”

“Dreams.” Her father coughed a half laugh of derision. “Dreams and fancies and the willful desire to have again what you have been denied for good reason.”

“I need the libraries to research the codex.” Kellatra frowned and cursed herself. Her approach to her father followed the same worn path to the same closed lane as ever.

“Always what you want instead of what is right.” Her father shook his head as he stared at her, his face bearing the sad look of a man who had failed to raise a child capable of his own iron integrity.

“The dreams are real, the pilgrims are real, the star is real, and there is a prophet who is going to cross the Zha Ocean to the Forbidden Realm, and this book has something to do with all of it. I know it. I am certain. And I do not believe it is a coincidence that it should fall into my hands, of all people, on the very night the dreams were confirmed as being portents of the future and not the wild imaginings of the deluded.” Kellatra had avoided considering what to do if her father could not be persuaded. Could she risk keeping the book and fleeing the city once more? Would it put her family in twice the danger, hunted not merely by unknown adversaries but the very Academy of Sight itself?

Her father turned from her and looked at the fading glow of the coals in the fire, standing there without speaking for a long time.

“I have had the dream. You are right about it being a harbinger of future events.” Her father turned back to her, wariness in his eyes. “You may be correct about the codex as well. Bring it to me. I will make your case to the High Council. I can make no promises. They banished you for a reason, but they also know of your Philosophership in ... esoterica. They may be convinced to allow you to study the codex under watch if you agree to banishment once more after you have uncovered its mysteries.”

“Thank you.” Kellatra could not restrain the smile that filled her lips nor the warm ripple of emotion that spread throughout her breast. She made to step closer to her father, but he raised his hand.

“Leave through the servants’ entrance in the back. Return that way tomorrow night. It would be best if you are not seen coming to this house.” Her father gestured toward the door with his hand, a dismissal and an order.

Kellatra's lips tightened and her stomach hardened, dark feelings swirling in her head and heart as she did as her father bade. As she left his house, no longer thinking of it as her home, she considered whether she trusted the man who had so often betrayed her for his principles. As she stepped into the dark street behind the house, she realized that while she doubted she could trust her father to uphold his promises, she really had no other choice if she hoped to protect her family. As much as she might desire to ply the unknown depths of the codex in freedom, her greater care came for Rankarus and the children and even Abananthus and Jadaloo. She would sacrifice anything to defend those she loved. She had changed in many ways over the years of her banishment, but that aspect of her nature would never alter.

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

SPARKLING EMBERS of crimson and gold floated upward on wafts of heated air, glowing against the charcoal-tinted clouds still coating the sky, concealing the noonday sun that gave the dark canopy above a dim glow. Kadmallin sat before a small fire outside the tent where Sketkee meditated, her clothes hanging on a makeshift rack fashioned from long sticks. He wriggled his bare toes before the blaze, enjoying the warmth and dryness provided by the heat of the flames. The rain had fallen all through the previous night, and well past dawn, encouraging the pilgrims to maintain their camp and huddle in their tents or beneath their wagons and wait for the seemingly ceaseless torrents to end. He and Sketkee had spent most of the morning beneath the waxed canvas of their tent, she either in meditative repose or reading a book, while he cleaned his weapons.

The rain finally stopped at midmorning, and the pilgrims decided to spend an hour or two drying out before heading down the road again. Kadmallin had helped collect branches from fallen trees in the surrounding woods, stripping back the bark of the largest pieces to find drier wood to chop for tinder. After assisting in starting a central campfire, he made a smaller one near the tent he shared with Sketkee.

Kadmallin put his back to the flames as he watched the pilgrims slowly packing up the campsite and drying their clothes beside the large blaze between the wagons. As his eyes scanned the roadside, he ruminated about his exchange of words with Sketkee the prior day. She continued to surprise him. So very much like her people as a whole, but unique in curious ways. To steal the artifact struck him as deeply irrational, an act he would never have expected from her when they traveled together two decades ago. She had changed. Possibly the roots of this difference began with the shift in her endeavors. He had known her as an ambassador, someone skilled in the arts of delicate communication, schooled in the histories of many lands, and fluent in multiple languages. With her father's passing and her return to the Sun Realm, she had altered her path and redirected it unexpectedly.

He received several letters from her throughout the years, and had replied in kind, each informing the other of the progress of their individual lives in the absence of the other. While he took up a position as captain of the targas in Vendau, a middle-sized town in the north of Punderra, she abandoned her station as ambassador and returned to the Kidjat University in Taknaht, the capital of the Sun Realm, to study the various schools of natural philosophy. She spent fifteen years buried in libraries and laboratories, her descriptions of which left Kadmallin's imagination

alight with images of books stacked in endless rows and unfathomable equipment turned to the investigation of nature's inner workings. Rakthors always advanced beyond the knowledge of the other realms, until they collapsed back upon themselves in inevitable war. It made them a people of severe contrasts. Intelligent, purposeful, insistent that rationality guide them, but frequently consumed by the two emotions they did comprehend — fear and anger.

Had fear or anger driven Sketkee to steal the artifact? Her mind demanded answers when presented with enigmas, and the artifact represented a great mystery, one nearly as intriguing as the dreams and the new star that set the pilgrims they traveled with on the road. Could her theft of the artifact and the dreams and the pilgrimage be connected somehow? Sketkee would deride him for conjecture in the absence of evidence. Nothing concrete linked the artifact and the dreams, but Sketkee leaning of it in the Sun Realm at the same time the dreams arrived in the Iron Realm struck him as an interesting coincidence. She had a point, though. The human mind did tend to see patterns where none existed. People commonly read meaning into random events. A flock of birds overhead might portend a bad omen. A broken glass might presage death. A found coin could mean good health. Or the reverse for all of them. Different superstitions for different lands.

His own mind eschewed superstition. He had seen enough lands and enough believers in various gods to avoid holding firm to any faith of his own. Time spent with a godless rakthor only confirmed his predisposition. Of course, they did not discuss their lack of faith with the pilgrims. The faithful would not understand their skepticism. He and Sketkee might argue over the cause of the dreams and the star, he favoring a conspiracy of dark seers and she preferring the numerical probability of random chance and mass delusion — but neither expected to find a god of any sort behind the events they witnessed.

Kadmallin's eyes caught motion to the east of the road, the sight of three approaching travelers chasing away considerations of dreams and gods and the artifact. Two of the pilgrim men packing the camp noticed the strangers and walked to greet them. New pilgrims commonly joined the band during the day along the road. The three strangers talked with the two men from the pilgrim band at the edge of the campsite. He could not hear what they said, but recognized the broad gestures of the taller pilgrim as he questioned the three newcomers.

Kadmallin noted the appearance of the three strangers. They wore clothes familiar to any farmer in the land, but their dry shirts and breeches indicated that they must have managed to hide from the worst of the rain. The men carried long knives, not uncommon among pilgrims as the roads presented grave dangers to those unarmed. Something about them reminded him of the three men he had sent away with a pouch of coins a few weeks previously. These were not the same men. Their sizes did not correspond, but the way they moved, their calm manner and easy stance, made his neck itch. Pilgrims were usually less confident when joining a new group, especially when so few in number.

Kadmallin grabbed his socks and boots as he tapped the side of the tent.

“Best come out.”

He heard Sketkee stir as he slid his boots on and laced them up. She emerged to stand naked behind the tent, the pale light from the clouded sky and the warm glow of the fire casting competing

bluish and orange shimmers across the dark green scales of her flesh as her tail flicked out behind her. Rakhthors found no rationality in modesty. The sight of her nude, her smooth ovoid skull, her taut muscles beneath alien skin, her flat and breastless chest, the hairlessness of her female region, her slender tail — alive like another symbiotic creature — all aroused in him a conflicting cascade of desires — to run, to hold her, to gape in disgust, to pull her by the hand back into the tent and satiate the curiosity at the heart of his unending fascination with her.

“New arrivals.” Kadmallin pointed toward the men at the edge of the camp.

He looked away as he handed her the dried clothes from the makeshift rack of sticks. He pointed to the newly arrived pilgrims as she dressed, using the tent to shield her body from the campsite. She stared over the top of the canvas at the men.

“Ah, yes. It makes sense now.” Sketkee’s tail wrapped around her waist as she slid her legs into her pants. Rakhthors did not divide their manner of dress among their sexes. All wore simple functional pants and shirts. He had seen her once in a dress for a formal ball in her ambassadorial capacity decades ago. She had been uncharacteristically unpleasant the entire evening.

“What makes sense?” Kadmallin stood to his feet, strapping on the belt with the two swords.

“The number of graves and the unburied bodies when we arrived.” Sketkee pulled a black cotton shirt over her shoulders and stepped from behind the tent.

“What about them?” Kadmallin looked to the rows of earthen mounds, partially washed away by two days of precipitation.

“The pilgrims did not depart before completing their task.” Sketkee tightened the drawstrings of her pants.

“I see.” Kadmallin nodded as he turned to watch the newly arrived men who were certainly not pilgrims. “They left bait for the next pilgrim band. They likely only waited because of the heavy rain last night. Hard to fight in heavy rain. And now the rain has stopped, and the pilgrims are half-dressed and packing to leave. Not as great an advantage as a night assault, but good enough.” The three new arrivals chatted easily with the two pilgrims, the men laughing at an unheard jest.

“I will need my sword.” Sketkee extended her open hand.

“Are you certain?” Kadmallin placed his hand on the hilt of the second sword, the one he never drew to use himself.

“These imitation pilgrims will be joined by their companions soon enough. You will need help in killing them.”

“Don’t let the battle provoke you.” Kadmallin pulled the sword free of its scabbard and tossed it to Sketkee. “It’ll frighten the real pilgrims.”

Sketkee snatched the hilt of the sword from the air. “I will restrain myself as appropriate.”

“Good.”

“Kadmallin.”

“Yes?”

“Take care.”

Sketkee sprinted toward the men at the edge of the camp as a glint of metal glimmered in the hazy daylight. One of the newly arrived men held a long knife in an upraised hand. As Kadmallin dashed to follow Sketkee, he heard the pounding of many footsteps approaching through the woods. He shouted the alarm, calling the pilgrims to defend themselves, and wondered at his companion's last words. Odd that she should voice the concern for him that he felt for her.

Time did not allow for more consideration of Sketkee's statement. She attacked the three knife-wielding men, and he rushed to help as dozens more bandits emerged from the shadowed forest to assault the camp, and terrified screams and cries for help filled the air.

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

JASMINE, HYACINTH, and clovatt permeated the air as hummingbirds hovered to suck the nectar from the petals of nearby lilies that lined the stone path, a few daring to hang above the lotus flowers blooming in the gazing pool. Tin-Tsu ignored the bees buzzing around him as he disregarded Tonken-Wu and the retinue of wardens, attendants, and servants trailing a respectful distance behind him. Rin-Lahee did not find the presence of the bees so easy to overlook. She swatted at one that came too close to the folds of her hair, expertly arranged in several layers of ascending curls.

“If you anger them, they will sting you.” Tin-Tsu laughed.

“If they sting me, I will squash them.” Rin-Lahee adjusted her hair with her free hand. Her other hand sat atop Tin-Tsu’s, her elbow entwined through his, both their forearms held parallel with the ground, maintaining the appropriate distance and intimacy for a courting couple.

Tin-Tsu laughed again, and Rin-Lahee smiled in return. He realized, much to his continued surprise, that he quite enjoyed his time with his future bride. A woman possessed of both intelligence and charm, she made the conversations that could have been awkward and unendurable into pleasant respites in his long and conflict-ridden days. She held the additional advantage of being very beautiful. He found that while her womanliness did not arouse his desires, a smile from a lovely face did make the day’s cares fade, if only briefly.

He needed momentary adjournments from the burdens of his station, and his walks with Rin-Lahee, while intended to help acclimate them both to their future life together, also gave him an opportunity to consider that life in greater depth. His decision to accept the counsel of Kao-Rhee and his mother and the rest of his advisers regarding the necessity of a marriage to Rin-Lahee in order to stabilize the fortunes of the ascendancy and the nation still troubled him. He saw the heartless logic of the matter, the need to solidify the familial ties that provided the power to rule, especially in a period of protracted war. However, this presumptive nuptial came at the cost of vacating his long held and devoutly adhered-to vows. He felt positive the power of Ni-Kam-Djen had saved him from death at his coronation and that his god’s intercession hinged upon Tin-Tsu’s fidelity to his faith. If Ni-Kam-Djen might move falling stones to save him and his subjects as reward for his piety, how might The True God respond if Tin-Tsu wavered from the path of the righteous?

“You are thinking about your vows again, aren’t you?” Rin-Lahee’s voice called his eye toward her smiling lips.

“How did you know?” Tin-Tsu sighed. She had begun to read his moods better than his family in the weeks since the coronation. This pleased him, in that it suggested a future wife sensitive to his state of mind, but worried him in the loss of yet another aspect of his privacy he had taken for granted.

“Your eyes have the look of seeing invisible things at an impossible distance.” Rin-Lahee turned away, her smile fading. “It is hard, but it is the right choice.”

Tin-Tsu could not be certain if she attempted to persuade him or herself of the rightness of the course they followed together. Probably both.

“Vows are not usually broken without repentance.” Tin-Tsu watched a dragonfly land on a lotus leaf in a nearby gazing pond. “We have seen the greatness of Ni-Kam-Djen’s protection. I have no desire to see the power of his wrath.”

“You could make prayers of atonement each night of our marriage. Surely that would appease.” Rin-Lahee’s lips curved mischievously.

“It might appease my god, but I doubt it would set me in the good graces of my future wife.” Tin-Tsu saw the dragonfly take flight but quickly lost sight of it among the many flowerbeds of the palace garden.

They walked in silence for a time. With each step along the stone-lined path through manicured trees, trimmed lawns, and geometrically arranged rows of flowers competing in color, he noticed her mood shift, her body tense, her palm upon the top of his hand dampen.

“It is a strange time to live such strange lives.” Rin-Lahee watched a hummingbird buzz around the flowers of a rose bush.

“A monastery priest made zhan in the span of weeks. A young tahneff from the provinces set to marry one zhan suddenly marrying his brother. Strange times indeed.” Tin-Tsu observed one of the dragonflies alight upon the shoulder of Rin-Lahee’s embroidered silk robe, apparently mistaking the flowery curves of red and yellow for some natural bloom. Unsatisfied with what it found, the insect departed in a blur of tiny wings.

“I meant more the events beyond our own personal lives.” Rin-Lahee frowned, seeming uncertain how to proceed. “I mean that we have seen, as you say, the protection of our god, The True God, Ni-Kam-Djen, but we have also seen things that openly contradict his power throughout the dominion and the realm. The dreams. The star. This prophet and her pilgrims. It is confusing to try and understand what it all means. Do not you find this? Or does your faith shield you from uncertainty?”

“My faith guides me while Ni-Kam-Djen shields me.” Tin-Tsu sighed, feeling the hidden weight of her question settle around his shoulders. “But I appreciate your concerns. Beyond the war, there is little else my advisers of the council discuss. They insist that I take a firmer hand with the pilgrims. That I reauthorize the militias.”

“And will you?” Rin-Lahee turned to look up at him, her large eyes filled with curiosity and what he took to be supportive concern.

“I do not think it wise to command the slaughter of my own people for the loss of their faith in the face of extraordinary events.” Tin-Tsu frowned. “During the First Great Dominion of the Iron Realm, zhan after zhan struggled to bring the whole population under the bough of the great tree of our faith, to have the entire realm worship The True God, Ni-Kam-Djen. In frustration, Zhan Lin Zu-Gi issued a proclamation outlawing all other faiths, imposing the worship of Ni-Kam-Djen on all people. A rebellion formed within a year, and within ten years, the First Great Dominion fell to sectarian wars. During the Second Great Dominion, Zhan Wan Tan-Wu issued a similar proclamation, giving the added enforcement of public whippings and imprisonment for those who failed to comply or who were caught with contraband texts and objects of worship. Rebellion began in months, and within five years, the Second Great Dominion had fallen to sectarian wars. Zhan Vay To-Zhee of the Third Great Dominion went further than his predecessors, fielding armed militias to search homes, destroy temples, and kill in the street those who refused to convert. His rule lasted a further nine months before the collapse of the Third Great Dominion. Each time we try to force our faith upon the various believers of the realm, it dooms our rule. Were there only two faiths to contend for dominance, it might be possible. But we see how the war with the Tanshen Dominion drags on over a schism within a single faith.”

“What then will you do?” Rin-Lahee asked.

“End this war and preserve our faith in the face of an unknown force.” Tin-Tsu hoped that his best efforts proved sufficient to the task. He had begun to doubt his ability to reconcile the religious and political aspects of the situation.

“Do you believe, as the priests tell us, that the dreams and the star and all the rest are products of dark seers with unholy intentions?” Rin-Lahee brushed back a fallen strand of hair, setting it expertly in place among its companions.

“I do not know.” Tin-Tsu considered the question again as he had every day since the arrival of the new star weeks ago. “It is easy to proclaim your god to be The True God and all others false when no explicit action of any god announces their existence. It becomes more difficult when people across the realm share the same dream of a star that one night shines suddenly in the sky. Ni-Kam-Djen granted us a miracle at my coronation. I do not know what to make of the other events.”

“If there were more than one god, what might happen if they made themselves known all at once?” Rin-Lahee blushed as she glanced away from him. “I do not intend blasphemy, but who else has a priest as her future husband to pester with theological concerns?”

“It is no blasphemy, at least not to my ears.” Tin-Tsu managed a thin smile. “However, it might be best if you reserved such queries for me rather than the temple priests. As to what will happen, we must put our faith in Ni-Kam-Djen and wait to see.”

“A sensible suggestion.” Rin-Lahee smiled up at him.

Staring into her eyes, he wished he could feel for her what he knew a prospective husband should. What he had felt once for another. A passion that had driven him into exile and the cold walls of a mountain temple. Different walls confined him now, not as easily seen, but more constricting than ever.

Twin dragonflies darted to hover before Rin-Lahee as they walked, keeping pace with their steps. Tin-Tsu welcomed the distraction from his thoughts as they stopped to watch the multihued insects dance in the air. Rin-Lahee raised a finger toward them, and the more daring of the two lit atop her long, red, lacquered nail. She smiled at the little beast, giggling as two more dragonflies joined the first to float effortlessly around her hand.

Tin-Tsu stared in wonder and growing amazement as more dragonflies arrived — called by some unheard sound, some unseen beacon, creating a gently undulating swarm around Rin-Lahee's head. The cloud of dragonflies began to churn in a single direction, gradually aligning themselves in a pattern that Tin-Tsu recognized, a symbol that chilled his skin and quickened his breath. The dragonflies held their positions, spacing themselves out in a curving line from the one atop her finger in three spiraled arcs. Tin-Tsu had seen that spiral image before in another form in a different place — in the heretic dream that came to him each night.

“It's beautiful.” Rin-Lahee marveled at the dragonfly spiral looming above her.

“Yes.” Tin-Tsu reached his hand slowly toward the insects.

As Tin-Tsu held his hand near Rin-Lahee's, a cloud of black wings descended from the sky, shattering the spiral in a frenzy of motion. A small flock of hummingbirds attacked the dragonflies, jabbing at them with tiny beaks. The dragonflies darted off for the safety of the trees, the hummingbirds in urgent pursuit.

“What can it mean?” Rin-Lahee held her hand to her mouth in shock.

Tin-Tsu looked behind to see that only Tonken-Wu had noticed the aerial battle above their heads. The look on his face spoke of even greater concern than usual. Dragonflies did not fly in spirals of their own accord. Hummingbirds did not flock to attack. Invisible forces exerted their will around him. Again. A portent of something. But what?

“It is a sign,” he said finally. “Of what, I cannot fathom.”

THE SEER



RANKARUS

THE STINGING scent of crushed limestone clung to the air and permeated the roughhewn walls of the small shop. Rankarus bent to sniff the layers of parchment paper stacked on the table. They smelled clean, more like dried wood than processed animal skin. The aroma of lime wafted through again, carried on the breeze from the back room where a young boy of twelve or so stood stirring animal hides in a large iron vat, the lime water gradually dissolving the hair from the pelts.

“I also have some fine paper here.” A gap-toothed man with a gnarled, fleshy nose pointed to a stack of rag-pressed sheaves on a counter.

“Parchment.” Rankarus ran his fingers along the firm sheets, judging their smoothness, holding them each between thumb and forefinger to test thickness and gauge durability.

“If you have the coin.” The shopkeeper licked his lips.

“I do.” Rankarus smiled at the shopkeeper, turning from the stack of parchment to a shelf of inks and writing implements. “I’ll need a few other things as well.” Rankarus held forth a small pouch, jiggling it in his fingers to bring forth the sound of coins.

Rankarus still smiled as he left the print shop a short time later, a burlap sack slung over his shoulder. His smile faded with every footstep. The sullen face he had borne in private the past weeks, ever since the fire that had destroyed the inn and his former life, returned, worn like a mask at a mourning ceremony. His shoulders slumped as he considered again the shift in his and his family’s fortunes.

He did not blame Kellatra for the dangers facing them. He could have done. It would have been easy to question her actions and condemn them. But to do so meant ignoring his own decisions over the years. Choices that now put his family in as great a danger as presented by that infernal book.

What was the codex? Why would people kill for it? What secrets did it contain? Rankarus knew this last question motivated Kellatra more than any other. She always found puzzles and mysteries irresistible. How did the mechanical clock in the temple tower work? How had the rabbit gone missing from the hutch near the barn? Could sense be made from the alignment and appearance of certain numbers? The book presented the greatest puzzle possible — especially for a seer.

His wife, a seer. How had he not suspected it in all those years? Had his love inured him to the obvious? It appeared plain enough in hindsight — a reading lens revealing with clarity a script

once fuzzy and familiar, but illegible. Kellatra possessed The Sight. That fact brought many questions to mind. Had she started the fire by setting that man aflame? Had she killed the soul catcher, or had Abananthus snapped the creature's neck? Rankarus had asked them both, only to be rebuffed with claims of dim memory due to the weight and terror of the events. Why had she been banished? She had fled to meet with her father before telling him. Her father. A man dead but not dead. A riddle representative of his wife's life before meeting him. She had returned late and said nothing before falling asleep. Not wanting to broach the subject, for fear of an argument or further deceptions necessary by both parties, he had slipped out before she awoke to attend to errands in the city.

He thought of her still sleeping in the bed, sheet curled around her slender frame, hair spilled across the pillow, breath shallow, face twisted in concern, even in slumber, the dreams likely taunting her. Dreams that made no sense of the life they now found themselves living. He had lied to her about having the dreams, pretending they did not afflict him. He pretended as much to himself as well. He could not understand them, would not follow their call, and so decided to ignore the dreams as best he could. He did not believe in gods and spirits, and the dreams implied things he would rather never need contemplate.

He sighed as he thought of his conversation with Kellatra the previous day. So much about her still remained unseen even with the revelations of her true past. Were it not for his own secrets, he might have been tempted to rage at her deceptions, especially with their children's welfare at stake. He could not honestly condemn his wife's reticence to expose her hidden truths when he concealed his own. There would be time for answers to his questions later, once they were free of the book and well shed of the city. There might be time to explain his own history in the hopes of setting their old stories aside to concentrate on the new one they told together.

For the moment, he concerned himself with issues more important than why his wife feared introducing him to her father, or why the man might try to have her arrested. Instead, he pondered the source of their troubles — the book. How soon could they return it? Might they fetch a reward for its safe retrieval? How quickly could they leave the city? Could he avoid being recognized by any of his old acquaintances?

As though manifesting out of his daydreams, like a seer manipulating the fabric of reality to fashion an inopportune and ill-fitted suit, a man with an all-too-familiar face passed him in the street. Rankarus kept his eyes ahead, his pace steady, not daring to glance back and give acknowledgment of his presence and identity. He reached up to run his hand through the weeks-old beard cloaking his chin. It might alter the look of his face enough to render him unrecognizable. He patted his stomach, regretting the loss of the ale fat that had melted away over the long pilgrim march to the city. His trimmer features made him resemble his past appearance too greatly.

He turned a corner, quickened his pace, and turned another, stopping to look back around the edge of a building, waiting to see if the man he recognized followed him. He stood and watched the street, leaning against the wall of the shop. He did not see the man round the corner. Maybe the man had not seen him, had not recognized him. Possibly, Rankarus had been mistaken in identifying the man. Perhaps his nerves and fears and daydreams warped his judgment.

He hitched the burlap bag over his shoulder and continued back to the Black Elk Inn, taking a circuitous route through side streets and small parks and narrow alleys. As he walked, he remembered the last time he had seen the man he hoped to evade with his meandering path through the city.

TEN YEARS AGO

METAL STRUCK metal — bent slightly, twisted gently.

“Yer dead as ya stand.”

The slender shaft of the metal pick probed the keyhole of the hand-sized lock.

“Ya hear. Dead.”

The click of metal gears falling into place accompanied the relieved pop of the lock arm from the housing block.

“Skin flayed and heart eaten while ya watch dead.”

Rankarus cast the third and final lock aside and opened the lid of the steel-clad wooden chest. He smiled as the contents reflected glittering light from the lantern onto his face. Gold coins and sapphire brooches, diamond necklaces and ruby earrings, an emerald-encrusted dagger, and a silver chalice. He pulled a small leather bag from beneath his shirt and filled it with what he needed. What belonged to him.

“I’ll roast ya alive and gut ya like a stag at a holy festival.”

Rankarus finished filling the bag and closed the lid of the chest, replacing the locks and snapping them shut. He stood up, grabbed the lantern, and walked from the small storeroom into the main chamber of the subterranean grotto. The low ceiling and stone walls created long shadows from the lantern light. A table sat in the middle of the room, dice and cards next to cups of wine. Three men lay sprawled on the floor near their empty chairs, their heads rolling, their eyes unfocused. The man in the center of the room, the one with the scar across his forehead, the one drooling as he struggled to form words, cursed and pawed uselessly at the floor. Kinorus.

“Chop yer limbs off one by one and feed them to ya till there’s nothin’ left.”

Rankarus frowned. He should have dosed the wine more strongly. He hadn’t planned for them to wake for hours. If they made too much noise, it would alert the men in the upper chambers. He walked to the closest of the three men, an older fellow named Jantipur. Rankarus grabbed a cup from the table, held Jantipur’s nose until his mouth opened, and poured wine down his throat. The third man, Donalthus, larger than the other two, began to struggle to sit upright. Rankarus grabbed the second of two open bottles and repeated the procedure, forcing the man to swallow the wine. Donalthus fell silent, his head drooping forward to his chest.

He did the same with Kinorus, pouring wine into the man’s mouth, holding his weakened arms as he struggled vainly and voiced one last protest.

“Nobody steals from me and lives,” Kinorus gurgled between forced gulps.

Rankarus stared into the drugged but furious eyes of his captive, his former employer, his always adversary, as the man's mind dimmed under the poison. He needed to leave, but first, he wanted to bid the man farewell, so that he might understand Rankarus's actions.

"I am not stealing from you, Kinorus. I am claiming what you stole from me. I surveyed the estate. I seduced Kinsett Alandri. I broke into the family vaults. I stole the jewels. You did none of these things. I escaped without raising notice or alarm. You did what you always do. You claimed half merely for not killing me. The same fee you charge to all thieves in the city, but an injustice I can no longer bear to pay. And I believe you. You will kill me if you see me again. But you will not see me again. I will take my bounty and go far away and never return. No one will know I have taken from you what is mine. You will say you sent me away to scout a new prospect. Your enterprise will continue unaffected. And you will remember when you awaken that I did not slit your throat when I held the opportunity in my hand."

Rankarus watched Kinorus's eyes slide closed. As he pulled the men up into the empty chairs, leaning their heads against the table, he wondered how much Kinorus actually heard and would remember of his well-rehearsed speech.

Rankarus hid the bag at his side as he slid his cloak over his shoulder and looked again at the room. The men would appear to have fallen asleep after a night of drinking and gambling. A perfect alibi for all involved. A part of him wondered if it might not be best to slit at least Kinorus's throat, but he had never been comfortable killing men, much less men who could not defend themselves.

He hoped leaving Kinorus alive would keep the man from sending hounds to follow him as he fled the city. Where would he flee? That part of his plan had never been detailed. Someplace distant enough to make pursuit unlikely. Someplace he could create a new life. Punderra? He had a friend there who ran an inn in a town called Nahan Kana. A wealthy trade town with plenty of merchant daughters. Maybe his friend needed a partner. Running an inn might be the perfect masquerade to distract attention from his endeavors to liberate the wealthy locals of their excess abundance. Yes, running an inn might be fun. A change of direction in his life. A cleansing rain causing new seeds to flourish.

Rankarus smiled and slipped from the room, using a secret passage to leave the warehouse unseen, disappearing into the darkened streets, claiming his newly purchased horse from a local stable, and riding out of the City of Leaves for the last time.

THE PRESENT

RANKARUS WALKED sideways into the alley across the street from the inn where he and his family stayed with Abananthus and Jadaloo. He waited, as he had several times along the way home from making his purchases. He stepped farther into the shadowed alley and bent to one knee beside two cracked and discarded wooden barrels, watching the entrance to the alley. He had seen no one following him, but he could not risk a mistake. His family's life depended on it. He still cursed himself for his flailing attempts to defend himself against the man who had attacked him in

the kitchen of the Three Moons Inn the night of the fire. Had he not been so drunk, his blade would have hit its mark and he might have been able to help Kellatra rather than leaving her to face a soul catcher. He had taken to practicing throwing his dagger at trees far from the pilgrim campsites each night, honing a skill he had let fade over the soft years of playing innkeeper. He needed to shed that role — an actor in a traveling troupe walking from the stage to return moments later in a new costume, inhabiting a new character. He needed to become the man he had been. The man he had hoped never to be again.

He heard footsteps and tensed against the wall, out of sight from the entrance to the shadowed alleyway. He had been followed. He slid the dagger silently from the sheath at his waist, holding his breath until the feet of the man who pursued him stepped past his vision.

He stood, moving in a single motion, slamming the man against the far wall and thrusting the blade to his exposed neck. Fearful brown eyes looked back at him through wild-cast locks of oily gray hair. The man's breath stank of sour ale as he spoke, his voice trembling.

"It is ya then."

"You did not see me, Jantipur." Rankarus leaned his weight against the dagger, the blade pressing into the sagging flesh of the man's throat.

"No. No, I didn't see ya, Rankarus, old friend." Jantipur relaxed and laughed slightly, his grin revealing yellowed and broken teeth. "I did not see ya for a price."

"This is all I have." Rankarus pulled the coin pouch from beneath his shirt with his free hand and pressed it into Jantipur's grasping fingers. "Now go. If I see you again, the metal you get will be between your ribs."

"Yer no murderer, Rankarus, or I'd not be alive." Jantipur clutched at the pouch, holding it with both hands. "But Kinorus is alive. And he'll kill ya if he hears yer in the city again."

"Then you keep your mouth locked tight." Rankarus gripped Jantipur's throat for emphasis. "I may not be a murderer, but that doesn't mean I won't kill you."

Rankarus drew back his arm and brought the heel of the dagger against Jantipur's temple. The man groaned and collapsed to the dirt of the alley. Rankarus tucked the coin pouch beneath the man's soiled shirt and pulled his limbs behind the broken barrels, out of sight. He had no way of knowing if Jantipur would take his money and betray him, but the man would surely run to Kinorus if he awoke robbed penniless by passersby. He looked enough like a drunkard sleeping off a bad night to turn away all but the most curious eyes. He could not leave the man conscious. Not so close to the inn. Rankarus cursed, annoyed at having led his past back to his family's doorstep. He needed to be more careful in the future. Hopefully, that future did not require too many more hours in the City of Leaves.

As he stood to leave the alley, he saw someone at the entrance to the street and swallowed as recognition caused his heart to beat faster.

"Who is that man, and why did you knock him unconscious?"

Kellatra stared at Rankarus, frowning in worried curiosity.

Rankarus stepped forward, doing as he had always done when his mind would not form words or thoughts, moving into action until his mouth might work of its own accord.

“We need to find another place to stay.” Rankarus looked deep into his wife’s concerned eyes.
“It is not safe here.”

THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

SUNLIGHT FILTERED through the leaves of oak and lanish trees, warm against naked skin, a delicious contrast to the cool water, heated by the noonday sun but cooling in the later hours of day. Palla floated, arms outstretched, feet paddling slowly beneath her, adding buoyancy, keeping her suspended in the middle of the pond. She filled her lungs with air scented by forest plants and soil. She held her breath a moment and then slowly exhaled, releasing all her concerns about the pilgrims and the carnival as she bobbed gently in the water.

The carnival quit the road early that day, and after helping set up camp, Palla had wandered into the woods in search of much needed privacy. Life with the carnival did not provide many opportunities for solitude, and she often sought them out by walking the woods and fields near the nightly camps. Her wanderings took her farther than expected, but she forgave herself all concerns of safety with the first sight of the small pond.

With water so clear it revealed the bottom three body-lengths below, and no doubt fed by a subterranean stream, the pond represented too great a temptation to resist. It had been more than a year since she had the opportunity to soak alone in a small body of water. The pools of water she had once frequented tended to be far smaller and lined with iron, but a secluded pond made for easy adaptation.

It felt good to be far from the others for a short time. The tensions between the pilgrims pretending to be carnival folk and the real carnival people ebbed and expanded as the weeks passed. Some days, the two groups appeared indistinguishable as they made camp or marched along the roads. The pilgrims made themselves useful when they passed through towns and villages large enough to set up the stage. A few of them even took roles in *The Saga of Fallen Lands*, the play they mounted most often, the play with so many scenes, written by so many hands over the centuries, that it could rarely be presented in its full form in a single day. Usually, Leotin selected scenes to perform based on the mood he intuited from the patrons, sometimes choosing the next scene while the actors spoke their lines. He seldom gauged a crowd wrongly, nearly always knowing what they wanted to see and what would entice them to spend more on trinkets and games between acts.

While the performances with both pilgrims and carnival folk frequently showed great promise, the times between often shattered that hope, particularly when the band came across other faithful wayfarers. Jhanal, the spokesperson for the leaderless pilgrims, repeatedly made the case

for adding more of his fellow believers to their collective. He argued that all the Goddess's children deserved to travel in the relative safety provided by the carnival and its three foreign warriors. Leotin refused to listen to Jhanal's entreaties, threatening to banish them all back to the road alone. Only Palla's continued persuasion, and the threats of the three outlanders to accompany the pilgrims, kept Leotin from making good on his stated intentions. Tensions rose higher when passing the remnants of pilgrim bands attacked by militia, but tended to ease after a few days without harassment. Today had been a good day, with all parties behaving like a closely woven village rather than a roaming band of strangers.

Palla smiled, reflecting on the difference of her life in little more than a year. A year traveling with the carnival, of acting before crowds, causing them to swoon with her words, fear her presence, or hate her actions, depending upon the character she played. She lived a life she had never imagined, a life more fulfilling than she could have hoped for had she stayed with her family.

She sank a little as her body tensed at the memory of her home. She pushed the thoughts away. Some memories added too much weight and dragged one beneath the surface. Best to consider them on dry land in the safety of a warm blanket. She tilted her head back into the water, immersing her long, fiery hair to fan out behind her — a wide, crimson lily pad waiting for a lotus to bloom forth from it.

“Hello?”

Palla opened her eyes and twisted around, searching for the voice that called to her. She saw Ranna, one of the pilgrim women, standing at the edge of the pond, holding the branch of a tree from her face with an upraised arm, strands of her long black hair caught among the leaves.

“Hello.” Palla smiled and waved. One of the more friendly and helpful of the pilgrim band, Ranna always pitched in to set camp or make a meal or hold scenery upright at the sides of the their portable stage.

“I was lookin' for someplace to...” Ranna waved her hand to indicate the pond. “You've found the bathin' hole.”

“I got lucky with the direction I chose to walk.” Palla wiped water from her face as her head bobbed along the surface of the pond.

“Is it cold?” Ranna released the branch and stepped closer to the water, tugging at her large leather boots.

Palla thought the older woman looked ridiculous wearing men's boots, but Ranna had told her they were all that remained from her father, a farmer who had taken his lone daughter on the road to seek the source and meanings of the dreams they shared each night. He had died, impaled on a militiaman's sword. She had been out walking in the woods and returned to camp to find everyone dead.

“It's chill, but not cold.” Palla averted her eyes as Ranna tugged her dress over her head and shucked her underclothes to the ground.

Ranna's form reflected across the water, slender brown limbs submerging quickly beneath the surface. As Palla turned back to Ranna, she noted how clearly she saw the woman's small breasts floating before her. She experienced an irrational desire to cover her own breasts, knowing

they were as easily visible. An odd sensation coursed over her as Ranna swam closer to float a few paces away. She chided herself for being silly. She had seen plenty of naked women in the last year and been seen by plenty more. The same for the men. A carnival of actors made a poor home for false modesty.

“This is lovely.” Ranna sank beneath the water, staying down a long time.

Palla ignored the nagging thought that Ranna saw her nakedness even more obviously while swimming below the surface. She popped up a few feet from Palla, water streaming from her face as she smiled.

“I wish we could take this pond with us along the road.” Ranna spit out a mouthful of the clear water.

“I rather doubt it would fit it in a wagon.” Palla laughed at the idea.

“I been meanin’ to thank ya.” Ranna’s angular face took on a serious cast. “Fer working so hard to take us pilgrims along with ya all.”

“You don’t need to thank me.” Palla blushed under Ranna’s intense stare. “I’m sure it had more to do with the outlanders promising to go with you if Leotin kicks you out.”

“All the same, yer words help. It’s much appreciated. Dreamers don’t find many to take their side across the realm. Does ya have the dream yerself?” Ranna’s eyes held Palla’s.

“Yes.” Palla ignored the urge to dip her burning cheeks beneath the water. Why did a simple farm woman cause her so much consternation? “I think half the carnival folk have the dream. Maybe more.”

“And ya gots no desire to follow it? Ta see what it means?” Ranna cocked her head to the side, curious.

“I gave up letting forces around me guide my steps when I left home. I go where I choose and do as I choose now. And for now, I choose to follow the carnival.” Palla did wonder about the dreams, about the star and the prophet, but she wouldn’t allow those things to set her course. She’d run from home to make her own life instead of one others wished for her. She’d not go back to allowing someone else to point her feet or pick her path, especially not some dream goddess in the Forbidden Realm. As far as concerned her, only one goddess likely existed, the Great Mother Goddess, Nag Mot Gioth, creator of all, twin eternal force and mate to the elemental destroyer, the Great Father, Nag Pat Gioth. Two gods were two gods too many to believe in already.

“Pretty flowers floatin’ in the water.”

Palla turned to the voice calling loudly across the pond. She grimaced as she saw Grandal and Tellin at the water’s edge. This time, she did not ignore the urge to cover her breasts, churning her feet faster to keep afloat.

“Come closer so we can smell ya, pretty flowers.” Grandal laughed at what he clearly thought to be good joke.

“Go away, Grandal.” Palla put as much authority as possible into her voice, calling on her many times playing the queen on stage.

“Ain’t no fake trees here, and we ain’t yer footman today.” Tellin sneered at her.

The two men had joined the carnival two months ago as simple laborers to replace two older men who left to follow a pilgrim band. The new recruits often served in lesser roles without words or managed scenery for the actors. Palla scowled. She did not like these men. They did not fit well with the others in the carnival. Did not respect the work each person did. Did not respect much of anything beyond their own high opinions of themselves. They constantly pawed at the women of the troupe, bringing hard words from Leotin until they learned to restrain themselves to mere verbal advances.

“We’ll leave if ya want the water that bad.” Ranna made to swim for the shore.

“Thank ya fer yer kindness.” Tellin glared at Ranna. “Maybe we don’t wanna wait.”

“What’s yer hurry? Ya got no clothes to wear anyways.” Grandal grabbed the women’s dresses and pitched them up into the branches of a nearby tree.

Ranna stopped in the water, paddling in place.

“Stop acting like fools, the both of you.” Palla raised her voice to a shout.

“Think yer too good fer us?” Grandal jabbed a finger at his chest.

“We’ll shout for the others if you don’t leave.” Palla feared that would help little. She had walked far from the camp. Doubtless the men had followed her and Ranna from the start. Their arrival at the pond could not be chance.

“Call all ya like.” Tellin stepped closer to the water’s edge. “Can’t no one hear ya.”

“I got a better idea.” Grandal tugged at his shirt, yanking it over his head. “Don’t you bother comin’ out. We’ll come in fer ya. I got sumpin’ I wanna show ya.”

Tellin laughed and ran around to the opposite side of the pond. He kicked his boots off as he mimicked his friend’s disrobing. As Grandal shed his trousers and waded into the pond, the engorged state of his member indicated his intentions.

“If ya don’t want to lose that little thing, don’t swim no closer.” Ranna moved beside Palla, both paddling backward.

“Oh, I wanna get it lost somewheres, that’s fer certain.” Grandal snorted as he dug his arms into the water to propel himself toward the women.

“Ain’t had none say it were small.” Tellin grunted in amusement as he splashed into the pond.

Palla doubted it as well, from what she glimpsed as the man dove into the water. Her limbs began to feel weak and her stomach tightened. She looked to see Tellin approaching from behind them. She and Ranna could try to swim for the side of the pond and run through the woods. How far would they get barefoot and naked? She didn’t see many other options.

“We need to get out of the pond and run,” Palla whispered to Ranna.

“Yep.” Ranna paddled faster.

They were unwilling to take their eyes from the men and watched as Grandal and Tellin reached the middle of the pond.

“Where do ya think yer swimmin’? Didn’t we just get in ta join ya?” Grandal leered at the women from the center of the pond.

“Ya ain’t changed yer minds, has ya?” Tellin splashed beside his friend. “If ya thinks yer wet now, just wait a bit, girl.”

Palla did not like her options. They could run, but the men would catch them. They could fight, but the men would overpower them. They could surrender, but the men would take that as permission. Who among the carnival or pilgrims would believe them then?

“Goddess protect us.” Ranna traced the sign of a spiral across her chest as she continued to paddle with the other hand.

“Yer not dreamin’, ya daft girl.” Grandal threw his arms wide. “There’s no goddess here.”

As Grandal’s voice echoed between the trees of the woods, the water around him began to move. At first, the motion of the pond resembled ripples sent rushing outward from Grandal’s movement, but in the space of seconds, the direction of the waves twisted sideways, turning back upon themselves, rotating in a circular fashion.

“What the hell!” Grandal yelled in panic.

“What have ya done?” Tellin cried out as the water spun him around.

Palla stared in fear and wonder as she watched the whirl of water grow into a churning vortex, a liquid sinkhole that pulled the two men beneath the surface. The whirlpool continued for several long seconds, touching only the center of the pond, leaving Palla and Ranna floating well beyond its reach.

The mysterious fluid phenomenon ended abruptly, the water returning to normal, the surface of the pond once again still. Palla looked around, expecting the bodies of the two men to float to the surface. Whatever force had pulled the men to the bottom of the pond, it did not release them again, and no evidence of their presence arose in the water, now muddied from the silt churned up from the bottom by the bizarre whirlpool.

“Did you do that?” Palla’s breath came in frantic gasps. She could not discern if her fear originated with the plans of the two men, or the manner of their death and disappearance.

“Not I.” Ranna smiled. “The Goddess saved us.”

Palla thought the woman’s wide-stretched mouth to be beautiful. Maybe a goddess had saved them, but it had been Ranna who had called for divine assistance.

“We must tell the others.” Ranna’s eyes seemed alight with the passion of her belief.

“We tell no one.” Palla could not imagine the response of the carnival folk to the events she had witnessed, and did not feel certain she wanted to know what the pilgrims would make of it. “For now at least.”

THE SEER



RANKARUS

“WHY?”

“I told you. It’s not safe.”

Rankarus looked out the window from beyond the edge of the wooden frame, resisting the urge to close the shutters. Closed shutters in the afternoon would stand apart from the other windows and call attention to them. Only people who needed to hide something closed their shutters before sundown.

“Yes. You said. But you did not tell me why.” Kellatra folded her arms across her chest. “Who was that man?”

“Someone I knew.” Rankarus turned back to face his wife, staring at her over the bed of their small room in the inn. Abananthus, Jadaloo, and the children sat in the adjoining room. He stepped around the bed, closing the distance from Kellatra.

“Do you always knock old friends unconscious?” Kellatra scowled at Rankarus as he pulled her away from the chamber door.

“When they want to mention that I’m in town, yes.” Rankarus lowered his voice, blinking his eyes as he tried to think. He had not expected Kellatra to see him in the alley. The children were hungry. She had been out buying food and found him by chance. How much could he tell her? How much did he want to tell her?

Kellatra stared at him, waiting in silence for the further explanation she clearly expected.

“I have not told you all of my past.” Rankarus glanced toward the door to the other room.

“We have that trait in common, it seems.” Kellatra smiled and took his hands.

“I owe someone in the city money. Or that is the way he will see it.” Rankarus found he breathed a little easier with her hands in his.

“How much money?” Kellatra asked.

“Enough to want to kill me for it.” Rankarus frowned as Kellatra gasped.

“You borrowed it?” Kellatra clenched his hands.

“No. He stole it from me, and I stole it back.” Rankarus winced at the look in her eyes.

“That is why you did not wish to come to the City of Leaves.” Kellatra looked away, obviously thinking through their conversations over the last weeks. “That is why you wanted to sell the book?”

“No.” Rankarus’s voice deepened in anger at the thought. “I’ll never give that man anything more than a knife blade. No, I wanted to sell the book so we would have the money to go and begin somewhere anew. Someplace where no one might recognize us. Someplace we would be safe.”

“This adds rubble to the ruins.” Kellatra released his hands and clasped hers together in concentration. “I made an arrangement with my father.”

“And the terms of that arrangement?” Rankarus’s stomach soured.

“If I give him the codex, my father will convince the Academy High Council to suspend my banishment while I uncover the meaning of the text.” Kellatra’s eyes darted around the room, seeking something unseen.

“We cannot stay in this city.” Rankarus pointed out the window in emphasis. “I cannot hide forever, and he will kill me.”

“The codex and the dreams and the star are all connected.” Kellatra stepped closer to Rankarus, looking up to him, her face a mixture of confusion and anger and passion.

“If the man who seeks me finds me, he will kill all of us as surely as those men and that soul catcher would have back in the inn,” Rankarus said. “Give your father the book and let us leave.”

“I am to take him the codex tonight,” Kellatra said.

“Good.” A wave of relief spread through Rankarus’s limbs — cool water on sun-tender skin. They could be clear of the city before dawn. It made the errands he ran that day useless, but better to be free of the book than see his family suffer for his plans. “When do we go?”

“I will go alone.” Kellatra sounded sad, the loss of the book and the chance to study it nearly bringing tears to her eyes.

“It is not safe.” Rankarus followed Kellatra’s gaze to the box hidden under the bed.

“That is why I must go alone.” Kellatra’s face hardened. He recognized the look when she would brook no argument to her mind’s direction. “If something happens to me, you must protect the children. I will meet you by the north gate at middle-night.”

Rankarus stared at her, uncertain what to say. All his past decisions had led to this moment, yet he could not discern which of them he would have needed to change to avoid the resulting danger surrounding his wife and children and friends. It did not matter. He could not alter the past. He could only act in the present and hope for better results in the future. A future where Kellatra and the children were safe.

“Middle-night at the north gate.”

Rankarus walked to Kellatra and took her in his arms, kissing her deeply, filling the kiss with all the words he could not manage to speak — words of fear and love and hope and anger and shame. As he pulled away from the kiss, he added a few words aloud.

“If anything happens to you...” He found he did not have more words than that.

Kellatra looked up at him, a near fanaticism in her eyes.

“If anything happens to me, you will take the children and run.”

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

THE JARRING clash of steel against steel resounded through the air, mixing with the screams of women, the moans of wounded men, and the sound of flesh being torn beneath the force of powerful, taloned hands. Sketkee fought four bandits, each larger than an average human male, each more skilled than one might suspect from those who typically fought unarmed travelers. She blocked a sword with her own blade and smashed her fist into the sword bearer's face, bones cracking loudly under the strength of her arm. She spun to the side, deflecting another blade, leaping back to dodge an ax.

She and Kadmallin had quickly dispatched the three impostor pilgrims as the bandit cohort first attacked the pilgrim campsite. They had pressed their attack against the first men to reach the camp, but the bandits proved more organized than expected. The invaders rapidly divided into four teams, two assaulting the pilgrims and the other two engaging Sketkee and Kadmallin, pushing them apart to pick them off alone.

The bandits forced her and Kadmallin into retreat farther from each other with each backward step. Kadmallin's skill with a sword was matched by few, but his age worked against him when facing so many opponents. He could not hope to survive long against three trained men. Sketkee found it difficult to accurately assess her own odds of survival. A new man joined the fight to replace one she felled by relieving him of a leg. Even the best warrior would be brought down by superior numbers, and it had been many octads since the peak of her ambassadorial combat training in her youth. She needed to gain the advantage against her adversaries.

She attacked the nearest bandit with a flurry of sword strikes, seeking his limbs and the soft spots around his thin leather armor. She staggered back as a blade bit into the shoulder of her free arm. While tougher than human flesh, rakthor skin provided little protection against sharpened metal. Blood oozed down her bicep as she swung her blade to block another blow.

This could not continue. She would die, and Kadmallin would be killed. The mystery of the artifact would perish with her passing. An unacceptable situation. With limited options, one path presented itself, even if it caused the pilgrims to shun her completely. However, they were not likely to live if she died.

Sketkee took a deep breath, filling her chest, clenching the glands of her neck, holding her stomach tight. She released the breath with all the force her lungs could produce, clicking her jaw wide as the glands at the back of her throat and underneath her tongue expelled their special venom,

combining on contact in the air and igniting in a burst of flame that belched forth to consume the man nearest her.

Flames clung to the man's arms and face as he screamed in agony and terror. Sketkee turned and breathed fire again, spraying the bandits with a blue-orange liquid light, creating a conflagration among the men who encircled her. Howling in pain and surprise, the men turned to run, stumbling as they flailed against the unstoppable fire eating at the flesh of their hands and chests and cheeks. Sketkee swung her sword with deft precision, slaughtering the four men as they attempted to flee, their bodies tumbling to the ground, fire still consuming their clothes and exposed skin. She crossed the short distance to where Kadmallin battled the three bandits. One of the men had seen her kill his companions and the method of doing so. He turned and bolted, throwing away his weapon to make greater haste in his escape.

Unencumbered by the reduction in the number of assailants surrounding him, Kadmallin dispatched one of the remaining bandits as Sketkee plunged her sword through the back of the last man, both falling to the ground together, the pleas of their final moments before death spoken to the cold, deaf earth.

"You're wounded." Kadmallin stared at the bleeding cut along Sketkee's arm.

"I will be fine. I can bleed like this for another twenty minutes before it kills me." Sketkee looked past Kadmallin's shoulder to see that the bandits had lost their enthusiasm for the fight in the face of their friends' fiery deaths. They ran in groups of two and three back into the woods.

"We should get you stitched." Kadmallin came closer to examine her wound.

"There are others who will need stitching." Sketkee saw several pilgrims sprawled on the dirt and grass, holding wounded limbs as they called for help. A few held their chests or stomachs. These would die soon. No field dressing could save wounds to the gut or lungs. The rational thing to do would be to end their suffering peacefully, but she knew from long experience with humans, particularly those of great religious persuasion, that to do so would create unnecessary unease. They would rather watch their companions die slowly in pain from injuries than kill them with their own hands. She had explained the rakthor position on such circumstances to Kadmallin, and he had assured her he would not hesitate if such a thing proved necessary. He in fact insisted she commit the same assurances in the event he could not take his own life if needed.

"I'll fetch some thread. Help the others as best you can." Kadmallin turned and sprinted back toward their tent at the border of the camp.

Sketkee looked across the campsite, assessing how to contribute to the restoration of normalcy among the pilgrims. Humans, she had found, did not do well with the sudden loss of companions. They fared better when the circumstances in their lives did not greatly alter. She used the edge of her sword blade to cut a strip of cloth from the bottom of her shirt and tied the length around her upper arm to staunch the flow of blood. She then placed the sword in the hand of her wounded arm and used her free hand to lift an overturned wagon back to its wheels and free from the legs of the man trapped beneath it.

The man stared up at her in terror. Without her deep cloak to hide her features, the clouded daylight exposed her face and form more clearly than any of the pilgrims had previously seen.

“You breathed fire.” The man moaned the words, grasping at his broken leg. “Fire like a demon.”

“I breathed a glandular combination that ignites when mixed and explodes in the air.” Sketkee bent to examine the man’s leg, ignoring his panicked twitches as she probed the break. “Demons are a figment of febrile imaginations. You should restrain yourself to facts. Your leg will need a splint, but if set properly, it will heal.” Sketkee had a deep familiarity with human anatomy from her studies, and a more practical knowledge gained from years of patching up Kadmallin’s numerous injuries.

“Fire-breathing snake demon.” The man sputtered his words between gasps of pain.

“This will be painful.” She pulled the man’s leg, setting the bone into place. The man’s eyes rolled back into his head as he passed out. “A preferable condition for both of us.”

As she scavenged for a short, broken board from the wagon and a length of twine to make a rudimentary splint, she noticed the attention of the pilgrims upon her. Even those who tended to the wounded spared an eye toward her actions. If they had not directly seen her pyrotechnic display, the murmurs among them spread the tale quickly enough. It seemed improbable they would allow her to continue to follow their group to the coast. Had they merely viewed her in the full flesh, they might have been willing to forget the matter, marveling at the curiosity of such a foreign creature. Seeing her breathe fire likely proved an insurmountable difference. Even though they were human, she could not judge them entirely unique in that distinction.

Few rakthors breathed fire as Sketkee did. She had only met one other non-familial rakthor in all her sixty-three years who could accomplish the task. No rakthor produced fiery breath by natural inclination. The trait did not exist anywhere in her people’s collective ancestry. However, a highly skilled seer could manipulate an organism’s body to alter its function. An exceptional seer could make such transformations in a way that allowed them to be passed on to the modified individual’s progeny. History told that the roagg people had been fashioned in such a manner by human dark seers long before the rise of the first Great Dominion. A people created to be warriors in perpetual service of their masters. Stories also told how the urris intervened and removed the roaggs to the continent of the Stone Realm to pursue their own destiny unencumbered by their past, far from the human seers who had birthed their kind.

Seers rarely arose among rakthors. The act required a way of apprehending reality that appeared infrequently in her people. A rakthor with The Sight might arrive once in a generation. Her great-great-grand sire, a warrior turned ambassador, had paid considerable sums for a human seer to gift him with the power of fire, an advantage in a fight that few opponents could defend against, as Sketkee had shown once again. The trait extended down the family line, each of her seven siblings possessing the same incendiary ability. She suspected the modification could be accomplished with any of the peoples of the different realms, but doubted they would easily survive the use of the alteration without further change to their physique. The toughness of rakthor flesh, especially the lips and inner mouth, made the pain from the glandularly created flames bearable rather than life threatening.

Kadmallin returned with needle and thread in hand as Sketkee finished binding the splint to the unconscious man's wounded leg.

"We have a problem." Kadmallin knelt and pulled the bloodstained knots of the cloth strip away from her arm, ripping the shirt apart where it had been cut by the bandit's blade.

"Yes, the pilgrims will ask us to leave after what they have seen." Sketkee noted that Kadmallin's face looked grimmer than the circumstances demanded.

"A much bigger problem." Kadmallin stared up at her with hard eyes. "They ransacked the tent. The artifact is gone."

Sketkee blinked at Kadmallin, noting the change in her heart rate as her mind accessed his words. She had taken the artifact from the satchel and hidden it beneath the edge of the canvas tent. A safe hiding place if potential thieves calmly searched the tent and found the diversionary coins she'd left in the satchel, an unfortunate place if they pulled it up by the stakes to reveal the contents within. She could imagine the artifact rolling through the low grass in such a circumstance, its crystalline structure reflecting light, calling attention to its movement. She had planned poorly, assuming she need only worry about the curiosity of the pilgrims rather than the covetous encroachment of bandits.

She winced slightly as Kadmallin plunged the threaded needle into the flesh of her upper arm. Only one rational course of action presented itself.

"When you finish, we leave to hunt the bandits and retrieve the artifact."

THE SEER



KELLATRA

THE PACKAGE hit the polished wooden table with a loud thud, the leather wrapping dampening the sound of the impact.

“The codex?” Kellatra’s father touched the dried cowhide that enclosed the box with a long, bony finger.

“My demands have altered.” Kellatra stood before her father’s desk, twin oil lamps eating away the darkness of his study. The fireplace sat ash-cold and empty. She kept her hands behind her back to keep her fidgeting fingers from her father’s perceptive gaze. She had not given the previous arrangement great odds at success and had no idea how her new needs might alter the chance of failure.

“My surprise is unbounded.” Her father pulled at one of the leather straps securing the bundle and slowly unwrapped it.

“Circumstances are not what they were.” Kellatra watched her father pull the binding from the wooden box with a feeling of jealousy and despair. She would never have the opportunity to unlock the secrets of *The Unseen Codex*. The injustice of that knowledge, coupled with the firm sense of entitlement accompanying the manner in which the book came into her life, left her more despondent than angry.

“Conditions change so swiftly in a day?” Her father opened the box, hands shaking slightly as he lifted the lid. “A manic existence you lead.”

“I do not want you to talk with the council.” Kellatra took a step forward. “I need to leave the city. Tonight.”

Her father looked up from the book, his large eyes squinting in the darkness — an owl curious of its prey’s motions in the forest night.

“Why?”

“The reason holds no relevance for you.” Kellatra nodded to indicate the book. “I have abided by my side of the agreement, and I suspect you will prefer my new request considerably. I need money. As much as you can assemble from the house. Anything of value will suffice. Coin if you have it. Jewels if possible. Enough to carry me far away and out of your life forever.”

Kellatra had reassessed her situation and her needs on the walk through moonlit streets to her father’s estate house. She could not stay in the city. Turning the codex over to the Academy would likely end the pursuit of those who hunted her, but Rankarus had been frighteningly adamant that

the man who wished him dead would continue until successful. She had not pressed him on the reasons he had stolen from the mysterious man. While she could imagine him pilfering a hot roll from the local baker as she caught him doing now and again, she could not reconcile the man she knew as stealing anything of real value. Possibly charming someone into making a gift but not outright theft. The details, however, weighed less on her mind than the import of his words. For the children's sake, they needed to leave the city with all haste.

"Why the shift of demands? What has changed your thinking that you would abandon a prize puzzle as intriguing as this?" Her father opened the cover of the book, holding his breath briefly and nodding to himself as he flipped the first of the pages.

"Unimportant." Kellatra raised her voice as she again stepped closer to her father. "I need to leave tonight, and I need money to travel. I assumed you would be pleased to be rid of me."

"Nothing about you has pleased me in quite some time." Her father did not look up from the codex as he continued to leaf through its thick parchment pages.

Kellatra bit her lip to stifle the words that ached to rush from her tongue — a pain that helped distract from the feeling that an invisible fist clenched unmercifully at her heart. She waited. Her father would either agree, or not, and she would respond as needed.

"This is indeed the codex." Her father closed the cover of the book and raised his eyes to his daughter. "I had feared some manner of diversion."

Kellatra remained silent.

"Your mother had such great hopes for you." Her father glanced away as though seeing an apparition of his dead wife made visible only to him. "She thought of you as a precious stone, only needing to be properly cut and polished. She never realized that she beheld a lump of fractured quartz rather than a rough-split diamond."

"Father..." Kellatra did not know if she could restrain the sentiments that yearned for expression in response to her father's statements.

"You shall have your reward for the return of the codex." Her father reached out to a small hand bell on the desk and rang it loudly three times, the traditional signal to the house servants that the master required attendance.

Kellatra glanced over her shoulder as the door to the study opened, and three men and one woman rushed through the open portal. She had not seen them in many years, but she recognized them easily. The four councilmembers who had sat in judgment against her. The seers who had banished her.

"It will be the reward of justice, not extortion." Her father's voice sounded soft and sad from behind her.

Her body became immobile as a haze of insensibility shrouded her thoughts. Her father had betrayed her. Again. He had called the Academy High Council seers to arrest her.

"You should have stayed away." The councilwoman shook her head.

The name Sherata came after some effort to Kellatra's mind.

"You and your past must remain forgotten," the councilman nearest her spoke.

Nerantis. His name. The names of the others receded into the fog imposed on her mind by their use of The Sight.

“The return of the codex speaks in your favor,” one of the unnamable councilmen said.

“But you may have just as likely stolen it to affect your public return,” Councilman Nerantis said.

“You have proven yourself unworthy of trust and willing to break even our most sacred oaths to satisfy your desires.” Councilwoman Sherata stepped closer, tilting her head back as she examined Kellatra — a collector studying a rare insect.

“You will be judged, here and now, the sentence carried out immediately,” the fourth councilman said. A name floated up through the haze. Gerantus. The head of the council. “All those in favor?”

The three men and the woman all raised their hands. Gerantus looked past Kellatra’s shoulder to her father. Seeing what he desired, he nodded and returned his attention to his captive.

“The council has spoken,” Gerantus said. “Kellatra Rajani, the punishment for breaking the terms of your banishment is death, to be administered directly.” He pulled a dagger from his belt, holding the blade to her heart. Even in execution, the oath constrained the council. The Sight could not be used to kill.

She could not make her mind function. Could not seek the clarity of The Sight. She could only conjure a few potent thoughts as her heart thundered in her chest. She would never see her children again. Never again hold Lantili and Luntadus in her arms as they squealed with joy. Never again kiss her husband, Rankarus, and lie in his arms in the exhaustion of passionate embrace. She would never learn the meaning of the dreams and the star and...

Councilman Gerantus gasped in gurgling pain, the hilt of a dagger suddenly protruding from his neck. He staggered back, clutching at the handle of the blade. A second knife struck the councilman nearest him, the bloodstained metal tip protruding from the front of the man’s throat. His eyes bulged in pain as he sank to his knees.

Kellatra’s mind cleared, and she watched in dazed astonishment as Rankarus dashed through the door, brandishing a wooden baking roller, swinging it to strike the side of the third councilman’s head. She blinked as the councilman fell to the ground, movement returning to her limbs. She saw her husband turn and swing the large wooden dowel at the head of the remaining councilwoman. The woman yelped and made to duck, but the motion of Rankarus’s arm halted, his body abruptly taking flight and slamming against the wall beside the door.

Undistracted, the deep mist clouding her mind evaporating, Kellatra sought the embrace of The Sight, willing reality to conform to her desires, manifesting her rage and resentment in physical form — the form she always found easiest to master.

The councilmembers each burst into fire, flames rising up to consume them. The councilwoman shrieked, releasing the invisible hold she used to grip Rankarus as she stumbled back toward the door. The others, two still clutching at their gushing knife wounds, rolled across the floor in fiery agony. Kellatra heard screams of pain from behind her and turned to her father, his limbs flailing in panic as he sought to extinguish the blaze engulfing him.

After a time, Kellatra willed the flames attacking the councilmembers and her father to wither and fade. The councilmembers became still, smoke rising from their charred flesh and clothes.

“You step too far,” her father wheezed, falling into his chair.

“And you trample your only child beneath your piety.” Kellatra clenched her fists, fighting back the urge to stop her father’s heart once more and forever. It had required considerable restraint to spare him the intensity of the flames that devoured the other councilmembers. “The oath is not justice.”

Her father glared at her, then darted his eyes to the side.

“Who is he?”

“Her husband.” Rankarus’s voice shook in anger and fear as he stepped cautiously past the body of the councilwoman to stand beside Kellatra.

“The father of my daughter and son.” Kellatra noted the shift in her father’s expression with the mention of her children.

“You said nothing of children.” Her father looked at Rankarus, squinting in judgment.

“With good reason.” Kellatra opened her hand and willed the codex box to slide across the desk away from her father. She plucked it up and handed it to Rankarus.

“If you are fortunate...” Kellatra held her father’s eyes, her heart filled with an inexpressible remorse. “...you will never see me again.”

Kellatra flicked her hand and the largest of the books on the table leapt to strike her father in the forehead. He fell backward to the floor and did not move.

“We should go.” Rankarus looked around the room, whorls of smoke still rising from the bodies of the councilmembers. He turned to Kellatra, his expression a mixture of fear and awe and love.

“Yes.” Kellatra swallowed as the recent events took hold of her mind. What she had done. The dead lying at her feet. What Rankarus had done. What he had seen her do. The fires. How could they speak of such things? How could they continue? How could they be what they had always been while knowing each other as they did now?

“Yes, we should go.”

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

“BANISHMENT.”

A murmur arose from many mouths, carried on the breeze, and to the ears of all assembled beneath the light of the twin moons. Raedalus stood beside the Mother Shepherd, a fire burning at their backs as they looked out on the crowd of pilgrims come to hear her judgment.

A pilgrim court had been called by a woman asking for justice, accusing two men of raping her in the fields by the campsite earlier that night. Pilgrim courts had been Raedalus’s idea, a way of trying to establish order among the ever-growing, constantly moving sea of believers — a jumble of people from different nations, ethnic stocks, and original faiths. Conflicts in such a diverse band were inevitable, long held prejudices impossible to subsume beneath the bond of communal dreams and shared footsteps along the road.

Moreover, simply because a man or woman had the dream and came to the road did not mean their hearts were pure or their intentions noble. There were also the men, and some women, who feigned faithfulness to fleece the flock, stealing from a few and conning others of their belongings, or in certain instances, assaulting them in the most heinous manner. There had been no deaths as yet, but rape and beatings were not entirely uncommon. They could not pass such cases over to the local magistrates to be tried before the resident tahn as the pilgrims were likely to be killed for heresy upon sight, even along the Old Border Road.

Unfortunately for the woman who stood publicly against her accusers with no witnesses, no obvious physical signs of assault, and only her word against that of the men, the Mother Shepherd’s judgment had limits. She could not whip them on the woman’s testimony alone, although from the look on Junari’s face, she preferred to rip their flesh from somewhere other than their backs. Raedalus knew the woman, a farmer’s wife widowed in a militia attack a month prior, and he knew the men, town boys more acquainted with nightly cups of wine than evening prayers. He knew who he believed and who the majority of the pilgrims believed as well. A pronouncement of banishment did not give the woman the justice she sought, but it would protect her from ever encountering the men again.

“You profess your innocence, but you do so from behind smirking faces and shifting eyes.” The Mother Shepherd’s voice rose to carry throughout the crowd as she glared at the two men. “You will be banished from the pilgrim community now and forever. If you attempt to join another pilgrim band, I will know of it, and the full wrath of the Mother Goddess will come down upon

you.” The men looked at each other, suddenly concerned. “Moreover, if you ever dare to touch a woman improperly, her wrath will fall upon you tenfold. Go now and never be seen by our people again. May your dreams be barren of the Mother Goddess until your hearts repent.”

The Mother Shepherd pointed toward the road while staring at the two men until they shuffled off into the darkness, muttering between themselves in low voices. After the men left, she stepped from before the fire to embrace the woman, wiping the tears from her face, blessing her by touching her forehead to the woman’s own, assuring her the Mother Shepherd would do better to safeguard them all in the future. As she left the woman and headed toward her tent, Raedalus traced the spiral across his chest.

“The Mother Shepherd has spoken,” Raedalus shouted to the gathered pilgrims. “May the Goddess protect her as she protects us.”

Raedalus followed the Mother Shepherd back to her tent, nodding to the two protectors stationed as guards, asking politely for entrance. He pulled the tent flap aside and stepped into the warm lamplight at her beckoning.

“How can I claim to defend them when men are free to violate them with impunity?” The Mother Shepherd sat on one of many cushions spread across the large wool rug covering the grass of the camp field.

“Mother Shepherd, you...” Raedalus paused in his speech as he noted the eyebrow arched in annoyance at him. “Junari, you cannot protect all of the Goddess’s followers all of the time.”

“I should be able to protect the ones under my direct care.” Junari glared at the lamp on the nearby table.

“You cannot stop the wicked from being wicked.” Raedalus crossed his hands behind his back. “All you can do is punish them.”

“With no rules to guide them, what else can we expect?” Junari waved her hand at a pillow. “Sit. You make me nervous looming over me like that.”

“My apologies.” Raedalus took the nearest cushion. “There are laws in all the lands we pass through and the pilgrims can be held to them, even if we cannot bring them before a local court.”

“And what becomes of those laws when we leave this realm?” Junari turned from the lamp, her eyes probing Raedalus for an answer. “What will guide them when we are crossing the Zha Ocean? What laws will they follow when they set foot in the Forbidden Realm? How do we keep chaos from tearing our community apart from within?”

“You must create new laws.” Raedalus had said this before in other ways.

“I am a prophet, not a law giver.” Junari echoed her responses from the past.

“You are the vessel for Moaratana upon Onaia.” Raedalus frowned at the Mother Shepherd’s reluctance.

“I would not know where to begin.” Junari shook her head in frustration. “When we were Pashist priests, we had thousands of years of sacred texts and tradition to guide us, to shape our choices and those of the faithful. Now we have Moaratana, but nothing else. We have lightning from the sky to smite our enemies, but no holy words to comfort us in our pain or inspire us in the

seeking of our lives. We have a star in the sky, but no scriptures to fashion our world around. We have dreams, but no rites bind us together as a people over time and distance.”

“Then you must give us these things.” Raedalus leaned forward on his cushion, swept up by the passion of Junari’s words. “You may ban me from calling you the Mother Shepherd, Junari, but this is who and what you are. If you do not guide them, guide us, guide me, then who can? You must pray for guidance to give guidance.”

“But I have, Raedalus. I have prayed for guidance. And there is only silence.” Junari’s eyes brimmed with tears that she wiped away in frustration.

“Then you must pray for something else.” Raedalus thought back to the words he had spoken several weeks past in that village, surrounded by hostile men and women, fearful of what the dreams and the star could mean in their lives. He thought not about the words themselves, but from where they arose. “You must pray for inspiration. You must pray to be filled with the divine presence from which to make the rules and write the scriptures and fashion the rituals that will bring the Goddess Moaratana to the hearts of all her followers.”

Junari looked away, blinking her damp eyes as she considered Raedalus’s words. She took a deep breath and adjusted herself on the cushion, looking to him with a thin smile.

“Pray with me, my old friend.”

“With pleasure.”

They faced each other, holding hands as Junari spoke aloud her entreaty.

“Moaratana, Great Goddess, hear me now in my time of need. Fill me with the wisdom of your timeless understanding. Guide my hand and my voice to embody your will and your desires. Help me shepherd this magnificent flock to the golden shore of the glorious future you have ordained for us. Let me be the manifestation of your intentions. Grant me your divine inspiration.”

Junari’s hands tightened on Raedalus’s, and he opened his eyes. She sat with her head tilted skyward, eyes rolled back in her skull. She whispered something he could not hear and he leaned closer. She repeated the phrase again and again, louder with each iteration.

“I am the bright sun of black night and the lone star of full day. I am the fire that cools and the ice that burns. I am the tree growing in the sky and the cloud rising up from the soil. I am the reaper of the past and the future. I am the all within nothing and the emptiness within all. I am Moaratana, the Dragon Star, and I call you now out of the eternal darkness and into my loving embrace.”

Raedalus released the Mother Shepherd’s fingers, feeling his heart beat in his throat. She began to speak the words again and his hands shook with fear and ecstasy. Paper. He needed paper.

He scrambled to find a quill and paper and an ink bottle, scratching down as quickly as he could the words tumbling from the Mother Shepherd’s mouth — the words of the Great Goddess Moaratana.

As he wrote, the words changed, new proclamations pouring forth in line after line of divinely begotten poetry, shaping the nature and the meaning and the direction of the new faith for generations to come. Raedalus wrote as fast as he could, never missing a word, each phrase sacred, each utterance holy.

When Junari finally collapsed an hour later, falling across the cushions in an exhausted sprawl, Raedalus looked back over the pages he had transcribed. He had been witness to divine grace. He had beheld Moaratana as she filled her chosen vessel to bring her message to her people. He had captured, by his own hand, the first pages of the great sacred scripture of a new faith. He had midwived the inspirational essence of a newborn religion.

Tears streamed down his face as he brought the Mother Shepherd a cup of water to drink.

“Did you get it? Did you get it all?” Junari sucked at the cool liquid.

“Yes, Mother Shepherd.” Raedalus wiped his eyes. “They will weep in ecstasy when they hear the words of the Goddess that you have revealed to them.”

THE SEER



RANKARUS

FOOTSTEPS FOLLOWED shadows and dark corners, moving from street to alley to street to tree-filled park and back to street again, always avoiding people and light and open spaces.

“I see now why you did not wish to introduce me to your father.” Rankarus clutched the box with the codex to his side as he walked through the streets, his other hand firmly entwined with Kellatra’s fingers. He had nearly lost her moments ago and would not countenance the possibility of it happening again, even if she did terrify him in ways he never thought possible.

“I am a shame to him, and he is a sorrow to me.” Kellatra stared straight ahead as they walked, her face tight with the effort to restrain her emotions.

“Are you certain we should not have left the book?” Rankarus glanced at the box beneath his arm, the source of so much trouble in their lives.

“We risked our lives to return it.” Kellatra tightened her grip on his hand. “I will not leave such a prize with my father after his betrayal.”

“Surely they will hunt us now. The council. Your father.” Rankarus considered that others might pursue them as well. If Jantipur did not take his coins in silence. If he sought to double his bounty with a second reward for revealing what he knew.

“They will not find us.” Kellatra’s voice did not sound to him as certain as her words implied.

“Where will we go?” Rankarus pondered this question as he spoke it aloud. They must flee Juparti. Punderra seemed a bad choice now. To hide in the Tanshen or Daeshen Dominion while their mindless war still raged would be foolish. They could try Atheton. The strict religious codes would be a burden, but ones beneath which they could camouflage themselves.

“The pilgrims.” Kellatra walked a little straighter as she spoke.

“Again?” Rankarus considered the idea. “To what end? They head for the free city of Tanjii and mean to cross the ocean to the Forbidden Realm. Would we hide in Tanjii? Make it our home? I suppose that makes sense. They are neutral in the wars, and a little more open to non-Shen peoples. We might build a life there again.”

“No.” Kellatra turned to him as her steps continued to snap across the cobbles of the street. “We need to go to the Forbidden Realm with the pilgrims.”

“That...” Rankarus blinked, momentarily unable to form a reply. “I don’t understand.”

“The codex and the dreams and the star and the pilgrims are all connected somehow.” Kellatra shook her head. “I don’t know how, but they are. I feel it. I see the book in my dreams of the star and the temple and the rest. They must mean something.”

“Many have the dreams, Kell. Even me.” Rankarus ignored her sudden frown. “Maybe they are merely dreams. Perhaps the star is only a coincidence. It is possible it is all some form of delusion.”

“You don’t believe that,” Kellatra said. “Not if you have the dreams.”

“I don’t know what I believe,” Rankarus said.

They walked in silence, crossing a street and following a thin cobblestone lane through a small park, the wide, full branches of the trees draping the ground in shadow. As they came into a pool of moonlight spilling across the grass of an open glade, Kellatra stopped and turned to face him.

“I know that I have deceived you, that I have broken your trust.” Kellatra looked up to him, her eyes welling with tears. “But you must have faith in me in this. I beg you. It is important. I sense it. Not simply to me. Not for the solving of the riddle of an old book. It is important to understanding the dreams and all that has happened since. It is imperative to our future and the future for our children.”

Rankarus released Kellatra’s hand, seeing her wince as his fingers slid free of her own. He raised his hand to cup her chin in his palm as he so often did.

“We have both kept secrets.” Rankarus stared into her eyes, his stomach suddenly tight with fear as he forced his mouth to form words he had avoided for years. “I used to steal things. Frequently. I stole back what the man who wants me dead had taken from me. Something I stole from someone else. I was not an innkeeper’s son. I grew up here in the City of Leaves. My parents were poor merchants who died before I turned ten. I found a living cutting purses and stealing from drunken gamblers. As I aged, I got better at theft and wooing young maidens, relieving them of their virtue and their jewels. I was a thief. That is what I have kept from you.”

Kellatra nodded, looking at the ground for a moment before lifting her gaze once more.

“I don’t understand something.” Kellatra bit her lip. “You killed the two councilmen in my father’s chambers. You killed that man in the kitchen at the inn. I passed his body that night. Why did you not kill that man in the alley today? Or the man who wishes you dead?”

Rankarus frowned. They had not spoken of the body in the kitchen. Kellatra had never mentioned it, and Rankarus had hoped she had passed it unseen in the chaos of that evening.

“I could have killed him. The man who would kill me if he finds me. But to kill a man in defense is not the same as murder.”

“No. It is not.” Kellatra looked away. Her voice broke with emotion as she spoke. “I killed a man. It was not defense. I killed him for revenge. He took my mother’s life, and I sought the only justice I could find. I violated the central oath of the Academy. I used The Sight to kill him. The punishment for such a violation is death. But the council did not want word of my actions becoming known for fear the people of the city would turn against them. If the public knew the full power those with The Sight wielded, none would feel safe. My father argued for adherence to council

law, but Menanthus, the man who left me the codex, he spoke up for me. The other council members agreed to banishment.”

Kellatra turned back to face Rankarus, clearly seeking out some sign of his reaction. He looked into her eyes, the eyes of the woman he loved, the mother of his children, a seer, a fugitive, a murderer. He could not fully imagine her acting in anger. She rarely so much as raised her voice, even in the heat of an argument. She had never been anything but loving and tender and kind to him and the children and everyone who walked through the door of the inn. How could that woman be the same one who set those councilmembers and her father aflame? How could that woman have killed a man?

“You broke the neck of that soul catcher.” Rankarus thought back to that night their lives changed so completely. The night that set both their secrets climbing up from the graves of their past where they had been buried. “You set that man on fire.”

“No.” Kellatra shook her head, looking concerned. “I killed the soul catcher, but I have no idea how the fire started or how the third man came to be aflame.”

Rankarus frowned in concern as well. If Kellatra had not created the fire at the inn, how had it begun? Had someone else been tracking the book? Could that person be following them in hopes of retrieving it? He shook his head and returned his attention to the questions that gripped his soul rather than those that teased his mind.

“If you say the man you killed took your mother’s life, and you say he deserved to die, then I trust you.” Rankarus’s heart beat fast in his chest. “If you say this book has something to do with the dreams and we need to follow the pilgrims to figure out what, then I trust you.”

She said nothing, grabbing his neck and kissing him forcefully and passionately, her fingers clutching at his thick hair. He clasped his free hand around her waist and lost himself in the kiss, forgetting the cares of what his wife might be or not be, what she might have done or not done, what she knew or did not know about his past.

She smacked his chest as she released him from the kiss, her eyes narrowing.

“I told you to stay with the children.” Anger and gratitude warred across Kellatra’s face.

“When do I ever listen to you about the children?” Rankarus smiled that cocky grin that always made her smile in return.

“When do you ever listen to me?” She kissed him again quickly, then looked at him quizzically. “A baker’s dowel?”

“I followed you in through the servants’ entrance at the back and grabbed the first thing I saw as I ran through the kitchen.” Rankarus thought back to following Kellatra through the streets and breaking into the estate house, worried something would happen to her before he could find her again. So much had happened in such a short time. “I’d hoped for a cleaver.”

“And the knives?” Kellatra asked. “Were you lucky?”

“I’ve always been good with knives. Somehow, I always manage to cut myself with swords.” Rankarus frowned at the memory of retrieving his blades from the necks of the dead councilmen before they fled her father’s house. He hated killing, but when he realized they intended to execute Kellatra, he had not hesitated to throw his daggers. Thoughts of how differently the evening might

have transpired drove him to hold her tight and kiss her deeply again. She held tight to him, returning his passion, expressing without words the fear attendant to the recent events.

“Love birds lost in the night. How sweet is that?”

“She looks tasty, friend. Is she juicy like a plum?”

Rankarus turned from Kellatra’s kiss to see three men standing abreast in the lane, blocking their path. He glanced to the opposite side and found two more men impeding any possible escape. He turned back to find Kellatra glaring at the men.

Rankarus noted the odd sensation associated with understanding he faced no real danger while standing beside his wife. A man ought to be the protector of his wife and family. Knowing his wife posed more threat to any potential attackers than he could ever muster aroused not a sense of inadequacy, but a strange and growing longing. He had always been attracted to Kellatra’s sharp mind and her willful nature, but seeing her stare down violent-looking men without flinching, having recently seen the consequences of her wrath, left him overwhelmed with desire. He found himself wishing he could pull her into the darkness behind the bushes and show her the extent of that yearning. Instead, he let the more practical side of his mind find expression.

“Fire might bring unwanted attention,” he said.

“Walk with me.” Kellatra took his hand and pulled him off the path.

“Ooo the love ... What?”

“Dark gods and spirits!”

“What have ya done?”

“Dark Sight!”

Rankarus walked hand in hand with Kellatra, circling well away from the thugs in the lane, their cries of terror ricocheting off the trees, their feet sunk deep into the stones of the path, held tight as though planted there ages ago.

“Quiet now,” Kellatra said to the men. “Or I will do more.”

The men fell silent, watching as Rankarus and Kellatra stepped back onto the lane and continued on their way. Rankarus smiled broadly in the moonlight filtering through the leaves of the branches arcing over the lane.

“I think I’ll rather enjoy having a seer for a wife.”

“I think I’ll rather enjoy having a thief for a husband.”

“I’m not really a thief anymore.” Rankarus wondered at that statement, realizing that he had not thought of himself as a thief in many years.

“No, you are not.” Kellatra squeezed his hand. “But we may both need to rely upon the skills of our past on the road ahead.”

“The pilgrim road.” Rankarus worried about Kellatra’s plan, but he did trust her. The book arriving on the night of the new star’s birth might merely be coincidence, but sometimes, coincidence meant more after the fact than at the time. Ripples flowed from events in unpredictable ways, the way stealing from a wealthy merchant girl’s family led to a wife and children and an inn and a journey across the realm.

“Yes, but we need to take a different road first.” Kellatra quickened her pace. “There is a woman I know who may be able to tell us more about the codex. If we’re lucky, we’ll be able to find her.”

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

STEAM ROSE through the smoky, dense air, carrying the scent of beef and broth and onion and garlic and potatoes and carrots. Ondromead's mouth watered as his spoon dipped into the bowl of meaty soup. He and Hashel sat side by side at a table in the far corner of a tavern, lanterns around the room coating the patrons in an oily yellow haze as they talked quietly and ate and nodded their heads to the music of a fiddle player seated by the empty fire hearth. The fiddle player's arms swayed with the bow, fingers wavering along the strings to the sad tune he played.

Hashel grinned as he stuffed spoon after spoon of thick, hot soup into his mouth. The boy did not speak, but he could eat a seemingly endless amount of food. Ondromead chewed a stringy piece of meat and stared at the boy. He had tried writing in the book to ask the boy his name, but the child did not read. When he first called him Hashel, the boy looked surprised, but responded. A good enough appellation until the boy spoke to correct him.

The morning sunlight had found them sleeping on the docks of a fishing village along the northern coast of the Iron Realm. The day's events unfolded as one might expect at first, the Nevaeo villagers setting their boats into the water and heading out to gather the day's catch. Hashel had watched the fishing boats with great interest. The boy quickly learned over the preceding weeks that their arrival presaged some event of importance, and he keenly observed the faithfulness with which Ondromead recorded the happenings in the black book. He had been even more fascinated with the book's endless supply of blank pages than the purse at Ondromead's waist that always held enough coins to pay for their needs.

After the first week, Ondromead took to opening the book each night in an attempt to teach the boy how to read and write. He wrote the events of the day in the language of the land they occurred in, and there were many languages to choose from. He had no idea how he could speak and write every language of Onaia, nor did he understand why he felt compelled to record each day's events in the black book. With so many options, Ondromead chose the language he suspected the boy might speak. As they had met in the south of Atheton, he only selected passages in the Easad tongue to read to the boy. Sitting in an inn on the north coast of the Nevaeo Dominion provided a chance to recite the day's events in the language shared by the two dominions, thus making it easier for the boy to understand them in written form.

Ondromead pulled the book from the bag sitting beside him on the wooden bench and placed it on the table. Hashel wiped the inner depths of his bowl with a piece of stale bread and stuffed the soggy mess into his mouth, licking his lips as he tried to chew the oversized bite.

Ondromead opened the book to the page recording the event they had witnessed earlier that day. His finger found the exact spot with ease. He could always open the book to any passage from any date whenever he wished. It did not matter if he opened the book at the front or the back, the words he wished to see would be on the page before him. He turned the open pages so Hashel could follow his finger beneath the hand written text as he read aloud.

“Year 3512. Month 9. Summer. Kullhah. Nevaeo fishing town. The fishermen pushed their boats out into the water shortly after dawn, rowing far out from shore. The fishermen here work in teams of three or four boats, each with two men aboard. The boats have a single mast and sail with one set of oars. One man minds the tiller and the sail while the other rows. Once in position, the lead boat passed slowly by the other craft in the team, the men pulling at one edge of a large net until it spread out between the vessels. They lowered the net by means of stone weights, waiting nearly half an hour before pulling it to the surface, piles of large fish flopping in panic.

“The fishermen then hauled the catch into the boats and rowed to shore, piling the fish in rows along the moss-speckled docks before returning to repeat the process several more times. The women took the fish and gutted and smoked them in huts along the beach. In the afternoon, a young man of twenty or so years fell from one of the boats, getting tangled in the net. The other men tried to save him, but his struggles only ensnared him more deeply in the woven strands, trapping him and a school of fish. The fishermen eventually pulled the man into a boat, but he had drowned. His mother wailed for hours at the dockside, clinging to his body, the man’s younger brother standing behind her, weeping.”

Ondromead looked up from the page to see tears in Hashel’s eyes. The boy reached over and closed the book, looking away from the table to the fiddle player by the fire. Ondromead understood the boy’s pain. While witnessing death and suffering became familiar, it never grew easy. Not all days bore events of that nature, but more than most. Some days entailed births or weddings or merely listening to conversations between lovers. A tragic death could be hard to watch, but he understood from writing in the book that cause created effect, and a drowning could easily lead to important incidents years and decades later, like ripples from a dropped stone striking the far shore of an ocean.

The fiddle player began another mournful tune, some of the villagers humming along. Everyone knew the drowned young man, and all spoke of him with warmth and affection, trading stories about mischievous and amusing acts from his childhood. Hashel slid off the bench and walked over to the fiddle player, an older man with long, graying locks, and a brown face weathered by too many days fishing in the sun. Ondromead placed his hand beneath his chin. What had drawn the boy from the table? The song? Did it come from his past? As he listened to the tune, wondering how many times he heard it played at inns and taverns and campfires over his many years, Hashel started to sing.

“Fallow fields and fallow hearts.

The fire ends and always starts.

Mountains rise and forests fall.

The harvest comes for each and all."

Hashel's voice carried high and clear across the room, stilling all speech, turning every ear, capturing every eye with the words of his song. Ondromead listened to the boy sing, unfamiliar with the words of the song, an oddity that gripped his mind. He had heard nearly every song sung in every realm. How did the boy know the words, and he not? Did Hashel create the words as he spoke them? How might a boy so young manage such a thing with apparent ease?

"He sings beautifully."

Ondromead turned from watching Hashel to find a woman sitting across the table. A woman he knew. A woman he had known for as long as he had known anything. A woman he called Meraeu, although he did not know her actual name or how she found him through the centuries or even why. It had been decades since he had seen her last. She placed her elbows on the table, leaning her chin on her folded fingers, her long, gray curls of hair falling around the rich, dark skin of her oval-shaped face. She smiled. He did not smile back. Her presence generally forewarned of ill times to come.

"Why do you return?" Ondromead rested his hands on the cover of the book.

"The same reason as always." Meraeu's smile faded. "I am concerned for you."

"If you held any real care for me, you would answer my questions." The ancient annoyance, the central anguish of his existence, arose within Ondromead.

"Your questions are not for me to answer." Meraeu shook her head slightly — repeating lessons to a child.

"Naturally." Ondromead glanced down at the empty bowl before him. "Tell me then of your concern."

"You have never traveled with another." Meraeu's words brought his eyes up from the remnants of his meal. "You know what happens to all you witness."

"I do not witness the boy." Ondromead tapped the book. "He does not get written down."

"Whether you record him in that book makes no difference to the fact that he will die." Meraeu dropped her hands to the table.

"A threat?" Ondromead's tone deepened.

"All will die sooner or later." Meraeu looked to the room of mourners listening to Hashel sing the bewitching song, swaying slightly with the entrancement of his voice.

"All except me. And you apparently." Ondromead followed her eyes to watch Hashel. "I know this."

"You know it, but you have not felt it in a very, very long time." Meraeu's voice sounded sad, almost comforting.

"I have observed loss and sorrow for thousands of years." Ondromead saw a tear crawl down Hashel's face as he sang. Tears fell from the eyes of many of the patrons. He wiped at his own eyes with the back of his hand.

"True," Meraeu said. "But can you remember when you beheld the loss of one you loved?"

Ondromead turned back to answer Meraeu, only to find himself once again alone at the table. He sighed. She always came and went thus. She never stayed to explain herself.

Hashel's song ended, and the crowd applauded, begging for more. Ondromead caught the boy's eye and nodded his approval. Hashel sang another song, and the fiddle player struggled to follow along. Ondromead considered the old woman's words. Should he leave the child now, before he witnessed the boy's inevitable demise? Or did he wait, as he always had, for events to unfold as they would, recording them in his book, preserving them for reasons he did not understand and would never know.

Listening to the boy's pure-toned voice, feeling it enter his chest like air breathed in, its power seeping into his heart, Ondromead decided to do as he had ever done. He would wait and see what came with the sunrise.

THE SEER



LUNTADUS

THE WAGON shuddered and swayed beneath the stars and the slivered moons. Luntadus peeked open his eyes, pretending to be asleep, curled up against his sister on a bed of hay, the two of them lying between Uncle Abananthus and Jadaloo on either side. Luntadus frowned at the sound of Uncle Abananthus's snoring. How could he sleep with all that noise? He wanted to climb up and sit between Mommy and Daddy in the driving seat, but he knew they would only send him back to rest beside his sister.

He had been pretending to doze ever since they left the inn in the dark of the night, Jadaloo carrying him at her shoulder while Abananthus held Lantili in his arms. They had met Mommy and Daddy not long later, picking them up at a street corner by one of the big gates to the city. Jadaloo worried aloud that the city guards would never open the gate so late at night. Mommy told her not to worry. The gates opened just as Mommy said they would. Jadaloo grew very quiet afterward. Luntadus had peeked through the open back of the wagon to see the guards sleeping on the cobblestone as the giant iron door of the gate slid to the ground. He wondered who opened the gate if not the guards. Lazy guards. Sleeping when they should be watching the gate. He felt surprised Daddy didn't chide them. Daddy always chided people for not doing what they were supposed to.

Daddy would chide him for not sleeping when he should have. He often found it hard to sleep, the lights buzzing before his eyes as he tried to slumber. Annoying little dots of light that danced in front of his eyes whether he closed his lids or not. He once told Mommy and Daddy about the lights, but they said to ignore them. If he had been a good boy and ignored the lights, they could all still be at the inn. But he hadn't been a good boy. He had stayed awake when Jadaloo put him to bed beside Lantili, staring at the ceiling, watching the lights dance above his bed. He should have ignored them. He should have been asleep. If he had been asleep, he would never have seen the man come into the room. If he had been asleep, he never would have gotten frightened. If he hadn't gotten frightened, he never would have thought to wish the lights to attack the man as his big hand reached toward the bed. If he had been asleep, the man would never have caught on fire.

The man had screamed and screamed and thrashed around the room, everything he touched lighting with flame. Then he had found the door and run away, along the hall, setting the whole inn alight. Luntadus had sat in the bed crying, the fire swirling around the room, not knowing what to do until Mommy appeared to scoop him up and grab his sister in her other arm.

Luntadus sighed as he thought about the inn. He missed the piglets in the shed in the backyard. They always made him laugh. The horse that pulled the wagon licked his hand and made him giggle, but it wasn't the same as piglets. His sister had named the horse Ooshoo. She said it was the noise the horse made when he farted. The horse farted a lot.

Luntadus listened to Mommy and Daddy talking as Ooshoo plodded along the road. They talked about the book again. He liked the book. It made his hands tingle to touch it. The little paintings looked like things he saw sometimes in his dreams. His old dreams. Before the dreams of the star and the fallen down stone house. He fell asleep, staring up at the tiny lights circling the wagon, wondering what they were thinking as they buzzed around, wishing they would go and bother someone else, hoping Mommy and Daddy would never find out about how he had talked to them and burned down the inn.

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

NIGHT-BLACK WINGS soared between azure skies and a valley of summer green crops and verdant trees — a heptad flock of ravens chasing along a winding line of humans below, following the curve of the road out of the mountains and down to the city rising up in stone and brick and clay where the white-crested waves of the ocean met the rocky shores of the land.

Junari shielded her eyes as she tilted her head upward, watching the seven ravens swoop through the sky, their v-shaped formation never wavering. An omen? A portent of some manner? A coincidence of avian curiosity? As with most things in her complicated life, she would not know until she knew, which might prove too late, or merely reveal useless knowledge obscuring more helpful information.

She lowered her eyes to the road. The steep descent out of the mountain path and through the valley left the free city of Tanjii yet another a day's journey ahead. High stone walls enclosed the metropolis, mimicking the mountains encircling the valley beyond, both providing a bulwark against invasion from either of the warring dominions that might wish access to Tanjii's docks and shipyards. She saw temple prayer towers rising up above the ramparts, their gold-plated caps glimmering in the high sun. A few estate houses rose to a height above the wall, but none higher than the temple spires. From the vantage of her elevation on the road out of the mountains, she saw the city streets twisting and turning on themselves, creating a maze of bleached white brick homes, shops, workhouses, and inns, each with red clay-tiled roofs jutting up at varying heights.

It had taken the pilgrim band, now grown to nearly two thousand, three days to travel through the wide mountain pass, more a valley of its own, sunk between twin razor-edged walls of granite. As they marched, they had crossed numerous military stations carved into the mountainside. While the soldiers did not impede the pilgrims' progress through the canyon channel, neither did they interact with them. History told of several armies attempting to force passage through the ravine, only to have rocks and troops brought crashing down upon them. One town sat in the valley, a small nest of a hundred-some people making a living selling supplies to travelers and providing a place to rest on the journey through the mountains. The town did not welcome the pilgrims, shops and homes closing their doors as the band of believers passed. Between the constant presence of soldiers at a distance and the cool reception by the locals, Junari did not wonder that the knife blade lodged in her stomach for three days began to dissolve as the last of her flock entered the vale.

Raedalus walked beside her. He rarely left her side these days, fearful that he might miss some goddess-inspired verses to capture in writing. He had bound the loose sheaves of paper from the first visitation into a red leather volume with many more blank pages. The Goddess spoke through her six times since that night, each instance longer than the last, words rushing forth, emanating from someplace beyond her mind, formed by her tongue, and uttered through her own mouth. When arising from the fever of the trance state, she would remember her utterances, but they faded, dreamlike, as the minutes passed. Had Raedalus not faithfully recorded Moaratana's missives, they would have been lost to the ether of forgetfulness.

Raedalus's fervor and passionate belief concerned her. She worried that he put too much faith in her and not enough in the Goddess. She also felt concerned that his long held desire for her had transformed into something beyond a passion for her body or heart. Now, when she might find comfort in having a lover she trusted as a friend, she dared not breach that barrier between them for fear of the ramifications not merely to herself or to him, but to the entire flock. Raedalus had gained, through his steadfast faith and pious actions, a place of prominence among the pilgrims. He stood as the first and most respected priest of the new faith. The chronicler of the Goddess's words, spoken through her chosen vessel. Junari could not risk that balance of personal and spiritual dependency coming undone. She needed him, she knew, more than he or the new faith needed her. The Goddess Moaratana could speak through anyone. She doubted anyone but Raedalus could fulfill the role he played.

It took the entirety of the day to march through the valley to the sprawling town of mud and stone and wood houses surrounding the city fortifications — the overflow of a population confined yet still growing year after year for ten centuries. Outer Tanjii, the residents called it. As the sun dipped behind the walls of the city proper, Junari and her pilgrims came to the ceremonial wooden gates marking the official entry to Outer Tanjii. A battalion of soldiers, each armed with swords and shields and spears, stood abreast of the road. She had expected a welcome but not one such as this.

Seven ravens cawed and called to one another as they dove down to alight upon the frame of the wooden gate, staring at the humans amassed below. Junari looked at them, wondering again if they represented an ominous sign or were instead a symbol of the Goddess's protection.

A soldier, a commander by the plumage on his helmet, stepped forward from the others to address Junari and the pilgrims stretching along the road behind her. He raised his hand as he spoke in the Shen language.

"The Circle of Elders has decreed this city closed to all pilgrims and wayfarers." The soldier looked at Junari with his next words. They sank into her heart — hooks weighting down her spirit and her hopes.

"You must leave this valley or be driven out."

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THE PRIMARY CAST



THE FUGITIVES

Sao-Tauna — The seven-year-old daughter of Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi (brother to Zhan Taujin Letan-Nin of the Tanshen Dominion).

Lee-Nin — Sao-Tauna's former tutor and protector.

Ing-Ku — The warden commander who hunts Sao-Tauna with orders to kill her.

Sha-Kutan — A farmer with a dark past.

Ogtankaa — The huntress who pursues Sha-Kutan.

THE THRONE

Tin-Tsu — A former priest and the newly raised zhan of the Daeshen Dominion.

Dju-Tesha — Tin-Tsu's sister.

Pai-Nakee — Tin-Tsu's mother.

Kao-Rhee — The prime councilor to the Daeshen ascendancy.

Rhog-Kan — The prime tigan (military commander) of the Daeshen Dominion.

Tonken-Wu — A sub-commander warden of the Daeshen palace.

Rin-Lahee — A tahneff engaged to marry Tin-Tsu.

Tiang-Rhu — A priest and childhood friend of Tin-Tsu.

THE TEMPLE

Junari — A former Pashist priest called by the new goddess to lead a pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm.

Raedalus — A former Pashist priest who is Junari's closest friend and adviser.

Taksati — Junari's former Pashist temple servant who follows her on the pilgrimage.

Bon-Tao — A Tanjii soldier responsible for Junari's security while in that city.

Kuth-Von — A Tanjii Circle Elder.

THE SEER

Kellatra — The owner of an inn in the largest town in the Punderra Dominion and a secret seer with a hidden past.

Rankarus — Kellatra's husband.

Luntadus — Kellatra and Rankarus's six-year-old son.

Lantili — Kellatra and Rankarus's nine-year-old daughter.

Abananthus — A merchant and family friend of Kellatra and Rankarus.

Jadalo — A young serving woman and family friend at Kellatra and Rankarus's inn.

THE PHILOSOPHER

Sketkee — A rakthor former ambassador who has chosen against custom to become a natural philosopher.

Kadmallin — Sketkee's personal guard and oldest friend.

Viktik — A rakthor ambassador and former colleague of Sketkee.

THE CARNIVAL

Leotin — The master of a traveling carnival that traverses the Iron Realm.

Palla — A member of Leotin's carnival and lead actress in the plays they perform.

Tarak — A roagg scout sent by his people to learn about the human pilgrims and the dreams of the new goddess.

Yeth — A yutan scout sent by her people to learn about the human pilgrims and the dreams of the new goddess.

Shifhuul — A wyrin scout sent by his people to learn about the human pilgrims and the dreams of the new goddess.

Donjeo — A teenage boy who cares for the animals of the carnival.

Jhanal — The leader of a pilgrim band that travels with the carnival for protection.

Ranna — A pilgrim who joins the carnival and becomes Pall's friend.

THE WITNESS

Ondromead — An ageless old man who has awoken every day for thousands of years in a different place in the world compelled to witness certain events and record them in a black book with endless pages.

Hashel — A speechless ten-year-old boy who travels with Ondromead — the first person to ever do so.

Meraeu — A mysterious old woman who occasionally appears to Ondromead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a childhood spent whizzing through the galaxy in super sleek starships and defeating treacherously evil monsters in long forgotten kingdoms, G.L. Breedon grew up to write science fiction and fantasy novels. He is also an ordained interfaith minister. He lives with his wife in Brooklyn, NY.

For more information about G.L. Breedon, his books, to follow his blog, or to sign up for his mailing list to receive updates on the status of the next episode, free short stories, and other interesting things, please visit: Kosmosaicbooks.com

You can also follow G.L. Breedon on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Google+](#).

Word of mouth and recommendations are essential in helping an author's work find new readers. If you enjoyed *The Dragon Star* please consider writing a short review at Amazon. Even a few words would be very helpful.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER OF *THE WIZARD OF TIME* (BOOK 1)

Chapter 1: That Sinking Feeling

Gabriel closed his eyes as the fist dug into his stomach, knocking the air from his lungs in a gust of breath and pain. He opened his eyes in time to see a second fist strike his chin. A blinding white light suffused his brain. His vision blurred as he saw another fist swinging for his face.

The bus swayed and the tires squealed as the brakes locked up. People screamed. He screamed. The bus hit the railing of the bridge. The boys beating him flew through the air as the bus tumbled over the railing, spinning as it fell. Gabriel spinning as it fell.

It must be a dream, he thought. It was too real.

The bus struck the water, the engine dragging it down into the river, the water rushing in, filling the bus as the screams echoed in the air until there was only water. Ice cold water filling his nose, filling his mouth, filling his throat, filling...

Gabriel woke from the dream, lurching up in bed, gasping, sputtering, and sucking for air as though water really were flowing down his throat and into his lungs against his will.

He hated dreams like that.

He had them sometimes. Dreams that felt more real than reality. Dreams where he saw and did things that felt like he was really seeing and doing them. But he knew they were dreams. He always knew. Because of the feeling. The feeling it was more real than his waking life. And he always knew something else as well — whatever happened in the dream would happen when he woke up. Not right after he opened his eyes, not in the first hour maybe, possibly not for a day or two, or even a week, but eventually it would happen.

So, Gabriel Salvador knew he was going to drown that day.

The first time it happened, he was five and he had dreamed he was falling out of a tree. The next day he had fallen out of the willow tree in the backyard. When he told his father about the dream, his father had smiled and said it was what was known as a self-fulfilling prophecy. He dreamed he would fall out of the tree and then he had climbed the tree, remembered the dream, and was made so anxious by it that he had fallen. Gabriel didn't tell his father he hadn't remembered the dream until he saw the ground rushing up at him. He was lucky then. He only sprained his arm. But it happened again. And again. It couldn't be avoided. What he dreamed was going to happen.

Gabriel decided not to think about it. There was nothing he could do. If he stayed home from school, he might drown the next day. Or he might drown in the bathtub. Or it might rain for two days straight and he might drown in a flood. It didn't matter. But it didn't make him happy, either.

He climbed out of bed and looked at himself in the mirror above his dresser. He was tall and skinny for thirteen, his hair slightly wavy like his Jewish father's and dark black like his Guatemalan mother's. He looked like his father's child in the dim light of winter and his mother's

in the sunny days of summer. Even his eyes seemed like a blend between his parents: deep brown with flecks of green. He wished one of his parents had been a fish. That might help.

He reached out to pluck his lucky pocket watch from the top of the dresser and paused. That was odd. Where was his lucky pocket watch? He had put it on the dresser the previous night before going out to practice catching fly balls with his dad in the back yard. Had it been there before he went to bed? He couldn't remember. Could it have fallen on the floor? Gabriel searched around the dresser and the room with no success. Where could it have gone? It seemed like a bad omen, losing your lucky pocket watch on the day you thought you were likely to die.

His father had given him the pocket watch on his thirteenth birthday, just as Gabriel's grandfather had given it to him when he had turned thirteen. His grandfather had inherited the watch in a foxhole during a battle in World War II when his best friend had thrown himself on a mortar to save his buddies' lives.

But there was no lucky watch to be found that morning no matter where Gabriel looked for it. He filled his pockets with the usual things: coins, crumpled bills, a pack of gum, and a pocketknife and headed downstairs.

At breakfast his mother could sense his mood immediately. "Why the Glum Gus routine this morning?"

"Didn't sleep well," Gabriel said. He had learned long ago that telling his parents about his dreams never worked out. He didn't need any more lectures about over-active imaginations and he especially didn't need any more threats to see Dr. Wallace again. Gabriel didn't need a psychiatrist, he needed a hot breakfast. And a life jacket.

"Do I have to go today?" Gabriel asked. He knew the answer, but he figured he should try.

"Are you not feeling well?" his father asked.

"No, I'm fine." It was too late to start faking an illness. If he were going to go that route, he should have come down the stairs coughing. Besides, it didn't matter if he went or not. The dreams always came true.

"Then you have to go," his mother said.

"Is that boy still bothering you?" his father asked.

"No," Gabriel answered. "Not usually." Eddie Sloat was the neighborhood bully who had been pestering him for months.

"You should walk to school with Emily Baskin," his mother said. "You used to walk with her all the time."

"Emily hates me."

"That's ridiculous," his mother said. "Why would she possibly hate you?"

"Do you honestly think I understand why girls do any of the things they do?"

"Not to fear, Son," his father said with a grin. "Once they become women, their actions are wholly and completely comprehensible in every way. Why, I understand your mother better than I understand myself."

"That's odd," his mother said. "When boys turn to men they become completely obtuse. Your father surprises me every day with the things he says."

“I should go,” Gabriel said, standing up. “Wouldn’t want to be late.” He kissed his mom and hugged his dad and started for the door.

“Walk with her.”

“That’s how I won your mother over. Ignoring her when she told me to go away.”

Gabriel waved at his parents. If he couldn’t figure out a way to let the dream happen without him drowning, it might be the last time he saw them.

“I love you both,” he said as he closed the door.

The first raindrop exploded gently on Gabriel’s face as he walked toward the school parking lot. He quickened his pace as a sheet of rain followed the lone raindrop. His best friends Tom and Harold laughed and rushed along with him and the rest of his class toward the waiting school bus. School was normally school, vastly boring daily drudgery, but today was a class field trip to the Museum of Natural History, so Gabriel was excited.

History was Gabriel’s favorite subject. Baseball was the other. While Harold and Tom played other things, baseball was the only sport that had ever interested Gabriel. He suspected it was the history of the game that appealed to him — the way it had been woven into the character of the American psyche for over a century. Gabriel didn’t think there would ever be a football player who held the same sort of mythological wonder as Babe Ruth or Mickey Mantle.

Stepping onto the bus, Gabriel wiped the rain from his face and looked around for a seat. Most of the seats were already taken. To his left he saw Emily Baskin. She looked up at him with a half-smile that quickly transformed into a scowl as he passed by her seat. Harold and Tom had already grabbed a seat, so Gabriel slipped into the seat across the aisle from them next to Larry, a sickly boy who was always sneezing. Something to do with allergies. Larry sneezed and wiped his nose on his jacket sleeve. *How could you have allergies in a rainstorm?* Gabriel wondered.

He groaned silently to himself as Eddie Sloat slid into the seat behind him and the bus rumbled into motion. Eddie was on the wrestling team and was forever wrestling smaller kids to the ground who had never even seen a wrestling match, twisting their arms, pushing their faces in the mud, and generally enjoying himself at their discomfort. Gabriel was one of his favorite targets, although Eddie had so far confined himself to verbal taunts and the occasional shoulder shove in the hallways.

Gabriel was skinny, but several inches taller than Eddie, so he had hoped to avoid any wrestling matches. Unfortunately, the thuggish red-headed boy bristled with animosity whenever Gabriel was around. Gabriel assumed it was because he was different. The only non-white kid in a small rural town. Although most of the kids accepted him for who he was, being different was enough for some people to hate you in a small town in 1980. It was certainly enough for Eddie.

Gabriel knew it was coming. It took no clairvoyance to see what would happen next. It was like it was scripted and he was just playing his part. It started with the finger snap to the back of his head. Gabriel didn’t ignore it. His mother was always telling him never to start a fight, but to

make sure he finished it if someone else did. His father was of the opinion that violence usually only led to more violence. Gabriel tried to walk a path somewhere between the two. Run when you could. Hit hard when you couldn't. Which is probably why he'd been able to avoid a fight with Eddie so far.

"Knock it off, Eddie," Gabriel said, whipping around and looking the other boy in the eyes.

"I didn't do anything," Eddie said with that gap-toothed grin of his.

Gabriel turned back around, but it wasn't long before the next finger snap came to the back of his head.

"Seriously, knock it off."

"It must be your imagination."

"I must have imagined you had enough of a brain to realize how stupid you're being." Not a great retort, but the best he could think of on short notice.

Then came the full-handed smack to the side of the head.

"If you want to fight, why don't you just fight?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"If you keep it up, Tom's going to kick your ass." That was Harold.

"I don't fight girls." That was Tom.

The fist came next. And then the pushing and the pulling and the yelling and the other fists. Some were Gabriel's landing on Eddie's face. Some were Eddie's landing on his. The bus was over the Tillet River Bridge by then. Gabriel was busy trying to punch Eddie's nose so he didn't have time to notice if the bus driver, Mrs. Hopper, was distracted. He thought he heard her voice somewhere in the din of shouting that erupted with the fight, but he wasn't sure. It didn't pay to listen to voices of authority when someone was punching you in the face.

So, maybe she was distracted. Maybe she turned the wheel when she was looking into the giant rearview mirror. Maybe she didn't see a car stop in front of her. Gabriel never knew. All he knew was the sudden fishtailing motion of the bus and then the squeal of metal against metal as the bus scraped along the guardrail of the bridge. And the screams. After the screams, it was hard to hear anything else. His own scream was particularly hard to hear over.

And then the bus was tumbling. Over the guardrail. Spinning as it fell. He could see the other students falling and twisting through the air, bouncing against seats and windows and the ceiling and the floor. He saw Tom's head hit a window. He saw Harold clutching at the leg of the seat. He saw Eddie, terror in his eyes and his mouth wide in mid-scream, slam his shoulder into the ceiling.

And he saw the water. The bus plunging toward it. Forty feet from bridge to river in long, panic-filled moments. Enough time to notice anything. A small eternity. And he had seen it all before.

The bus struck the water sideways and the motion within came to a jarring halt, bodies falling into the windows on the bottom. Some of the windows had been open. Others broke. The water began pouring in faster than Gabriel would have imagined possible. He was wedged under a body. Tom's body. Not moving. The blow to Tom's head must have knocked him unconscious. Gabriel could see Harold. Screaming. Everyone was still screaming.

“The door!” Gabriel screamed. He struggled up above the side of the seat and saw that the front door of the bus had been pushed open by the impact and water was rushing in. The entire bus would be flooded in seconds. He couldn’t see Mrs. Hopper. Straining to push Tom’s unconscious body off himself, he saw two kids struggling near the emergency door at the rear of the bus. It took a moment before he realized it was Emily Baskin and Eddie. Emily was struggling to get near the exit door and Eddie was trying to stop her.

“We have to get it open,” Emily screamed.

“The water will come in,” Eddie screamed back.

He probably can’t swim, Gabriel thought. Gabriel hadn’t been able to swim either until last spring. He hadn’t wanted to learn, but his parents had insisted. It had been a mortifying experience. The only thirteen-year-old learning to swim with a class of seven and eight-year-olds. Apparently Gabriel had a higher tolerance level for mortification than most boys his age. He was glad he did. Otherwise, he might have been like poor Eddie; so afraid of drowning that he would try to stop the one person who could save him.

The water continued to flow into the interior of the bus from the windows and the front door. Emily continued to fight with Eddie near the emergency door at the rear. The water was up to their waists. People continued to scream. And Gabriel continued to struggle to get from underneath Tom.

He saw Eddie punch Emily in the face. Emily’s head snapped back, but her legs never moved. She may have been a slender, geeky girl, but she knew how to take a punch. And she knew how to deliver one. Emily had six older brothers. Eddie saw the left hook, but he never noticed the right-handed haymaker that clocked him in the temple. Eddie collapsed with a splash into the ever-deepening water. Gabriel had just enough time to think that if it was going to be the last thing he saw, seeing Eddie Sloat being knocked out by Emily Baskin wasn’t half bad.

Of course it didn’t matter, Gabriel thought in a wave of despair. The rear emergency door only opened out. It would never budge until the water had already filled the interior of the bus. However, Emily didn’t move to open the door. Instead, she reached down behind the rear seat and pulled free the large red fire extinguisher. *Why didn’t I think of that?* Gabriel wondered as he continued to struggle with Tom’s unconscious form.

Emily slammed the base of the fire extinguisher into the window of the exit door with all her strength. The window cracked. That was all. *Too bad*, Gabriel thought. Emily struck the window again. Nothing. She shouted in frustration and raised the fire extinguisher to strike again when the window suddenly imploded, a wall of water throwing her back into the bus. Gabriel barely had time to suck in a lung full of air before the water was over his head and the bus filled to capacity, sinking even faster than before.

Gabriel floated up to the opposite side of windows near the surface of the river as the bus swiftly sank to the bottom some fifteen feet below. The engine of the bus sank first, the rear falling more slowly. The bus rotated as it hit bottom, the ceiling becoming the floor. It was all Gabriel could do to keep his head straight and know which way was which. *Where was the door?*

He dragged Tom through the water, pulling him past the row of seats above their heads, struggling past kids panicking and drowning, past kids trying to swim for the exit door. Gabriel pushed people with one hand, pulling Tom with the other, using his feet to kick against anything he could use to reach the exit.

Someone before him had managed to open the door. Gabriel groped his way through the opening and looked around, seeing cloudy sky above the water fifteen feet over his head. He swam. He swam harder than he ever had before, the weight of Tom pulling him down, the small mouthful of air in his lungs burning to get out, stinging like acid in his chest. He could feel the weight of his clothes and shoes, his jacket making it harder to move his arms. He was getting closer. The water above his head was lighter. Brighter. Nearer.

He gasped for air, spitting water and wheezing. *I'm not going to drown today*, he thought as the rain beat down on his face. He grinned as he put his arm around Tom and began to swim for the shore. It wasn't far. Only thirty feet or so. He looked around as he swam and saw that he was not the only one swimming for the riverbank. Twenty or so of his fellow classmates paddled to safety. He could see Harold flailing his arms, trying to remember the strokes he must have learned when he was six like everyone else.

"Help me!" Gabriel shouted as he came to the shallow edge of the river. Harold struggled to reach them. Gabriel didn't even wait to get Tom all the way to the riverbank before turning him over, wrapping his arms around Tom's middle, and pulling repeatedly to empty the water from his stomach and lungs. Swinging Tom onto his back, Gabriel continued to push on his stomach to clear the water from his airway. Tom spit in Gabriel's face, his eyes fluttering open. Harold had reached them by then.

"Gabe," Tom said.

"You're okay now," Gabriel said.

"You saved me," Tom said with a weak laugh. "Just like Aquaman."

"There are still kids down there," Harold said, looking back at the river. The shimmering yellow form of the bus was easily visible beneath the gently flowing water.

"Stay here with Tom," Gabriel said as he looked into Harold's eyes. Harold could swim well enough to reach the shore once, but he would never make it twice.

"You can't go back down there!" Harold said, fear making his voice jump an octave.

"I'll be fine," Gabriel said, shrugging out of his jacket and kicking off his shoes. "My parents paid a lot of money so I'd be able to do stupid things like swim back down to sunken buses." He doubted that was what his mother had been thinking when she had insisted on the swimming classes.

He gave Tom a quick wave and then jumped back into the water, his legs kicking hard, his oddly long arms making for smooth, strong strokes that brought him to the middle of the river in hardly any time at all. His fellow students screamed, cried, shouted, and tried to swim for the shore. Gabriel looked down at the bus. He didn't see any motion, but he could see what looked like shadowy shapes that might be people. He sucked air in fast, let it out, and sucked it in again, filling his lungs. Then he dived.

He fought his body's natural inclination to float as he dove, his arms striking through the water in unison. It took a few seconds to reach the bottom of the river and the bus. A few seconds that allowed him to think. *What the hell am I doing?* He'd only learned to swim six months ago. Why was he the only one going back down? He'd been on the shore. The dream hadn't come true. Why tempt fate? And then he reached the bus and saw the two faces floating near the rear windows. That was why. Because you couldn't just let people die when you might be able to do something about it.

He edged around the emergency door and swam into the bus. There were more bodies than the two he had seen. They might be dead. Or maybe not. Five in all, he could see. He grabbed the one closest to the door. Emily. He thought she had gotten out. The fire extinguisher must have hit her when the window broke. Her open eyes stared right through him. He didn't look back for long. He grabbed her arm and hauled her toward the door, pushing her through and giving her a shove toward the surface. She moved upward. Not as fast as he had wanted. He hoped it was fast enough. He hoped someone above would get to her in time.

Looking back, he knew he couldn't save them all. Not all four that remained. He just couldn't hold his breath long enough. It wasn't possible. He could come back down. They might make it if he could come back down fast enough. He swam back into the bus and grabbed the arm of the next person he came to. *Perfect*, he thought. Just who he'd always imagined saving. Gabriel grimaced and pulled Eddie to the emergency door, pushing him through and giving him a shove toward the surface as he had with Emily.

Just enough, he thought. *Just enough air. One more and I'll go back up. Just one more.* He twisted around and swam back into the capsized bus once more. The next unconscious person he came to was Larry, the sickly boy who was always sneezing.

Larry's arm was wedged between the seat and the wall of the bus. Gabriel pulled on Larry's arm, but it was no good. Gabriel tried to pull at the seat. To bend it back just a little. Nothing. He pulled the seat with one hand and Larry's arm with the other. Harder. Harder. His lungs stung again. His vision was getting blurry. But he kept pulling. Then Larry's arm slipped free. Gabriel tugged at Larry and pulled him toward the emergency door. Then the world shifted.

The weight of the bus settling on the soft river bottom sent it tumbling again, lurching sideways once more. Gabriel spun with the bus as Larry's unconscious body fell on him, a shoulder pushing down into his stomach, forcing the air from his lungs in a burst.

Gabriel pushed and pulled at Larry's unconscious form, but it was no good. Larry was slight, hardly weighing a thing, but the angle of the seats kept him wedged against Gabriel.

He fought. He fought to move Larry's body. He fought to slide out from under him. He fought to hold what little air was left in his lungs. He fought to keep his vision straight. He fought the temptation to open his mouth. He fought as hard as he had ever fought for anything, but he couldn't stop himself. His body betrayed his will. His mouth slipped open and the bubbles of air flooded out. He tried to stop it. But it didn't last long. He pushed against Larry's body again. He knew it was a body now. Larry was dead. There was no saving him. No saving the others in the bus. No saving himself.

He held it as long as he could. Held the moment between breaths as long as he could. He knew how it would end. Just as it had ended in the dream. Maybe that was why he had come back down. Not to try to be a hero. Not because his conscience told him he should, but because of the dream. Because he knew the dream would be fulfilled no matter what he did.

He held on, hoping that someone would come down after him. One of the other students. Maybe a driver of a passing car. Someone. He held that un-breath and held it and held it and then before he knew it his mouth was open and he was sucking water into his lungs against his will. He willed his mouth to close, his lungs to expel the water, the spasms of his body to stop. He willed his eyes to stay open, his mind to stay clear, and his vision to remain. He willed the blackness to stop. He willed his heart to start beating again. He willed his mind to remain conscious. He willed himself to remember his mother's face and the kiss she had given him. He willed himself to remember his father's hug and his smile. He willed himself to remember who he was. He willed himself to remember his name. He willed himself to live.

And then Gabriel Salvador died.

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