

THE DRAGON STAR

REALMS OF SHADOW AND GRACE

VOLUME ONE: EPISODES 1-7

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BOOK DESCRIPTION

(In case you forgot what this book on your digital shelf is all about.)

AN EPIC STORY OF MAGIC, LOVE, AND WAR

Across the Iron Realm, a vast land of warring human dominions, thousands share the same dream each night of the birth of a new star and a new deity. As the new goddess's prophesied star appears in the night sky, and the old gods remain as silent as ever, seven exceptional people find their lives thrust into turmoil, forcing them to become fugitives, warriors, spies, and saviors.

Junari, a courageous priestess with newfound faith, becomes a reluctant prophet leading a pilgrimage of believers toward the Forbidden Realm, fighting past bandits, militias, and armies to follow the new star and the goddess who speaks through her voice.

Sao-Tauna, a brave and gifted six-year-old Tanshen princess, her resourceful tutor, Lee-Nin, and their protector Sha-Kutan, a man with unearthly powers and a mysterious past, are hunted by palace soldiers who believe the girl is a threat to the realm and must put to death.

Tin-Tsu, a prince and devout warrior-priest, unwillingly assumes the throne of the Daeshen Dominion after his brother's death as unseen enemies within the palace attempt to end his nascent rule by ending his life.

Kellatra, a powerful seer with a secret past from the City of Leaves, flees her home with her family and an indecipherable lost book, hoping to escape the magical creatures who will kill her and her loved ones to possess it.

Sketkee, a brilliant reptilian philosopher from the Sun Realm, races to recover a stolen ancient artifact that may reveal crucial knowledge about the urris — the elusive magical creatures who have proscribed access to the Forbidden Realm for thousands of years.

Leotin, the world-weary leader of a traveling carnival, enlists the protection of a trio of non-human outlanders from other realms as he fights to keep his people alive while trapped in a castle under siege by a fanatical militia.

And Ondromead, a man who cannot die, awakens each morning in a new place to behold events he cannot fathom, such as a shy, young boy named Hashel, whose traumas leave him speechless, but who sings songs not heard for a thousand years.

With their lives irrevocably intertwined and altered, they all ask the same question: Will the goddess truly appear, and will she shatter the world as the dreams foretell?

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

WELCOME TO *The Dragon Star*, the first novel in the Realms of Shadow and Grace series. There is a lot going on in this novel, but there are a few aspects of the book that will hopefully make things easier for readers to follow the story.

The novel is written in episodes — seven in each volume — and follows seven different story arenas, each with several view point character storylines. Every episode centers around a primary and a secondary story arena, and the other remaining story arenas all appear briefly. If at any point you find yourself confused about who is who, please refer to the [Primary Cast List](#) at the rear of the book (available through the table of contents). Additionally, for more information on places mentioned in the story, you can check out the [maps](#) and the [Onaia Gazetteer](#) at the rear of the book. The major entries of the gazetteer are hyperlinked from places where they are mentioned in the text.

Also, throughout the novel certain words will be highlighted and linked to the [Miscellany of Fragments and Artefacts](#) at the rear of the book. The Miscellany contains various cultural documents related to words, ideas, events, and things in the story. Think of it as a glossary of cultural excerpts.

Additionally, while I would recommend reading the novel in the order it is presented, each chapter (and interlude) has a set of links at the end which allow readers to follow the seven story arenas separately. There are also links that allow readers to follow individual character storylines through the novel. In this way you can read (or reread if you are so inclined) the novel in several different ways, choosing which story arena or character you wish to follow.

To receive updates on the status of the next volume, free Realms of Shadow and Grace short stories, a free copy of my YA fantasy novel *The Wizard of Time*, and other interesting things, please sign up for my mailing list at Kosmosaicbooks.com.

Lastly, word of mouth and recommendations are essential in helping an author's work find new readers. If you enjoy *The Dragon Star* please consider writing a short review at [Amazon US](#) or [Amazon UK](#). Even a few words would be very helpful.

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 of barren deserts, towering mountains, and lush forests.

[Onaia.](#)

A world of seven known realms separated by deep ocean waters. 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. A land of diverse people slumbering beneath the light of twin moons, three in ten dreaming the same dream — rulers, peasants, priests, minstrels, merchants, tanners, soldiers, sailors, seers, farmers, fishermen, philosophers, blacksmiths, brew-wives, pilgrims, and fugitives all afflicted in equal measure.

They all dream of...

Stars blazing in coal-black emptiness. Celestial magnificence.

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

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

Saltwater waves lap against barnacled hulls.

Sand and forest and ice-clear skies. A rainbow rises over weathered temple stones, splintered with time, yet retaining shape and form and function.

Clouds paint the sky in a sinuous spiral.

A woman stands atop a temple dais. Below, thousands kneel.

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

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

To continue reading the storyline of the Interludes [follow this link.](#)



EPISODE ONE



THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

HEART THUNDERING within her chest, Lee-Nin woke from the dream and clasped her free hand to her mouth to silence her quickening breath as she looked down to the sleeping girl clutched in her arm.

The dream. The dream had filled her sleep. Moments of unconsciousness she could ill afford in their flight from the men who wanted the girl dead.

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, 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.

Might it 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](#)?

She 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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Lee-Nin’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sha-Kutan's storyline [follow this link](#).

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."

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Lee-Nin's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Ing-Ku’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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 then.

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sha-Kutan's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Junari's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Lee-Nin's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

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

Raetalus 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."

Raetalus 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. Raetalus 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.

Raetalus 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,” Raetalus 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!” Raetalus 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, Raetalus 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. Raetalus 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.

Raetalus 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. Raetalus 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. Raetalus 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 appraised 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.”

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Raedalus’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Hashel's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sha-Kutan’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Ogtankaa's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Junari's storyline [follow this link](#).

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 tamak seed 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.”

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Lee-Nin’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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.”

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Ing-Ku's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

SLIPPERED 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..."

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Tin-Tsu's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.”

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sao-Tauna’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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...”*

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Tin-Tsu’s storyline [follow this link](#).

INTERLUDE



SHADOWS AND dust. Lamplight and camphor fumes.

In the Tanshen capital of Tsee-Kaanlin, in the palace library of Zhan Taujin Letan-Nin, in a small study, sits a man of early years dressed in the black silk robes of a palace philosopher.

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.

To continue reading the storyline of the Interludes [follow this link](#).



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.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Tonken-Wu's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

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.”

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Kao-Rhee’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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 gleaned 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.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Leotin's storyline [follow this link](#).

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 tahnns 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.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Tin-Tsu's storyline [follow this link](#).

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 endurable, 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.”

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Yeth’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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 Toyen-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 Toyen-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 Toyen-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 Toyen-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 Toyen-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 Toyen-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 Toyen-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 Toyen-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.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Tin-Tsu's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sha-Kutan's storyline [follow this link](#).

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 poda 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, Tahan-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.” Tahan-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.” Tahan-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.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kao-Rhee's storyline [follow this link](#).

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 kellt, 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.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Shifhuul's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Dju-Tesha's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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 Toyen-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.

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To continue reading Tin-Tsu's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

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To continue reading Ondromeads’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

“Ironical 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.”

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To continue reading Tin-Tsu’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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.”

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Tarak’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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 quavering 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?

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Tigan Rhog-Kan's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Raedalus’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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 Donjeon, the boy who looked after the animals, and followed Shifhuul. Donjeon 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.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Palla's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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 rakthors 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.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Tonken-Wu's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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 crimson 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.

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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Kellatra's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

To continue reading the storyline of the Interludes [*follow this link.*](#)



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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kellatra's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Abananthus’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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 the humans 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 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 recent 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 that she dreamed of the star? An unrecognized mental influence by the pilgrims provided the best explanation — the most logical conclusion. But might not such a verdict 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 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.

"Red 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.”

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kellatra's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.”

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To continue reading Rankarus's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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 rakthor, 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 rakthor 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.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kadmallin’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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, Taosee, each a pouch of coins to travel to a nearby town for safety. Taosee 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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Abananthus’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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 rakthors 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 rakthor 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 rakthors 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.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Kellatra’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sha-Kutan’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Kellatra's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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. Rakthors found no rationality in modesty. The sight of her nude, her smooth ovoid skull, her taut muscles beneath alien skin, her flat and beastless 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. Rakthors 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.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kadmallin’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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."

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Tin-Tsu's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.”

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Rankarus’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.”

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Palla’s storyline [follow this link](#).

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.”

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Rankarus's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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-grandsire, 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."

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.”

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Kellatra’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.”

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Raedalus’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

“Cosy lovers 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.”

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Rankarus's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Ondromead's storyline [follow this link.](#)

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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link](#).

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.

Raedralus 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 Raedralus not faithfully recorded Moaratana's missives, they would have been lost to the ether of forgetfulness.

Raedralus'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. Raedralus 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 Raedralus 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."

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Junari's storyline [follow this link](#).

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.

To continue reading the storyline of the Interludes [follow this link.](#)



EPISODE FOUR



THE TEMPLE



TAKSATI

THE SMELL of stale urine and festering feces rode the heat-churned breeze across the camp, making noses twitch and faces sour. Taksati ignored the odor as she sliced a large apple and a hunk of hard cheese for Junari's breakfast. She had smelled worse things over her many years of service in the Pashist temple back in Juparti. It made no difference, as the scent would pass as soon as the wind once more shifted away from the latrines dug at the edge of the camp.

Junari had not heeded the Tanjii soldiers' warnings to leave, instead setting up a pilgrim camp in the fields beyond the shacks and huts ringing the city walls, the town they called Outer Tanjii. While the pilgrims were not permitted to pass through the flimsy wooden gate of the shantytown, as soldiers guarded it night and day, the townspeople were allowed to come outside to trade and sell their food and wares. The farmers from the valley also proved happy to put coin in their purses by selling vegetables and fruits and eggs and sacks of grain left over from the winter months. A few chickens made it into pots and even an old sow and a bone-thin cow. Nearly a thousand pilgrims provided a welcome influx of sudden wealth, but such a sizable itinerant population needed considerable supplies to survive.

Taksati considered these issues in more practical terms as she carried the plate to her mistress — how long could they hold out against the threat of the soldiers to push them off before they ran out of things to eat? They could not steal from the locals, could not force them to sell their provisions. The Goddess surely frowned on such things. But they were not allowed to enter the city and make preparations to travel the great ocean without the permission of the city leaders. The Circle of Elders had sent only one message since the soldiers greeted the pilgrims two days prior. A simple, single-word note written on a sheet of parchment in three languages: *Leave*.

Taksati frowned at the memory. The city elders reminded her of the high priests of the Pashist temple — bound so tightly by the past that they could not raise their arms to embrace the future.

Her short legs quickly brought her to Junari's tent. She looked up at the two guards — a man and woman, Jupterus and Kantula — grunting a morning greeting to them as she pulled back the canvas flap and entered the tent. She stood just within the entrance for a moment, letting her old eyes adjust to the dim light. It would do no good to trip over one of those ugly cushions Junari insisted upon and spill the breakfast to the floor. As the room brightened to her eyes, she

noticed Raedalus standing beside Junari. She bowed slightly to the two and placed the tray of food on a low table nearby.

“Breakfast, Mistress.” Taksati used the old, customary address. Raedalus and the others insisted on calling Junari *Mother Shepherd* or *Voice of the Goddess* or some other such nonsense, but Taksati persisted in referring to Junari as she always had. Carrying the burden of all the pilgrims’ hopes and fears and dreams and desires weighed on her mistress well enough. She did not need the added load of heavy names.

“Thank you, Taksati.” Junari smiled at her, and she returned the gesture.

As Junari bent to pluck a piece of cheese from the tray, the sleeve of her robe slid back, revealing the pink, scarred flesh of her forearms. Taksati frowned. She needed to lengthen the sleeves of the new robe. Junari had wanted something that did not make her look like a Pashist priest heading for the temple in the traditional red and yellow garb. Taksati had purchased cloth at a larger town they passed through and sewn the garment over several evenings. Fashioned from a single sheet of white cotton cloth, the robe fitted tight around the torso, flaring wide below the waist, with a lone vestment trim of lapis-blue at the collar and the sleeves. Maybe she could extend the length of the blue trim by two fingers. She knew how Junari hated for people to see her arms. Hated to see them herself for the memory of how they had come to be disfigured.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

SMOKE ROILED, black and viscous, through the air — a thousand caustic snakes seeking to slide into lungs and poison them. Taksati screamed for her mistress trapped within the flames. The strong hands of a fellow servant held her in place as she watched the fire blazing skyward from the pyre-temple, wood turning to char and ash before her eyes. Movement from within the entrance sent the smoke and ashes curling in wild currents as they rose upward. A figure stumbled outside, flames lapping at legs and arms and shoulders and hair. Junari collapsed to the ground, coughing, her limbs still held up to protect her face.

Taksati broke free from the fingers restraining her and rushed to her mistress, using her shawl to blot out the flames, casting dirt from the dusty ground onto those that flickered stubbornly before being exhausted. Others came to help her carry her mistress away. Junari moaned in pain and anguish. Taksati gently held her soot-smudged head.

“Must go back.”

“Quiet now, my child. You could not know. It is not your doing.”

Junari groaned again and passed out. Taksati guided the servants helping to bear her mistress through the temple grounds and to the healer’s chambers. An older woman with gray-streaked hair and pale skin looked up from concocting a vile smelling herbal remedy. She blinked in surprise for a moment, then hurried into motion, giving orders to Taksati and the others, guiding Junari’s burned, unconscious form to a cot in the corner of the room.

The temple healer prayed as she worked, carefully stripping the cloth of Junari’s robes from her wounded flesh. Taksati moaned in sympathy with her mistress as skin came away with the

fabric in strips along her forearms. The healer possessed a limited ability with The Sight, and she used it to repair the worst of the blistered dermis on Junari's body. She combined prayers and salves with her seeing, bandaging the burns with thin pieces of muslin.

Hours later, Taksati sat on a stool beside the cot, pressing a cool, damp cloth to her mistress's forehead. Junari's eyes fluttered. She had regained consciousness several times since the healer departed for the night, but each time, slipped back into fitful slumber.

"Rest now, my child." Taksati ran her thumb across Junari's brow with a soothing touch.

"Where am I?" Junari looked to the clay jars stacked along the wooden shelves around the room.

"The healer's chamber. Sleep now." Taksati refreshed the damp cloth with cool water from a wooden bucket at her feet.

"I failed." Junari stared at the ceiling. "I failed her."

"It is not your failure. You did not know. No one knew." Taksati wrung the water from the cloth and placed it on Junari's forehead.

"I failed through my ignorance as much as my actions." Junari blinked the tears from her eyes.

"Hush now." Taksati wiped the salt-laden drops from Junari's eyes with her calloused fingers. "All will be well once more. The healer says, in time, she will be able to remove the scars from your arms."

"No." Junari looked down at the bandages wrapping her limbs. "The scars will stay."

"No." Taksati frowned as she stared into her mistress's eyes. "You must not inflict punishment for a thing you have not done."

"That is exactly why." Junari stared up at the ceiling. "So I will remember my failure to act."

THE PRESENT

TAKSATI LOOKED away from Junari's arms and pushed the memories of them back down from where they arose, focusing on her mistress in the present. She noticed Raedalus nod to her. She spared him a thin grimace, as close as she could come to a smile in his direction. She did not like the man and never had. She trusted him and did not fault his faith and his dedication to Junari, but his obvious and long held desire to become her mistress's lover soured Taksati to him. Junari had never had a lover who met with Taksati's approval, but that did not mean she did not see the depth of her mistress's needs. However, a woman like Junari needed more of a man than Raedalus would ever be. Surely the vessel of the Goddess could not bed a mere priest, a glorified secretary.

Taksati had read the writings of *The Red Book of Revelations*, as Junari's channeled teachings were known. They were inspired words, offering guidance in all manner of life, from birth to courtship to marriage to worship and even death. Sacred words. But not Junari's words.

Not Raedalus's words. The words of Moaratana. In the depths of the trance, Junari became the horn amplifying the voice of the Goddess and Raedalus merely a clerk, recording it for posterity.

Taksati bowed again and made to leave the tent, finding her path blocked by Kantula, the female guard.

"Mother Shepherd, the soldiers have come again with a new message." Kantula bowed and held the tent flap open.

"What message?" Junari walked out of the tent, Raedalus at her heels.

"They do not say, Mother," Kantula said.

Taksati followed behind, walking through the opening of the tent before the guard let the flap close. She held her hand up to shield her eyes from the bright morning sun, waiting again for her vision to accommodate the change in illumination, marveling at the wrinkles lining the back of her hand, the earth-black flesh puckered from years of toil and life. So many years. So much life.

She lowered her arm and trotted after the others, her short legs stamping against the flattened grass of the camp. Ahead, twelve soldiers waited near the edge of the camp where it met the Old Border Road. A crowd of the faithful gathered nearby in a large circle. As Junari approached, one of the soldiers stepped forward. Taksati recognized him as the same man who had delivered all the previous messages from the city's Circle of Elders. Bon-Tao. A tall man of middle years with wide shoulders and a sharp chin. Handsome in the way of men who exerted their will upon the world with their hands. A bit of gray touched the hair at his temples, although no wrinkles marred his deep, charcoal-tinted skin.

"I bring an invitation." The soldier, Bon-Tao, spoke the Tanjii dialect of the Shen tongue, but Taksati understood it well enough. He did not bother with titles as he greeted Junari. Taksati found this annoying in a strange way. What she or Raedalus or the pilgrims called Junari did not matter as much as the respect, or lack of it, implied by the way non-believers addressed her. To avoid even calling her a priest insulted her position as head of a new faith.

"What do you invite me to?" Junari stepped toward the soldier, staring him in the eyes.

Bon-Tao swallowed visibly, but did not fall back. Taksati grinned to herself. Her mistress knew how to judge people and act accordingly. The soldier had no doubt heard stories of the pilgrim priest if he did not have the Goddess's dreams himself.

"The Circle of City Elders grants you audience." Bon-Tao glanced behind Junari to Raedalus and her retinue. "You may bring one adviser and two guards, but no more."

Taksati did not like the sound of that offer. A trap more likely than a parley.

"Your conditions are acceptable, Commander." Junari smiled at the soldier. "When?"

"Now." Bon-Tao straightened as he spoke.

"Lead the way." Junari gestured with her open hand and a broad smile toward the city behind them.

Raedalus fell in beside Junari, her guards stepping after her as she followed the city soldiers from the camp and through the wooden gate of Outer Tanjii. Taksati placed her palm on her stomach to quell the sudden unease she felt. Junari always possessed an impetuous streak in the

face of authority, a tendency to act quickly before considering the consequences that might befall her. She could dither for weeks over an arcane religious matter and jump to action when faced with opposition. Taksati had many times tried to explain the need to reverse that proclivity to no avail. She sighed, knowing she held no power to help her mistress now. Nothing beyond prayer.

Prayer. Yes.

The Goddess Moaratana might not hear the prayers of one old woman, but surely she would listen to the petitions for protection of a thousand of her flock. She smiled with confidence. She had never felt such assuredness of faith in her previous life as the dutiful servant of a Pashist priest.

“The Mother Shepherd goes to seek safe passage for our continued journey.” Taksati turned to the pilgrims nearest her, raising her voice to be heard above the murmurs of concern at Junari’s departure. “The Mother Shepherd needs our help and our prayers. Pray now to the Great Goddess Moaratana, to protect and guide our Mother Shepherd. Everyone, wherever you be, kneel now in prayer. Spread the word.”

Taksati knelt to the ground, the dried, matted grass and small stones no match for her calloused knees. She interlocked her fingers before her heart as she had done so many times while praying to the pantheon of gods as a servant in the Pashist temple. Now she prayed to the Goddess Moaratana to protect Junari, her mistress, from the worshipers of yet another god.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Taksati’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

SHOUTS FOLLOWED whispers, and cries of *heretic* chased the softly intoned words of *dreamer prophet*. Stale fruit and wilted vegetables came soon after, thrown more with the intent to frighten their supposed targets than actually strike them. Junari ignored the taunts and the projectiles. The people feared her. She had seen this reaction to her presence many times in countless towns and villages over the past months. While their passage through Outer Tanjii, the town beyond the city walls, proved uneventful, word of her transport to the elders spread in advance of her arrival. Once past the massive wood and iron gates of the city proper, she found the citizens of Tanjii lining the streets, curious to see the much dreamed of and spoken of prophet. Many came to gawk, others to taunt, and some to shout their faith in their god Ni-Kam-Djen, protesting the open presence of a heretic in their thoroughfares.

Junari held her head high, making eye contact with those who screeched insults or threw wasted food. She did not worry. She knew the Goddess Moaratana protected her. To their credit, the soldiers and their commander, Bon-Tao, did their best to keep the citizens back. They also kept the pace swift, walking with long strides, clearly intending to reach their destination as quickly as possible. To her side, Raedalus walked with hunched shoulders, more than one turnip having landed against his spine. Behind them, the guards, Jupterus and Kantula, glared at the people along the street, hands gripping the hilts of their short swords.

“You must not let them see fear,” Junari whispered from the side of her mouth. “Your fear feeds their own and gives their anger strength.” She flicked her hand out, snatching from the air an apple plummeting toward her head. She looked at the apple, smiled broadly, and took a large bite.

As she crunched the fruit, enjoying the tart juice, wiping it from her chin with the back of her hand, she noted the subtle shift in the mood of the crowd. Her confidence did not engender greater fear, but rather kindled deeper curiosity. The procession turned yet another corner of the winding street, crossing an intersection with one of the few avenues that ran in a straight line through the city. Down the wide avenue, she spotted a large, round tower rising up six stories in height. The Circle Tower, seat of the Circle of Elders and home of the city courts. Bon-Tao did not turn down the lane leading directly to the Circle Tower. Instead, he continued along the same curved and convoluted path among the city’s brick buildings. Raedalus noticed the tower as well, his face darkening with concern.

Odd. She had expected the audience with the Circle of Elders to take place in the seat of their power. She might have considered it a trap were it not so obvious. Surely if the city elders wished her dead, they could find a less blatant means to incite violence among the people outside their walls.

Their progress through the city improved slightly as they reached the wealthier districts. As the buildings began to show less age and more ornamentation, so too the women wore more expensive dresses, the men more stylish jackets and well-polished shoes. While the men and women of respectable social standing did not throw insults and vegetables in the streets like commoners, they still gaped in surprise, still whispered among themselves, but did not attempt to impede Junari's movement in any way.

Only when they turned onto a larger boulevard and she saw the massive doors rising above her in the distance down a surprisingly linear street did Junari realize their destination. They had crossed the entirety of the city to stand before the western gate leading to the docks beside the ocean. Looking back over her shoulder, she noted that the street they now walked along ran directly back to the gate they had entered through. Had Commander Bon-Tao taken them on such a circuitous route to ensure their protection, or had the plan been to allow as many citizens as possible to observe their presence?

As they reached the gate, the commander surprised her by turning to a set of stone stairs built up along the inner reaches of the wall, rather than marching through the enormous open doors. Junari and her retinue followed him up the stairs one at a time, Raedalus in front of her and the guards behind them.

The walls of the city stood ten paces thick and spanned upward the height of twenty men. Crenellations ran the length of the outer side, providing stations for attack and defense, while a thick brick railing protected the guards from falling off the backside. Eight watchtowers, spaced equidistantly around the circumference, rose an additional two stories above the top of the parapets.

As Junari reached the walkway at the top of the wall, she paused momentarily, taking in the sight of the city spread out beneath her, feeling a little dizzy from the height. She placed a hand on Raedalus's shoulder to steady herself.

"A disorienting view the first time."

A man stood atop the wall, flanked by four soldiers. His hands rested on his waist, accentuating the flare of his coat, his lips curved in a thin smile. The gray of his hair seemed at odds with the smoothness of his dark brown skin. Junari found it difficult to judge his age, but the keenness of the look in his almond-shaped eyes led her to suspect he had lived far greater years than his face suggested. Thanks to Raedalus's briefing their first night making camp outside the city, she knew the man's name before he spoke it.

"I am Kuth-Von, Speaker of the Circle of Elders. Welcome, prophet, to the City of Tanjii." Kuth-Von spread his arms wide to indicate the city sprawling out before them.

Junari noted the eloquence of his Punderra-inflected Mumtiba, thankful for his skill with her language. She spoke Shen, but not with such great fluency.

"I am Junari. This is Raedalus." She bowed slightly to Kuth-Von, Raedalus mimicking her gesture. Her guards behind her did not move.

"No titles, then?" Kuth-Von looked at her a quizzically.

"I am called Mother Shepherd by those who follow me, but unless you will be joining our journey, that seems an awkward title." Junari smiled broadly. "Call me Junari."

"As you wish." Kuth-Von turned to Raedalus. "Your attendant?"

"My high priest and most trusted counsel." Junari looked around the top the wall. "I understood we were to meet with the Circle of Elders." She knew they would meet only with Kuth-Von, but appearing easily confused might help him to think less of her, an advantage she likely needed in negotiating.

"I convinced the Circle that it would be best if I met with you alone." Kuth-Von turned from the city to gaze out at the docks below and the ocean beyond them.

"I thought the Circle of Elders had no head." Raedalus glanced at Junari, his face revealing none of the concern she knew he must feel.

"There is no head of the Circle, but I do stand as Speaker, the lone mouth representing many voices." Kuth-Von laughed lightly at his own words. "I assure you, I am empowered to conduct this meeting and guarantee any agreements that might arise from it."

Junari did not doubt Kuth-Von's ability to negotiate for the Circle of Elders. From what Raedalus had told her of the man, he held great sway over a council that supposedly had no leader. The Circle consisted of nine men drawn from the noble and merchant houses throughout the city, selected through a lottery every ten years. Only one wealthy family always maintained a seat, one man always designated by his relatives to represent them. While the Circle had no official head, Kuth-Von embodied it in every possible way.

"How shall we proceed?" Junari joined Kuth-Von at the western edge of the wall.

Below, near the docks, stood a wide plaza, apparently used as a training ground for city soldiers. Men marched in unison in small groups, while some matched blades in twos and threes, and still others practiced the use of their long spears against straw-stuffed men.

"Impressive soldiers." Junari assumed they had been brought to the wall to see that very sight.

"They have an unbroken record of defending the city for more nearly a thousand years." Kuth-Von raised his eyes to Junari's. "They have never failed us."

"I do not doubt their courage and skill." Junari held Kuth-Von's stare. "Nor do I doubt the Circle's desire to do what is best for your city."

"But you doubt something." Kuth-Von raised an eyebrow.

"I doubt the wisdom of denying the obvious." Junari turned back to the ocean.

"And the obvious is?" Kuth-Von's voice deepened with his words.

"The new star rises over this ocean each night to shine down on your city as your people sleep and dream the dream that brought me here." Junari looked from the sky to the city behind the wall. "We are only the first of thousands who will arrive. You cannot hope to litter the only

road to your city with the corpses of tens of thousands of pilgrims. Would it not be better to be free of us, letting us pass through, making coin from our time in your city?"

Kuth-Von stared at Junari a moment, then turned and walked south along the wall. Junari looked to Raedalus, his frown expressing her inner frame of mind. She nodded in the direction of Kuth-Von and followed the city leader, Raedalus at her side, her guards and the city soldiers trailing them.

"I am the speaker for the Circle of Elders, but I do not voice a unanimous view in regards to you and your pilgrims." Kuth-Von glanced to Junari as she stepped abreast of him. "Many in the Circle fear you and what you represent. Some, under the influence of the Ketolin and Zatolin Kam-Djen priests, believe it would be better if we simply killed you. Take the head from the snake before it can bite, as they say."

"I am but a vessel for the Goddess." Junari noticed Raedalus and her guards tense at Kuth-Von's words. "If I am killed, another will rise to replace me. Like you, I speak for a greater body, but mine is of one voice. I am merely the mouth that delivers Moaratana's words. I am not important."

"Moaratana. Dragon Star." Kuth-Von frowned. "You are correct. We cannot turn you all away, no matter what the priests might wish. However, your presence creates problems the priests only amplify. Our city sits free between two warring dominions, fighting a decades-long war with sectarian roots that go back centuries. This is the one place both priests can come together. The Ketolin and Zatolin clergy disagree in how to worship The True God, Ni-Kam-Djen, but they do not disagree that you are a heretic worthy of death. They see the star and they hear of the dream, even if they protest not to have dreamed it themselves. And it frightens them. Not for what they fear your goddess will bring. No, they fear the attention of their fellow priests in the Daeshen and Tanshen Dominions. They fear the leaders of those dominions will use this as an excuse to invade and cleanse this city of corruption."

"And what do the elders of the Circle fear?" Raedalus spoke from half a pace behind Junari.

"They are not wise enough to fear invasion." Kuth-Von laughed. "The people of our city are divided very closely in number between those who follow the Ketolin and Zatolin paths. Those who believe only priests can intercede with The True God live mainly in the northern side of the city and those who believe they can pray to their god unaided live largely here, in the southern side of the city. The elders worry your presence will disturb the long held balance between the faiths within Tanjii and create a civil war mirroring the one beyond our protected valley."

"And what do you fear?" Junari looked at Kuth-Von from the side, his eyes slowly turning to her.

"I fear nothing, for I realize the limits of my power to control what happens in Tanjii." Kuth-Von clasped his hands behind his back as he walked. "I see the star and I have dreamed the dream of your goddess, but these things do not alter the need for this city to be strong and its rulers stronger. Governing a city is like a game of koris; you must place and move your pieces as best you can, given the lay of the board. Your opponent must do the same. But you cannot determine the initial fall of the cubes and can have only limited impact in guiding your

opponent's moves. Moreover, you must accept that there are games you will lose through your own mistakes as well as events you cannot control. The game we play is not to decide the fate of your pilgrims, but to define the future of my city. That is a game I will win, even if I must cheat the rules."

"This could be a game we both might win." Junari and Raedalus had spent considerable time the last few days outside the city walls considering a means for obtaining what she desired in the easiest possible manner.

"You and I might win this game, but someone is likely to lose, and losers often become winners themselves someday." Kuth-Von looked back over to the city at his side.

"We each desire similar things." Junari glanced toward Raedalus, who nodded his assent. Now seemed the best moment to present the results of their late night debates. "We wish to leave your city and you wish to have us gone. Both things can be accomplished in a manner beneficial to all."

"We wish you to leave the way you came, and you wish to pass through our gates and sail the ocean." Kuth-Von shook his head. "These are not the same desires."

"In only one instance would we truly be gone for good." Junari continued before Kuth-Von could reply. "Most of the pilgrims who joined us on the road these past months came from farms and small towns and left with little more than the clothes on their backs, or maybe food in a wagon or livestock. However, there are a few followers of Moaratana who left positions of power and considerable wealth, which they have given to the cause of our transport. We can pay to hire and provision ships for the journey. Your city can profit from our passage through your walls and along your docks. I spent many years as a Pashist priest in Punderra, and I have often witnessed the great balm that coin can be when properly applied to the civic wounds, imaginary and real."

"It is good to hear you have coin." Kuth-Von seemed surprised by this information. "But will you have enough to buy the ships you need?"

"Will your captains refuse to hire their ships to us on grounds of faith?" Junari had wondered at this potential problem.

"Sailors spend too much time at the mercy of the winds to have more than a cupful of faith." Kuth-Von gestured back toward the docks. "The problem is your destination, not your religious inclinations. You head to the Forbidden Realm, a land from which no ship has ever returned. Even if they did return, you'd be asking them to sail homeward with empty hulls. An empty ship is only just barely less useful than a sunken ship."

"It has been decades if not longer since a ship attempted to sail to the Forbidden Realm." Raedalus stepped more quickly as he spoke. "The urris may no longer guard it so tightly. Especially with the arrival of the dreams and the Goddess's star. There may be no peoples to trade with, but there might be other things of value they could obtain. Surely there are men of adventure and enterprise among your captains."

"You might find a few captains willing to take the risk, but you have nearly a thousand to transport and more to follow them," Kuth-Von said.

“We can pay double passage.” Junari did not see a way around it.

“Can you afford double passage? Will your pilgrims who follow be as well funded as you?” Kuth-Von pointed to the pilgrim campground, now visible along the eastern portion of the wall where they walked, tents spiraling outward from Junari’s small pavilion in the center. “You would be better served to gather your coin and purchase one or two ships outright. You could carry two or three hundred at a time. It will take you longer to cross your people, but I do not see how else it will work.”

“And how long will you and the Circle of Elders allow those left behind to remain?” Junari considered the possibilities of Kuth-Von’s plan. She did not find them appealing.

“There is an abandoned town an hour’s sail up the coast. A great sea wave crushed it some years ago. They could gather there and wait for the return of your ships. As pilgrims arrive, they could be sent to meet their companions. To have them near the city for too long will incite the very things we both wish to avoid.”

They walked in silence for a time as Junari regarded Kuth-Von’s suggestion. She glanced at Raedalus. Practical as always, the look on his face suggested resignation to the deal. As she walked, she looked out at her pilgrims. She had not noticed at first glance, but saw now that they stood motionless. She smiled, realizing the entire pilgrim band knelt in prayer. Prayers for her protection and success, no doubt. If they could have such faith in her and the Goddess, she could do no less.

“I will need leave to meet with the captains along your docks, to hire them if I can, or to buy as many ships as possible if not.” Junari turned to Kuth-Von from the sight of the pilgrims in prayer. Her pilgrims. The men and women and children she had accepted responsibility for. She would see them to the Forbidden Realm, whatever the hindrances.

“Agreed.” Kuth-Von stopped near the stairs beside the eastern gate. “I will arrange escorts for you each morning.”

“Some of your citizens were not pleased to have us passing through your streets today.” Raedalus pointed to a bruise on his forehead.

“My apologies.” Kuth-Von seemed genuinely regretful. “I will double the guard and provide a closed carriage for you.”

“What will *you* require?” Junari asked Kuth-Von, staring into the man’s eyes, trying to gauge his response.

“Through your success, I will have what I require.” Kuth-Von smiled. “My ancestors helped found this city. They built the docks and the first shipyard. One of my great grandsires built this wall. This city is my lifeblood and my life’s work. In one manner or another, you and your pilgrims will leave and my city will be safe. And I will have my percentage of the shipyard profits of your departure. As you say, we may both take advantage of the game.”

“And how long will we have to arrange our ships?” Junari tried to ask the question in a causal way, but the tightening of her voice gave away her anxiety at the possible answer.

“I can hold the council off for seven days, no more.” Kuth-Von looked out at the pilgrims praying beyond his city’s walls. “After that, the priests and the elders will demand that we cast you back the way you came.”

Junari stifled a sigh. Seven days. Three days short of a week. Not nearly enough time and likely far less money at her disposal then required for the task. She raised her hand against the glare of the sun as she looked out at her people kneeling in the grass and dust of the valley. She would need their prayers to get them safely beyond Tanjii and across the open waters to the shores of the Forbidden Realm.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Junari’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

FUR AND tongue and whiskers accompanied a mewling purr. Hashel opened his eyes to find a small black cat curled on his chest, nuzzling her head against his chin. He smiled as he rubbed the sleep from his eyes with one hand, scratching the cat's ears with the other. The cat purred again and licked his fingers. Hashel sighed. His cat, Serta, had licked his fingers like that back on the farm. The farm. Hashel's smile faded at the memory. He smiled again, pushing his memories back beneath the ground of his mind, piling happy thoughts atop them.

He sat up, still petting the cat. He would name her Medra. A simple name. He wondered who she belonged to. He sat on the covers of a large bed, the old man, Ondromead, dozing on his back. They had fallen asleep in a stack of hay in a farmer's barn, seeking shelter from a rainstorm that had dogged them all day. They awoke, as always, someplace else. They were in a bedroom of some sort. A chest sat under a small window, a table with a pitcher and washbasin by the door. An inn, maybe? Hashel had never seen an inn, but Ondromead had muttered much about the comforts of a bed in an inn on several of the nights they slept out of doors, pitching camp beneath the stars on rocky ground.

Hashel picked up the cat and placed her on Ondromead's chest. The cat looked confused, padding around to find a comfortable place to lie. Ondromead opened his eyes and rubbed his beard as he groggily eyed the feline making herself a nest in the folds of his shirt.

"Found a friend, have we?" Ondromead ran his hand along the cat's back. Medra stretched against his hand and arched her spine.

"Finally. To wake in a bed. It's been months." Ondromead picked Medra up and handed her to Hashel, who clutched the cat to his chest, petting her head as her tail lapped against his arm.

"Do you know the best thing about waking up in an inn, lad?" Ondromead scratched his scalp and turned to place his booted feet on the floor. "There are baths and breakfast."

Ondromead smiled at Hashel as he pushed off the mattress with a grunt, reaching his arms over his head as he stood by the bed. Hashel watched Ondromead follow his morning routine, stretching arms and legs in various postures, moving slowly between them. He said it helped ease the aches of his old bones. Hashel joined him most mornings because it looked fun. Today, petting the cat seemed like more fun.

Hashel did not regret his decision to stay with the old man. Ondromead proved a great traveling companion, even if they did not know exactly where they traveled to or why. Waking

each day in a new place became less and less miraculous and more and more mundane. Other things, at first frightening and confusing in their unnatural nature, came to feel commonplace. The purse that always had more coin in it. The book that always had more pages. The bottle that never emptied of ink. He found it easier to accept the strangeness of these things than the events he and Ondromead witnessed each day.

He hoped they would be called to witness a wedding or a birth. These were his favorite events. Ondromead's mood always lightened on such days when he recorded what he saw and heard in the black leather book. Hashel hated the deaths. The deaths by accident. The deaths by war. The deaths by fighting. The deaths by illness and old age. So many deaths. He looked away most of the time. He found it too hard to bury the memories when he saw people dying. Ondromead had explained that they could not interfere. That it would not be allowed. That he had tried many times, only to make things worse. If they were to travel together, Hashel needed to accept the nature of their bizarre existence.

After Ondromead finished his morning stretches, they found a bathing room down the hall. The cat, Medra, followed them, observing with great curiosity as an attendant, a boy of fifteen, helped them strip out of their clothes and sink into pools of warm water. Ondromead tipped the attendant with a silver coin from the purse as they dressed and left the room. Hashel had noticed that his clothes never needed washing now that he traveled with Ondromead. No matter how soiled or torn they might be by the end of the day, they were spotless and mended when he awoke the next morning. Another mystery he embraced without question.

Downstairs, they found a table in the common room of the inn, and Ondromead ordered breakfast from the serving maid, a young woman in her twenties who seemed more asleep than awake. Hashel tried to guess where they could be in the world from the woman's accent. He easily recognized the Easad tongue spoken in Atheton and Nevaeo, as he formed his thoughts in that language, but had never heard the accent. He gestured around the room of the inn with one hand, the other still petting Medra, who sat curled in his lap.

"Somewhere in Atheton." Ondromead looked at the other patrons of the inn. Two men nearby talked over cups of morning ale and plates of sausage. "In the north, I'd guess. I would ask, but I gave it up long ago. People look at you strangely when you don't seem to know what town you are in. I'm sure we'll overhear something that will tell us soon." He nodded toward the men at the table. Ondromead often eavesdropped on people speaking close by, sometimes even writing down in the book the things they said.

"...tell you I heard the priests talkin' 'bout it, I did." The elder of the two men, scrawny with a ragged beard, tapped the tabletop for emphasis. "Gonna do it today."

"Don't seem right." The younger man, large-boned with long hair pulled back in a knot behind his neck, shook his head. "Not their fault."

"They're heretics." The elder man took a swig of ale.

"They don't see it that way." The younger man poked at an uneaten sausage with a greasy finger.

"They had the dream," the older man said.

“Lots of folks have the dream. Don’t make ’em heretics.” The younger man brushed a stray lock of hair from his face.

“Sure it do. The dream is how you knows yer a heretic.” The old man eyed the younger suspiciously. “You had the dream?”

“People got no control over what they dream.” The younger man grabbed his cup of ale and took a long drink.

“That ain’t no answer, is it?” The old man jabbed a finger at the younger. “Is you dreamin’ ’bout the false goddess bitch or not?”

A commotion outside the window drew the older man’s attention before the younger man could answer. They turned their heads to see a crowd of people rushing past, some yelling, others screaming, several being carried or pulled along against their will.

Hashel looked to Ondromead as the serving maid approached with two plates of steaming sausages and flat fried eggs. Ondromead frowned as he looked at the food and then out the window, finally bringing his eyes to rest on Hashel, still petting the cat.

“Our purpose calls.” He pulled a cloth from his leather satchel on the bench beside him and gathered up the sausages from the plates. Hashel snatched the fried egg from his plate, stuffing it in his mouth in large, lip-burning bites. Ondromead took a few coins from the purse and placed them on the table before slinging the strap of the bag over his head and standing up. “Ready?”

Hashel nodded and stood, the cat still cradled in his arms.

“That cat may not belong with you.” Ondromead stroked the cat’s head with his finger. “Best to let her choose her own path.”

Hashel sighed and put Medra on the floor. He would like to have a cat again, but Ondromead had a point. The cat might belong to the serving maid. Its name might not even be Medra. The cat followed them to the door and watched them as they stepped out to witness the mob of people yelling in the street. Hashel looked back to see the cat skitter out of the way as the two men from the other table stumbled through the doorway.

Hashel lost sight of the cat as he and Ondromead pushed along the edge of the crowd. He reached up and took the old man’s hand, knowing how easy it would be to get separated in the crush of people. The thought terrified him, the egg in his stomach feeling like it might crawl back up his throat.

Ondromead pulled him up the side of the street, staying close to the buildings to avoid the angry faces in the center of the crowd. Hashel did not stand tall enough to see where the mob headed, but he heard plenty of voices among the townspeople to make a guess.

“Heretics.”

“Gettin’ what they deserve.”

“Should of put ’em in the square long ago.”

The press of people thinned out as the crowd passed into a wider space between the streets, likely the town square. Ondromead tugged them to the side, around the edge of the dirt-packed space. Hashel still could not see what the people moved toward, even though he could tell by the direction that the crowd faced the town temple. Ondromead stopped, holding his free hand above

his eyes to shield them from the morning sun. Hashel glanced around, spotted what he needed, and disengaged from Ondromead's hand.

Hashel moved back through the throng of people toward an unattended wagon. He climbed the spokes of the large wooden wheels and flipped his legs over sideboards. He caught Ondromead's eye as the old man pushed through the people to stand nearby. Hashel jumped atop a barrel in the back of the wagon and turned to face the town square.

The square resembled more of a rectangle, stretching back from the mouth of the temple at the far end. The twin spires of the Tot Gioth temple, one for Mother Creator and one for Father Destroyer, rose above the temple body in stones of red and white. A simple wooden scaffold sat before the wide stone arches of the temple entrance. Branches of fallen trees piled the space beneath the framework, five thick posts rising up at regular intervals between the roughhewn planks. An iron brazier stood at the edge of the platform, a fire of short logs burning in its metal arms.

"A sad day to follow a soft bed." Ondromead climbed up into the wagon to join Hashel at his post. He pulled the black book from his satchel, taking out the bottomless inkwell and always-sharp quill.

Hashel looked from Ondromead to the pyre of wood before the temple. A commotion crested and flowed like a wave, rolling from the front to the back of the crowd. He tried to make sense of the many voices repeating the same words.

"What?"

"They found 'em."

Hashel saw several men with drawn swords push five people through the space behind the scaffold and the temple, herding them toward the pyre posts. Although tied at the hands, a man, woman, and a girl who looked to be about fifteen clung together, sobbing. The man, the father, tried to shield the wife and daughter from the rocks and potatoes and other items cast at them by the crowd. The two other prisoners, a man in his twenties and another in his late fifties, held their hands above their faces as the sword-bearing guards pushed them forward.

Hashel's eyes followed the man, wife, and daughter as the guards pushed them onward, stumbling toward their deaths. The air froze in his lungs, his lip quivering as his hands shook.

"You should not watch." Ondromead patted his shoulder gently. "I have seen far too many of these star-goddess believers burned as heretics. It will do you no good to witness this."

Hashel could not take his eyes from the family tripping over their feet as the guards forced them to the pyre, ducking projectiles from the angry townspeople along the way. The sight of the three brought the memories he had so deeply buried reaching up to grasp at his heart and pull him down into darkness. He had seen them, but not seen them. Known them, but not known them. Loved them, but not loved them. He had watched them die and would watch them die again if nothing could be done.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Hashel's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

“THERE MUST be assurances.” The man, Kai-Mando, crossed his fingers on the distended pot of his belly and leaned back in his leather-cushioned chair. His narrow face, framed by a close-trimmed beard, set an odd contrast with the arching dome of his stomach. “Without assurances, we cannot weigh the risk of a transaction. When a captain comes to us and asks for money to buy a ship, we have the vessel as assurance if he cannot repay the debt as agreed.”

“The ships we buy will be the assurance.” Raedalus frowned, repeating words he had spoken several times to similar men. The banker spoke a Tanjii dialect of the Shen language that often left Raedalus struggling to follow the conversation. He glanced to the Mother Shepherd and saw the look of great concentration on her face as she tried to interpret the banker’s words.

“In a normal transaction, indeed.” Kai-Mando patted his stomach. “We can gauge and calculate the risk of a ship lost at sea. We can work this into the price we charge. The adjustment on the debt. A captain who sails up and down the coast will pay less atop the loan than one who sails for the Sun Realm to trade with the talking snakes.” Kai-Mando grimaced at the mention of creatures he clearly found disturbing. “We can add no numbers to calculate the risk of sailing to the Forbidden Realm. None who go return. If our coins purchase your ships, and your ships do not return, we have lost our coin and have no assurance to balance that loss. No adjustment is high enough to assuage that risk.”

For four days, they had traversed the city streets in a blinded carriage, frequenting ship after ship along the docks, seeing captains who might gamble their vessels with a journey to the Forbidden Realm in return for a payment of double passage. They found the same arguments presented to them that Kuth-Von had enunciated in their walk along the city wall. Sailing to a realm no one ever returned from did not encourage risk, even in the most adventurous men.

They found one captain, a would-be pilgrim who wished to provide them with passage on his vessel, but could not do so for fear the merchant bank he still owed for the purchase of the ship would protest. If the Mother Shepherd paid his debts on it, he’d find a crew of the faithful to sail it toward the star in the west.

This notion, and the idea mentioned by Kuth-Von of buying ships, had helped Raedalus realize they wasted time speaking to captains on the docks. They needed to approach the merchant bankers instead. They did not possess the coin needed to acquire enough ships to carry the entire pilgrim flock, growing each day as more of the faithful arrived outside the city gates.

And every night they stayed camped beyond the city walls ate into their coffers in order to buy food for the many hungry mouths. They needed more money than they possessed to procure more ships than they could afford. Thus, bankers. Now they must convince a moneylender that their new temple could be relied upon to repay the loan and the interest. So far, that task appeared more difficult than any others they had faced.

“The temple be assurance.” Junari leaned forward in her chair, her simple Shen words sounding strange to Raedalus’s ears.

“A temple in name is a not a temple in deed.” Kai-Mando waved a hand at the room, encompassing the shelves of books and stone statues of men with long faces adorning the wood paneled walls and the gold gilding highlighting the ornately carved trim around the ceiling. “This building can be sold to pay a debt. A ship can be claimed and sold for a debt. A temple with no bricks and no land, a temple of words, is worthless.”

“Pilgrims are temple.” Junari pointed in the direction of the pilgrim camp. “Pilgrims come and come. Bring more coin.”

“Then perhaps you should wait until your pilgrims have arrived with enough coin to obtain the ships you desire.” Kai-Mando smiled as though speaking to slow-witted children. “Until then, our house can hold your coin for safekeeping and offer a very robust adjustment for the privilege. Thieves thrive within the city and even more so beyond its walls.”

Junari thanked the moneylender for his concern, leaving to return to their carriage. They did not need to protect their collected coin from thieves. Only a handful of trusted pilgrims knew of the small chest’s hiding place, buried beneath Taksati’s tent. It rested safe enough for the time being.

“The same words with a more condescending tone.” Raedalus peeked out the curtain of the closed carriage as it rumbled along the uneven stones of another winding city street. He closed the curtain and turned back to where Junari sat beside him. Jupterus and Kantula sat across from them. The two guards did not speak. They did not join a conversation unless requested. The seriousness with which they took their duties impressed Raedalus greatly, inspiring him to do the same with his own.

“They profit from what they know and what they can suppose.” Junari slumped slightly in her carriage seat. “They fear the unknown, and the Forbidden Realm is the greatest unknown in all of Onaia. We have faith that the Goddess will protect us from the urris, but that faith is not shared by others outside the fold.”

“Do you think the urris will try to stop us from reaching the Forbidden Realm?” Raedalus had pondered this question many times, but feared to broach it with the Mother Shepherd.

“The urris are the second greatest unknown.” Junari sat up straight as she placed her hand beneath her chin. “No one has proved a claim to see one in decades, and they have not made a significant mark on the world since the Vanished Fleet sailed against the Sun Realm near the end of the Third Great Dominion.”

“If the urris can make a fleet of six hundred vessels vanish in a fog, whatever small flotilla we can piece together will pose no obstacle to their wishes.” Raedalus felt as though his concerns betrayed his faith in the Mother Shepherd and the Goddess.

“The Goddess will shield us from the seeing and The Sight of the urris in reaching the Forbidden Realm.” Junari’s voice sounded firm. “Of this I have no doubt. My concerns lie more in how we will accomplish the departing rather than the arriving.”

“We could pray for a miracle of funding.” Raedalus infused his voice with the humor he intended for his comment.

“Prayers for miracles must be held for times of great need.” Junari lurched forward as the carriage came to a sudden halt. “The cub must learn to forage for itself even as it stands in the shadow of the mother bear.” Sounds of shouts echoed off the walls of the buildings lining the street. “What is happening?”

Raedalus pulled the curtain of the carriage open slightly. A crowd of people pressed close, faces strained in anger. Some had their arms outstretched while others threw rocks that bounced from the slanted shutters of the window in the carriage door. Men and woman shouted to be heard, their words lost in the crush of voices. The carriage jerked into motion, veering to the left before he could make out what the people said.

“A crowd outside.” Raedalus reached out to steady the Mother Shepherd with a hand. They had encountered crowds regularly the last few days. It had not taken long for word of the Mother Shepherd’s mode of transport to run through the city’s rumorways. Across from him, Jupiterus and Kantula each held one hand on a short sword as their other hands clung to the railing along the ceiling.

“We must find a way to convince the people of this city that we pose no threat to either them or their god.” Junari clutched the cushion of the seat to hold herself in place as the carriage bounced wildly.

“The Kam-Djen priests teach that belief in any god but Ni-Kam-Djen is heresy, even for those of another faith.” Raedalus’s stomach clenched at the nausea created by the swaying motion of the speeding carriage. “Their temples turned deaf ears to the words of others’ faiths when their zhans ruled the entire realm, but they will now only see us as a threat to their legitimacy.”

“The star and the dreams should speak to our own legitimacy.” Junari placed a hand to her mouth as though she might need to hold something back. “If only their god would place a star in the night sky, it might ease their fears of our goddess.”

“They must wonder why their *true god* remains silent when the Goddess speaks to so many.” Raedalus looked out of the curtains, again seeing the buildings of the street blur past.

“If their god spoke, and spoke clearly, they would not have spent centuries fighting over how best to pray to him.” Junari looked to Jupiterus and Kantula. Both looked ill in the face. She rapped the ceiling of the carriage with her knuckles. “Commander Bon-Tao must cease this ridiculous jostling or he will find our breakfast painting the inside of his lovely carriage.”

To Raedalus's surprise, the carriage skidded sideways to a halt, the wails of the horses carrying over the noise of the large, iron-rimmed, wooden wheels screeching against stone. He heard the commander shouting from the driver's seat above them. The soldier yelled commands, but Raedalus had no time to discern the Shen words as the carriage cabin jostled sharply to the side. The carriage rocked from side to side, the clamor of hands smacking the lacquered wood, voices crying out, the commander and his soldiers shouting Shen curses.

"What are they saying?" Junari fell forward as the carriage jerked between hands pushing it and horses pulling.

Kantula reached out to nudge Junari back into her seat. Jupiterus drew his sword, holding tight to the handle of the carriage door. Raedalus tried to make out the individual words yelled outside the carriage as it rocked on its wheels. He understood *dreamer* and *goddess* and *heretics*, but could not interpret a coherent sentence from the mangle of voices calling outside in the street.

The cabin of the carriage shifted violently, the door handle flying from Jupiterus's grip, swinging wide. Kantula placed herself before Junari, yelling an ancient Punderra battle cry as Jupiterus drew back his sword, readying to stab the first person through the carriage hatch. Raedalus gasped as dozens of hands reached in through the open door, voices rising in unison to express a single word.

"Heretics!"

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Raedalus's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

A DRIZZLING mist collected on wide leaves, pooling into droplets, falling to cascade in an uneven fashion over the narrow dirt trail up the mountainside. Abananthus tilted the brim of his hat down against the slow, endless shower from the trees. Lantili and Luntadus sat next to him on the driver's bench of the wagon, a thin tarp pulled up over their shoulders and heads against the water. Their parents walked behind the wagon in the rain to lighten the load on the wheels and the drag on the horse. Jadaloo walked ahead, helping to coax the animal up the winding mountain path.

Abananthus flicked the reins, urging the horse, Ooshoo, up the rain-slicked furrows of the trail. If the directions they followed proved accurate, they might hope to reach their destination in another hour or so. He did not press the beast to move more quickly, as the eastern side of the path dropped away precipitously, the ground below hidden in a hazy fog.

"How much longer?" Luntadus whacked the stick he'd been playing with against the wooden plank of the driving seat.

"Only those who know, know what they may know." Abananthus had given the same answer countless times since setting off at the bottom of the mountain hours ago.

"I still don't know what that means." Luntadus whacked the stick harder on the seat.

"It means stop asking how close we are." Lantili sighed in exasperation.

"That's near enough to the meaning." Abananthus chuckled loudly.

"I hope this is the right mountain." Luntadus began tapping out a rhythmic beat with the stick on the seat. "I'm tired of climbing mountains."

"You're riding in a wagon." Lantili frowned at her brother.

"I'm tired of riding in a wagon climbing mountains." Luntadus frowned back at his sister.

"Your mother knows where we're going." Abananthus glanced back to see Kellatra holding hands with Rankarus as they followed the wagon.

"That's what Mommy said on the last two mountains." Lantili scooted away from the stick as it struck the wooden seat.

"It was three mountains." Abananthus coughed to cover his own annoyed tone of voice. Kellatra insisted that her former teacher had always spoken of retiring to the low mountains east of The City of Leaves. Unfortunately, she didn't know which mountain in particular. "And don't question your mother. She's the smartest woman you'll ever know."

"I'll be a woman one day and I'll be just as smart as her." Lantili looked offended by Abananthus's comment.

"Yes, well, I'm sure you will." He felt the desire to leap from the wagon. Yet another conversation with the children that threatened to go every direction except the one he wished. "But for now, she is the smart one, and we are all following her instructions."

"Daddy's smart, too." Luntadus started knocking the stick against his chest and his legs and arms in an apparent attempt to explore the acoustic properties of the various parts of his body. He even pulled the tarp back to give better access to his skull.

"Your father is very wise," Abananthus said. "Especially in the manner in which he heeds your mother's advice."

"Stop hitting your head with that stick." Lantili smacked at Luntadus's arm.

"It's my head. I can hit it if I want." Luntadus doubled the rhythm of the stick against his head as he glared at his sister.

"It is your parents' head until you turn of age, and I suspect they would prefer it remained intact." Abananthus snatched the stick from Luntadus's hand.

"I thought you were fun, Uncle Abe." Luntadus crossed his arms in a pout. "You're no fun at all."

"The great joys of life are not held in our hands; they are held in our hearts." Abananthus deepened his voice as he spoke the words of Sage Monji.

"I was hitting my head, not my heart." Luntadus deepened his pout.

"He means you can't find happiness playing with things." Lantili rolled her eyes at her brother.

"Maybe you will be as smart as your mother." Abananthus looked approvingly at Lantili, who smiled proudly.

"I'm smart, too." Luntadus's pout became a whine.

"You were hitting yourself on the head with a stick." Lantili laughed at her brother.

"I was testing to see how strong it was." Luntadus glared defensively at his sister, who lowered her forehead to her palm in exasperation.

"You're both very bright in your own ways. Two little stars shining in the..." The wild whinny of the horse ate Abananthus's words as the rear of the wagon slid sideways, the wheels careening over the edge of the trail to spin fruitlessly in the air. Abananthus slapped the reins to urge Ooshoo to pull as he reached toward the children. The back of the wagon sank in a jerk, teetering off the edge of the path. Lantili and Luntadus fell from the riding seat and slid into the back of the wagon bed, crashing along with the bundles of supplies against the backboard.

In front of the wagon, Jadaloo cursed, pulling at the bridle to urge the horse forward. Abananthus kept his eyes locked on the children. He heard Kellatra and Rankarus yell as they ran for the wagon.

"Climb up to me." Abananthus stretched his arm out, trying to keep the greater portion of his bulk on the driver's bench. If he moved too far toward the back, the shift of balance would

send the entire wagon — horse, children, and himself — plunging over the edge of the trail into the fog-shrouded ravine. “That’s it. Use the sideboards to pull yourself up.”

Lantili and Luntadus each grabbed the top of the sideboard to the right of the wagon bed, but the incline proved too steep, and the misted slats of the wagon too slippery for them to make the ascent.

“Pull.” Abananthus stretched to reach the children, their arms much too far away.

“Help!” Lantili screamed as her feet slid against the rain-slicked bed of the wagon, her legs dangling down. Luntadus grabbed at his sister’s arm to steady her as he cried in fright.

“Don’t move, children.” Kellatra stood at the edge of the trail, her hands extended in a soothing gesture.

“Everything is fine.” Rankarus stepped off the trail, wedging his feet against a rock as he grabbed the side of the wagon. He looked at the children with a wild grin. “Just a bit of a bumpy ride. We’ll have you back on the trail in no time.”

Abananthus watched as Rankarus tugged at the side of the wagon, the veins on the side of his neck bulging as he pulled. He could see Kellatra standing behind her husband, hands still extended, her face suddenly still and free from fear. A tingle of excitement spread across his skin as he realized what she was doing. Rankarus pulled at the wagon, the frame sliding sideways, first one wheel, and then another setting down on the trail. Rankarus scrambled back, appearing to drag the wagon to the trail. Abananthus noted that it could more accurately be said that the wagon pushed Rankarus back to the trail, but it would look the same to the children and Jadaloo.

Lantili and Luntadus leapt over the sideboard of the wagon and into their father’s arms. Kellatra came up to crush the children between them in an embrace. As they finally broke apart, tears in all eyes, Lantili clung to her father’s neck as Luntadus held to his mother.

Abananthus climbed from the wagon, his legs unsteady. Jadaloo put an arm around him, more for mutual comfort than any real need. He accepted the arm and gave her his own, looking over the edge of the trail, noticing that his hands shook.

“Well done.” Jadaloo looked up at him. “I was afraid you’d try to climb back to get them and you’d all go over.”

“I feared the same myself.” Abananthus wiped his brow, noticing his hat still sat on his head. Good hat.

A man’s hat is like either the best of all friends — dependable in every weather — or the worst of all friends — deserting him when most in need.

“Thank you.” Rankarus stepped forward with Kellatra and the children.

“For what?” Abananthus raised his hands in question. “I drove the wagon off the side of the mountain.”

“Certainly not.” Kellatra gave him a stern look. “The trail is dangerous.”

“And a lesser man might have leapt from the wagon in fear.” Rankarus clamped a hand on Abananthus’s shoulder.

“Where they go, I go.” Abananthus smiled at Lantili and Luntadus. The children were still too unsettled to return the gesture. “That was very quick thinking.” Abananthus spoke to Rankarus, but his eyes turned on Kellatra.

“Yes, well, it seemed the only thing to do.” Rankarus rubbed his hand through his damp hair. Kellatra said nothing.

“You’re so strong, Daddy.” Lantili stared, wide-eyed, at her father.

“Sometimes fear gives you great strength, darlin’.” Rankarus grinned reassuringly.

“I hope I’m that strong one day.” Luntadus looked at the wagon and then back over the edge of the trail.

“We should all walk awhile.” Jadaloo patted Ooshoo’s rear flank. “I’ll guide the horse. He an’ I got an understandin’.”

“An excellent idea, Jadaloo.” Kellatra nodded gratefully to the young woman.

“A bit of walking will be good for the joints.” Abananthus turned to check the wagon bed, ensuring all their belongings remained. It seemed a bag of walnuts purchased in the last town they passed through had fallen out of the wagon.

“Everything still there?” Kellatra’s tone of voice indicated her concern rested with only one item.

“Lost the walnuts, but everything important is still aboard,” Abananthus said.

He walked beside Jadaloo and Ooshoo as they all trudged up the mountain trail. An hour later, the woods opened around the path to reveal a wide clearing. A small cabin fashioned of tree logs rested near a long vegetable garden. A woman sat on a narrow porch under the extended awning of a roof. Abananthus had never seen a home constructed quite that way. Nor had he seen a woman like the one who stood up from her chair. Taller than himself, unless his eyes deceived him, her skin seemed to glow in the diffuse light, paler than the bone-white hair of her head. Even from a distance, he could tell something looked strange about her eyes, as though they contained more red than white or black.

“Tamateraa.” Kellatra sighed from behind Abananthus.

“Took you long enough.” The pale, red-eyed woman stepped off the porch of the house into the drizzling rain. “I expected you days ago.”

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Abananthus’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

“HERETICS!”

Junari pressed her back into the seat of the carriage, looking around Kantula’s shoulder at the outstretched arms and wide-eyed faces outside the cabin door. She did not understand all the Shen words shouted and cried throughout the crowd, but one rang clear in her ears.

“Heretics!”

The men and women crushing against the carriage looked frightened, no doubt fearful of her and the pilgrims and the silence of their own god.

“Heretics!”

Junari pushed Kantula to the side, leaning toward the people beyond the entrance of the carriage.

“Wait.” Junari reached out a hand to stay Jupiterus’s sword near the door. As she did so, more words formed from the fog of voices, resolving within her mind.

“Heretics! We are heretics! Take us with you! Protect us! Save us, Mother Shepherd!”

Junari pulled herself toward the door, clasping the hands of the people reaching out to her. Men and women swooned at contact with her. They did not grasp at her, did not tug at her arms or clothes. They only wished to touch the prophet.

“These are our people.” Junari looked to Raedalus, his eyes filled with concern as she inched closer to the new pilgrims.

“Careful, Mother Shepherd.” Raedalus placed a hand on her arm and stayed her momentum, pushing himself out the door ahead of her, shouting to the Tanjii pilgrims to move back.

“Room, room! Room for the Mother Shepherd!” Raedalus shouted in Shen, forcing the crowd back by an act of will.

Jupiterus and Kantula followed him, helping to create an open space around the carriage door. As Junari stepped out, she looked up to see Commander Bon-Tao, still atop the driver’s bench, a whip in his fist, two soldiers with swords drawn at his side.

“All is well, Commander.” Junari raised a hand to stay his whip. She beheld the throng stretching across the street, people shouting, waving their hands in the air, smiles and tears painting their faces. The crowd numbered well over a hundred. People in the back climbed atop overturned vegetable crates to stand taller. Men held children on their shoulders. Women pressed to the front to better see.

Junari twisted toward the carriage and extended her arm up toward Commander Bon-Tao. He frowned at her, clearly unhappy with the unfolding of events, but clasped her hand and pulled her up beside him. She turned to the Tanjii pilgrims, raising her arms and gesturing for silence. Slowly, the people ceased their calls, voices fading, cries diminishing, even as tears still stained their cheeks.

“Moaratana welcomes you!” Junari shouted in Shen, her voice carrying across the street, amplified by the walls of the houses and shops around her.

Commander Bon-Tao touched her arm gently.

“Do not incite them.” His eyes stared into hers.

Junari nodded at the commander. She understood his concerns. His charge to protect her did not negate his duty to defend his city. A riot of pilgrims needed to be dealt with harshly. She had no intention of provoking discord. She hoped to achieve quite the opposite effect.

She looked out again at the pilgrims gathered in the street before her, taking a moment to herd her scattered thoughts into a flock of words appropriate to the conditions of the field before her. These people sought her protection. The Protection of Moaratana. Trapped among their fellow Tanjii citizens, they had waited in secret for her arrival. To reveal themselves meant risking being branded a heretic and killed. Yet they stood before her in the street, before their neighbors, proclaiming their devotion to the Goddess. Imploring her for assistance. Begging to join the pilgrim band on the most dangerous portion of their journey.

The looks of devotion she saw in the eyes gazing up at her reminded her of a young woman years ago, filled with love for the gods, overwhelmed with desire to glimpse the divine, standing before a trio of Pashist priests, pleading to be accepted as a temple initiate, desiring only to lay her life before the gods in service of their will. Junari saw in the faces of those before her a passion not unlike what she once felt in applying to join the Pashist temple. A fervor, she now realized, that appeared dim and inscrutable compared to the adoration her heart manifested for the Goddess Moaratana. If she could give these new pilgrims a taste of the Goddess, show them her love and benevolence, it might ease the fears of their predicament.

“You come to the Goddess Moaratana as she comes to you.” Junari spoke slowly in the Punderrese dialect of Mumtiba. She had not mastered the Shen language well enough to convey her meaning. She heard a few in the crowd repeat her words in Shen to their fellow pilgrims. She trusted the Goddess to make her import known for those who could not catch the translation of her speech.

“You are welcomed into the fold of the Goddess.” Junari smiled at the pilgrims beaming back at her. “Moaratana accepts into her embrace all who have witnessed the truth of her being and chosen to believe. You have seen the dreams in your slumber. You have seen the star, guiding us to you, from across the realm. Join us now as the Goddess star shows us the path to the Forbidden Realm and the new life she promises to build for us there.”

Those who understood her words cheered. Those catching the delayed translation from their fellow pilgrims raised their voices a moment later.

“You have risked much to stand here and voice your belief in the Goddess.” Junari waved her hand to indicate the streets around them. “You are heretics in a city balanced between two arms of the same faith. You risk being crushed between those opposing forces. Your courage commends you. Do not think it will be ignored. The Goddess will protect you. Moaratana will...”

Junari’s sentence faltered and faded from her lips as she looked east along the street. A new crowd marched the cobblestones of the narrow lane, a mass of men and women, arms raised high, hands clutching sticks and brooms and axes and metal pry bars. A scream turned her head westward along the road to find a similar sight, a violent mob attacking the new pilgrims from the rear. She looked back. Kam-Djen fanatics yelled curses as they clubbed the men and women fleeing before them. The two hammers of the fanatic mobs pressed the would-be pilgrims toward the center, crushing Raedalus and Junari’s guards against the side of the carriage.

“We must go.” Commander Bon-Tao grabbed Junari’s arm.

“Go where?” Junari looked around, seeing the new pilgrims pressed close on all sides, driven inward by the assault of the fanatics against their fellow citizens at the edges of the crowd. She saw a woman fall, blood gushing from her head under the impact of a shovel blade.

“Mother Shepherd, we must flee.” Raedalus pulled himself to the top of the carriage, pushed up from below by Kantula. Once atop the carriage, he turned and helped Kantula join him. One of the city soldiers reached out a hand to pull Jupiter up beside them.

“We can cut our way to that alley.” Bon-Tao pointed to a narrow gap between two buildings twenty feet behind them. “It will lead to a street that runs to the southern wall.”

“You will not cut your way through my pilgrims.” Junari brushed Bon-Tao’s hand from her arm as she glared at him. “It is a tragedy enough that Kam-Djen maniacs slaughter defenseless believers.”

“Mother Shepherd, we cannot stay here.” Raedalus wiped blood from his lip. “They will overwhelm the new pilgrims and they will come for you.” He pointed to the Kam-Djen fanatics already forging through the crowd of believers, slicing a path toward the carriage, screaming as they swung the blades of work tools and kitchen knives. She understood their Shen curses well enough.

“Kill the heretic bitch!”

“Kill the false prophet!”

Junari ducked as a knife spun through the air toward her head.

“Mother Shepherd...”

Raedalus’s voice faded as the carriage lurched, tilting under the pressure of the bodies pressed against it. Junari slid sideways as the wheels on one side of the wagon left the ground. Men and women, pilgrims who moments before cried with joy, now shrieked as the carriage fell atop them. Junari screamed as well, skidding across the roof of the cabin and falling atop a woman half trapped beneath the overturned vehicle. Junari’s head struck the ground, the smooth edge of a street stone biting into her scalp.

The woman beneath her wailed for help as Junari rolled away. Raedalus reached out for Junari, seeking to place himself before her and to shield her against the Kam-Djen fanatics pressing over the bodies of the fallen pilgrims. Jupterus and Kantula stood beside Commander Bon-Tao, swords flashing in the sun as they attempted to push back a group of men stabbing with pitchforks and long metal hooks normally used to pull barrels from the merchant ship holds.

Junari held the hand of the woman beside her, tears in both of their eyes. A man grasped her arm. Thinking it to be Raedalus, she turned to find a knife-wielding fanatic readying to stab her. The man jerked back from her, pulled away by Kantula. The man's grip tore the sleeve of Junari's robes free, exposing the scarred flesh beneath the folds. Kantula thrust a sword into the man's belly and turned to defend herself from another fanatic behind her. Junari turned back to the woman trapped beneath the overturned carriage, still holding her hand.

"Mother Shepherd..." The woman's words faded in a moan of pain, lost in a vast ocean of sound, drowning out all individual voices in wave upon wave of anger and terror.

Holding tightly to the nameless woman's hand, Junari tipped her head skyward as she shouted her petition to the heavens.

"Great Goddess Moaratana, listen to my plea! Listen to the cries of your people! Protect us from those who would kill us! Shield your flock from the wolves who tear our flesh! Show the fury of your wrath to those who slaughter your chosen!"

Junari's voice echoed in her own ears as the sound of fighting crashed upon her. Uncertain if her goddess heard her appeals, she looked down from the sky to see the carriage burst into flame. Confused at what she witnessed, Junari shielded her eyes against the fire leaping upward from the side of the carriage cabin. The woman beside her cried out at the sight of the fire now consuming the vehicle pinning her legs. Her screams vanished in a greater cry, one called forth in terror from throughout the mass of people jammed into the street.

Kam-Djen fanatics yelled in panic as the wooden handles of axes and pitchforks and shovels and knives and jury-rigged spears burst into flame. Their cries of "*Dark Sight*" were lost as more screams rang out — salamander flames leaping from hand to breast, from man to woman, setting the clothes of the Kam-Djen extremists alight.

"Help me." Junari waved to Raedalus and Bon-Tao as she watched the zealots flee before the righteous flames of the Goddess Moaratana.

Junari released the woman's hand and placed her fingers beneath the edge of the carriage roof that crushed the stranger's legs. She lifted with all her strength, feeling the vehicle begin to rise as more and more hands joined her own — Raedalus, Bon-Tao, her guards, and pilgrims still nearby and unwounded.

As they set the carriage upright on its wheels, the woman sighed with pain, her eyes fluttering, and she passed out. Another pilgrim, a young woman who could have been the wounded woman's daughter, knelt beside her.

"We must go, Mother Shepherd." Raedalus took Junari's hand, his face a mixture of fear and awe.

“The alley.” Bon-Tao pointed to the path through the wounded pilgrims running for safety from the flames and the fleeing Kam-Djen fanatics.

Overwhelmed and dazed, Junari let herself be pulled through the remnants of the crowd of pilgrims, around men burning where they lay in the street, past women bleeding as they crouched against walls and hid in doorways. As they rushed into the narrow alley, she looked over her shoulder to see that the flames had spread to nearby houses and buildings, running up moss-covered walls to dance across rooftops and skip down the lane.

Junari coughed as she ran, her lungs choking on fear rather than smoke. In her anger and terror, she had begged the Goddess to unleash a divine wrath upon their enemies, and Moaratana had set the city aflame.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Junari’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

“SEEMS A hard way to go.”

“Nag Pat Gioth will burn up their souls.”

“I thought souls was all eternal?”

“Not heretics, the priests say. Heard tell heretics lose their souls.”

“Priests always said the wicked is servants of the good in the Amaranthine Fields.”

“New rules for the heretics. Like to show that daughter a few rules, I would. The mother too, maybe.”

“Hard way to go.”

Ondromead watched and listened to the two men from the inn as they talked near the rear of the wagon he stood upon with Hashel. The elder of the two men spoke correctly. The high priests of the Tot Gioth faith had convened a special council to debate the fate of the souls of heretics. Ondromead had witnessed the final vote himself. All twelve of the robed men agreed — heretics of the new goddess no longer possessed souls if burnt by fire. The god Nag Pat Gioth, the Great Destroyer, the Father of Death, consumed their souls as punishment. There had been a profound theological argument as to whether these heretic souls were consumed by the God of Destruction for all eternity, or if they simply ceased to exist. That question had been tabled for discussion at a future date. The faithful needed to know the dire consequences of following the heretic star. They lost their souls and any chance at joining their loved ones in the Amaranthine Fields upon their deaths. They did not need to worry if this process took a day or lasted for all time.

As Ondromead watched the armed guards of the town tie the five hapless believers to the stakes thrusting up from the planks of the narrow scaffold over the pyre, a hand tugged at his arm. He looked down to see Hashel’s eyes, wet and pleading. The boy pointed to the pyre, stabbing his finger as he pulled at Ondromead’s sleeve.

“You know we can only witness.” Ondromead sighed, sensing the boy’s pain as his own, as if he would experience the agony of the men and women while they burned alive. “I have told you. We cannot interfere. I have tried. Many times. It has always turned matters from awful to disastrous. Turn away. It is for the best. We will leave afterward. Soon. I promise.”

Ondromead patted the boy on the back of the head, resting his hand there for a moment. The child perceived things more powerfully than most. He eventually turned the events they witnessed into song. A birth of a child rising from his voice by the fire later that night, a lullaby

to soothe all wounded minds to sleep. A death likewise brought a ballad of aching beauty to make one realize the joy and sorrow of being left behind when loved ones fled the firmness of the world for some ephemeral life beyond mortal grasp.

Hashel bit his lip and turned back toward the temple. Ondromead sighed again. The boy could be stubborn. His continued silence evidenced his obstinacy. Ondromead followed the boy's eyes. The scene looked familiar. One seen many times in many lands over thousands of years. Angry people setting light to their fellows over a disagreement in belief or action. A pyre built from fear as much as wood. Something about this scene struck him as more similar than most. Maybe the morning hour. Most heretics and dissidents met the flames at night rather than with the first rays of the day. Maybe the number. Usually, there were only one or two. Often women accused of Dark Sight, frequently for the simple act of blending herbs to heal the locals, or for being a little less like their neighbors than the men with the torches thought they should be.

Ondromead looked at the black book in his hand, flipping back through its pages, quickly finding the entry that came to his mind. Not as long ago as he remembered.

THIRTY YEARS AGO

CRIES AND shouts fought the caws of ravens and the crows of cocks as morning light cast stone shadows across Ondromead's blinking eyes. He sat up to discover headstones flanking him on all sides. He turned to the sound of voices, angry and afraid, righteous and pleading. He pushed himself to his feet. He stood at the edge of a graveyard behind a modest temple at the far corner of a small village. The temple looked to be Kam-Djen in design, a single spire rising up from the front. Zatolin by the markings above the door. Men and women with sticks pushed five people through the streets. Five people in the robes of Pashist priests. Another small crowd of cowed villagers followed, urged forward by men with swords and axes.

Ondromead walked toward the temple and the crowd. He hated waking straight from a dream-filled night to a morning of witnessing, especially when the event looked to be violent and sad and unjust. Another helpless priest caught in the wrong place and set to fire by priests of a different god. He scratched the sleep from his head as he walked. The village appeared familiar, but they all did after so many years. He had probably been there centuries ago. Yes. Yes, he had. He recognized the way the spire sat, at an angle on the temple, rising between two large hills in the distance where the sun floated above their summits. The spire had been added long after the temple's construction, pulled down, rebuilt, and finally left alone. He forgot the name of the village, but knew it rested at the border between the Punderra and Tanshen Dominions, on land that had once belonged to the Juparti Dominion. A village that found itself in all three nations repeatedly over the centuries as the national boundaries shifted under war and negotiations.

The hamlet had once been Pashist entirely, but the loss of a border war left it with a population half Kam-Djen for the duration of the Third Great Dominion. After the dissolution of that Great Dominion, Punderra took control of the land, and the villagers lived in uneasy peace

for many years until the town fell back under the rule of the Tanshen zhans. It seemed the local Kam-Djen priests had decided to end their years of coexistence with a bonfire.

Ondromead took the black book from his satchel and held it in his hands. He would write down what he saw afterward. Sometimes, he recorded things as they transpired, but he did not have the strength, just waking from sleep, to face transposing these particular horrors as they unfolded.

The men with swords and axes pushed the Pashist priests to the stakes and tied them in place. Two women and three men. One of the men reached out for the hand of the woman tied beside him. They clasped hands and looked into each other's eyes before turning to stare away from the crowd and the village, gazing off into the distance as though staring into the faces of their gods, welcoming them to their deaths.

The flames came more quickly than he expected. The Kam-Djen priest presiding over the execution appeared agitated that he had not been given the opportunity to sermonize the occasion. He tried to say a few words before the roar of the fire and the cheers of the crowd drowned out his voice. He addressed his remarks to the villagers corralled together in a bunch by their armed and furious-faced neighbors.

“Ni-Kam-Djen is The True God. There is no other god and all worshipers of false deities shall suffer the same fate — to be burned in the flame that they might be purified in the wrath of Ni-Kam-Djen. Take the deaths of these vile Pashist demons to heart. There is still time for you to find the love of Ni-Kam-Djen. Admit now the errors of your ways, come before the house of Ni-Kam-Djen in supplication, and feel the glory of his presence in your lives. Ni-Kam-Djen is righteous but forgiving. Abandon your false Pashist Gods and Ni-Kam-Djen will forgive you. Persist and you will join these priests in the flames.”

Ondromead wondered how many of the Pashist villagers would accept the terms of conversion — and how many would flee in the dark of night for their brethren across the nearby border with Punderra. The shouts of the Kam-Djen faithful grew louder, as if trying to conceal the wails of pity and sorrow rising up from the Pashist villagers. The five priests made no noise and gave no sign of the torment they endured. Flames coursed over their flesh, but they did not exclaim in agony. Three of them closed their eyes and appeared to enter a private inner reverie far from the fire and smoke assailing their bodies. The other two, the man and the woman, still clasped hands even as fire engulfed their fingers. Husband and wife, no doubt, as the Pashist priesthood encouraged rather than prohibited marriage. They did not close their eyes, but continued to look away from the town, staring off into the distant woods, the trees seeming to glow with flames of their own as the morning light touched their leaves.

Eventually, the smoke and flames obscured the Pashist priests entirely, cloaking their final moments of life from the crowd that had brayed so loudly for their fiery passing. Ondromead waited until the flames burned down and the smoke blew away, revealing blackened mummies of charred flesh slumped against the stake posts, the ropes binding them scorched through. He turned and walked along the path leading out of the village. He could always tell when he had observed what needed to be recorded. Often, he stayed to chronicle the reactions of those

affected by the death or the birth or the natural disaster, but these were mere addendums to the necessary record of specific instances he bore witness to with the words he wrote in the book.

As he walked, he looked back, noting that the bodies of the husband and wife still held hands, still looked into the infinite distance, away from the village. He wondered what their last thoughts had been. Had they thought of their love for one another? Had they, as their Pashist scriptures suggested, forgiven those who took their lives? Had they found peace in the belief that their souls would be born once more into new bodies in new lives where they might once more meet and fall in love? He wished he could record the answers to these questions in his book, but he knew that even a book with endless pages did hold room for all the hopes and sorrows of those he had watched passing from this plane of existence and into the unknown. He could only transcribe what he saw and heard. Only walk and wait to wake somewhere new the next day and begin again his everlasting act of bearing witness.

THE PRESENT

“WHAT’S HE sayin’?”

“Somethin’ ’bout the fires burnin’ their souls forever.”

“That can’t be right.”

“Wouldn’t wanna burn like that.”

“Then don’t go dreamin’ ’bout no dark goddess bitch and her star.”

“But the star is there in the sky.”

“Dark Sight tricks, I hear. Like a mirror held up far away.”

Ondromead listened to the two men from the inn argue theology in the way of men who had never heard the word, watching as the Kam-Djen priest shouted words passed back through the crowd in various versions. He didn’t bother listening to the speech. These words did not matter. When they mattered, he knew it instinctively. Had they mattered, he would have written them down as they were spoken. He listened to the priest working to a crescendo of anger and religious righteousness. The lighting of the pyre would follow soon. He looked down, intending to ensure that Hashel did not watch. The boy did not stand beside him. He looked around. The boy did not stand in the wagon at all.

The boy had gone.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Ondromead’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

CLOUDS THE color of ash on wet slate clung close to the ground, a monochrome sky hanging just above the treetops, fog rising up from the dew damp grass to mingle in a hazy mist, swirling lazily in a wayward breeze. In the moist earth of the road, bodies lay in pools of congealed blood, staining the dirt black — men with gashes across their necks and chests, women with stab wounds to the heart, dresses and undergarments torn away, children seeming to sleep, arrow shafts protruding from their backs.

“Not long. A day. Maybe less.”

Sketkee looked up from examining the welter of boot and hoof prints heading south down the road. Kadmallin knelt beside one of the bodies, the back of his hand pressed to the exposed flesh of a dead man’s neck. He stood up, wiping his hands on his trouser legs.

“We should go.” Sketkee glanced at the clouds, judging the location of the hidden sun just reaching its apex in the sky. “We can march through the night and catch them by dawn if we are fortunate.”

“We’ll march through the night, but we’ll bury the bodies first.” Kadmallin pulled a dead woman’s dress down to cover her bare legs.

Sketkee glanced around the devastated campsite. She counted thirty-three dead pilgrims, not including the three dead dogs and two dead pigs. The bandits they had tracked for the past several days were indiscriminating in their slaughter. She looked from the bodies to Kadmallin, his irrational human instincts evident in his manner.

“They are dead, Kadmallin.” Sketkee waved her hand to indicate the campsite. “There is nothing that can be done for the dead.”

“They deserve the respect of a burial.” Kadmallin stared at the body of a boy nearly sliced in half by a sword strike.

“They cannot experience respect.” Sketkee kept her tone even. She found it best to project a manner of calm when arguing with humans about their *emotional* responses and desires. “They can perceive nothing now. While this is regrettable, were they alive, I suspect they would prefer we spend our time seeking justice for them rather than wasting time disposing of their corpses. Do you believe they exist in some manner after their corporeal demise?”

“You don’t need to believe in ghosts or spirits to want to bury their bodies.” Kadmallin frowned in annoyance.

“An afterlife? I thought you did not believe in gods or a world beyond this one.” Sketkee still viewed with great fascination the tendency of humans and the other peoples of Onaia to accept as true things unseen and improvable. How they managed to continually delude themselves eluded her comprehension.

“I had no cause to believe in anything before that star appeared in the heavens and people started having the same dream.” Kadmallin waved a hand toward the sky and then the bodies of the pilgrims scattered around him. “These people are dead for their belief in all of that.”

“Coincidence is not causation.” Sketkee kept the exasperation from her voice. “The appearance of the star is one event. The dreams are another. Both explainable without recourse to supernatural intervention.”

“Fine. There are no gods. The dreams and the star are just things that happened.” Kadmallin pointed to the body of a woman near his feet. “That doesn’t matter. You pay the dead, you pay this woman the respect of burial for her memory.”

“You did not know these people.” Sketkee shook her head in mild confusion. Disagreements with humans, even one as intelligent as Kadmallin, often included distracting detours that led down blind trails into a fog of unintelligibility. The mist around her and Kadmallin would eventually lift, but she suspected the haze of human unreason would likely never be burnt away by the sun of rationality.

“I’ve known people just like them and so have you,” Kadmallin said.

“A likeness is not the thing itself,” Sketkee replied.

“We’re all the same enough.” Kadmallin gestured to the body of the woman near him again, his hand shaking slightly. “This woman could have been my wife. That boy could have been the son she would have borne.”

“You attach sentiment to categories of being.” Sketkee found herself surprised by Kadmallin’s mention of the woman who would have been his wife. He never spoke of her. She only knew of her from the accounts of others. She decided to proceed in a manner that relied on arguments not likely to involve emotions from his past. She had noted, over years of observation, that non-rakthor peoples, and humans in particular, did not function properly when in the grip of memories about those in their lives who had died. “It still does not provide a rationale for the expenditure of time it will take to accomplish the task you propose. Burying these people might mean losing the trail of the bandits who killed them.”

“Rakthors bury their dead, do they not?” Kadmallin raised his chin as he queried her.

“We dispose of our dead for sanitary, not sentimental, reasons.” Sketkee attempted to keep a pedantic tenor from her voice. Kadmallin never responded well to such a tone. “The bodies of the deceased are collected and cremated. We do not hold ceremonies to collectively celebrate their departure.”

“You don’t miss your friends and family who have died?” Kadmallin stepped closer, his face pulled tight in curiosity.

“Certainly we miss them. They have been a part of our lives. How could we not feel displeasure at their absence?” Sketkee thought of her father and mother, dead now for octads.

She often wished she might have the pleasure of their company and conversation, but did not experience the emptiness that she had heard humans describe in the loss of mates and parents and children. “It is not in our nature to grieve for the dead we have known. If you die before me on this adventure, I will remember you in private, as a great friend and companion.”

“Well, I’ll grieve for you if the time comes.” Kadmallin grimaced as he looked from Sketkee to the bodies at their feet. “Just as I grieve for these people I did not even know.”

“That is your right, and I would not argue with it.” Sketkee saw an opportunity to appeal to the more rational side of Kadmallin’s mind. Their arguments usually took the pattern of her deflecting his entreaties to the emotions she did not possess until she could make an approach to the reasoning mind he did. “You must concede that it will take hours, if not most of the day and well into night, in order to gather these corpses and dig a burial pit for them. And while I might be able to continue the hunt for this bandit band after such exertion, I suspect you will need several hours rest, at least. You are no longer a young man.”

“You need not remind me.” Kadmallin placed a hand on the railing of a battered wagon, a dead man hanging over the side.

“Apparently, I must.” Sketkee glanced down the fog-enshrouded road to the south, feeling a momentarily irrational impulse to dash into the mist in pursuit of those who stole the artifact. She desperately desired its return, almost to the point of questioning her own judgment.

“What if there is another way? A way that did not take as much time, but showed respect for the dead.” Kadmallin’s voice sounded determined yet optimistic.

“If it is not exhaustive of our time, I will consider it.” Sketkee brought her gaze from the road back to Kadmallin. “What is your compromise?”

“You mentioned cremation, did you not?” Kadmallin patted the side of the wagon as his eyes swept over the corpse-littered campsite.

Sketkee found Kadmallin’s proposal efficacious and surprisingly well reasoned. They pushed the two wagons side by side near the road but not too close to the trees. She helped Kadmallin carry the dead bodies of the pilgrims from around their final campsite and loaded them gently on the beds of the wagons. They then collected a sizable stack of fallen branches to lay under the wagons and stepped back to examine their work.

“Do you wish to say something?” Sketkee looked at the mound of bodies with the inherent detachment she observed all events, noting that those most likely to miss them, to grieve in the human way for their loss, in all probability lay dead beside them. It occurred to her, oddly, that this could be considered an added injustice to the taking of their lives.

“May you be remembered.” Kadmallin shrugged. He apparently had no more words for the occasion.

Unable to get a spark from Kadmallin’s flint fire kit in the dampness of the fog, Sketkee worked the muscles of her throat, urging her fire glands to action. She opened her mouth wide, spraying blue-orange flame across the branches beneath the wagons and the bodies of the dead. They stayed and watched the fire grow and rise into the sky. Sketkee argued to herself that they remained to ensure the blaze did not spread to the surrounding forest, but knew that, in truth,

they lingered so that Kadmallin could witness the completion of the cremation he had orchestrated.

“Good enough.” Kadmallin stepped away from the fire and hitched the strap of his pack over his shoulder.

Sketkee grabbed her own pack from the ground, heading along the southern road with Kadmallin, fog whorling around them in their passage.

“Let’s go find the bastards who did this and kill them.” Kadmallin rested his hand on the hilt of his sword as he walked.

Finally, Sketkee thought, *something we agree upon*.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

SINUOUS SNAKES of black air and ash twisted and wriggled between buildings as they rose above rooftops to curl around each other in the sky. Junari leaned against the inner railing of the city's great wall and watched the neighborhood of clay-capped houses beneath her consumed by flames, men and women running through the streets, arms clutching their meager possessions or wrapped around their wailing children.

"You must cease what you have begun." Commander Bon-Tao gripped her bare arm. He looked away from the scarred flesh.

"I have tried." Junari continued to stare at the wave of fire fast approaching the wall of stone she stood atop. Commander Bon-Tao had pulled her through the city alleys and streets and up the stairs of the outer wall to safety. Only once above the rooftops could they truly see the effect of the blaze pouring over the southern corner of the city, consuming centuries-old buildings as the impoverished owners and renters fled for protection.

"Try more." Bon-Tao pointed to the flames. "The city burns under your god's touch."

"Mother Shepherd, we will pray with you." Raedalus stood beside her, looking over the railing of the wall.

"Yes. Yes. That may help." Junari bowed her head, gesturing for Jupiterus and Kantula to join her. She raised her eyes to the smoke-stained sky as her two guards knelt at her side. Bon-Tao and his fellow soldiers stepped back, faces blended between disgust and fear.

She had prayed as she ran through the streets and again upon reaching the top of the wall, but the flames only spread quicker, her horror growing with each passing moment and every new building set alight. She did not know why the Goddess did not respond to her prayers for intercession.

"Great Goddess Moaratana, our hearts overflow with gratitude for the shelter of your wings from the storm of unbelievers assailed against us. Hear now our pleas for mercy for those who would have slain us. Grant compassion to they who would cast us out. Spare the city and the innocent from the flames of your wrath."

Junari lowered her eyes, her heart searing with the pain of those she witnessed below, fleeing from the fires she had called down upon them. She looked on, not knowing what else she might do, or how she might unmake the tragedy she had fashioned from her fear and anger. Tears streamed across her soot-smudged cheeks, falling to splash along the distended surface of

the scars wrapping her arms. She stared at the mutilated flesh, remembering the fire that had scorched her, hearing the wails of those in the city facing flames, fearing she had tread the same path twice without realizing it.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

THE SCENT of lamp oil stung the air, stabbing sharply as it rose up from the dampened beams of the walls and sodden planks of the pyre. Junari waved a hand before her nose. The attendants had been thorough in dousing the wood with the oil, the fumes wafting out to infuse the clothes and burn the eyes of the priests, family members, and congregants gathered around the funeral temple-pyre.

The funeral pyre-temple, constructed over the past two days from aged timber, rose to the height of three men in the center, spreading seven paces at the base. The long beams tilted inward in a circle, coming to a peak at the top in a crisscross of angles, nailed together with wooden pegs for support. The assembly resembled a wooden version of the tents of the nomad people of the Kytain Dominion, the Sky Plains. Junari had seen a painting of the plains people and their dwellings once as a child, dreaming of a life among the tall grass and rolling hills. Her life had instead taken her to inner planes, the meditations of the temple priesthood supplanting the wide-open skies of the eastern lands.

Those many years training and rising through the priestly hierarchy placed her that day before the pyre-temple of her prayer and ritual guide, Lamno Horda. She had supervised the building of the structure herself, choosing the words to add to those of the traditional memorial, memorizing what she intended to say in farewell to a dear friend as he made his passage to his next incarnation. She had studied under Lamno Horda's careful tutelage since her first arrival as a temple novice, becoming like a daughter to the childless couple. Lamno Horda's wife, Miraa, had insisted that Junari perform the ceremony that would see Ongaa, god of fire and death, consume the wooden shrine and her husband's body, preparing it for further embodiment in the world.

Nervous, the fumes of oil and incense making her dizzy, Junari rubbed tears from her eyes and turned to look behind her at the family and fellow priests gathered in the grassy clearing. The sun sat just above the horizon, blinding her with its fire-orange light, the tint deepening the hue of her amber robes until they seemed as aflame as the bonfire burning beside the funeral pyre-temple. She did not see Miraa, but had noted her among the congregants earlier. Funeral pyres were lit with the final rays of the day's light, symbolizing the last days of life, the dark night to come, and the dawn of a new incarnation to follow. Junari turned, as customary, to face the pyre-temple and address the god Ongaa in prayer, reciting the most famous devotion to the bringer of flame and the guardian of death.

*"Great god Ongaa,
Bless us with your presence,
You who brought us out of savagery and darkness,*

*You who light the fire of our hearth,
And bring the glow to our lamps.
Great father of death and flame,
You who consume our souls in the blaze of your love,
You who transform the ash of our lives,
And kindle the clay of our rebirthing,
Grant us the bounty of your flames and the wisdom of your spirit,
Embrace our beloved in your loving arms,
Carry our cherished one through the endless night
And to the dawn of the eternal morning.
So may it be now, so may it be forever.
Anaha, Ahana."*

Junari concluded the prayer with the traditional benediction, placing her clasped hands to her forehead. The ocher light of the setting sun washed across the land, trees and hills and temple spires gleaming in its wake as it splashed over the beams of the pyre-temple, making it appear to alight from within. She gestured to the attendants, and three men pulled flame-drenched torches from the bonfire to walk around the structure, touching the fire-tipped points to the oil-soaked wood. Blue-orange flames ate their way up the wooden beams to meet at the top, sparks spiraling into the air, glittering brightly against the plum-black sky of twilight.

As the blaze grew, Junari turned to the assembly and continued the memorial, quoting from *The Book of Ending and Beginning*. She read a passage in the ancient Muntiba language, the first tongue of the sacred scriptures, reciting a prayer of peaceful transformation and auspicious birthing, blessing the consciousness of the departed with the good tidings of the congregation as they spoke back the words she said aloud.

A sound, unexpected and immediately disconcerting, rose above the crackling of the sanctified wood and mixed with her intonations of the prayer. She stopped, turning her head, uncertain if she imagined the noise from behind her. It came again, clear and unmistakable. The cries of a woman fought the roar of the funeral flames. The cries of Miraa, her mentor's wife.

Junari rushed to the entrance to the pyre-temple, the wide gap between the supporting beams filled with smoke and flame. She heard the cry again, the wail of fear and pain and despair. How could Miraa have come to be in the pyre-temple? She had not seen her friend when she began the ceremony. Had she already been inside? What could she have been doing there? Saying final words to her beloved? Hoping to join him on his journey through the unknowable dark night? This did not sound like the woman she knew.

The answer to her questions struck Junari as a man came into her view, the brother of her mentor, a merchant in the city, a seller of rugs in the market place. A man with fire reflected in his eyes, his head nodding in prayers unheard over the flames.

Junari did not wait to think, leaping forward into the burning inferno, following Miraa's screams. The smoke and heat slammed into her, knocking her back — fiery fists that both pummeled her and sought to grasp her tight. She held her arms above her face, peering around

her elbows, wiping her stinging eyes, holding her breath as she searched out the source of the cries for help.

She stumbled beneath the oppressive heat, discovering the origin of the screams even as they faded. Junari found Miraa tied to the bed of wooden slats where her husband's body rested in final repose, fire lashing out at her. Her head hung in unconsciousness as flames fed upon her clothes and arms. The smoke had overwhelmed her. Junari knelt down and tugged at the ropes binding her friend to the funeral bed. Pain seared her mind as the fire-tinged ropes bit into the flesh of her fingers. She screamed, releasing the life-sustaining air she held in her lungs as she continued to paw at the knots binding Miraa to certain death.

In that moment, staring at Miraa restrained and aflame, another fire came to mind, in another place and time, a blaze she had buried beneath years of shame and guilt and recrimination. A morning sun in a clear sky. A village between rolling hills. Townspeople gathered, herded into the streets. Five people tied to stakes beneath a pile of wood, flames climbing up their legs, smoke hovering around their faces. A man and a woman. Arms free of the ropes wrapping their chests. Hands held. Eyes wide open in silence, gazing at the forest beyond the town as the firestorm ate away at their bodies. Staring at an unseen girl of twelve who had left her bed with the dawn to walk in the fields and pick flowers long before the armed fanatics from the town assembled. A girl who hid in the woods and watched, frozen in terror, as she saw her mother and father dragged from her uncle's home and into the open lane between the houses. The girl who cried as the angry invaders bound her parents and tied them to a makeshift pyre built from the ruins of a wagon and the firewood of nearby homes. A girl who observed in anguished stillness as a holocaust of intolerance and hatred devoured the two people she loved most.

Junari cried out in pain and sorrow, sobbing for the loss of her mother and father and the loss of the man and woman, Lamno and Miraa, who had taken their places in her life, all consumed by fire. She struggled again with the ropes securing Miraa to the funeral bed. The charred corded fibers would not unwind, nor had they yet been eaten thoroughly enough by flames to snap. Junari coughed and tugged at Miraa's lifeless body, fire creeping down to set the woman's hair alight. Junari felt dizzy, the poisoned air burning her lungs even as flames ran up along the sleeves of her robe. She beat at the flames and turned from the fire and death to crawl toward air and hope and life.

A support beam fell beside her, sending embers cascading over her body, burning her face and neck. She lurched to her feet and staggered through the blazing entrance and into the cool night, gulping down the sweet air, coughing up the blackness within as she collapsed to the ground.

THE PRESENT

JUNARI STARED at the cicatrix marks along her arms, remembering the flames of the makeshift temple that had served as a double funeral pyre. She looked to the conflagration

engulfing the city below the wall, the same long-cooled embers of responsibility and shame of that night so long ago rekindled to scorch and scar her heart. She had failed again to see what stood before her and had acted to appease her own desires.

The night of her mentor's funeral, she had been so possessed of the desire to impress the priests assembled, to make good upon his long endorsement of her studies, that she had not noticed his wife Miraa's absence until too late. Had she carried more concern for her friend's sorrow than her own selfish need to shine, she might have noted the erratic expressions of her mentor's brothers and cousins. She might have considered the source of the fevered looks in their eyes. She might have guessed that they had knocked their brother's wife unconscious and dragged her into the pyre-temple before the mourners gathered, tying her to her dead husband's funeral bed so that she might join him in death and further birth.

A vile, ancient, and outlawed custom — burnt marriage offerings, as they were known — still happened in the outer reaches of the dominion, far from civilized society, although rarely in the towns and temples near the capital. It had not occurred to Junari that her mentor's family would exact this loathsome tribute from Miraa. While women were accepted as equals in the search for the Divine within the temples, many men outside the priesthood could not see them as more than property to be discharged with the house and land and other items of estate upon their husband's death. And, in many cases, the women were seen as obstacles to inheritance, a funeral pyre providing an opportune means of ensuring the desired transfer of title and deed and familial wealth.

Junari had called for the pyre-temple to be lit. She had sentenced her friend to a death in flame. And now, years later, consumed with fear and anger and self-importance, she had called down the wrath of a newborn goddess upon a people she needed to view her as a blessing rather than a threat. She had failed her pilgrims and her goddess and the people she would never know dying in the flames of her ignorance and malice. Just as she had failed her parents, hiding in cowardice rather than trying to save them from the death pyre of their captors. How were her actions this day different from those of the fear-blinded Kam-Djen priests who burned her parents alive?

She wiped tears from her eyes. Moaratana's wrath could not be called upon in blind anger or fear, for it would consume all in its path, like the firestorm devouring the city. She had asked not merely for protection, but retribution, and the Goddess did not act in half measures. Nor, it seemed, would she rescind her fury without some greater plea than meager words of prayer.

The famous Juparti legend of a kinsett named Willona came to Junari's mind, and she knew with sudden clarity what the Goddess Moaratana required to cease her inflamed reproach of the city. In the ancient days, the gods had demanded sacrifices to bestow their bounty upon believers. The taking of an animal's life-energy fed the gods and gave them cause to receive human petitions for intercession in their lives. The greater the deed petitioned of the god, the more significant the required offering. Powerful priests and rulers in those far-gone days had been known to surrender even their children to appease the hunger of the gods and turn the events of the world to their favor under divine guidance. Sacrifice of any kind had fallen from

use under the reformations of the prophet Godonteka, the Golden One, as his followers called him. The preciousness of living beings, their divine energy, made their sacramental deaths abhorrent to the sacred essence of the divine cosmos, the Nahan Tagana.

But Moaratana was not a Pashist god — not a god to sit silent in response to her people's prayers. Moaratana acted in the world, and she required action to encourage her continued involvement.

“Moaratana, hear my plea.” Junari raised her head and her voice to the skies. “Save these people who hate us. Spare this city that would turn us back from your will. Protect those who suffer through ignorance of your benevolence. Accept this sacrifice as supplication to your divine will and in return for your grace.”

Junari lowered her head, reaching her hand out to snatch the dagger from Kantula's belt, turning the blade inward, thrusting the tip into the flesh beneath her ribcage, crying out as she pulled the hard steel up into her heart.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Junari's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE THRONE



DJU-TESHA

SMOKE FROM herb-scented lamp oil cloaked centuries-old decay, clouds of rancid dust, and the tang of deep earthen mold. Dju-Tesha raised a kerchief to her nose, trying to ignore the battle of smells assaulting her nostrils as well as the darting shadows and tiny nails scraping along the stone floor. Rats. Dju-Tesha hated rats. The flea-infested creatures overwhelmed the palace every few years, appearing in private rooms, their naked tails trailing as they scurried from stomping feet and screaming voices. She had awoken once as a child to find one on her bed, attempting to gnaw at her hair. She retched silently at the memory.

“Still hate the rats?”

Dju-Tesha grimaced at her brother holding the lamp beside her.

“They have made no attempt to endear themselves to me over the years.” Dju-Tesha coughed at the earthen clouds kicked up by their footsteps.

The catacombs were cleaned for her brother’s burial a few months past, but the dust seemed decades deep. Maybe they had taken a wrong turn. The maze-like warren of sepulchers and sarcophagi looked identical from nearly every angle. She had searched the library shelves for a map to the resting place of her ancestors, but none had ever been made. Were it not for the ill blood between her and the long-tailed subterranean inhabitants of the tunnels, she might have been inclined to create one herself. A useful addition to the palace library. She had frequently dreamed of writing a book that would be as valuable and as inspirational as the tomes she read and reshelfed in the archives. Something to rival Gan-Wot’s *History of the Three Great Dominions* or Lan-Win’s *Articles of Discourse and Belief*.

“Fan and I played here often as children.” Tin-Tsu swung the lantern to look down a corridor of cobwebs.

She remembered her brothers’ accounts of terror in the burial chambers beneath the palace. They would return grimy and reeking of stale death to recount tales of ghosts and demons they had battled in their journeys underneath the earth. They taunted her to join them, but she had always preferred stories of adventure to actual escapades. She simply did not possess the temperament nor the constitution of an adventuress. She only now ventured into the burrow of entombed bodies because of Tin-Tsu’s request to accompany him to see their father and brother. He had missed both funerals and wished to make his prayers for their fruitful passage into the Pure Lands in front of the crypts of their final material resting place.

“This way?” Tin-Tsu pointed into darkness.

“Possibly?” Dju-Tesha shielded her eyes from the lamplight as she peered into the blackness.

“I thought you came down with the burial parties.” Tin-Tsu plunged ahead, apparently on instinct more than visual confirmation of their destination.

“I followed the priests and mother. And, if I may point out, I was rather too distraught at the time to calibrate my surroundings.”

Dju-Tesha sighed at the memory. She had not been close to her eldest brother — he had carried too many burdens in life to allow for intimate relationships — but she missed him greatly nonetheless. She hoped she might find herself closer to Tin-Tsu in the coming days, although he, too, seemed preoccupied with matters of state.

“Of course. My apologies.” Tin-Tsu nodded in solemn sincerity as they walked.

“There.” Dju-Tesha pointed to a row of stone coffins ahead. “That is the place.”

They approached slowly, the glow of the lamp revealing five slate black caskets, two with ornately carved lids detailing in images and words the deeds of the men lying within them. Each generation had a set of graves for their ultimate repose. Her father and brother already filled their last stone beds. She hoped it would be a very long time before she needed to lie down beside them for the final sleep. She had no desire to see the pleasures of the Pure Lands until she had witnessed the best of those in the gross realm of Onaia.

“Would you join me in a prayer?” Tin-Tsu hung the lantern on a metal hook protruding from the arched brick wall of the chamber.

“Certainly.” Dju-Tesha clasped her right palm around her left fist and bowed her head.

Tin-Tsu lowered his head and raised his hands as well, pausing before he spoke. Dju-Tesha did not recognize the prayer her brother uttered and suspected it to be one of his own fashioning, created in the moment rather than memorized and recited. She envied him this skill. She possessed a keen mind with an inexhaustible memory, but she did not have the form of imagination necessary for making poems or prayers from nothing but the air in her lungs and the intentions of her heart.

“Great God, master of all things in all times, hear our humble pleas for the care and good keeping of our loved ones in the Pure Lands. May you guide and nurture them in all their needs. May you reward them for their many deeds here in this shadow world. May they bask in the brilliance of your eternal love. May you make for us a place beside them to reunite when we, too, have exhausted the filament of our inner flame and passed from this shaded realm of sorrow. Onna Djen.”

“Onna Djen.” Dju-Tesha repeated the customary conclusion of all Kam-Djen prayers.

She breathed deeply of the stale air and dabbed her kerchief at the corners of her eyes. Her brother’s words had moved her unexpectedly. She missed her father with renewed pain — scab pulled free to bleed before the skin could fully heal. Her father had doted on her in ways that infuriated her mother, but left his daughter seeing him as the only one who truly understood her nature. When her mother had pressed for marriage to some lesser tahn to shore up the family

power, her father demurred and postponed. When her mother had complained a tahneff of her standing should not roam the palace library alone at night, her father ensured the porters and servants did not disturb her studies. When court tongues wagged and mocked her looks and bookish behavior, her father complimented her publicly and requested her presence in public gatherings and occasionally, even at council meetings.

With her father's passing, these things had changed. Her elder brother had largely ignored her, as he had done for most of his adult life. She made herself as unappealing as possible to the suitors her mother arranged for her, and managed to convince Fan-Mutig that none of them could help the family enough to warrant a union. She noted the irony of that long sought matchmaking, as the man she hoped to marry would solidify the family's power in ways her past suitors could not possibly achieve. If only he would muster the courage he displayed on the field of battle in approaching her brother for her hand.

"Thank you for coming with me." Tin-Tsu's voice brought Dju-Tesha's mind back from thoughts of the past and the future and into the present.

"Thank you for asking me to accompany you." Dju-Tesha ran her hand along the inscribed stone lid of her father's crypt, her fingers passing slowly over the words.

"He forged the vessel of state in his image — powerful, compassionate, wise, and faithful."

"I did not bring you down here merely to pray with me." Tin-Tsu turned to Dju-Tesha.

"No?" Dju-Tesha tilted her head back to see her brother's eyes in the flickering light of the lantern. Why did he ask for her company if not to share the burden of grief?

"I wished to have a few moments alone with you where we would not likely be overheard," Tin-Tsu said.

"You fear spies?" Dju-Tesha frowned. What could he wish to say that required such secrecy?

"Not spies so much as meddling." Tin-Tsu smiled reassuringly. "There are many voices on the council, and mine is not as easily heard as I had hoped. I have ordered the militias attacking the heretics to cease. Officially, they have. However, I have received unofficial reports that the militias still roam the countryside. Our scouts send intelligences that the Tanshen army is massing near the border again. When I ordered a diplomatic envoy to approach the Tanshen, he mysteriously disappeared. I feel that speaking my mind does not equate with my will being enacted."

"What would you say here that you could not speak elsewhere?" Dju-Tesha asked.

"I would request your service." Tin-Tsu stood a little straighter as he spoke. "I know Father sometimes asked you to be present at council meetings. I heard Mother mention it disparagingly in passing. And I have watched you these last months. You are not the girl I left behind. You are a woman of sharp wit and great learning. And in our conversations, you have provided a rare ability to look at circumstances from various positions. You would make an invaluable councilor."

"You wish me to join the high council?" Dju-Tesha coughed from the idea as much as the dust in the air. The notion both intrigued and repulsed her. As a member of the council, she

might wield the power to see her view enacted, but to sit at that table required the sort of cunning and plotting that she so detested about the palace. She would need to become like the people she most despised.

“Not at first. Possibly not at all.” Tin-Tsu did not seem to notice the sigh that escaped Dju-Tesha’s lips. “What I seek from you is an alternate view. What in the temple we called the *shadow advocate*, one who argued the opposite of established theology to help hone the debate skills of the priests in training. Only by hearing the heretical position, the *shadow opinion*, fully explored, can one completely defend one’s beliefs.”

“And you wish me to be your *shadow advocate* in secret?” Dju-Tesha’s mind became luminous with the idea — a flame blazing as it illuminated multiple possibilities, casting bright light into long, dark tunnels of stately problems.

“I need someone I can trust to advise me. To present me with options I will not hear from my council. You are family. Our blood has ruled this dominion for centuries, blood that flows through your veins as easily as my own. I need your advice, but it must remain hidden from sight. A woman to council is rare enough, but your reputation of solitude among books would likely bring ridicule rather than respect. I see what Father saw in you, but I fear others will only do so when circumstances force them to.”

Dju-Tesha stared at her dust-caked slippers, considering the possibilities and problems her brother’s request might create in her life. It meant a chance to put her learning to use and provided an excuse to extend that scholarship in fields of study she had long ignored. It presented many likely complications and potential triumphs. It also offered an opportunity she had not dared to hope for.

“I agree to your proposal.” Dju-Tesha looked back up to her brother, a smile bending his lips.

“That is good.” Tin-Tsu sighed. “I was not certain how you might respond.”

“I agree, but I must ask for something in return.” Dju-Tesha held her breath, gathering the courage to speak aloud the words held silent so long in her head and heart.

She could not much longer conceal the child growing in her womb. Fortunately, it had always been her habit to bathe alone rather than with the help of servants. Her shyness was finally of aid. She ordered her maids to bring sweets to her room each night, which she hid and discarded later, to explain her expanding stomach. She had passed off the infrequent bouts of morning illness as poor digestion of spicy food. All these clever deceptions could only hold back the secret developing in her belly for so long.

“If I can offer anything, you need but request it.” Tin-Tsu inclined his head, a serious expression on his face.

Dju-Tesha released her breath, her voice firm, almost commanding as she spoke, staring into her brother’s eyes, eyes so much like her own, reflecting hopes and desires long held close and never uttered.

“You must give your assent when Tigan Rhog-Kan asks for my hand in marriage.”

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Dju-Tesha's storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

A FOREST of bodies crushed around, reeking of sweat and fear and smoke and seldom-washed clothes. Hashel tried to push through, but the density of limbs repelled his attempts to get closer to the front of the square near the temple.

“Burn ’em!”

“Heretic filth!”

“Heretics!”

“Chase ’em down!”

Hashel turned and pushed back through the crowd. He knew he couldn’t force his way forward. He needed to move around the edge of the square and get to the front. He saw the priest, still shouting, although he couldn’t make out the words of the sermon. The townspeople yelled back at the priest.

“Enough preachin’!”

“More burnin’!”

“That way!”

“Run her down!”

“Hide here.”

Hashel made it to the side of the street, rushing along houses and shops. He came to the corner and turned, running toward the lane where the temple stood. As he ran, he tried to ignore the voices of the crowd and the voices from the past.

“Got to be more of ’em.”

“Should round ’em all up.”

“Over here. I got one here.”

“Don’t kill her yet. We can have some fun first.”

Hashel ran, not knowing what to do. He ran because he had to. He could not let them die. Not like this. Not again. He saw a wagon full of hay not far ahead. The horse hitched to it stamped the ground, nervous from the crowd. He passed a house with the door swung open. The owner must have left quickly to join the mob. He noticed a fire nearly burned to ember in the hearth, a black pot steaming where it hung from an iron arm over the coals. He skidded to a stop, an idea forming in his mind.

“Kill ’em!”

"Kill 'em!"

"The True God punishes the wicked!"

"Come here, ya wicked girl. Lemme show ya how we punish heretics."

Hashel darted into the house, grabbed a thin branch from a pile of wood near the hearth, and thrust it into the coals, blowing on them until they glowed red, the bark of the stick in his hand catching light. He pulled the branch from the fire and held it up like a torch, the flames crackling in the air. He turned and ran for the door, stopping to hold the torch beneath the corner of the sun-faded blanket on the bed by the window. The hungry flames jumped to the bed, devouring the new fuel.

"Finally."

"Hold her down."

"Thought he'd never give the word to light 'em up."

"Please, no!"

"Got things to do."

"It'll all be over soon, girl. All over for good."

Hashel dashed from the house, flames licking the windowsill, and ran to the wagon. He dragged the flame of the branch across the top of the hay. No one noticed. All eyes held fixed on the temple. The dry hay caught light in an instant. By the time Hashel slapped the backside of the horse, fire and smoke curled upward in a roar. He threw the flaming branch through an open window of an empty house and ran again around the crowd toward the temple. Behind him, he heard brays of fear and people shouting as the panicked horse pulled the fiery wagon into the crowd.

"Fire!"

"Look what I got! Found a boy."

"Heretic treachery!"

"Kill 'im like the others."

"Stop that horse. It'll set the town on fire."

"Is that yer sister, boy? Ya wanna watch?"

With the crowd's attention turned to the new flames behind it, Hashel sneaked around the front of the temple, unseen. He paused a moment. The priest held a torch from the brazier in his hand, ready to light the pyre. He seemed uncertain whether to proceed. The crowd surged toward the platform, driven forward from the rear by frightened villagers trying to escape the flames of the wagon. One man thrashed about screaming, his arm afire.

Hashel concentrated on the pyre. A lone guard still stood on the narrow scaffold plank beside the bound heretics. The other guards tried to hold the crowd from crushing the priest and overrunning the pyre. Hashel pulled the small dagger from the belt at his waist. The dagger he had pulled from a dead man.

"Dark Sight fire!"

"I'll take the boy."

"Hold back!"

"Hold still, boy."

"Heretics come to burn the town!"

"I'm gonna show ya what yer sister's gettin'."

Hashel crept forward, crouching and moving as fast as possible. He knelt under the planks of the scaffold, behind the guard. He pushed his arm up past the pile of tree branches forming the pyre beneath the scaffold and slid the blade of the dagger between two of the boards. Grunting with the effort, he jammed the blade upward, through the thin leather of the soldier's boot and into the man's foot.

The soldier yelped and yanked his leg into the air, falling backward off the scaffold, his head striking the ground with a thud. Hashel didn't wait to see if the guard recovered. He scrambled up the back of the scaffold and set the blade of his dagger to the ropes binding the hands of the heretic girl.

"Thank you! Thank you!"

"Please stop!"

"Please save us!"

"We'll stop soon enough, an' so will yuz."

"Hurry, boy."

"Leave him alone!"

Hashel sliced through the bonds holding the girl and turned to her mother, digging the blade of the dagger into the ropes. She sobbed as she looked at him, tears coursing down her face. He cut through the rope and made to do the same for her husband.

"Look! Look! There's a boy cuttin' 'em free."

"Hold still or I'll cut yer throat."

"They's gettin' away."

"Stop yer screamin' or I'll stop it fer ya."

"Stop the boy."

"No! Leave him alone!"

Hands grabbed at Hashel's shoulder and pulled him around, tossing him from the rickety scaffold to the ground. He hit hard, landing on his back, the dagger falling from his hand to clatter across the stone of the temple patio. The priest jumped down, towering above him, his face contorted in anger.

"Heretic vermin!" The priest reached down and grabbed him by the neck, pulling him to his feet. The priest's fingers clamped around his throat, squeezing tight. Hashel fought back as best he could, kicking at the priest's legs, trying to land a blow to the groin, pulling at the fingers crushing his airway.

"There's other's helpin' 'em."

"That weren't so bad, were it now, boy?"

"Where'd they get to?"

"Where's my damn blade? Tuss it. A rock ta the head'll do."

"Take yer hands off her!"

“No! Leave him alone!”

“The Goddess answers our prayers.”

“Hope ya said yer prayers ta yer false bitch god.”

Hashel’s arms grew weak as a familiar blackness settled over his vision and his legs buckled beneath him. Darkness draped his eyes, the sounds around him fading into the distance, fainter and fainter, his own thoughts slowing as...

A face suddenly loomed before him as pain stung his cheek. He knew the face. Had seen it before. Where? At a table? The younger man who had been speaking with a friend at the inn.

“Get up, boy.” The man pulled Hashel to his feet. “They’s seen ya. They’ll be after ya now.”

Hashel’s eyes darted from place to place, taking in a madness of motion around him. The five heretics were gone. Flames burned over the empty pyre, townspeople falling back from its heat. He saw the wife and husband and daughter being led down a street by a group of other villagers. The priest lay still on the ground, a charred log from the pyre near his head.

“Run now.” The young man from the inn pushed Hashel gently.

He needed no further encouragement. He turned and fled, slowing only slightly as he spied his dagger and stooped to scoop it up before stretching his legs as far and as fast as they would go. He ran from the town square, seeing not the packed earth of winding streets in daylight but the flattened grass beside a darkened road at night, not the straw-roofed houses with pigs and chickens behind wooden fences, but tents and wagons with livestock squealing beneath the light of the twin moons. He did not remember the faces of the husband and wife and daughter fleeing the fanatic mob.

He saw instead the face of a man stabbed through the heart, eyes open, staring at the sister moons one last time. He saw a woman, struggling to reach the man, crawling over the lifeless bodies of men and women. He saw an ax appear in the woman’s skull, her eyes going wide as air escaped her lungs for the final time in a desperate sigh. He saw a girl of fifteen pinned to the ground by three men tearing her clothes and violating her as they laughed. He saw a man holding him down and pulling at his breeches as he screamed. He saw the man swinging a rock to the side of his head. He saw a field of dead bodies as sunlight broke upon the land and he staggered to his feet. He saw his sister with her neck slit so deep her head and body no longer seemed part of the same thing. He saw his mother dead, a gaping wound in her head. He saw his father, eyes open, staring up into nothing forever. He saw a dagger protruding from a dead man’s chest. He saw his hands pulling the dagger free. He saw a road, mist rising in the heat of the dawning sun. He saw himself walking along the road away from death and life and all he had ever known. He saw...

Ondromead caught him in strong hands, holding him upright as he gasped for breath. They stood on the road out of town. He had no idea how far he had run. No recollection of leaving the town. He only remembered what he had tried so hard to never remember. He sobbed as he buried those memories again, digging a deeper hole, piling it with dirt, pushing massive stones atop the mound.

“You are safe now.” Ondromead placed Hashel’s face in his hands.

Hashel nodded.

“I have never been so frightened for as long as I remember anything.” Ondromead looked back down the road toward the town. He seemed worried. “I felt fear in that town. Seeing what you did. Seeing what nearly happened to you. I don’t know what it means that you were able to do that. That frightened me as well.”

Hashel wiped the tears from his eyes with his sleeve and blew his nose into his hand, smearing the snot on his trouser leg. He looked back at the town. Several columns of black smoke rose skyward. He heard the shouts of townspeople, but he made no sense of them. Anger and fear at a distance. Best kept at a distance.

He started walking, away from the town, away from the family of three who had driven him to act when action seemed impossible. Away from the memories of who and what he had been. He walked toward the future. A future life more unpredictable than the one he had lived. A future of new places and new people with each new morning. A future with an old man writing in an endless book. A future as far away from his past and his memories as possible.

They traveled all day, Ondromead walking at his side in silence, until they made camp alone by a small lake at sunset, watching the stars slowly fill the night sky until sleep came and erased the events of the day, replacing them with dreams of a ruined temple in a far off realm.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Hashel’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

“MOTHER SHEPHERD!”

Raedralus opened his eyes from prayer, turning to see a blade protruding from the Mother Shepherd’s stomach, the hilt clutched in her hands. He reached out to grasp her as her knees buckled.

“What has happened?” Raedralus’s eyes darted around in panic, seeking the arm that must have thrown the dagger.

“I am sorry. She took it from me before I noticed.” Kantula held the Mother Shepherd from the other side.

“What?” Raedralus looked to the Mother Shepherd’s face.

“It is as it should be, Raedralus.” Junari reached forth a bloodied hand to touch his cheek. “A sacrifice for the fire.”

Raedralus did not understand. The Mother Shepherd had stabbed herself? As a sacrifice? Her eyes wavered and dimmed. He turned to the city, watching in terrified astonishment as the fires that once consumed the streets fluttered out of existence while his beloved Junari faded from life in his arms.

Raedralus and Kantula lowered Junari to the stones of the walkway atop the wall as her eyes slid shut.

“Help me.” Raedralus clutched at the dagger hilt, pulling it from Junari’s motionless chest, blood dripping from the blade.

“Let me see.” Bon-Tao pushed Raedralus aside as he knelt beside Junari, tearing the fabric, widening the hole where the blade had penetrated the robes. Blood stained the white cloth and covered his hands as he sought the wound. His fingers hovered, trembling, above Junari’s flesh.

“Impossible.” Bon-Tao fell back from Junari, holding his bloodied hand before him as though defending against some unseen aggressor. “A trick? The Sight?”

“What? What is wrong?” Raedralus leaned forward and pulled the cloth away from where Junari’s wound should have been. Instead of a gaping divide of flesh, he found smooth brown skin coated in blood.

“All praise to the Goddess.” Kantula bowed her head as Junari’s chest once more expanded with air.

“The Goddess preserves.” Jupiterus knelt to the ground.

“Thank you, Goddess Moaratana.” Raedalus lowered his head in prayer as he grasped Junari’s hand. “Thank you for sparing our Shepherd and your prophet. Thank you.”

Raedalus ignored the tears falling from his cheeks to mingle and dilute the blood drying on Junari’s hands. He watched her chest rise and fall with each breath. He closed his eyes, praying silently in gratitude. The Mother Shepherd had offered her life in exchange for the lives of the city’s citizens, and Moaratana had taken that life to quench the flames. But the Great Goddess, in her infinite generosity, had returned that sacrificial offering.

“The fires?”

Raedalus opened his eyes to find Junari’s looking into his own, her face filled with concern.

“The fires are gone, Mother Shepherd.” Raedalus clung to Junari’s hand. “The Goddess accepted your offering and gave you back to us.”

Junari placed a hand to the spot on her stomach where the dagger blade had pierced through skin and muscle to stab her heart. She blinked in wonder, looking at her blood-caked fingers as though questioning whether they could be hers.

“Commander.”

Raedalus turned his head to find that two hands of soldiers had joined them at the top of the wall. Bon-Tao lowered his hands and pushed himself to his feet. He still appeared dazed by the recently transpired events. The leader of the newly arrived soldiers saluted Bon-Tao with a fist to his chest.

“Yes, soldier?” Bon-Tao wiped the blood from his palms across the sides of his breeches.

“I am sent by the Circle of Elders.” The soldier glanced to the bloodied form of Junari as she sat upright. “You are ordered to bring the heretics to the Circle Tower for an immediate audience with the elders. They face accusations of Dark Sight.” The soldier looked to the plumes of smoke still rising from the neighborhood beneath the wall. “I am to accompany you for protection.”

“Thank you, soldier.” Bon-Tao nodded to the younger man and turned to extend a hand to Junari. “It seems you and your goddess will be called to answer for the results of your prayers.”

Raedalus scrambled to help Junari to her feet, although she little needed it with the assistance of Bon-Tao’s strong arm. He took the sash from his robes and helped her tie it around her middle, covering the torn and bloodied fabric.

“Thank you, Raedalus.” Junari patted his hand and smiled at him, her eyes alight as he had seen only when waking from the deep trances in which the Goddess granted her the sacred scriptures. She turned from him and stared out to the fire-gutted streets of the city inside the wall, her smile fading as the corners of her mouth drew down in anguish. She wiped her eyes and looked to Commander Bon-Tao.

“Thank you for helping us.” Junari looked up to the commander’s face. “I am sorry about your men.”

Bon-Tao nodded to her, then spun on his heel and gestured with his arm.

“We should go.”

The walk to the Circle Tower took place in silence, Bon-Tao leading the way, followed by Junari with Raedalus at her side, Jupterus and Kantula close behind, and the double hand of city soldiers bringing up the rear. They walked westward along the wall until Commander Bon-Tao chose a set of stairs to descend. Once on street level, he commandeered a covered wagon, asking Junari, Raedalus, and their two guards to lie in the back. Raedalus began to protest the indignity of the Mother Shepherd traveling like a cask of wine, but Junari readily agreed. As the commander pointed out, it would be best if they remained unseen while traversing the city streets, especially considering that smoke still hovered above more than one of its neighborhoods.

When they arrived at the Circle Tower, Commander Bon-Tao quickly spirited them inside, using a servant entrance to avoid catching the attention of passersby. He led them up a wide, winding staircase that spiraled up the outer wall of the tower, leading to the great audience chamber of the Circle of Elders on the top level. As Raedalus climbed the stairs behind Junari, he tried to take the spiral staircase as an omen of good fortune, but had trouble believing the coincidence presaged a peaceful resolution to the conflict toward which they walked.

The fires brought down by the Mother Shepherd's prayers had likely killed dozens and destroyed several blocks of city buildings, casting hundreds if not thousands out of their homes. The Circle of Elders would hold her to account for the severity of the Goddess's protective wrath. They could as easily order the Mother Shepherd's execution as well as her banishment. Raedalus could not see a path forward that did not end with the pilgrims being forced from the valley unless further prayers to the Goddess provided protection from expulsion. However, Raedalus had recently seen how the Goddess might reply to petitions for her hand to touch the world and the fee she might require for her intercession to cease. Had he known what would be demanded to stop the fires, he would have gladly turned the dagger blade upon his own heart to spare Junari. The Goddess would not likely have returned him to life in a miracle of healing, but better his sacrifice than for Junari to suffer even a moment of pain.

Bon-Tao pushed open two tall doors at the top of the stairs and ushered them into a large, circular room with high, slender windows of yellow-aged glass set into the walls at regular intervals around the chamber. Nine bulky wooden chairs sat on raised stone daises before each window, the light outlining the men who occupied each. Raedalus noted Kuth-Von sitting in the chair directly opposite the entrance, a place of primacy among equals. Two men stood on either side of his chair. One wore the red robes of the Ketolin sect while the other wore the green mantle of the Zatolin sect. Kam-Djen priests, present to witness the proceedings.

Bon-Tao led Junari and Raedalus to the center of the chamber; Kantula, Jupterus, and the soldiers remained outside the room. As he stopped, Bon-Tao lowered himself to one knee and bowed his head.

"I bring the pilgrims as requested." Bon-Tao raised his head but remained kneeling.

"Stand, Commander." Kuth-Von's words echoed up to the domed ceiling, the scenes of battles from the city's history painted there seeming to increase the sound of his voice as it returned to the floor. "Remain here. We may wish to add your testimony to the proceedings."

Testimony. As Raedalus feared. They were on trial. He glanced to Junari beside him. He expected apprehension or defiance, but she appeared unconcerned with their presence before the Circle of Elders, her face calm, her eyes staring steadily at Kuth-Von. Raedalus held none of the Mother Shepherd's confidence. He quelled the churning of his stomach and glanced around the room at the other elders. All men of various ethnic origin, they ranged in age from forty to well beyond seventy. He had done his best to learn the names of the elders in studying about the city, but could not match faces to titles. He looked back to Kuth-Von, knowing that as the Speaker, the head of the headless Circle, the man would determine their fate more than anyone else in the chamber.

"You stand before the Circle of Elders accused of starting a fire that has ravaged our city and killed many of its citizens." Kuth-Von's expression remained inscrutable, suspended between indifference and condemnation.

"Who makes this accusation?" Junari spoke evenly, her voice filling the room without reverberating from the smooth marble walls.

"The people of the city." Kuth-Von looked southward. "Those who claim you used Dark Sight to set the people and their dwellings aflame."

"I do not possess The Sight." Junari glanced to Raedalus briefly. "Nor do my companions."

"How then do you explain a firestorm rising up of its own accord to engulf our people and our streets?" Kuth-Von leaned forward, his tone ringing with annoyance.

"Prayer." Junari let the lone word linger in the air, adding no other to accompany it.

"Am I to believe that you prayed to burn our city?" Kuth-Von's tone shifted from exasperation to disbelief.

"I prayed for protection and wrath against our attackers," Junari said. "The Goddess Moaratana chose fire as her shelter and sword."

"Heresy!" The Ketolin priest, tall and slender, stepped forward, looking as though he might rush to strangle Junari with his own hands.

Raedalus moved closer to Junari, noting Commander Bon-Tao tensing at their side. Kuth-Von waved a hand at the angry priest and the man halted. The Zatolin priest looked as though he, too, might leap forward, but remained silent.

"You claim you were attacked?" Kuth-Von looked back to Junari.

"Yes, Speaker." Junari nodded her head. Raedalus noted the way she intoned Kuth-Von's title, making it sound as though she addressed a zhan. "We were stopped in our carriage by a crowd of men and women who wished to seek our protection as pilgrims. As I addressed them and promised them sanctuary, the new pilgrims were attacked by their fellow citizens with knives and shovels and clubs. I saw women hacked down by men with axes and cleavers. I witnessed men fall to hand-fashioned spears. I watched unarmed men and women slaughtered for their faith, rivers of their blood running into the gutters of the street. I prayed to my goddess, Moaratana, in anger and fear, asking for her protection, begging for her wrath against those who would kill us. The fire rose to touch wood and cloth and savaged our attackers with flame."

“Heretic,” the Ketolin priest fumed from beside Kuth-Von’s chair. “She admits to starting the fire.”

“You cannot claim our goddess does not exist and yet blame her for the flames she brings down upon your fanatics.” Raedalus jabbed a finger at the priest. He had sensed Junari about to respond to the priest’s accusations and leapt to speak first. If they were to have any chance of surviving this trial, Junari could not be seen to argue with the Kam-Djen priests. He, however, could easily fill that role.

“The flames should be brought down upon you.” Anger twisted the Ketolin priest’s lips. “A pyre to cleanse the valley of your darkness.”

“Enough.” Kuth-Von glared at the Ketolin priest until the man looked down and away. The Speaker passed his gaze back to Junari. “Even if you speak the truth, that the people of our city rose against you and citizens who wish to join you, you cannot deny that the flames did not stop with your attackers.”

“I cannot.” Junari lowered her eyes.

“Then you accept responsibility for the fire and the deaths and the damage it caused, regardless of how it came into being?” Kuth-Von raised a quizzical eyebrow at Junari.

“I do.” Junari lifted her eyes.

Raedalus cursed beneath his breath. This approach would fail. He should have taken time to coach her on the possible tactics to use with the Circle of Elders while they rode in the back of the covered wagon. He had been so overwhelmed by watching her die, seeing the flames extinguished with her life, and her miraculous return unscarred, that he had not fulfilled his duty to her. He had lain next to her, thinking more of the smell of her hair and the feel of her body pressed close to his own than of the means of their salvation from a threat more dangerous than men with axes and carpentry tools.

“Mother Shepherd, do not...” Raedalus whispered to Junari, but she placed a hand on his arm to silence him.

“I am responsible for this tragedy that befell your city.” Junari raised her voice, turning to catch the eyes of the elders seated near Kuth-Von. “I prayed without wisdom and my goddess granted my foolish prayers. And for this foolishness, she required a sacrifice. As my actions brought the fire and death to your streets, I made that sacrifice of myself. I took a dagger and thrust it into my heart, dying to preserve your city and your people. Only with my death were the flames extinguished.”

“Lies. Heretic lies,” the Ketolin priest shouted as he shook his head.

“Does she speak the truth?” Kuth-Von directed his question to Commander Bon-Tao.

Raedalus held his breath as the commander looked first to Junari, then to the elders before replying to Kuth-Von.

“She does.” Bon-Tao stared at Kuth-Von. “We were attacked in the streets. The innocent were killed. She did pray to her goddess, and the flames did come. I also watched her plunge the dagger into her heart. I saw the flames cease as she bled and her heart stopped. I inspected her

wound myself and found it absent. She died, and she came back unscathed by the blade that killed her.”

“Dark Sight tricks!” The Ketolin priest thrust an accusatory finger toward Junari and Raedalus before turning it to Bon-Tao. “Or he’s a heretic liar as well. Let us put him to the Questioner. We’ll soon hear the truth from his lips.”

“There will be no questioning of our most decorated commander.” Kuth-Von let the venom in his voice silence the bilious priest’s interjection. “If he says he witnessed something miraculous, I will take his word. We have all seen extraordinary things these past months.”

A spark of hope kindled within Raedalus’s heart. If Kuth-Von could be convinced that the fire had not been intentional, that the Mother Shepherd had offered her own life to stop it, they might have room to bargain for release. He did not see how they could still hope for asylum in the valley beyond the city walls, but they could always return to the border road and try to negotiate safe passage from the Tanshen zhan, as unlikely as that seemed. If necessary, they could travel back all the way to Punderra or Juparti and down to the southern coast, attempting to secure ships from one of the trade towns there. It would add a year to their journey, but better than lose most or all of their pilgrims in a battle with the Tanjii army. They could barely defend themselves against bands of bandits, and certainly not trained soldiers. And, as they had seen, to call for the Goddess’s protection could just as easily result in the annihilation of the entire city as the safeguarding of the pilgrim flock.

“You have spoken, and a witness has corroborated your tale.” Kuth-Von sat straight in his chair, assuming an official posture. “The Circle has listened, and now we shall pass judgment. The punishment for the crime you are accused of is...”

“Wait.” The volume and tone of Junari’s voice silenced Kuth-Von.

“You wish to make further testimony?” Kuth-Von did not appear accustomed to being interrupted.

“I wish to make the Circle of Elders an offer that may resolve this situation favorably for all parties.” Junari turned as she spoke, making sure each of the elders could see her face.

Raedalus swallowed, feeling his gut clench, the back of his throat burning. What offer could Junari have in mind? What concessions might she hope to bargain from the Circle of Elders? Was she creating an offer in the moment, or had she been considering this since their experience atop the wall? Why had she not confided in him? Why had he not taken the time to counsel her when he had the opportunity?

“You spoke to me, Speaker Kuth-Von, of the game koris, of the placement of blocks on the board, of players using strategy and wits to upend luck.” Junari stepped away from Raedalus to stand alone before Kuth-Von and the Circle of Elders. “What you failed to realize is that there is now an unseen player on the board. Two of that player’s stones are here in this chamber with you while nearly a thousand gather in the valley beyond your city walls. Thousands more trudge along roads and across fields and through forests on their way to join the game. As I have seen myself today, this unseen player can be ruthless and unpredictable.”

“You do not believe in my goddess, even when faced with the silence of your own.” Junari turned to the Ketolin priest, her voice gentle. “My goddess touches the world, moves her pieces, changes the lines upon the board. I cannot predict what she will do in response to my prayers. I can only try to pray with wisdom in beseeching her assistance. Today, I failed, but I have learned from that failure. We must all learn from that misstep or risk the Goddess’s wrath.”

“Are you threatening this Circle and this city with vengeance from your dark god?” One of the elders spoke, a weighty man with more flesh filling his seat than any two of his fellow elders.

“I am no threat to your city, but my goddess may be, and your god seems intent on remaining silent in her presence.” Junari turned to look at the jowly elder as he glared at her.

“Death is the sentence for treason against the Circle.” The Ketolin priest rocked on his feet with obvious enthusiasm for his proposed verdict.

“As I told Speaker Kuth-Von, my death will not affect my goddess nor her endeavors in this world.” Junari looked again to Kuth-Von, ignoring the Ketolin priest. “As I told you, I am but a vessel. Shatter my clay and another will be formed and filled with the Holy Fire of Moaratana to replace me. Kill a thousand prophets and a thousand more will arise. Yet, remember, each prophet will be different. I may be a weak vessel, others may prove too strong, some too porous, but all will pray for protection and seek the wrath of the Goddess against those who would destroy her chosen people.”

“You do threaten this Circle and the city.” Kuth-Von sounded more intrigued than offended by Junari’s words. “What move do you propose to establish harmony on the board?”

“You cannot listen to the extortion of this heretic, this Dark Sight demon.” The Ketolin priest shook his head in disbelief.

“You are here to witness the Circle’s debate, not to participate in it.” Kuth-Von turned to the Ketolin Priest. “Remain silent or be removed.” The Ketolin priest looked like he might explode from the attempt to keep his voice confined within his body.

Junari glanced toward Raedalus. His eyes held to her face, his heart chilled by her speech. He experienced a sense of wondrous elation rising within him at the danger of her words. He found his doubts and concerns melting before the heat of the Mother Shepherd’s righteousness. His faith in her confirmed and amplified his faith in the Goddess. As with the trances that manifested Moaratana’s voice in word and scripture, Raedalus sensed the presence of the Goddess herself, inhabiting Junari as she spoke to Kuth-Von and the Circle of Elders. Tears of awe welled in his eyes, but he ignored them as he listened.

“The pilgrims of Moaratana require transport to the Forbidden Realm.” Junari paused a moment before continuing. “As Speaker Kuth-Von suspected, and I have learned, the captains of your docks will not rent their vessels for such an unpredictable journey. Neither will your merchant bankers fund the purchase of ships without proper assurances to safeguard their investment. I propose that the treasury of the city of Tanjii offers assurances to the merchant bankers who will in turn provide my temple with the funds to purchase a fleet of ships to carry the pilgrims to the Forbidden Realm.”

“What?” The rotund elder moved anxiously in his seat. “What nonsense is she talking?” A murmur of voices arose among the Circle of Elders as they exchanged looks of astonishment and confusion.

“Please elaborate.” Kuth-Von gestured with an open hand to his fellow elders. “I fear some of the Circle members do not clearly see the import of your suggestion.”

“My proposal is simple and lays the larger weight of risk at my temple’s door.” Junari spun slowly as she spoke, conveying the nuance of her plan to the elders encircling her. “As I said, the merchant banks will loan us the coin to purchase a small fleet of ships. These ships will be crewed by the pilgrims themselves. The ships will set sail with the pilgrims, deposit them on the shores of the Forbidden Realm, and return to gather more pilgrims for subsequent journeys. Speaker Kuth-Von mentioned a deserted town along the coast nearby where the pilgrims can be stationed, freeing your valley from the camps. Pilgrims will arrive, spend coin on food and supplies, pay to be ferried to this town, and depart in temple-owned ships. Those ships will return with rare items from the Forbidden Realm, which will be sold to pay the debt to the merchant banks. If the ships return empty, the coin for the debt will be culled from the arriving pilgrims’ purses. The city’s treasury will be affected only if our ships fail to return from the Forbidden Realm to claim more pilgrims. Then, the city’s coin would pay the debts to the merchant bankers. Otherwise, the city’s only part in the bargain will be to collect the profit from so many travelers passing through her gates, and to assure that all pilgrims, whether from far off or from its own streets, will be safe while within its walls.”

“A fine arrangement if it were not for the fact that no ship has ever returned from the Forbidden Realm.” Kuth-Von leaned forward in his seat. “How can you hope to do what thousands have failed to accomplish for thousands of years?”

“You have seen the power of the Goddess Moaratana.” Junari raised her chin. “I have every faith that she will answer our prayers for protection in the Forbidden Realm as she has answered our prayers here.”

Kuth-Von tapped the arm of his chair with a long fingernail. He remained silent, all eyes of the room upon him.

Raetalus looked at the faces of the elders. They would mold their decision in this matter to Kuth-Von’s. If he voted against it, they would voice their disapproval. If he accepted it, they would champion the plan’s wisdom.

“What about the people who have died by fire this day or had their homes and shops burned to ash?” Kuth-Von narrowed his eyes at Junari.

“I cannot express in words the depth of my sorrow at the deaths caused by the fire of the Goddess.” Junari’s face twisted in obvious mental anguish. “I cannot bring back the dead the way the Goddess returned me to the living, but I can make restitution for the damage to the city and the loss of life. We will give coin to the families of those who have died and coin to rebuild what has been burned.”

Kuth-Von considered Junari’s words in silence for a long moment, his finger still tapping a steady rhythm on the arm of his chair.

“And if the Circle refuses to accept your proposal?” Kuth-Von’s finger fell still.

“I will pray,” Junari said. “For guidance or for protection or for vengeance as necessary.”

Kuth-Von looked to the battle scenes painted across the sky blue ceiling of the audience chamber dome. He seemed to find something there that made him smile. Raedalus raised his eyes, wondering what the Circle elder had glimpsed, what flaw he might have discerned in Junari’s plan. Had he seen an alignment of the game pieces that favored his side of the board? Had he intuited a means of playing against an unseen player? Or had he merely accepted a proposal that profited his city handsomely for doing little if anything other than speaking in its favor?

“I cannot speak for the Circle of Elders without a vote, but I believe there should be at least one requirement for the city to proceed with your suggested arrangement.” Kuth-Von’s thin smile faded. “When you depart, you must take all the heretics of Tanjii with you. Their presence creates discord, and our city has been wounded enough today by sectarian strife.”

“The temple of Moaratana will accept all pilgrims into its fold.” Junari bowed her head with her words.

Kuth-Von looked to the Zatolin priest to his left. Raedalus noticed the man nod, nearly imperceptibly.

“How shall we vote on this most curious proposal?” Kuth-Von looked to the Circle of Elders.

“You cannot possibly mean to consider the lying words of this woman and her dark false god.” The Ketolin priest turned to face Kuth-Von. The Speaker merely raised his hand for silence. The priest ground his teeth as he clamped his mouth shut. Kuth-Von turned his hand to the Circle members and raised it higher, indicating his vote.

Raedalus looked from face to face around the room, holding his breath, awaiting the individual responses, watching in elation as hand after hand, some grudgingly, some with lazy indifference, rose in acknowledgment of their assent. Raedalus sighed quietly as Kuth-Von’s voice brought his attention back to the head of the room.

“Your proposal is accepted under the terms you have defined.” Kuth-Von placed both hands on the arms of his chair. “You will be bound to it by your word and by your deed. Do not fail to adhere to the conditions set down between us. It would be unfortunate for all involved. Commander, please escort the prophet and her attendants back to the camp beyond the walls and begin making arrangements for their transport to the abandoned town of Tashi-Gano as quickly as possible.”

Junari bowed slightly to Kuth-Von before turning to follow Bon-Tao from the room. Raedalus hazarded a glance at the Zatolin priest before following Junari. He did not need to see the Ketolin priest again to know the man’s mind and interests. However, the Zatolin priest’s pointed silence, and the nod he gave Kuth-Von at the conclusion of the trial that Junari had somehow fashioned into a negotiation riled Raedalus’s curiosity. His curiosity would need to wait for satiation. There would be many more things to occupy his mind in the coming days.

Bon-Tao led them from the chamber and back down the curving stairs to the ground. Raedalus walked beside Junari.

“You were inspiring, Mother Shepherd.” Raedalus smiled broadly with pride in Junari’s accomplishment. “You have saved us again.”

“Another miracle of the Goddess.” Junari’s jaw tightened as she spoke. “We must hope it unfolds more perfectly than the other miracle today.”

“Indeed, must we all.” Bon-Tao’s voice rose from the stairs beneath them as they descended.

Raedalus did not let their caution overwhelm his elation. The pilgrims would face more trials, possibly greater adversities, but they would have the Mother Shepherd to lead them and she would have the Goddess Moaratana to guide her. And Raedalus would witness these new miracles as no other believer could. He smiled again.

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THE CARNIVAL



LEOTIN

BIRD CALLS and the buzzing of insects blended with the sound of horse hooves plodding against packed earth and the creak of wood as the covered wagon swayed from side to side. Leotin flicked the reins, urging the two horses hitched to his private wagon onward, up the rise of the hillside. He rubbed his neck where the sun warmed it, adjusting his wide-brimmed hat and wiping his brow.

“Are we close?”

Leotin looked askance at Palla, where she sat on the driver’s bench beside him, bouncing with the motion of the wagon.

“You have seen the map. You know as well as I.” Leotin touched the breast of his woolen jacket, the map folded in the secret pocket between the layers of cloth.

“Your map lacks any sort of scale.” Palla swatted at a large deer fly circling her head. “A finger width could be a day’s journey as easily as ten.”

“It is not as easy to make a map as you think.” Leotin tried to keep the tone of wounded pride from his voice. He had worked on that map for the better part of ten years. It probably held more value than anything else he possessed. And it held more value still for his *benefactor*. “Regardless, the towns and cities are all in the correct position as they relate to one another.”

“We passed the river last night.” Palla looked back over her shoulder as though judging the distance they had traveled since dawn.

“You complain a great deal for someone paid to travel the realm in comfort.” Leotin flicked the reins again as the horse began to slow near the apex of the hill.

“Comfort?” Palla clasped the seat to hold herself down as the wagon wheel hit a rut in the road.

“You could be walking rather than riding.” Leotin thrust his thumb toward the carnival folk trudging in a line behind the wagon.

“Hmmm.” Palla frowned, looking at her feet. She usually walked with the others, but had complained of a swollen ankle that morning, and Leotin had offered to let her ride with him. “I make observations. That you take them as criticism is your failing, not mine.”

“Observe that.” Leotin raised a finger to point as the wagon crested the hill. A tower of stone rose above an open plain, a small town sprawling around the walls of the squat castle — a gray beast crouched among a nest of wood and brick.

"I retract my observations." Palla lifted a hand to shield her eyes as she stared at the castle and town.

"Castle Peda-Lan. Just as I said." Leotin smiled and pulled back on the reins as the horses started down the hill toward the town. "A place to rest, perform a bit, and earn enough coin to make it to the next town. Maybe even find a few young men itching to see the realm to replace those louts Grandal and Tellin. Never had someone run off in the middle of nowhere. In cities and towns, yes. Not in the middle of a forest."

"They never really accommodated themselves to the life of the carnival." Palla stared at the horses' rumps. "Probably they came across a bandit horde and joined up."

"Wouldn't surprise me." Leotin doubted the men had done any such thing. Palla and that pilgrim girl Ranna both stuck to the story that they had gone into the woods, found a swimming hole, bathed, and returned to camp. That several people saw Grandal and Tellin enter the woods confirmed nothing. Both women denied seeing the men. The three foreigners had tracked the men to the same pond Palla and Ranna described, but lost the trail. They said the two men simply disappeared. Leotin doubted that as well. He had waited as long as it seemed polite. He felt no loss to have the men gone from the carnival. They proved more nuisance than help in their time on the road. He didn't know where they had gotten off to; he merely hoped he'd never see them again.

He did wonder if Palla and Ranna had something to do with the men's absence, but if they did, he suspected the men deserved it. While Palla clearly did not hail from a merchant family as she claimed, and kept the bulk of her past a secret or painted it with lies, on the whole, he trusted her. She wasn't the sort to murder men in the woods. Not without good reason.

"You're right," Leotin said. "Not up to the standards of this carnival. Too many men of caliber have run off to be pilgrims, though. Slims the choice of applicants. Wish we could trust the pilgrims to take their place. Suppose we could make do with them until we reach the coast. Would save on rations for the duration."

"We could send the three foreigners hunting again. It worked once." Palla looked back to where the odd trio of outlander creatures walked side by side at the rear of the carnival train.

"I agreed in desperation only." Leotin frowned. He had miscalculated the amount of food on hand and the distance between towns. A mistake he rarely ever made. He suspected the official count of pilgrim heads did not match reality. "We can't afford to anger some local lesser tahn by poaching his game. That is the sort of thing that gets a noose placed around one's neck."

"I don't think we need to worry," Palla said. "The town looks prosperous enough to support us for a day or two."

"It goes without saying, but the last time I did not say it aloud, and you did not realize it went without saying." Leotin lowered the register of his voice for emphasis.

"I know." Palla smiled brightly. "When we meet the castle tahn, you speak and I smile."

"You're very good at smiling." Leotin smiled at her, his lips curled in irony.

"You're very good at talking." Palla smiled back even more brightly than before.

“Impudence is the best way to find yourself left behind when we depart.” Leotin frowned. He often found himself thinking of Palla as the daughter he had never desired. He regularly considered the notion that she had not fled her family, but rather had been cast out in annoyance.

“I’d start my own carnival.” Palla raised her chin defiantly. “Palla’s Perpetual Pavilion.”

“Palla’s Perpetual Perdition, more like.” Leotin laughed at the thought of Palla leading a carnival. The girl had entirely too many scruples for such an endeavor.

“I think you should worry more about the pilgrims trying to sneak more of their brethren along with them when we leave.” Palla grimaced. “They’ve gotten much better at hiding them in the wagons. I found a boy in a barrel when we left that last town.”

“I’ll speak to them again.” Leotin tilted the brim of his hat down to shield against the sun as he looked at the approaching castle and town. A few farmers at the edge of the settlement stopped their chores and stared at the carnival procession slowly approaching down the hillside road. “Look. We’ve been noticed.”

The farmers waved with limp hands as they passed, and the townspeople looked on with bored curiosity, acknowledging them as more annoyance than potential entertainment. It did not surprise Leotin. Twenty years of war near the border between the Daeshen and Tanshen Dominions left the locals with little hope and little interest in hopefulness. For the first few years of the war, the people of towns like this had been excited for a respite from the constant battle, from the loss of loved ones conscripted to fight, or those who died caught between two armies. The longer the war proceeded, the harder Leotin and his carnival players needed to work in order to elicit a positive response from their prospective audiences. This town had changed hands at least six times that he knew of over the last two decades. No wonder they didn’t cheer when the carnival came to town. The people were worn down — blades held too long to the grindstone — no longer sharp, merely flat and edged.

While the carnival troupe lingered in the town, chatting with the residents, selling them on the show, Leotin and Palla proceeded to the castle to haggle with the local tahn for permission to perform in his burg. The three outlanders pulled their hoods above their heads and stayed out of sight. Best not to worry the locals by revealing their foreign nature. Better also to make the inhabitants pay for the privilege of looking upon such strange faces.

The tahn, Kang-Laau, a fat man with a balding head and a wife who looked much the same, greeted them at the iron-reinforced wooden gate of the castle. He proved unexpectedly interested in having a carnival on his lands. Usually, men at the top of the local hierarchy cared little for keeping their tenants and townspeople entertained. They typically worried more about how the carnival affected the loss of work in their fields by the farmers attending a play rather than plowing a furrow. Kang-Laau appeared more concerned with the notion that a carnival performance might increase his standing in the town. Leotin suspected the locals were unhappy with the tahn’s rule. It would not be the first time a town rose up against its tahn, especially during the years of war. Tahns who cooperated with enemy invaders often found themselves just as dead after an army retreated as if they had defended their town in the first place. Leotin

noticed few armed men in the castle. Most men of age were probably conscripted to fight in the Daeshen army. Those who remained were hobbled by age or the loss of a limb.

“None of those heretic pilgrims in your bunch?” Kang-Laau looked at the carnival folk massed beyond the walls of his castle.

“Certainly not.” Leotin sounded offended as he pointedly touched the iron Ketolin circle on the lanyard at his chest. He had traded it for the double circle of the Tot Gioth when they crossed the border from the Atheton Dominion. He’d tried to convince the pilgrims to wear them, but they refused. At least they refrained from displaying the spiral symbols they fashioned from scraps of metal and carved in wood each night. He *had* managed to convince the pilgrims not to mention that they recently hailed from Atheton and to speak as little as possible. It had cost him a considerable sum to bribe the border guards at the newly established checkpoint between the two dominions. While he’d heard numerous rumors that the feared plague, the Living Death, had reappeared in the north of Atheton, he’d seen no evidence of it elsewhere and had been surprised by the soldiers standing guard at the normally deserted border. He had also been astonished when Jhanal took up a collection among the pilgrims to reimburse him for their portion of the border graft. Of course, they fell short of their full share, but he appreciated the gesture. He hoped to make back most of his costs at the castle.

“Quite a lot of them. Never seen a carnival so big.” Kang-Laau squinted in the sun as he watched his townspeople mingle with the carnival folk.

“Hard times, my tahn.” Leotin shook his head in feigned sadness, adjusting his accent to match the tahn’s. He spoke all of the realms’ languages fluently and found it helpful to mimic the local dialect to better avoid unintended prejudice. He also found it helpful to lie about the size of his carnival staff. “We recently combined with another company that had failed to pay its debts.”

“It makes for a much more exciting performance of *The Fallen Lands*, my tahn.” Palla smiled demurely at the rotund man, his wife frowning behind him.

“Ah, the trilogy.” Kang-Laau rubbed his hands together. “It’s been years since I’ve seen it performed.”

Leotin doubted the man had ever seen [*The Saga of the Fallen Lands*](#) performed. He had played at the castle several times in the last thirty years, and Kang-Laau had not been among the nobles present at the last performance five years ago. Likely the man had been appointed by the regional tahn on the death of his predecessor, sent to hold the town and make sure it continued to pay tribute to the regional palace and the zhan in the capital.

Kang-Laau accepted the usual terms, insisting on three days of entertainment, one of them privately within the castle walls, in return for thirty silver coins and fifty percent of the ticket sales. It sounded a steep bargain, and Leotin protested the poverty of his troupe, but only to ensure the tahn did not ask for more. The carnival made the majority of its money from the sideshows and the sale of trinkets, particularly “ancient” religious relics from far off lands and medicinal potions for all manner of ailments. As long as they broke even on the ticket sales for the play, they would turn a tidy profit, assuming the town had enough people looking for relief from the monotony of the life they lived.

Sundown saw the carnival camp set in a fallow field behind the castle. The setting sun also brought a train of merchant wagons to town bearing spices and pottery from the east. It bore an additional cargo more valuable to Leotin — news of a Tanshen army massing beyond the border, three days' ride from Castle Peda-Lan. As Leotin listened to the news, relayed to him by Donjeon, the young animal handler, he looked southward toward the army he knew would soon march in his direction. Best to be gone by then. It would need to be a quick performance. He might need to pay the tahn of the castle extra to relieve him of their contract, but it would be better to be on the road and far away when the fighting began.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Leotin's storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

DECADES-OLD WOOD creaked and squealed under the pressure of a strong wind, swiftly running water, and an uncommon weight. A weather-worn bridge spanned two hundred paces over white-tipped water. Support posts swayed slightly as people, horses, and wagons crowded atop the structure. A wagon sat wedged in the middle of the bridge, a wheel caught between two rail beams, the axle shaft snapped. Only two hands wider than the wagon bed, the bridge did not allow space for the long line of people stranded behind it to move forward and join their few companions across the river.

The bridge shuddered and Lee-Nin grasped the railing of a nearby wagon with one hand, her other tightening around Sao-Tauna's tiny fingers. She looked up at the sky, taking a deep breath. She did not like water. She did not like heights. She did not like bridges. And she particularly did not like being trapped on tall, rickety bridges over fast-flowing rivers. Sao-Tauna returned the squeeze of her hand.

She stood on the tips of her toes to see over the crowd of people wedged onto the bridge. Sha-Kutan stood holding the bed of the damaged wagon in the air, his large canvas sack strapped over his shoulder. Beneath the wagon two other men pulled at the broken axle. A third man sat on the driver's bench, gripping the reins of the horse.

"Yer man is fearsome strong."

Lee-Nin turned to the woman at her side. She remembered the woman's name as Fao-Ashi. With splotchy pale skin and greasy blond hair, the woman possessed a quality of weary resignation. She held the hand of a small girl about the age of Sao-Tauna. Lee-Nin did not remember the girl's name.

"Yes, he is." Lee-Nin preferred non-committal responses regarding Sha-Kutan. They told people they were a family, but otherwise, they tried to say as little as possible about themselves. Be friendly. Blend in. Don't stand out. She generally spoke to strangers, as Sha-Kutan's manner did not tend to leave people disposed to forget him. Best to redirect conversations along other paths.

"Is that your husband up on the wagon?" Lee-Nin nodded toward the man cursing at the horse and yanking violently on the reins.

"Yes. Chu-Ki." Fao-Ashi looked at her feet, her expression unreadable, but certainly not one of pride or love. The girl averted her eyes as well.

Sao-Tauna disengaged from Lee-Nin's fingers to offer the other girl a tiny yellow flower from the small bunch she clutched in her free hand. She had picked the flowers earlier that morning with Sha-Kutan. In truth, she had picked the flowers while Sha-Kutan stood silently towering over her, his face expressing several emotions ranging from annoyed curiosity to curious annoyance. Lee-Nin did not understand him, did not trust him, but Sao-Tauna insisted, in her quiet way, through actions rather than words, that she had complete faith in the man.

The girl tentatively took the flower from Sao-Tauna's hand with a thin smile. She acted even more skittish than her mother.

"Say thank ya, Gao-Pai," Fao-Ashi said to the girl.

"Thank ya." Gao-Pai smiled a little wider.

Sao-Tauna smiled back, but did not speak.

"Her name's Sao-Tauna." Lee-Nin rested her hand on Sao-Tauna's thin shoulder. "She doesn't speak much."

"Mine don't talk much neither." Fao-Ashi pulled Gao-Pai closer, her arm around the girl's back.

Shouts drew Lee-Nin's attention back to the broken wagon blocking the bridge. Fao-Ashi's husband, Chu-Ki, shouted at the two men working on the axle and wheel. She could not hear what he yelled about, but Chu-Ki looked oblivious to Sha-Kutan's cold stare as he hefted the rear of the wagon aloft. Had the man noticed, Lee-Nin had no doubt he would have held his tongue. Sha-Kutan appeared to bear a broad dislike of all people, excepting maybe Sao-Tauna, but the look on his face indicated an especial disregard for Chu-Ki. There were many things about Sha-Kutan she did not like — his temperament, his reticence, his general ill mood, his mysteriousness — but he always proved to possess an immediate and faultless assessment of character. Moreover, she agreed completely with his appraisal.

She'd known many men like Chu-Ki in the years before her life in the palace. She'd even killed one once. She had watched Chu-Ki and Fao-Ashi for days, ever since they joined the pilgrim band. He rarely left her alone, and when he did, she stayed that way, separating herself and Gao-Pai from the others. When together, he held the girl too close, a little too firmly. He smiled when he did not look happy. He shouted when even tones might have been more helpful. Lee-Nin also noticed the ways Fao-Ashi and Gao-Pai behaved when he stood nearby. Animals frightened of their master's temper and the retribution of his whip. She'd noted no bruises on the girl, but had glimpsed a large, plum-colored mark on Fao-Ashi's arm while washing in a stream a few days back. And although the girl, Gao-Pai, appeared unharmed, the way she pulled within herself when Chu-Ki touched her led Lee-Nin to suspect his hands had seen too much of the girl. She began to consider that Chu-Ki might not even be the woman's husband. A man like him would not think twice about claiming for himself a lone woman and child, either to satisfy his own twisted desires, or to conceal his movements across the countryside from those who might be seeking him.

Unfortunately, Lee-Nin did not know what to do with her suspicions, especially as she had other concerns to occupy her every waking moment as well as those dreams not filled with stars

and ruined temples and a goddess newly born to the world. It had been days since their brush with the warden commander, but she knew it to be only a matter of time before he found them again. And what happened then? Would Sha-Kutan somehow kill an entire hand of soldiers with his bare hands yet once more? The memory of the dead men on the farmhouse floor chilled her. Not for any sympathy toward the men who wanted to slaughter her and Sao-Tauna, but for the knowledge that she walked, day after day, by the side of a man capable of such swift and horrific violence. Complimenting this thought, she also knew that were such violence once more unleashed, it would likely be in the effort to again save Sao-Tauna's life.

Sha-Kutan did not say why he traveled with them, why he acted as protector to them both, as she did herself to Sao-Tauna. She understood why she risked her life to save the girl, even if she did not know why the wardens hunted her. But why did Sha-Kutan help them? What did he gain? He stared eastward, back the way they had journeyed, several times a day, presumably toward the woman who hunted him. Why did she hunt him? Why did he fear a lone woman? What power could she have over him?

And more significantly, might Sha-Kutan being a fugitive place Sao-Tauna at greater risk? Should she leave him behind and proceed herself with Sao-Tauna to the Forbidden Realm with the other pilgrims? The rational side of her mind said she should, but her instinct told her, against all reason, that she should trust Sha-Kutan. Her instincts had always saved her in the past, and she chose to listen to them now. At least until Sha-Kutan revealed some reason not to. She would trust her instincts in regards to Chu-Ki as well, especially as Sha-Kutan seemed to share her opinion of the man.

The shouts from the wagon rose again, and Lee-Nin stood on her toes once more to better see. Chu-Ki yelled again at the two men working on the axle and turned to slap the reins against the horse's back, urging the beast to pull. The wagon bed yanked free from Sha-Kutan's grip, the shattered wheel catching in the rail, breaking the old wood, the nearest support post cracking under the strain. The wagon pulled free as Sha-Kutan turned and looked at Lee-Nin. He did not search the crowd. His eyes came to rest upon her as though drawn to her by a taut spool of string.

Lee-Nin's heart froze as the section of bridge beneath Sha-Kutan gave way, wood splintering and tearing under the weight of the people, the constant press of the river, and the inopportune damage from the horse-drawn wagon. She clutched Sao-Tauna tightly, the bridge collapsing in a wave, the people crammed along its slender planks screaming as they fell into the depths of the swiftly flowing river.

She did not scream; rather, she took a deeper breath as the wood beneath her feet dropped away with an ear-cracking screech. She held on to Sao-Tauna, arms wrapped around the girl, as they plunged through the panicked cries of humans and the wild brays of horses and into the cold, grasping hands of the river. She held Sao-Tauna with one arm and tried to swim to the surface with the other, avoiding the sinking people and wooden beams and planks from the collapsing bridge.

A support post smashed against her, pulling her into the river's depths even as the current dragged her downstream. She could see the terror on Sao-Tauna's face as the girl wisely held her

breath, cheeks puffed wide. She managed to slide from beneath the post as it struck bottom, but the sinking wheel of a wagon trapped her foot under the iron bands of its tread. She tugged at a spoke of the wheel, attempting to move it free. She looked at Sao-Tauna, the girl's eyes blinking with the struggle not to exhale. If she released the girl, she would have a better chance of freeing herself, but then would need to chase her through the rapid current downriver before she drowned. Maybe if she could...

A hand pulled at the wagon wheel, casting it aside with ease as an arm wrapped around Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. She turned to see Sha-Kutan, his face grim as he used his free arm to swim toward the surface. She added her own arm to the effort, kicking as best as the folds of her dress allowed. The three broke from beneath the waters of the river a moment later.

Lee-Nin spit silty water from her mouth as she gasped for air. She smiled in relief as Sao-Tauna did the same in her arm. She swam for the shore, the current pulling them farther and farther from the broken bridge with each stroke. Sha-Kutan swam beside her, a hand still holding to her waist to ensure they did not get separated. Near the shallows, he stood and walked to the shore, helping her to find her feet on the uneven stones at the river's edge. She set Sao-Tauna down, coughing water as she checked to confirm the girl suffered no damage from the falling debris of the bridge.

"How did you find us?" Lee-Nin looked up to Sha-Kutan as he stood on the shoreline, watching people swim to safety.

"I can always find you." Sha-Kutan said no more as he pulled the waterlogged canvas sack from across his shoulders and dropped it to the ground before wading back into the turbulent river to help the other pilgrims to the shoreline.

Lee-Nin watched him with a mixture of curiosity and annoyance. While she appreciated his saving her and Sao-Tauna's lives, she disliked the idea of being rescued by anyone. She had always rescued herself when the need arose. It caused feelings to surface that she found unfamiliar and discomforting. She might have named one of the emotions as gratitude if she possessed more familiarity with the sensation. And how had he found her beneath a river amongst the wreckage of the bridge and a hundred other pilgrims falling through the water? He had turned on the bridge just before it gave way and looked directly into her eyes with no hesitation or searching among the surrounding faces. How could that be?

Lee-Nin shook off the questions and the feelings they brought to help the pilgrims climb out of the water and onto the thin strip of sand and rocks at the river's edge. She saw Fao-Ashi holding tightly to Gao-Pai, both shaken, but alive. She spotted Chu-Ki stumbling toward them. He sat down in the sand and said something that made the woman wince.

Beside her, Sha-Kutan helped a man from the river to sit in a bank of tall grass. He left the man without undue ceremony and strode past several pilgrims still spitting up water to stand beside Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna.

"Thank you." Sao-Tauna offered Sha-Kutan one of the flaccid, water-soaked flowers she still clutched in her hand. Sha-Kutan accepted it with a nod, holding it delicately between two massive fingers. Sao-Tauna smiled and turned to look out over the river.

“Yes. Thank you.” Lee-Nin found the words more difficult to speak as she realized she had sincerely thanked him more times than anyone else in her life. He nodded to her as well, but said nothing. Oddly, that silence infuriated her more than his having saved her life. She looked at the bridge, thinking to redirect her thoughts.

“With the bridge down, we will face a choice,” Lee-Nin said. “We can try to swim across, maybe make a raft from the wood of the bridge, or we can stay with the pilgrims and waste several days trying to find another crossing. The longer we’re on this side of the river, the easier we are to locate.”

“Star people.” Sao-Tauna, as usual, added her opinion before allowing others to voice their own.

“Yes. We stay with the pilgrims.” Sha-Kutan stared along the shoreline of the river.

Fascinated by his sudden desire for the companionship of the pilgrims, Lee-Nin followed Sha-Kutan’s gaze to where it rested on Chu-Ki as he walked away from Fao-Ashi and Gao-Pai.

“The pilgrims, then.” Lee-Nin watched Sha-Kutan watching Chu-Ki, intrigued and somewhat concerned by his behavior and apparent interest in the man, mostly because it so closely resembled her own. They needed to protect Sao-Tauna at all costs, but she could not bring herself to leave Fao-Ashi and Gao-Pai until she knew they were safe.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Lee-Nin’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE TEMPLE



TAKSATI

“ENTER.”

Taksati stepped into the tent, the night guard holding back the canvas flap of the entrance, a candle on a tray casting flickering light to guide her into the darkened space. Steam from a cup of tea near the candle rose in curling, herbal-scented clouds, glowing in the flames that danced atop the waxed wick.

“You should be in bed.” Junari sat up on her sleeping mat, a thin white sheet wrapped around her torso.

“You should be asleep.” Taksati knelt beside Junari, placing the tray with the candle and cup on the rug. “Which is why I bring you tea.”

“You spoil me, Taksati.” Junari sighed at her old servant. “I need to be strong like a warrior, not pampered like a Tanshen tahneff.”

“Do you wish to leave the comfort of your mattress and sleep upon the hard ground with your followers, under the clouds, waiting for the rain to fall or the morning dew to soak your clothes?” Taksati held the tea in her cupped hands, feeling the warmth seep into the bones of her fingers, a pleasant sensation she always relished.

“Maybe I should.” Junari looked around the tent. “Disproportionate comforts can teach us to be callous to the concerns of our companions. I, too, am a pilgrim setting out to meet my goddess.”

“You are more than a pilgrim.” Taksati blew on the tea, seeing the steam carry the smell to Junari’s twitching nose. “You are a prophet with responsibilities far greater than anyone in this camp.”

“That is true.” Junari frowned. “To be two different things at the same time can lead one to confusion.”

“This is why you need to sleep.” Taksati extended her hands. “And this is why you need to drink your tea.”

Junari sighed again in resignation and accepted the cup from Taksati. She held it in her hands the way the elder woman had, tentatively sipping at the infused water.

“I have spoken with Raedalus.” Taksati settled her hands in her lap as she watched her mistress wince at her words.

"I am surprised, then, that you bring me tea and not a strap to beat me with." Junari sipped her tea again, looking into its shallow depths.

"We do not beat our masters anymore." Taksati kept her tone even. "It is considered uncivilized in this age."

Junari laughed, spitting tea from her mouth as she coughed. Taksati smiled, handing Junari a cloth to wipe her lips.

"I am no longer your master," Junari said. "I have told you this many times. When we left the temple, we left behind our old lives."

"Yes," Taksati said. "And in my new life, I serve you food and care for your needs. It seems much like the old life, but it is different because I choose it, not the temple clerics."

"You are a good friend, Taksati." Junari looked up, her eyes glistening in the candlelight. "Better than I warrant."

"I will judge what you warrant from me." Taksati leaned close as she lowered her voice. "Did you suspect the Goddess would bring you back after your sacrifice?"

Junari sat silent for a moment, staring down into her tea. She wiped her eyes with the back of her hand.

"No."

"That is why I follow you, and why I fear for you." Taksati reached out and took Junari's face in her weathered hands. "I know you see yourself as unimportant, as a vessel to be replaced if broken or lost, but you are not. *You are not*. You think yourself a clay pot, when in truth you are the golden chalice. It may be true that any one of us could be the voice of the Goddess, that any of us could be the prophet, but that does not mean any of us could be the best prophet. Of all the dreamers, of all the believers, of all the pilgrims, the Goddess, in her infinite wisdom, chose you and you alone to embody her voice on Onaia. That is no mistake. You will call it blasphemy, but that is the wisest thing the Goddess may ever do."

"You have too much faith in me." Junari bit her lip.

"I am your servant." Taksati's own tears dampened her cheeks. "I shoulder all the burdens you cannot carry yourself. I hold all the faith in you that is possible until you are strong enough to accept it yourself."

"I was so frightened." Junari's shoulders shuddered with the sobs of memory.

Taksati took the cup from Junari's hands, placing it on the tray before pulling her prophet, her mistress, her friend into an embrace, stroking her hair as she shed the tears of uncertainty and doubt.

"All is well. All is well," Taksati whispered in Junari's ear. "You are a warrior, and you are righteous."

Taksati held Junari in her arms as the woman wept for her death and resurrection. She believed all of the followers of the Goddess, all pilgrims had a purpose. Otherwise, why would Moaratana have chosen them? Some, like Jupterus and Kantula, became guards of the prophet. Raedalus chronicled the prophet's words and deeds and offered counsel on important matters. She, Taksati, humble servant, provided what the others could not — a voice to question softly,

ears to listen attentively, a mind to judge when needed, and arms to comfort when the life of the prophet became too much for a mere woman, for Junari, for the child she had never borne, to bear.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Taksati's storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE CARNIVAL



YETH

“WOULD THAT I were a beast of burden, an ox hitched to a harvest cart bound for market, a horse pulling a plow to furrow a fallow field, a camel of the dry plains straddled with bundles of wild spices, unpronounceable to the civilized tongue. Rather I were any of these mindless animals than to be tethered throughout the entirety of my sorrowful life to the putrid imitation of manhood that is Tahn Gerig-Shan.”

Yeth watched Palla from the shadows of her hooded cloak. The young human woman stood at the edge of the narrow stage, her face torn with anguish, her voice trembling with fear, as she pointed to the actor playing the role of her suitor. Yeth admired the woman’s commitment to the role and suspected the emotion she always managed to express so articulately each time she performed the soliloquy of Tahneff Koru-Jan likely found its source in some personal experience.

Palla clearly hid the true nature of her past, but seemed to hide little else, being more forthright, if somewhat less tactful, than many of the humans Yeth encountered. The only time her countenance had been dishonest came when speaking about the disappearance of the men Grandal and Tellin. She did not blame her or the woman Ranna for that. The men’s absence did not lend itself to easy explanation. That they themselves did not know the true manner of the men’s disappearance made their silence and prevarication on the subject beneficial to all involved — particularly as it involved Yeth.

FIVE DAYS AGO

DRIED LEAVES crinkled softly beneath boot soles, the only dim sound in a sudden silence of birds and insects normally vocal in their communications. Yeth moved quietly through the woods, attendant to the change in the behavior of its inhabitants. Although these forests did not resemble those of her homeland, the stillness of woodland creatures tended to mean one thing — the presence of predators. She heard the voices, and while she could not discern the words they formed, she recognized the tone and the intention behind them, as well as the speakers.

She moved a little more quickly, forcing herself to be patient, not to rush and risk the snapping of a twig or the cracking of a branch in her passage. She had been sitting in the carnival campsite, mending a torn shirt as Palla headed off into the woods. She noted with interest that

Ranna followed her not long after. Her curiosity transformed to concern as she saw the men Grandal and Tellin wander into the trees after the two young women. She doubted that either woman held any regard for the men. She also doubted that Grandal and Tellin would care.

Yeth did not like the men. A few days ago, Tellin, in a fit of drink-inspired ardor, had grabbed her breast and demanded that she mate with him. Only Tarak's firm words had restrained her from breaking the man's wrist or his neck. Her roagg companion had been correct. She did not want to risk attracting the wrong sort of attention by maiming malformed members of the lesser peoples in front of their companions.

She found her dislike of Grandal and Tellin growing as she knelt down and pushed a leaf-laden branch aside. The men, stripped naked, waded through the water from opposite sides of a small pond toward Palla and Ranna. The women, themselves naked, floated close together, attempting to keep a distance from both men.

"Ya ain't changed yer minds, has ya? If ya thinks yer wet now, just wait a bit, girl."

Yeth watched Tellin and Grandal splash in the water and considered her options. She could show herself. Possibly intimidate the men into leaving. She had only a dagger at her waist, but they had seen her and Tarak in repeated performances. They might be bright enough to realize her martial skills were real rather than feigned. It might resolve the situation for a time. But how long before a similar event arose?

Yeth frowned as she ignored the bite of a mosquito. To smack it would draw attention to herself. She looked at the pond and the men and the women, unsettled by the scene. The men disturbed the balance of the cosmos.

Her family had always held to the ancient yutan faith of Keesho, the belief that the entire universe manifested from the will of a singular, unnamable divine being. To the Keesho faithful, this divine being was the cosmos and all things — rocks, plants, people — an expression of that divine nature. Although raised in the Keesho ways, Yeth converted in her youth to the Aasho path, with its belief in the triune aspects of this divine being — Onn the creator, Tam the sustainer, and Kiv the destroyer — an expression of the cycle of birth, life, and death. Yeth's faith wavered and waned through the years, but her steadfast belief in the necessary balance of the cosmos never faltered.

"Goddess protect us."

Yeth watched as Ranna traced the sign of a spiral across her chest.

The men upended the equilibrium of the cosmos. Creatures who had fallen into ever-present destruction when others rose to create and sustain. The universe required all three to function in harmony. Like so many humans, the men only understood the single expression of destruction rooted in the selfishness of their base natures.

"Yer not dreamin', ya daft girl. There's no goddess here."

Yeth saw Grandal throw his arms wide as he shouted.

The Sight came over her without thought. She effortlessly saw the true nature of the reality she inhabited. The water of the pond came alive. The trees of the forest breathed with her inhalation, the sky sang with her exhalation. Palla and Ranna and Grandal and Tellin were all

one expression of an inexpressible truth. The Keesho believers were not wrong in the universe being a single divine being, even if they mistook that being for possessing awareness. The hand did not truly know itself to be part of a body, nor did a brain. Only a mind could reach that conclusion. These men, these minor diseased organs who disturbed the balance of the greater whole, would never realize how they infected and corrupted that body.

Yeth reached out with The Will in the embrace of The Sight and asked the water of the pond to move, to churn, to whirl. The men cried out as the water spun faster around them, sucking them beneath the surface. Yeth asked the water to stop and to hold the bodies of the men down, the silt of the pond bottom covering them, burying them from sight.

She sighed quietly as she watched Palla and Ranna swim to the shore of the pond and retrieve their clothes. The women dressed and argued in low tones. Ranna wanted to tell the pilgrims of the miracle. Palla thought it best to keep it a secret. Eventually, Palla prevailed, explaining that the carnival folk might not react well to the idea that the pilgrims could pray to kill them. This thought left Ranna admonished, and she seemed to reconsider her position.

Yeth leaned against a nearby tree trunk. She felt mentally exhausted. She did not use The Sight often, and rarely with much great effect. Creating the whirlpool represented her most potent use of The Sight ever. While she readily obtained the way of seeing necessary for The Sight, she had never found it easy to impose her will upon reality and shape the world around her. Healing, the one aspect of The Sight she excelled in, proved the only exception.

She watched the women gather the men's clothes and carry them into the woods. She looked to the pond again, wondering if she had been right in her actions. Had she restored balance, or had she merely created a different imbalance? Her choice arose without great thought, with little consideration of the consequences. The men would not be missed, but that did not mean their deaths would have no effect. She could not know what that effect might be. Sight Master Lamna would no doubt chide her for impetuosity, would likely claim that the consequences of her impulsive actions had led her to this Iron Realm of lesser and chaotic people.

The irony of her banishment on a pointless mission for her impulsive decision did not escape Yeth. However, Sight Master Lamna had never traveled outside the city of Gerhanach, much less sailed beyond the shores of the Sky Realm. She had no more faced difficult choices in the world than in her heart. To maintain balance in the yutan realm held no comparison to doing so in a land of lesser peoples with no notion of the necessity of order in the cosmos. Yeth could not follow the same path as her mentor. No, she would do as she had always done. She would trust her inner voice to guide her, even if her choices led to grave consequences. Even if it meant she would not see her son again until he reached his maturity. Even if she were never able to face her estranged mate and convince him to reunite their family.

She thought of the last time she had seen them, her mate holding her son's hand as the two stood on the docks at the departure for her journey. Her son's height matched nearly half that of her former mate's stature. Both had refused to embrace her, a rejection that stung doubly strong in the case of her son. She had missed much of his childhood while scouting for the pod

authorities. Too much. And now she would miss his years of passing from child to young adult and the ceremony that would mark his transition. Tears came to her eyes and a pain gripped her chest, but she ignored them. She could blame no one but herself. Her actions had resulted in her present circumstance, but she had always found that she could live with grave consequences if she did not regret her decisions.

THE PRESENT

YETH GLANCED at Tarak and Shifhuul standing beside her, both cloaked like her to conceal their true natures. Five days ago, the two other outlanders had helped her search for the missing men. She had ensured they found nothing, steering them away from the buried clothes. Both had noted her absence during the time the women and men left camp, but neither suggested any connection to the men's disappearance. She suspected that Tarak remained silent because he would have likely done something similar with the men while she doubted Shifhuul cared at all what happened to the humans. For the wyrin, the hunt for the missing men represented yet another annoyance in what he constantly exclaimed to be a thoroughly annoying land.

They would perform after the conclusion of the play *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*. The drama had three long acts, really plays in and of themselves, but Leotin insisted the actors could only bear the strain of performing one act a day. The better to ensure continued purchase of tickets for the subsequent performances. Yeth found the play to be somewhat predictable, and clearly inferior to yutan drama, but interesting enough to make repeated viewings bearable. The crowd numbered fewer than she assumed Leotin preferred, but many of the human males were off fighting in the Daeshen army, while many of the remaining citizens had left for the pilgrim path.

As Leotin instructed, Yeth, Tarak, and Shifhuul remained where the audience could see them in their cloaks, so the people might wonder and speculate as to who and what lay beneath the black fabric. So they would more willingly pay to see the cloaks removed and the strange outland creatures battle each other in combat. Their mock *mêlée* included fake blood and the breaking of prop swords, but always concluded with Tarak claiming the title as victorious warrior.

They had tried alternate versions, but the crowds did not take kindly to a female succeeding in a fight, at least not the vocal and usually drunken men. They only laughed in amusement and called for their money the one time Shifhuul had won the contest. This had annoyed the wyrin greatly, leaving him caustic in his communications for days. For her part, she cared not at all for the humans' opinions of her. She had met few of them she could not kill in single combat. They carried their pride as a mule carries a pack of turnips, never realizing the package contains nothing of real value.

"I like this part," Tarak's voice rumbled in her ear.

"This part no good. No enough fight." Shifhuul shifted his feet in apparent boredom.

"We will provide the fighting." Yeth tightened her gloved hand on the spear at her side.

“Should us put in play.” Shifhuul laughed, his voice pitching high. Yeth could not escape hearing the comparison to a wild animal caught in a trap.

“The time for our report draws near.” Tarak lowered his voice to the closest it ever came to a whisper.

“No report we have.” Shifhuul tugged the hood of his cloak tight as a passing boy of eight or nine tried to peek up into the shadows of the fabric. A growl from the wyrin sent the child scurrying away.

“We report what we have seen, even if we have seen little.” Yeth kept the tone of her voice even, betraying nothing of the anger she experienced at her predicament. “This is our purpose.”

“How long for?” Shifhuul did not hide the irritation in his voice.

“Until we have either...”

Tarak’s voice faded as a man’s shouts and the pounding of a horse’s hooves reached Yeth’s ears. She turned to see a man riding wild along the eastern road into the town, his horse foaming at the mouth from its efforts.

“Militia!” the rider shouted. “Militia comin’! Close the gate!”

The crowd of townspeople gathered around the stage turned with the performers to follow the rider’s voice. A moment passed in stillness as the man’s words sank into the minds of those present. Then, acting as one limb of a great discontinuous body, people began to scream and run, leaving the actors staring, blank faced, at the fleeing audience.

“It seems there will be more fighting for us than usual.” Yeth looked along the western road, wondering how far off the militia might be and how long they had to establish a defensive perimeter or escape. She did not have as long as she hoped to ponder that question.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Yeth’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

INTERLUDE



SUNLIGHT RAINS down through wind-shattered clouds, scattering shafted light across the Juparti coastal city of Tanlassa. Seagulls call to each other and dive into churning salt water as ocean foam laps against storm-weathered docks of wood and stone.

A human stands near a pier pylon. A wyrin stands beside him.

Curious this should come to me now when I need it most, the wyrin thinks. The sea gods favor me.

“It is not the original.”

“It’s a copy. That’s all he gave her. And I copied her copy. I can read it to ya.”

“I can read Shen.”

“Then ya knows what it says.”

“I do.”

“And now we’re even? We’re done? ‘Cause I gots to go. She wants to set sail as soon as can be.”

If he says no, the human thinks, I’ll gut ’im like the water rat he is.

The wyrin looks up at the human. *If he moves for that blade, I’ll slice that bald little manhood from him and feed it to the gulls.*

“Yes. Your debt is repaid.”

And provides me the means to repay my own, the wyrin thinks.

The human grunts at the wyrin and stalks away down the time-smoothed boards of the pier.

The wyrin turns to look at the trading vessel docked nearby. He runs a paw along the railing.

If she’ll accept this in return for her patronage, I can keep my beloved from the maws of the moneylenders.

To continue reading the storyline of the Interludes [*follow this link.*](#)



EPISODE FIVE



THE CARNIVAL



TARAK

A WHITE sphere of filament-fine tendrils in uniform distribution danced with the wind, spiraling high into the air, reflecting the later afternoon sun with a tinge of amber in its manifold spires. Tarak watched the dandelion seed float down and alight on his paw. Were his eyes not open, he would not have sensed the infinitesimally light structure of the seed's gauzy spindles against his flesh. The Stone Realm did not have these tiny flowers that bloomed to cover fields in butter bright yellow, only to transform into milky white ghosts of their former selves and drift away, herds of breeze-driven seeds seeking future rebirth on some far hillside.

The wind caught the dandelion seed and carried it once more into the sky. Tarak watched it rejoin its companions floating over the town before turning his attention to the militiamen assembled outside the castle gate. He stood in the shadows of a guard tower atop the rampart wall, beside the yutan and the wyrin. In the inner courtyard below, the humans of the town and the carnival crammed into the small square, the wagons of each creating a boundary between them. He noted that the pilgrims congregated together at the side of the carnival wagons. He frowned at that. Their presence would not remain unnoticed if they did not blend in better with the rest of the carnival folk.

On the wall, several of the humans stood above the wide, ironclad gate. Leotin and Palla spoke with the local tahn, Kang-Laau, his wife, and his man at arms, a slender, gray-haired fellow in his sixties named Pi-Gento. He understood the Shen language well enough to gauge the color of the conversation.

Kang-Laau worried the militia would attack the castle. Pi-Gento vociferously propounded the castle's defenses and his men's ability to fend against the fifty-some militiamen outside the gate. Leotin asked about stocks and supplies to measure the number of days they might expect to hold out, only to be informed by the tahn's wife that the castle held less than a week's provisions for its normal inhabitants. The town usually had more warning before a siege, and at least a day to haul in goods from the local farms.

Tahn Kang-Laau insisted they would stand against the militia. They had been tricked by the last militia, handing over suspected heretics — those who had not left the town for the pilgrim path — only to be betrayed. They had watched their neighbors burned at the stake, but the militia had not departed as promised. They instead stayed for several days, raping local women, stealing food and coin from the farmers, and generally turning the people of the town against the tahn for

his complicity in their suffering. While Pi-Gento and the handful of men at arms too old or too feeble to fight in the war had been able to prevent the militia from robbing the castle, only Kang-Laau's *donation* to the militia commander had prevented them from leaving town with several of the young girls in tow. A fee his wife loudly complained would take years to repay, if ever.

Tarak listened to the humans argue, noticing that Palla remained uncharacteristically quiet. She appeared far less concerned than he expected, especially as she spent so much time with the pilgrims, particularly the woman, Ranna. If Kang-Laau, or the townspeople, discovered that the carnival harbored heretics, the situation within the castle would become significantly more precarious.

Tarak found the violent concern of the humans for those who believed in the new god to be strange and incomprehensible. Roaggs did not believe in gods in the way of humans and other peoples. [Roaggs held that all living things possessed spirits](#) that continued on after death to reform in another fashion, imbued with the spirit essence once again. A roagg warrior might become a tree, a tree a stag, a stag a flower, a flower a part of a mountain. All things came into being and all things eventually ceased their being, but the unseen beings behind the visible world continued on forever, sometimes waiting thousands of years between manifestations.

For a time after a loved one's death, the spirit talkers could communicate and relay the impressions of those recently deceased. However, as more time passed, it became more likely for the spirit to have moved on, once more remade as another form, another roagg, another animal, a mountain tree, and some said, even as humans, wyrin, and other peoples. Tarak looked at the dandelions, the militiamen, the cows still in the nearby fields, and the trees in the forest, and knew that he had once been all these things, that the spirit within him would become all these things once again. If he lived the higher life of a roagg with honor, this would imbue his spirit with grace and propel it to a more intricate form of being, just as a dishonorable life would lead to a simpler manner of being. The spirit talkers believed it took many wicked roaggs to form the animals and plants and trees of the valleys and forests of the rocky and mountainous Stone Realm, but just as many honorable roaggs to reform as the people themselves. With so many spirits manifesting as so many things, what need did the roaggs have to believe in gods and goddesses? With no gods came no battles to kill for one's beliefs.

What now were Tarak's beliefs? What did it mean that he, a roagg, dreamed of a human goddess? What did it mean when birds descended to defend him from enemies? Did it mean his beliefs were wrong? How did one seek to reclaim honor when the basis for one's honor came into question? The spirit talkers could not speak to this human goddess, but the spirits they communed with all warned of great sorrow and great joy.

"What now they say?"

Shifhuul's question, phrased in broken Shen, brought Tarak's attention to the diminutive wyrin and away from the concerns of spirits and honor.

"They argue over what to do." Tarak looked down over the wall, making sure to stay in the shadows of the tower. The majority of the militiamen seemed to be searching the town house by

house, ostensibly looking for heretics, yet leaving each abode with hands full of foodstuffs and what few valuables they came across.

“There are few options available to us.” Yeth spoke from beside Tarak as she stared at the human militiamen below on the ground.

“Need more birds.” Shifhuul chuckled in a high-pitched snort, then seemed to think better of the idea, his lips curling downward into a near snarl.

“We wait for the humans to decide.” Tarak fingered the thick fur beneath the long chin of his snout as the tahn’s heavysset wife gestured violently toward the militia below. She appeared to think it her husband’s duty to march outside and confront the heretic hunters.

“And once they decide, we decide.” Yeth brought her pale eyes toward Tarak. For a yutan, she grasped the inherent nature of situations quickly.

“Decide the humans below first.” Shifhuul stared through an arrow slit in the wall of the tower toward the militia on the ground.

Tarak looked to see one of the militiamen, the apparent leader, riding up the road to the castle gate. He stopped a hundred paces away, flanked by fifteen of his men, all on horseback. The commander tilted his head back to sneer at Tahn Kang-Laau and the humans.

“I am Letan-Fee, commander of the zhan’s fifth militia brigade.” The commander sat tall in his saddle as he shouted.

“I am Tahn Kang-Laau, of Castle Peda-Lan and the surrounding lands.” Kang-Laau cupped his hands around his mouth as he yelled to the militia commander.

“You harbor heretics,” Letan-Fee called up to the tahn.

“There are no heretics here.” Kang-Laau’s voice rose in pitch as he shouted. “They were all burned by the last militia to pass through.”

“If you have no heretics, why do you hide behind your walls?” Letan-Fee raised an arm to indicate the castle fortifications.

“We were badly abused by the last militia.” Kang-Laau wiped his hand across his bald head. “We wish you great success. Take what you need from the homes and press onward in your hunt.”

“You hold heretics behind those stones. I feel it in my bones. My sword sings of them to me.” Letan-Fee patted the sheathed blade at his side.

“We do not.” Kang-Laau pointed to the temple spire rising from the center of the castle. “We hold true to the ways of Ni-Kam-Djen.”

“I will give you one hour to open your gate and hand over the heretics you give quarter to.” Letan-Fee raised one arm straight above his head. “If you do as I ask, I will forgive your blasphemous actions. If you do not, I shall burn your town to the ground.”

Letan-Fee lowered his arm in a swift, chopping motion. Behind him, at the edge of the town, flames leapt across the thatched roof of a mud-daub house. Militiamen lifted torches to the straw thatching, smoke and fire dancing as a stiff wind carried them upward and over the field of rye behind the home.

Tarak watched the flames of the house gain in intensity, white dandelion seeds drifting close to catch light in small, fiery bursts, falling to the ground like miniature comets, sparks trailing them to their demise. He said a short blessing for the spirits of the dandelions, for what they had been and what they would become. He extended the prayer to the spirit of the house and then the nearby tree, its leaves turning brown then black as the wind carried the fire through the small, backyard garden.

He thought of the dandelions drawn inexorably toward the flames, toward a moment of cessation and transformation, just as a wind of unknown origin set him in motion, pushing him along a path toward an unimaginable future. Would he, like the feather-light seeds, be consumed and transformed, his spirit birthed again in an unfamiliar fashion? Would he take form here in the Iron Realm?

He thought of his mate, Reeshka. Would he ever see her again? If he died in this land of sheetoo traitors, would his spirit, as the roagg poets claimed, reunite and bind with her in a future form? Might they not return together as a flower seed, floating on the air, carrying their love with them into a new life? He thought then about her yearning for cubs, for new vessels for the spirits, as she said, and of his reticence in the face of his dishonor.

If he endured this castle siege, and if he survived the pilgrim road to learn the source of the dreams and the star and the miracles, and if he lived to voyage home across the ocean, he vowed he would never again leave his mate's side, would father with her as many cubs as she desired, would become a roagg worthy of his clan, would savor every moment of this form before the fiery winds of time sent his spirit onward to another life.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Tarak's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE CARNIVAL



LEOTIN

“I SAW her. I saw her make the sign!”

“Heretics!”

“Cast ’em out!”

“Let ’em burn the heretics, not our homes!”

Leotin turned to the angry voices rising from the courtyard below where he stood on the castle wall. His heart seized in his chest, his lungs aching and unable grasp enough air. The pilgrims clustered near two of the carnival wagons. Jhanal faced a growing mass of more than two hundred townspeople shouting to expel the heretics. What had the man been thinking? Leotin had specifically told him to keep his people out of sight, to make themselves inconspicuous. Not to clump together and begin chanting prayers as they did now. Leotin shook his head. A madness added to an insanity, and him crushed between them.

“What? I see it, too. They make the mark of the heretics.” Tontu-Gua, the tahneff of the castle, Kang-Laau’s portly and easily angered wife, turned from the inner courtyard. She glowered at Leotin from beside her husband and Pi-Gento, the commander of the castle guards, one of whom also stood nearby. Palla stood beside Leotin, her face taut with concern as she watched the carnival folk move to stand between the townspeople and the pilgrims.

“There must be twenty or more.” Tahn Kang-Laau leaned against the inner wooden railing of the wall, staring down at the courtyard of his castle, his eyes squinting in the bright light.

“There are nearly thirty, my tahn.” Leotin tried to keep his voice even. There were few options available to him now, and he needed to proceed with as much contrition as caution.

“Thirty!” Kang-Laau rounded on Leotin, his jowls shaking in rage. “Your lies endanger us all!”

“I lied to protect my people, my tahn.” Leotin lowered his eyes. “We would never have stopped had we known a militia to be close.”

“They must be cast out.” Kang-Laau pointed emphatically at the pilgrims below as he shouted at Pi-Gento. “Gather your men and expel them.”

“Yes, my tahn.” Pi-Gento nodded to Kang-Laau. He spared a moment to glare at Leotin with hate-filled eyes before running to the wooden stairs that descended the inner side of the castle wall near the gate. The other guard remained, standing two paces behind his tahn, staring at Leotin and Palla.

“That would be unwise.” Leotin clasped his hands together in a gesture of pleading. If the tahn threw the pilgrims out, they would surely be killed, and likely he and his carnival for harboring them. He needed to convince Kang-Laau of the danger the militia presented to the tahn and his castle. “To open the gate to put them out also opens the gate to allow the militia in. You told me moments ago what happened the last time you showed hospitality to a militia.”

“Throw them from the wall then.” Tontu-Gua waved her thick arm toward the outer edge of the castle fortifications. “They are heretics and should expect no less.”

“Would you throw women and children to their deaths?” Leotin had heard Palla and Jhanal make similar arguments to him only weeks before. Had he followed the advice the tahn and tahneff now proposed, he would not find himself needing to defend heretics. He searched for a means of betraying the pilgrims without endangering his own people, but none emerged from the crowded forest of thoughts in his mind. He doubted he would enact such a plan if he could conceive it. He had spent too much time with Jhanal and his pilgrims. Had watched them help with the carnival tasks and performances. Had seen the children playing. One could easily turn away strangers, but handing over people one knew to certain death took more callousness than he could muster. A failing, no doubt, and one that might get him killed, but one he did not feel inclined to rectify.

“They are vermin. It is what they deserve.” Tontu-Gua spat over the inner railing toward the pilgrims. Leotin doubted the woman had been born into a noble family. Maybe a merchant’s daughter marrying up the chain of life. Possibly he could appeal to her sense of profit as well as her sense of preservation.

“My tahneff, you are not cruel people.” Leotin turned to Tontu-Gua. He had no doubt that she did indeed possess a vicious nature. She made little attempt to hide it in casual conversation and none in the current discussion.

“We are not fools to be lied to.” Kang-Laau pointed to the pilgrims below, fingering the blood-black garnet embedded in the hilt of the dagger at his belt. “They are an affront to Ni-Kam-Djen and must be expelled. Through the gate or over the wall makes no difference.”

“I have seen the charred corpses of the children the militia burned, my tahneff.” Leotin ignored the image that filled his mind. They had witnessed many unspeakable things in the past months traveling through the Atheton and Daeshen Dominions. “I do not think you wish to have that sight mar your memory as it does mine.”

“Then we can throw *you* from the wall as well,” Tontu-Gua fumed at him, spittle spraying his chest.

“My dead body would little assuage the blood lust of the militia commander.” Leotin calmly ignored the woman’s saliva now staining his jacket, making a note to have the boy Donjeon wash it at as soon as possible — assuming he survived the day.

“The militia must be heeded or they will burn my town to the ground.” Kang-Laau looked from the militia outside the castle walls to the pilgrims in the inner courtyard.

Leotin watched the castle commander, Pi-Gento, gathering his men. There were only ten of them, all too old to be called to fight. One walked with a pronounced limp and another had only

one arm to hold a sword. Against a militia, they would not stand for a minute, but against unarmed pilgrims and carnival folk, they might easily impose their will. Not all of the carnival folk were unarmed, however. Leotin scanned the inner castle grounds for any sight of the outlanders. They might be his only hope of saving the pilgrims.

"The pilgrims will save the town with their prayers." Palla stepped forward to stand beside Leotin, speaking in the northern Shen dialect.

She had remained atypically silent as Leotin attempted to quell the anger of the tahn and tahneff. He had hoped she might continue that way. His stomach tightened at her words, knowing he had likely lost all hope at swaying the nobles.

"Madness." Kang-Laau raised his chin in disgust as he turned from Palla.

"Their goddess will protect the castle and the town through the pilgrim's prayers." Palla leaned forward, her voice filled with emotion.

"You are all heretics!" Tontu-Gua threw her hands in the air as she stepped back, making the Kam-Djen circle over her chest and head.

"No, my tahn, we are not." Leotin placed a hand on Palla's arm, pulling her away from Kang-Laau and Tontu-Gua. He had seen her spending more and more hours with the pilgrim woman, Ranna, but had taken that for friendship or some carnival affair, not as conversion to the new faith. It worried him, for reasons he had no time to articulate. "I took them in to protect them from those who would kill them for what they dream at night. Some of my people have joined them. They are not wicked. They are not evil. They merely have dreams."

"Heretic dreams of a dark goddess bitch," Kang-Laau said.

A great wave of voices rose above the turbulent sea of sound below in the courtyard. Leotin turned to see a Ketolin Kam-Djen priest, his crimson robes fluttering in the slow cyclone breeze circulating through the castle plaza as he approached the pilgrims.

"May Ni-Kam-Djen have mercy upon you as you burn!" The priest pointed to the pilgrims and continued to shout as Jhanal raised his hands defensively and yelled his prayers to the heavens.

"You must ask your priest to refrain from inciting your people, my tahn." Leotin clasped his hands together once more.

"I must? You dare tell me what I must do?" Kang-Laau shook his head in disgust.

"Our son, Rantu-Wao, will purify the castle of your heretic infection." Tontu-Gua smiled in righteous anger as she looked down on the courtyard.

"Your son is the town priest?" Palla seemed surprised by the revelation.

"My family has always had a priest," Kang-Laau said with obvious pride.

"My tahn, I am certain we can come to an agreement." Leotin's heart thundered in his chest as he watched the men-at-arms closing from all sides on the pilgrims while the priest harangued them.

"Once the militia has you on their stakes, we'll see what you agree to." Kang-Laau leaned on the railing as he watched his men-at-arms begin to close on the defenseless pilgrims below.

“We can offer you compensation for sanctuary.” Leotin tried to judge the scene in the courtyard below. How much time did he have? Pi-Gento and his soldiers were not overly well armed. Each had a sword at his waist, but their leather and metal studded armor looked thin. They were not much a match for the outlanders. There were the townspeople to contend with as well. Several local men held makeshift weapons in their hands — lengths of wood, field knives, and wood axes. The carnival folk and the pilgrims might be able to overwhelm them if they fought back.

“Coin!” Kang-Laau shook his head as though bewildered. “You have enough coin to rebuild the town after they burn it down, do you? You have enough coin to eat when we run out of food? You have enough coin to keep the militia from scaling the walls? You have enough coin to purify our souls after betraying The True God, Ni-Kam-Djen? Coin!”

“You must give us time, my tahn.” Palla stepped forward again, hands clasped at her chest. “Time for a miracle or time to escape.”

“False gods perform no miracles, girl.” Tontu-Gua backed away from Palla as though the younger woman possessed an illness that might spread.

“I have seen with my own eyes the miracles of the Goddess.” Palla’s voice raised in volume with the obvious passion of her words.

Leotin wondered what she meant, but had no time to consider the implications of Palla’s statement.

“Lies and Dark Sight.” Kang-Laau turned back to the courtyard.

“No. Not The Sight.” Palla wiped at the tears in her eyes as she looked down at the pilgrims. Leotin saw Ranna staring up at the group atop the wall. “The goddess saved me.”

“Enough heresy.” Kang-Laau pointed to Pi-Gento and the men-at-arms as he shouted over the inner wall. “Round them up and ready the gate!”

Leotin swallowed back the bile rising in his throat as Pi-Gento and the nine men-at-arms drew their swords and approached the pilgrims. The townspeople cheered, those with dangerous implements raising their hands. A few threw small stones from the courtyard grounds. All chanted for the heretics to be cast out of the castle and burned.

“My tahn, I beg you, do not proceed down this...”

Leotin’s words faded under the animal roar that echoed between the courtyard walls, drawing everyone’s attention to the base of the western tower where the three outlanders emerged, casting off their cloaks to reveal their true natures, brandishing their weapons as Tarak’s growl ceased. The courtyard fell silent, the townspeople shuffling back a step in unison. Pi-Gento and his men froze where they stood as Tarak, Yeth, and Shifhuul stomped through the courtyard.

“The pilgrims are under our protection.” Tarak’s thunderous voice filled the air.

“Stand down, roagg.” Pi-Gento paced toward Tarak and the other outlanders, his men reluctantly following him. The old soldier had obviously seen a roagg. Leotin wondered if he had witnessed one fight.

“What is this?” Kang-Laau turned to Leotin. “What treachery is this?”

“Dark Sight creatures.” Tontu-Gua made the Kam-Djen circle of protection on her chest and forehead once more.

“Heretic demons!” the priest, Rantu-Wao, shouted from below at the outlanders.

Leotin ran toward the stairs leading down the inner side of the castle. He had made a mistake. He had wasted time standing atop the wall, quarreling with Tahn Kang-Laau. He should have been in the courtyard with his people, arguing with the town folk and the priest. The tahn or his wife might make decisions, but they were now driven by events rather than driving them.

“Hold! Hold!” Leotin yelled as he raced down the stairs. He stumbled slightly as he reached the bottom step, nearly falling to the ground. He recovered and rushed to stand between the outlanders and Pi-Gento and his men.

“This need not be a bloody day.” Leotin held his arms out, symbolically separating the two armed groups. The pilgrims shifted anxiously beside the outlanders, the carnival folk standing beside them. The townspeople warily moved back, creating a half circle to nearly enclose the outsiders.

“Tell your carnival freaks to stand aside or be cut down.” Pi-Gento gestured toward the outlanders with his sword.

“That would be most unwise.” Leotin gave a glance to Kang-Laau and his wife, still safely observing from atop the castle wall, before turning to Pi-Gento and his guards. “You are likely a skilled warrior, and your men are doubtless very experienced, but I have seen these outlanders fight, and there are simply not enough of you to defeat them. You would die. Of that you may be certain.”

“The people of the town will rise to crush you and cast you out in the name of Ni-Kam-Djen,” the priest, Rantu-Wao, shouted as he turned to the townspeople. A few of them yelled back their enthusiasm, but most remained silent, staring at the outlanders brandishing their weapons.

“And how many shall die?” Leotin stared at the priest, but Rantu-Wao seemed nonplussed by the idea of the townspeople being cut down in combat. Why did fanatics always rejoice in the likely deaths of others, whether believers or non-believers? And priests made the worst zealots of all. Maybe that explained why he generally despised them regardless of the god they worshiped. “There is another choice, and we can all survive this day.”

“The only way is the way of the righteous.” Rantu-Wao made the symbol of the Kam-Djen circle on his chest.

“The way is to stand aside or die.” Pi-Gento pointed his sword at Leotin.

“Smoke!”

“They burn our homes!”

“Cast ’em out!”

Leotin looked to see black smoke rising in several distinct columns from beyond the wall.

“They’re burning the houses!” Kang-Laau shouted from the top of the wall. “Kill them!”

“Wait! Wait! We can all...”

Leotin never finished his thought, never completed his plea for a truce among those gathered in the courtyard. The few armed townspeople, enraged by the loss of their homes, charged the pilgrims. Pi-Gento and his men took this as a signal to attack the outlanders, their swords glinting in the sunlight, tracing arcs over their heads. The priest yelled ecstatic prayers as the fighting began to churn around him.

Leotin shouted again for calm, for peace, for a chance to convince them all of a better plan. A pair of hands pulled him from the path of a charging group of townsmen. He looked to Palla's stricken face as she tugged at his arm, dragging him toward the safety of the carnival wagons.

"Stay here." Palla left his side, climbing up into a nearby wagon. She cast a tarp aside and began rummaging through a large box to retrieve a prop sword. The dull blade could not pierce flesh, but it would hurt well enough if struck by it. She pulled more swords from the prop box and handed them out to carnival folk and pilgrims alike. She shouted as she leapt from the wagon, a sword blade in her hand. "We must fight!"

Leotin felt dizzy, his mind unable to comprehend the multitude of events transpiring around him in unison.

The outlanders fought Pi-Gento and the castle's men-at-arms — a vastly disproportionate battle. Already three castle guards lay dead. Pi-Gento and two others battled Tarak, his axes clanging against the steel of their swords. Another two fought Yeth, her spear spinning in the air as she attacked, pushing them back toward the wall of townspeople behind them. Shifhuul rolled across the ground, springing through the air to thrust his slender sword into the neck of the man he attacked.

Townspeople, armed with whatever came to hand, most men of advancing years, attacked the pilgrims. Some fell back and hid. Others fought, striking with their hands and kicking with their feet.

Palla and the pilgrims and carnival folk, armed with prop weapons, waded into the front of the townspeople, pushing them back with dull, bruising blades and the anger of their raised voices. Some of the townspeople made for the gate wheel, but Palla's armed carnival folk intercepted them.

Leotin stared at the blood staining the earth of the courtyard. How many would need to die? When would it stop? He looked to Kang-Laau atop the castle wall. The fool and his foolish wife who had witlessly orchestrated these deaths he witnessed. Had they but listened, their men would still be alive, their townspeople would not be dying, his friends would not lie bleeding on the ground, the pilgrims he had sheltered for weeks would not rest lifeless in the dust. The guard who protected the tahn ran down the stairs to defend his companions at arms. Kang-Laau and his wife stood and watched the carnage they had fostered in the safety of distance.

He did not follow the rational thought that normally so dominated his decisions. He did not weigh the costs and benefits of action or inaction. He ran, his feet pounding the packed earth, his legs dodging townspeople who sought to slow him. He pushed open the door at the base of the western tower and plunged up the spiraling stone staircase. He gasped for breath as he reached

the head of the stairs, but pressed on, running along the top of the wall toward the tahn and his wife.

Kang-Laau and his wife faced outward toward the town, shouting down at the militia commander.

“They are killing us!” Kang-Laau yelled.

“Open the gate!” the militia commander called from below.

“Stop this!” Leotin halted beside Kang-Laau as the man and his wife turned to him. “Your people are dying. My people are dying. You can stop this.”

“You! You are the reason they die. Heretic!” Tontu-Gua charged Leotin.

He did not know what the woman intended and did not care. He thrust his fist toward her face with all his might, her nose cracking as she stumbled backward. Her husband, red-faced in disbelief and anger, grabbed Leotin by the throat.

“How dare you! How dare you, vermin!” Kang-Laau choked Leotin, pushing him back against the crenellations of the outer wall.

Leotin did not struggle to pull the man’s hands free of his neck. The tahn outweighed him by half a man or more, with arms grown strong not from work but from the effort of carrying the extra weight. He could not fight the tahn and win. Instead, Leotin pulled free the dagger in the tahn’s belt and rammed its blade up into the man’s ribcage.

Kang-Laau’s eyes went wide as the air wheezed from his lungs.

“What have you done?” Kang-Laau stared at Leotin in shock.

“I do not know.” Leotin looked into the tahn’s eyes, wondering what manner of man he had transformed into with the passing of a single moment and what further transformations awaited him.

“Open the gate!”

The militia commander’s call reached Leotin’s ears, and he found himself once more following some mindless instinct as he drew the blade from Kang-Laau’s chest. He pushed the dying tahn against the space between the crenellations atop the wall and bent down to grab behind the man’s knees. Straining, his legs burning and his back tightening in a spasm of pain, Leotin flipped the rotund tahn over the edge of the castle wall. Kang-Laau screamed as he tumbled briefly through the air before landing with a bone-cracking thud not far from where the militia commander sat on his horse.

“No!”

Leotin spun around to the sound of Tontu-Gua’s anguished voice, surprised to find her right behind him. He felt her body press against his, sensed the pressure on the dagger still in his hand, and saw the shock on her face as her momentum impaled her heart upon the blade. He bore her suddenly slack weight as he stared into her face, a wave of guilt and remorse welling up within him while he watched the flame of life in her eyes flutter out. He pushed her away with all his strength, her dead body falling back to smash against the flimsy wooden railing along the inner side of the castle wall. The weathered planks of thin wood gave way under the impact of Tontu-Gua’s mass, her body smashing through the railing to plummet to the ground. He heard a crash a

moment later and looked down to see her arms and legs splayed in impossible positions in the bed of a grain wagon.

The people of the courtyard turned as one toward the great cracking sound of Tontu-Gua's impact on the wagon. Leotin stared out at a strange tableau — a battle paused in a moment of time. The castle's men-at-arms all lay dead. Only Pi-Gento remained, his sword held in defense of a group of townspeople against three carnival folk with prop weapons. Pilgrims, carnival folk, and townspeople lay dead and bleeding around the courtyard. The yutan outlander held a bleeding arm close to her chest, but the roagg and the wyrin seemed uninjured. Leotin knew he had mere moments to turn tragedy to advantage.

"The tahn and his wife are dead!" Leotin pointed down to the tahneff's body, mangled in the broken wagon. "Your soldiers are dead. Your neighbors are dead. My people are dead. The pilgrims are dead. We are all dying for no cause. The militia burns your homes, but are your houses worth your lives? We do not wish to fight, but we will continue if we must and more will die."

"Heretic demons and blasphemers!" The priest, Rantu-Wao, now tahn of the castle and town, screamed in rage as he pointed to the body of his dead mother. "They killed our tahn. They killed my parents. They will kill you all. Slaughter them in the name of Ni-Kam-Djen. Open the gate and burn them all. The wrath of The True God shall fall down upon..."

Rantu-Wao crumpled to the ground beneath a blow to the temple from the hilt of a sword. Pi-Gento stood above the priest. He looked up to Leotin as he lowered his weapon.

"You have the castle, carnival barker." Pi-Gento wiped the blood from his blade on a pants leg. "What will you do now?"

Leotin's hands shook and a chill gripped his stomach. He held tight to the inner railing of the wall to steady himself as he looked down upon the carnage in the courtyard — townspeople pressed to one side, pilgrims and carnival folk on the other. Had he stood firm so many weeks ago, the pilgrims would not have been with him in the town and none of this day's events would have transpired. Had he been harsher with them as they hid behind the castle walls from the approaching militia, they could have escaped this outcome. Had he not confronted and killed the tahn and his wife, they might...

He ceased thinking about the past and what could not be changed and considered Pi-Gento's question. What would he do now?

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Leotin's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE FUGITIVES



ING-KU

“THEY DID not travel this way.”

“North, sir?”

“Yes. North. And quickly. We have lost two days.”

The sun sat three hours from falling to night, its rays hot even in the latter quarter of the day. Ing-Ku wiped the sheen of sweat from his forehead as he stared at the domed huts of the small village — over-sized walnut shells scattered haphazardly on either side of a lane. He sat on his horse watching a band of pilgrims shuffle past village houses beside a meandering river. The four men remaining of his hand of wardens sat on horses several paces behind him. The two dogs rooted in the nearby bushes, sniffing at a ground squirrel’s nest. His sub-commander, a young man with a round face and an easy disposition named Dian-Vang, rode a horse beside him.

“Back the way we came, or find a shortcut, sir?” Dian-Vang looked at the rickety wooden bridge crossing the river they had ridden over minutes ago.

They had lost the trail of the girl and her protectors days prior. Knowing the fugitives favored pilgrim bands, he followed the path of several heading north. This trail had split, with one band heading west and the other continuing north. He had gambled on following the pilgrims headed west, hoping they proved quicker to overtake. A gamble that bore no reward.

“No. We will waste too much time retracing our route.” Ing-Ku pulled a map from the satchel strapped to his horse and opened it between his hands. He had paid a considerable sum to the leader of a merchant caravan for the small piece of paper. It depicted the major roads and rivers of the region. “We will head forward and find a road north. There is one a day’s journey from here. If they stay with the pilgrims, they will make for the Old Border Road. We will reach it first and wait for them.”

“A good plan, sir.” Dian-Vang leaned over to look at the map. The man fidgeted with the reins, wrapping them around his fingers.

“Yes?” Ing-Ku worried he had promoted Dian-Vang too soon, but he needed a sub-commander, and while young, the man had potential. He also had a habit of playing with his hands whenever he wanted to say something that made him uncomfortable.

“What? Ah. Yes. It’s Ran-Hur, sir.” Dian-Vang glanced over his shoulder at the other men of the hand, their horses eating wild barley from the roadside. “He talks in his sleep, sir.”

“I have heard.” Ing-Ku had awoken from Ran-Hur’s nocturnal mutterings more than once.

“Well, sir, it’s upsetting the other men.” Dian-Vang looked at his hands, squinting his eyes as he visibly forced them to cease their motion.

“The dreams are not our concern.” Ing-Ku glanced at the map again. “Our concern is the girl.”

“Yes, sir.” Dian-Vang looked away, his hands fumbling with the reins once more.

In truth, the dreams did trouble Ing-Ku. Not so much for having them every night, as he had for the past several weeks, nor for the way they made him question his faith in Ni-Kam-Djen during the waking hours, but rather, for the nagging suspicion that a connection existed between the dreams and the girl. He could not place the source of that intuition, but trusted it nevertheless. He feared it would prove more accurate than his hunch about which pilgrim band to follow. Once the pilgrims before them cleared the narrow village street, they could pass around them and make good time to the next crossroad.

He looked at the map again and frowned. How did the fugitives continue to elude him? A tutor and a farmer and a girl. A farmer did not kill five armed wardens. A tutor for children did not escape the palace jails. As his mother used to say, an egg that stank when cracked went rotten long beforehand. The thought of his mother brought a smile to his face. He wondered if she still lived. He had often considered sending word to her, but to write letters to a woman who could not read in a village of illiterate fishermen did no good for anyone. He might have paid for a messenger, though. Someone to read aloud his words.

The notion of words recited brought his father to mind, the old man singing ancient songs in a soft voice as they cast their nets into the water, the boat bobbing in the placid ocean waves. His father had always said the fish needed to be coaxed to the net, to be lured in with the songs of lives they would never live.

Ing-Ku looked up from his map and back over his shoulder, an idea forming in his mind like a chart written out in a familiar hand. He might not be able to lure his prey to his net, but he could certainly fish for them.

“Tell the men to strip their things from the horses.” Ing-Ku scanned the edge of the river, finding what he sought.

“Sir?” Dian-Vang’s head snapped around at the odd command.

“We’re selling the horses.” Ing-Ku folded the map and slid it back in the satchel.

“We’re walking, sir?” Dian-Vang’s voice matched the confusion on his face.

“No.” Ing-Ku extended an arm and an index finger. “We’re selling the horses to buy that boat.”

Ing-Ku watched with restrained amusement as Dian-Vang followed his hand, the import of the command registering with his raised eyebrows and opened mouth.

“A very good idea, sir.” Dian-Vang turned his horse around to relay the order to his fellow wardens.

Ing-Ku slid from his saddle, looking at the long fishing boat by the bridge and the wide river stretching north through the forest, hoping this impulsive decision proved more productive

than the last. Hoping, as well, that when the time came, he ignored that other notion he spent his days suppressing and fulfilled his mission to kill the girl.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link.](#)

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

FILAMENT-THIN STRANDS of silk, woven layer upon layer, surrounded and entombed the tiny creature as it altered its essence from one form to another. Sha-Kutan pushed aside the slender branch, the cocoon dangling down — a chrysalis fruit portending a mid-season turn as much as an insectal transformation. He wondered a moment at the colors of the future butterfly's wings, then proceeded through the woods, back toward the riverbank, two rabbits hanging dead in one hand.

He slid from the forest and walked through the pilgrim encampment along the river's edge. It had taken nearly three days to find a new bridge to cross the river. The leaders of the band of wayfarers had chosen to set camp on the far side of the stone transfer after making the crossing. Sha-Kutan contributed, as always, by hunting the nearby woods. He had hoped to find a deer or a wild pig, but only managed to catch two rabbits. The noise from the pilgrims drove most of the animals farther into the forest.

He walked past the wagons and makeshift tents spread along the riverbank. Fifty some people settled down for the night, trying to get fires burning and food prepared before sunset. Far fewer pilgrims made camp than before the accident at the last bridge. They had gained three more in passing through a small village on the road that hugged the river, but the loss hung about the group — a palpable pain masking every motion and word.

Not for everyone, of course, and not in the same manner for all. Sha-Kutan said Pashist prayers for the dead each night, but did not weep for them the way many of the pilgrims did as they intoned their pleas to their goddess, tracing their fingers in spirals across their chests. Lee-Nin did not weep either, although he sensed her pain, hidden behind that hard resolve. He understood this as his own barriers against feeling had long been held in place. Unlike Lee-Nin, who constructed her walls to protect her inner nature, he spent years working to dismantle the bricks of the boundary to his heart, its density often resisting his efforts.

He noted another who did not weep or express more than feigned concern for the lost lives of the pilgrims drowned that day — the man most responsible for their deaths. Most of the men who had stood on that bridge were now dead, and none alive knew how Chu-Ki's anger and arrogance led to the bridge's collapse. None except Sha-Kutan, and he refrained from speaking of it for one reason — if the pilgrims gathered to expel the man, he would leave, but he would

also take his *wife* and *daughter* with him. The woman and girl bore no responsibility for what befell the pilgrim band, but they would be expelled with the culprit.

Thoughts of the man brought worries about his location and potential actions. Sha-Kutan expanded his senses to locate Sao-Tauna. He turned his head to see her by the river, playing in the shallows with Chu-Ki's *daughter*, Gao-Pai. They seemed easy companions. Neither girl spoke much. Lee-Nin stood nearby, helping two other women prepare food for the evening meal. She looked to him and he nodded back, his attention diverted by the locus of his previous contemplations.

Chu-Ki stood near the forest edge, leaning his arm against a tree, a pilgrim girl of ten or eleven years backed against the bark, barely visible from the camp. Sha-Kutan altered his course from the cook fires and toward Chu-Ki and the girl. He said nothing as he approached, coming to stand on the side of the man's outstretched arm. Chu-Ki turned to look at him, a thinly fabricated smile upon his lips.

"Ah, Fan-Nak. Ya bring us game again." Chu-Ki pointed to the rabbits in Sha-Kutan's hand.

He and Lee-Nin and the girl did not travel under their real names, using new ones with every pilgrim band they joined. Sha-Kutan had been impressed when Lee-Nin suggested the practice. She easily took to responding to new names, while Sao-Tauna spoke little and responded to no name unless she chose to, so the deception proceeded effortlessly wherever they traveled.

"I need your help to skin them." Sha-Kutan raised the rabbits in his arm.

There is something else I'd like to skin.

All wicked men may purify their hearts. We know this.

"Ya given' orders now, is ya?" Chu-Ki's smile widened as his voice deepened.

"No. I am asking for help." Sha-Kutan looked at the girl. She looked back, eyes widening. She understood the import of his gaze and turned, running off back to the camp.

"I gots things to do." Chu-Ki turned to watch the girl run away, his smile fading slightly.

"No. You don't." Sha-Kutan watched as Chu-Ki looked around, clearly judging who from the camp stood close enough to hear their words.

We know what he is.

What we are can change.

We should kill him now. It will save time later.

Killing evil men does not end evil.

Close enough.

"Look here, big man." Chu-Ki's smile faded as he jabbed a finger into Sha-Kutan's chest. "I take orders from no man. Nots you. Nots no one."

It would save time and words.

Words change what we know and who we are.

The right words to the right ears.

“I see you.” Sha-Kutan ignored the finger pressing into his chest as he stared into Chu-Ki’s eyes. Eyes he had seen on many men. Eyes he had seen often in his own reflection years ago.

“Don’t look at me.” Chu-Ki leaned in and fingered the hilt of his sword with his other hand. “Listen and listen good. Tuss with me an’ I’ll kill ya.”

Chu-Ki stared a moment longer, clearly attempting to impress upon Sha-Kutan the danger of his threat. Sha-Kutan made no reply, his expression stone and iron. Chu-Ki blinked and swallowed, revealing the depth of his menace, then turned, the artificial smile returning to his face as he walked back to camp.

He could change.

He will not.

We changed.

We wanted to. He does not.

That might change.

It will not.

It did for us.

TWENTY YEARS AGO

BLOOD, VICIOUS black in the blue-white light of the twin moons, dripped from sword tip to earth, pooling in a puddle beside a worn leather boot. Sha-Kutan wiped his nose on the back of his free hand, breathing hard as he looked around the roadside campsite. Five bodies littered the ground, five men who died with swords in their hands. Five men rent open, flesh torn wide to the chill night air, blood congealing as it dried, eyes staring into endless darkness.

Sha-Kutan winced as the pain in his side gained his attention. He placed a hand there, feeling his pulse pound in the gash cutting through his shirt and his skin. He pulled the hand back to stare at the blood painting his palm. He did not remember being struck. He had not expected them to fight so determinedly. Or to rise from their sleep so quickly. It occurred to him that they might not have been asleep. They might have been laying a trap for a lone bandit, one with a bounty on his head. They might have been hoping to fill with coin the wooden chest sitting too close to the fire, a place of prominence where it might be seen from a distance.

Sha-Kutan kicked a dead man’s arm from his path as he walked to the fire. An iron lock held shut the lid of the small box. He ignored the lock, bringing the edge of his sword down upon the top of the chest, the wood cracking open much like the skull of the man lying next to it had. He reached down and pulled the wooden panels of the lid apart to reveal a pile of rocks.

He bellowed curses to the twin sisters in the sky above, repeatedly kicking the lifeless body of the man who had once guarded the useless coffer of rocks. Bait. They had hooked him — the fish that came and ate the fishermen only to find no use in the boat it captured.

“You have been very busy.”

Sha-Kutan raised his sword as he turned toward the voice. A man walked toward the camp, flickering in and out of sight beneath the dappled shadows of the leaves arching over the remote stretch of road.

“Who is ya?” Sha-Kutan did not care who the man might be. He cared why the stranger would approach a man holding a sword with five dead bodies at his feet.

“I am no one.” The man stepped into the light of the fire, revealing a plum-black face, a shaved head, and the amber robes of a Pashist monk. Why did a Pashist monk walk a Tanshen road at night, risking death from Kam-Djen believers and bandits alike?

“What do ya want?” Sha-Kutan had never killed a monk before. A few priests. Raped a nun. Set a temple on fire. Never yet killed a monk. He held the blade out, blood still dripping to the ground.

“To help you.” The monk stopped at the edge of the camp, near enough to be heard, but not close enough to be attacked in one motion. Sha-Kutan noted the wisdom in that, as well as the fact that the monk spoke Shen with a highborn accent. He wondered where a Pashist monk learned to speak Shen so well.

“Leave or I’ll kill ya, monk.” Sha-Kutan had no need for help. Unless the monk could pray the rocks of the chest into coins of gold. Did the Pashist gods answer such prayers?

“Let us talk before I leave.” The monk kept his eyes on Sha-Kutan, ignoring the bodies of the men.

“Do ya wish ta die?” Sha-Kutan raised the sword and walked a step closer to the monk.

“Do you fear words more than swords?” The monk raised his hands. “I have no blade and my words will not cut you to bleed as you do now.”

Sha-Kutan touched the wound in his side.

“Speak then.”

“I am called Nukapan.” The monk smiled, spreading his palms in a welcoming gesture. “What is your name?”

“Sha-Kutan.”

Let the monk smile at that name.

“Sha-Kutan the Mad.” Nukapan’s smile widened. “Sha-Kutan the Night Terror. Sha-Kutan the Slaughterer. Sha-Kutan the Tower of Death. Sha-Kutan the Depraved. You have many names.”

“All true names.” Sha-Kutan smiled back at the monk.

“We name things to describe them, but the names are not the things themselves.” Nukapan lowered his hands. “Are you more than a name, and if so, what are you?”

“I’m a killer.” Sha-Kutan swung the sword down to point at the body near his feet.

“So I see.” Nukapan looked at the bodies and the blood by firelight. “You are a sword.”

“Yes.” Sha-Kutan nodded at the notion. A sword. A single word that described him perfectly.

“What manner of sword are you?” Nukapan looked from the blade in Sha-Kutan’s hand to his eyes.

“A deadly one.” Sha-Kutan smiled again. He wondered if the monk carried any coin. A few coins would not be a chest of gold, but it would buy some wine and maybe a woman in the next town.

“All swords are deadly in the proper hands.” Nukapan bent down slowly and picked up the sword of one of the dead men near the fire.

Sha-Kutan tensed. What monk held a sword? Could he be a bounty hunter in disguise? He had fallen for one trap that night. He would not fall for another.

“There are many types of swords with varying grades of steel.” The monk held the blade, orange firelight reflecting from the metal to glow across his face. “Have you heard of Juparti night steel, sometimes called shadow steel? A totally black blade that does not reflect light. A Juparti shadow sword is very sharp, tempered and honed, they say, through The Sight. The blade will never lose its edge. Will not rust. Will not break or shatter. It is even impossible, I have heard, to melt down. Once made, a shadow sword is always as it was fashioned. A shadow sword is impervious to all it cuts, but a common sword will wear down under use, affected by the blood and steel it meets. A common sword can chip, can break, can rust. But a common sword can also be honed and sharpened again, can be polished clean of rust, can even be melted down and remade whole and new.”

“I think I’d like a shadow sword.” Sha-Kutan had heard tales of such swords. They were said to be rare, even in the Juparti Dominion, few seers knowing the art of transforming the steel.

“I am sure you would. What swordsman would not?” Nukapan lowered the blade in his hand. “The question, as I said, is what manner of sword are you? Are you the kind of sword that is cold and impervious to the death it brings, or are you a sword that is altered by the bone and blood that cracks and flows beneath its edge?”

“I’m a shadow sword.” Sha-Kutan raised himself to his full height, a head and a half above the monk. He stared into the man’s eyes, letting him see the depth of the darkness within.

“I believe that is how you see yourself, but that is not what I see.” Nukapan did not take his eyes from Sha-Kutan’s gaze. “Would you like to know what I see?”

“No.” Sha-Kutan’s patience, never more shallow than when thwarted in a plan, drained away at the monk’s words. He did not know why he had listened, but he did not wish to listen anymore.

“I see a sword that is discolored from use, tainted black, but still reflective of light.” Nukapan continued to stare at Sha-Kutan. “I see a sword that can be something other than what it is.”

“And I see a monk who’s done talkin’.” Sha-Kutan leapt forward and swung his blade at the monk’s neck.

Nukapan raised the sword in his hand as he stepped to the side and bent his body back, under the arc of Sha-Kutan’s blade. Snapping back to an upright position, he brought his sword up to strike the back of Sha-Kutan’s blade, pushing it farther away even as he moved sideways, striking out again with the flat of his blade, cracking the larger man’s wrist.

Sha-Kutan howled in pain as he dropped his sword. He turned, his face contorted in rage, to confront the monk. Nukapan held the blade tip toward Sha-Kutan's chest. He wanted to charge the monk, to crush his neck beneath his fingers, to take the sword from his hands and ram it up through his bowels. The look of placid disregard on the monk's face stopped him. He had never faced an opponent who could disarm him so swiftly, nor one who seemed unconcerned with his response. The monk represented a far greater danger than the five men he had killed only minutes before.

"You did not expect to find a monk who knows how to use a sword?" Nukapan smiled slightly with his question. "I, too, once thought myself to be a shadow blade. But I was wrong. I had merely let the blood I shed coat me in rust, layer after layer, until I did not know that I had once been pure, clean steel, easily reflecting the light."

"What do ya want?" Sha-Kutan resisted the urge to step backward. He did not fear the monk or the sword, his years facing men with blades had worn that instinct down, but the monk's words troubled him in ways more frightening than battle.

"I want to offer you what another monk once offered to me." Nukapan lowered the blade, but kept the tip pointed at Sha-Kutan.

"I need coins, not words." Sha-Kutan made to spit into the fire but found his mouth suddenly dry.

"I will offer you words first, then a choice." Nukapan stepped back and lowered the sword to his side. "The Pashists in Northern Juparti have a legend they tell. A tale of a kinsett named Willona who lived a thousand years ago. She was born with a birthmark of a butterfly on her neck. The girl's mother died of fever shortly after her birth. However, her father never remarried and sired no more children, raising her as the son he did not have as well as the daughter he cherished. As rhegan of the northern territory, her father would pass his throne on to his heir. But her father had no sons, and a daughter could not inherit. When her father died in battle, the whole land fell into chaos, kinsa fighting kinsa for the right to the throne Willona's father once occupied. Her pleas for peace were as whispers among her cousins' and uncles' cries for power.

"In desperation, Willona retreated to the forest temple behind the palace and prayed to her chosen god, Landrohani, the goddess of the forests and all the creatures within them. In the middle of a forest glade, Willona prayed to her goddess to transform her, to strike her breasts from her body and fashion them into another organ. She prayed to be remade a man, to be the son her father never sired, the boy her mother never birthed. She prayed in deepest anguish for the lives of her people dying in the battles being fought to assume the throne she should sit upon in peace were she a man.

"After hours of devoted prayer, the goddess Landrohani spoke to Willona, a voice of the forest, a voice of creaking branches and chirping insects forming words woven into meaning on the breeze that rustled the leaves. Landrohani agreed to grant Willona's request in exchange for a sacrifice of great value. Having no means to obtain an offering, Willona chose to give what little she possessed and hoped it would be judged worthy of reward. She pulled the vines of wild grapes crawling up the nearby trees and braided them into a rope. Satisfied with its thickness, she

climbed to a high branch as her father had once taught her, crawled out to the wide, strong limb, and lashed the vine-cord around the arm of the tree. She then tied the vines around her neck, said one more prayer for assistance to her goddess, and fell from the branch. As she hung from the rope, choking from lack of air, she watched the sky cloud dark with birds.”

Sha-Kutan knew this story. He had heard it once as a child. A bedtime tale from a mother whose face he could not remember. A Juparti woman who ran off with a Tanshen man, both killed by enraged family members, leaving him first motherless, then fatherless, a boy of eight wandering Tanshen city streets alone. He listened to the monk recite the tale, caught up again in the story as he had been as a boy.

“As Willona died, the goddess Landrohani answered her prayer. Birds black and yellow and blue and multi-hued plucked caterpillars of white and red and gray from the leaves of trees throughout the forest and carried them by wing to the branch where the kinsett’s body swung gently in the evening wind. Thousands of the caterpillars crawled down the vine to swarm the girl’s body, casting and coating it in slender threads, weaving a cocoon about her lifeless form. By the time the sister moons rose above the treetops, the dead kinsett wore a shroud of whitest silk. The goddess Landrohani, taking the form of a sky herd of fireflies, settled upon the cocoon, instilling it with the light of life. The fireflies clung to the cocoon until it began to glow from within, shining like a beacon throughout the forest glade.

“The light within the cocoon glowed brightly all night and faded only with the dawning of the new day. As the sun touched the silken tomb, a woodpecker flew down to strike his beak against the rope of vine, slicing it in small nicks until it snapped. The cocoon fell to the ground, bursting open, revealing a man, naked as a newborn, blinking with wonder.

“Kinsett Willona, now Kinsa Willon, rose from the remains of his silken coffin and prayed with tears of gratitude to the goddess Landrohani. That day, he returned to the castle, and through his words and the birthmark still upon his neck, he convinced his cousins, uncles, and the court that the goddess had refashioned him as a man from his former womanly form. He assumed the throne and ruled in peace for many years.”

“I doesn’t believe in gods.” Sha-Kutan had felt his discomfort growing as the monk relayed his story. He decided he did not like the story as he had when a child. It made him think of things he wished would remain unthought.

“Neither do I.” Nukapan laughed. “Faith in a god is not the point of the story. Do you see the meaning of the tale?”

“Yes.” Sha-Kutan found the legend fascinating and terrifying as he contemplated its connotation in his life.

“My offer is to travel with you for a time.” Nukapan looked down the road. “Would you like that?”

“What sacrifice will ya ask?” Sha-Kutan saw a deeper meaning in the story than what appeared at its surface.

“A perceptive question.” Nukapan grinned. “As in the tale, it will be for you to decide. First, though, that wound needs tending. And then, let us grant these men the respect of a burial.”

Sha-Kutan watched as the monk put down the sword and rummaged through a leather satchel he wore strapped over one shoulder. A moment later, he produced a needle and thread. Sha-Kutan allowed the monk to clean his wound and stitch it shut, refusing to so much as even grimace as the slender metal punctured his flesh. When Nukapan had finished, he took up a camp shovel from one of the dead men's packs and began to dig.

Not certain why he did so, following some instinct leading to actions he could not claim as his own, Sha-Kutan helped the monk Nukapan bury the dead men. In doing so, he realized that he interred a part of himself. That realization caused him to dig the holes deeper, to pile more earth atop them, to pat the soil down more firmly. Things once buried could always be uncovered.

THE PRESENT

A BUTTERFLY flitted past Sha-Kutan's head, dipping down to light upon the cream-colored petals of a flower growing near the base of a tree at the edge of the woods. He smiled at the insect. He had not smiled in a very long time. That thought erased the smile.

He pulled his dagger from his belt and gutted and skinned the rabbits. When he had finished, he took them to Lee-Nin, handing them to her by the hind legs.

"For the pot." Sha-Kutan nodded toward the cook pot hanging on a tripod of sticks over a fire.

"Thank you." Lee-Nin took the rabbits and began quartering one with a knife. "I saw you talking to Chu-Ki."

"Yes." Sha-Kutan looked for the man again.

"I don't like him." Lee-Nin sliced a rabbit's head free from the skinned body. "You don't like him either."

"No." Sha-Kutan spotted Chu-Ki by the river, kneeling down to speak with his *daughter*, Gao-Pai, and Sao-Tauna.

"That is good." Lee-Nin tossed a rabbit leg in the boiling pot of vegetables and roots.

Sha-Kutan said nothing, watching Chu-Ki smile as he placed his hands on the shoulders of the two girls.

We may need to...

Kill him after all.

A butterfly drifted past. The same one? Sha-Kutan stared at it, wondering how much of its nature truly changed with the metamorphosis of its physical form and how much of his own had been remade in the past years.

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To continue reading Sha-Kutan's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

SAPPHIRE-BLACK ON gold, a motionless contrast of color. The night jay sat at the edge of a crenellation atop the castle wall, silhouetted against the amber clouds of a summer sunset. Palla watched the bird as it watched something beyond her sight. A mouse possibly? Another bird? The militia making camp outside the castle gate? She would never know. The night jay took flight, falling from the side of the wall and disappearing from view.

“I’m hungry.”

Palla turned to the voice of Donjeo, the fifteen-year-old Nevaeo boy standing next to Leotin. The boy pushed his poorly cropped hair from his face. From what Palla understood, he’d been with the carnival since orphaned as a child and taken in by Leotin and the others. He spent most of his time eating when not daydreaming and taking care of the animals. The boy had a knack with animals.

“When are you not hungry?” Leotin placed a hand on Donjeo’s shoulder. The man looked sad. And worried. As well he should be.

“When I’m asleep.” Donjeo’s face pinched in thought. “No. That’s not true. Sometimes, I dream about eating.”

“The sun is going down.” Palla looked out at the courtyard of the castle. “Maybe we should set to making a meal for everyone.”

She, Donjeo, and Leotin stood by the carnival wagons near the south wall. After taking command of the castle, Leotin had segregated the new inhabitants into groups. The carnival workers congregated near the wagons, clustered together, mourning the loss of two of their friends — the animal trainer and the bearded child, actually a midget woman with a beard. Not far from the carnival wagons, the pilgrims sat in a spiral line circling out from Jhanal at the center, holding hands as they quietly prayed. There had been two pilgrim deaths, both men who left behind wives and children.

The third and largest group, made up of castle residents and townspeople, massed to mourn their dead near the horse stables and supply sheds. The priest had regained consciousness and led the people in prayers for the safe passage of the fifteen dead, including his mother and father, the tahn and tahneff, to the Kam-Djen Pure Lands. The last and smallest group, the three outlanders, stood guard in front of the gate to discourage any locals from attempting to open it for the militia.

“Not yet.” Leotin frowned. “They have all lost people. They need a little more time to grieve. But you are right. They will require food soon or they will feed on their sorrow and turn it to anger again. Donjeon, find Cook and get him working on a meal to include everyone. I’ll talk to Pi-Gento and find out what stores the castle has available and what we can make of their kitchen.”

“Right. Cook. Food.” Donjeon nodded with a grin, brushing his long hair from his face again and running off between the wagons to find the carnival’s cook.

“What can I do?” Palla turned to Leotin. He looked very tired.

“Nothing yet.” Leotin stared across the castle yard to the pilgrims seated in a spiral of prayer. “You can join your friends if you want.”

Palla followed Leotin’s gaze to the pilgrims, conflicted by the suggestion. She did wish to join them. And yet, she needed to be doing something. Something to support the carnival. To support Leotin.

“You didn’t tell me you had the dreams,” Leotin said. “Or that you have seen a miracle.”

“It is...” Palla considered the words she had wanted to express to Leotin so many times, yet had failed to enunciate. “It is difficult for me to speak of such things.”

“It is difficult for you to speak of most things that have to do with who you are.” Leotin’s gentle laugh melted into a sigh.

“True.” Palla thought to say more but instead asked a question. “Will you be all right?”

“Yes. I’ll be fine.” Leotin took a deep breath and stood a little straighter. “As soon as I figure out how to keep everyone in the castle from killing each other or being killed by the militia outside.”

“That’s not what I meant.” Palla placed her hand gently on Leotin’s forearm. “You killed a tahn and tahnneff today.”

“Yes, I did.” Leotin’s shoulders slouched. “I doubt we will be playing freely in the Daeshen Dominion for many years to come. When we get out of this sinkhole of a castle, we will need to make for the Old Border Road with all haste.”

“To Tanjii still?” Palla kept her voice steady as she spoke the name of that far-off city. She would need to make a decision then, one she had tried not to think about the past weeks. One she did not want to make. One that had kept her from speaking to Leotin of the dreams and the goddess and the miracle at the pond. In Tanjii, she would need to decide whether to follow the pilgrims to the Forbidden Realm or stay with the carnival.

“Yes, to Tanjii.” Leotin looked again at the pilgrims. She had no doubt he knew the choice she needed to make, yet he voiced no opinion on the matter. “Go to them and pray if you wish. We could use a miracle. And there will be much work to do once the dead are burned or buried. I will speak to you later.”

Leotin headed off to converse with Pi-Gento, leaving Palla staring at the pilgrims. She noted that the townspeople, ostensibly praying themselves, kept a great many eyes trained on the pilgrims. How long before the two groups fought again? How long could the priest, pious and

angered at his parents' death, be held in check by Pi-Gento's counsel or another blow to the head?

Palla did not notice her feet falling forward into motion until she walked toward the pilgrims. Ranna sat at the end of the spiraling line. Palla lowered herself to the ground and took Ranna's hand, continuing the chain of pressed palms that flowed from Jhanal in the center. Ranna opened her eyes briefly and smiled at her, squeezing her fingers. As she closed her eyes again, she began quietly reciting the same prayer all the pilgrims spoke in whispered unison, calling the Goddess by the name they heard nightly in their dreams.

"Moaratana protect us.

Great Goddess, shelter us under your wing.

Smite our enemies who would destroy us.

Take our lost loved ones to your bosom.

Guide and instill us with your wisdom."

Palla recited the words in a soft breath, losing herself to the rhythm of repetition, her body swaying slightly as the cadence continued. A tingling sensation started in the hand wound with Ranna's fingers, running up her arm and to her heart as it grew in vibratory power. Her heart opened and grew light, the weighted events of the day burning away as rising smoke that cleared her body, leaving her mind empty of worry. That emptiness filled with a sense of wellbeing, passed to her from Ranna's touch. Did that sensation originate with Ranna or Jhanal, or did it come directly from the Goddess?

She had spent more and more time with Ranna and the pilgrims in the days since the miracle at the pond. She found her childhood faith in Tot Gioth, in Mother Creator and Father Destroyer, shaken. In her teens, she had been devoted, but that devotion withered as the years passed. With her departure from her home to travel with the carnival as it journeyed from land to land, and Leotin and the others feigning whatever faith the locals required, she discovered her cynicism waxing as her belief waned.

After the miracle at the pond, she felt shattered and reassembled. How could she not believe the things she had witnessed with her own eyes? Ranna had called for the Goddess Moaratana to shield them, and she had done so in the most inexplicable manner. Palla had ignored the dreams and explained away the new night star as simple coincidence, but she could not reject the evidence of her own experience. As real as her hand now holding fast to Ranna, the Goddess touched the world and did so to protect her. Surely the Goddess would do so again to guard a larger number of her flock.

These had been Ranna's words when the wooden gate of the castle closed behind them and the militia approached. If the Goddess protected the two of them, she would certainly intervene to defend a whole pilgrim band. Palla's burgeoning faith had been shaken after the attack of the townspeople, but Ranna defended the Goddess's hesitance to act, explaining that the pilgrims had so far been able to tend to their own defense. The Goddess would act when their own strength proved too little for the task.

Palla accepted this notion the way she took all of Ranna's pronouncements about the Goddess — with amazement at her friend's utter conviction. Even after the miracle, even with her faith transferred and reborn, Palla did not possess that depth of belief. She wanted to trust in the Goddess, but found it easier to invest her allegiance in people, and she held little confidence in most of those. Ranna had become an exception to that stance, joining Leotin and Donjeon and a few of the other carnival folk.

Her friendship with Ranna seemed different, though. She had never had a woman friend of any consequence, not even before she fled her home. The way Ranna looked at her sometimes made her uneasy. Not because of the affection she saw in Ranna's eyes, not for the way she took Palla's hand when they were alone, not for her blush at Palla's compliments — no, her unease originated within herself, as she noted her desire to be near Ranna more and more often, as she sought the touch of her hand in private, as she, too, blushed under kind words and gentle glances. She had no reference for these feelings in her life. They sounded all too like the stories of courtly love in the bedside tales of her childhood, of the tsentey who comes to rescue the tsentet from the evil Tey. But how could that be?

She opened her eyes to look at Ranna, seeing the woman rocking gently with the words of the prayer, her hair falling across the soft lines of her face. Why did that sentiment of friendship seem so different from others? Could it be because they had beheld a miracle that bound them closer together?

Thoughts of rescue and falling in love, the sound of the prayers, the castle keep and the temple rising up beyond the courtyard, the walls and towers — all brought back memories of a time when she had effected her own escape from a wicked tey.

ONE YEAR AGO

“NO MORE. No more arguments. I have heard your arguments for months now, and they mean no more to me this day than the first. You will wed Tsentey Jwaran because it is my will and because it is your duty and because it is necessary to this family and because the priest stands outside that door. Now dry your tears. You look a fool. I will not have my daughter presented to her future husband looking like a weeping beggar.”

Palla dabbed her kerchief at her eyes, her father blurred by the tears. She had hoped to sway him, had hoped once more to reach that part of him she had lost access to when she stepped from child to woman years ago.

“I know you are willful. You have always been thus.” Her father took the kerchief from her hand and wiped the tears streaking her cheeks, his touch not tender, but not as rough as his words. “We must all bend our wills to the needs of the family and the estate and the dominion. I have forgone my desires for the needs of the family and the estate many times over the years. You think you are the first to enter a marriage you do not wish? Your mother did not wish to marry me, nor I her, but our families required it, so we did. I did not desire to lead the men of my estate into battle against the Korphan estate, but honor demanded it, so I did. I did not wish to

burn the Oneara village for theft and insurrection, but the law demanded it, so I did. I bent my will in these ways, and you will bend yours to wed Jwaran.”

Palla considered what else she could say, what new rationales she might assemble to influence her father’s resolve. She had pleaded that she did not love Jwaran. She had insisted that the tsentey’s family would not accept her. That the marriage would breed more dissent between the two estates rather than bring them closer together. She had feigned illness. She had exclaimed devotion to Nag Mot Gioth, Mother Creator, and the wish to enter the nunning house to serve the great parental gods. She had said all the words she could think of to turn the course of her life, to reset the sails, to curb the wind, to tack toward some other shore. She had no more novel words, only the ones she had learned by rote over so many years of compliance and acquiescence.

“Yes, Father.”

Her father said no more, nodding and leaving her alone in her chambers. She looked from the window of her room over the garden and courtyards of the walled estate, the vineyard hills rolling on toward the northern sea a day’s journey away. She stared at the place she had called home for the past twenty-three years and wondered what her new home and new life would be like on Tsentey Jwaran’s estate to the east. She knew little of the man, having met him only once the day prior at the wedding feast. He did not resemble the description of him presented by her mother and father. She found a man a few years older than her, slovenly, ill-tempered, poorly read, reed thin, with his face sparsely bearded to hide the pockmarks left from a childhood bout of the red fever. She had left the dinner stricken with fear — how could she marry such a man? How could she let him...

Run.

The word echoed among the many thoughts of her mind, growing louder with each repetition rather than more distant.

Run, run, run.

Yes, she wanted to run, but how and where? She could not fly from the window. Could not soar across the courtyards and fields to alight on the branches of a new life of her own devising. And if she knew how to run and where to run, what would she do upon arrival? She could not show up at some farmer’s home and pretend to be a lost cousin as in the *Tale of Lhana Sowe and the Magic Horse* that her mother read to her as a child.

“It is time.”

Palla turned to see her mother standing in the doorway of her chamber, as though summoned from the childhood of her past, not to read her a bedtime tale, but to lead her to a kind of sacrifice — a giving of herself for the betterment of the family and the estate.

She forced herself to push her feet toward her mother, lifting the hem of her layered crimson silk dress — the deep red of the fabric said to represent the blood of her chastity to be given to her husband on the wedding night. She shuffled to her mother and stopped, clenching her jaw, refusing to allow more tears to form in her eyes.

“It will be over, and then it will begin.” Her mother sighed and took her hand. “He is not a fine tsentey of the stories, but he is a decent man by all accounts. Honorable. The first night will be the worst. It will get easier. All of it. You are strong. And bright. You will find a way to shine at his estate. A way to make your presence needed. Do this, give the family value, even if only by bearing plentiful children, and your path will ease. And when you feel alone, when you feel that you cannot proceed, pray to the Mother Creator for sustenance. She has been my comfort many nights over the years, and she will sustain you as readily as she does me.”

Palla did not know what to say, finding best the words she had recently used.

“Yes, Mother.”

“Good. Now let us go. Your new husband is not a man possessed of a temper for waiting.”

Palla followed her mother, servants trailing them through the halls of the castle keep, a haze settling over her mind that insulated her from the events transpiring around her. She watched from beyond her own mind and body as her corporeal self walked across the garden to the castle temple, down the aisle of congregants and honored guests, to stand beside the man who would become her husband, the heir to the Rwanwan Estate, the man who would now rule her life and determine her destiny.

She observed from above her own head as the priest spoke the ancient prayers and performed the Tot Gioth rites and rituals of binding between a man and a woman. She listened from far away to a voice like her own repeat the priest’s chanted phrases as a woman who looked like her took the hands of the man before her, face blank as he, too, repeated words spoken by the priest. They ate a piece of bitterroot to symbolize the past. They swallowed sips of sweet wine to represent the future. They held hands as the priest wrapped their wrists with a gold chain and talked of eternal unity. She saw this other, far-off self walk hand in hand with the man down the aisle between the guests who threw acorns, bidding the couple the blessing of many children.

She came back to her body for a time during the wedding feast, inhabiting her mind once more as she spoke with relatives, danced with her new husband, and watched her younger brothers eat and drink and flirt with the daughters of family friends. She ignored the sorrow that arose for them, knowing that they, too, would have mates chosen for them like livestock in the barns.

“You will like the Rwanwan estate, I think.” Jwaran, her new husband, sat beside Palla at the feast table, gulping lustily at a cup of wine between expounding thoughts. “The gardens are finer. Taller trees. And a pond. With fish, no less. And the temple has a much higher spire. The living chambers are similar. More rugs, I think. More tapestries. The vineyard is smaller, I’ll say that. I’ve been trying to convince father to expand the vineyards, but he refuses to expel the tenants from the land that would be needed. I try to tell him that wine can gain in value, but grain always brings the same price at market. He does not understand. He is better at hunting deer than hunting coin. I like to hunt, myself. Does good to run a beast down. Tells you you’re alive. You’ll see the antlers in my study. Heads from twelve stags. Some with as many as twenty points. And a bear. Not easy to bring a bear down. We were on a three-day hunt when...”

Palla found herself drifting away again as her husband droned on. She nodded at the right spots in his stories, smiled when it seemed appropriate, but promptly forgot everything he said. Sometime later, the guests escorted them to her bedchamber, cheering and chanting, singing the traditional wedding song of consummation, and drinking more wine.

As the door to the chamber closed, Palla drifted even further away, barely sensing the tug at her dress, the lips against her neck, the tongue in her mouth. She sat beside the twin sister moons in the sky as the man pulled the skirts from the woman, grasping at her nakedness with a rough hunger. She looked down from the stars as the man grunted and groaned above the body of the woman, seeing her eyes wince in pain, her teeth bite into her lips to stifle a cry. As the man rolled off the woman to lie on his back and snore, she slowly drifted closer, curious at the woman's demeanor, at the look on her face, at the fire in her eyes.

Palla stared at the ceiling, as she had throughout the mating with Jwaran, her new husband, the man she would sleep beside after his rutting and moaning ceased each night, night after night, year after year, child after child, until her hair turned gray like her mother's, until her skin sagged with age, until frailty broke her bones and Nag Pat Gioth, Father Destroyer, turned her to ash to fertilize the earth.

She did not know how to bear the life she saw unfolding before her — a table linen eaten by moths, gaping holes in the fabric, the edges frayed and stained with age. She could burn the linen. Give Father Destroyer the ashes he desired long before he expected them. She looked to the open window, shutters spread wide to let the light of the twin half-moons illuminate the room. She could go to the window. She could lean too far out into the cool night air. The fall to the garden four stories below would no doubt end her story with a snapping of her neck or a cracking of her skull. Or she could do as her mother and so many women of her family and the land had done for ages and succumb to the near inexorable force of community expectations to be a dutiful wife, a childbearing wife, a home-tending wife, a husband's wife. Or she could...

Run.

The word came back as a whisper from within and set her eyes wide. Her breath stilled in her lungs as she saw not a future determined by Jwaran or her father but one woven as she chose, with patterns bright and intricate. She held that inhalation as a vague notion slowly unraveled itself to disclose an idea shaped of dreams and hopes and desires never spoken aloud, yet harbored in her heart for years. She lay there, her breathing gradually returning, letting the plan unfold in her mind. With her alternate future revealed, she slipped silently from the bed.

She wiggled her toes into her slippers and stood as she pulled her sleeping shift down over her naked body. She took a red silken scarf from her dressing stand, and looked back at the man sleeping in her bed, the man who had made her a woman, the man she would never see again. She opened her clothes cabinet and removed a plain blue dress, the one she wore when accompanying her mother on errands of the estate grounds. She tied the laces of a pair of old boots and slung them over her shoulder. Then she slid from the room, closing the door gently behind her. The halls lay empty in the small hours of the morning, a lantern glowing near the

stairs. She walked down the hall to her youngest brother's room. She listened, heard no sound, and opened the door. Inside, she saw her brother sleeping, his face buried in a pillow.

Palla padded across the stone of the floor to her brother's dressing rack where she removed a worn pair of breeches, a stained shirt, a leather vest, and an old jacket. Clothes her brother no longer wore and would never miss. She glanced at her brother, then slid her sleeping shift from over her head and changed into her brother's clothes and her old boots. She found a leather hunting pack near a chest by the wall and stuffed the blue dress and her slippers into it. Lastly, she grabbed her brother's hat, tucking her long hair into a bun beneath it. She kissed her brother gently on the forehead and left the room.

She needed more than clothes to secure a future — she required coin. Fortunately, she knew where her father kept a reserve of gold coins hidden behind a book on the shelves in his study one floor below. It took her only minutes to find the small leather pouch of metal currency and continue her departure.

She encountered no one in the halls as she made her way down from the heights of the keep. The guests she saw in the gardens slept off the drink of the dinner feast, unaware of her passing. If anyone did see her, they would take her for a young man out strolling in the night. As she wound her way up the twisting staircase of the west corner tower, she came across a younger couple engaged in an activity similar to the one she had just completed. As she slid soundlessly past the moaning pair on the landing, she noted how enthusiastic they both seemed — possessed of some need to claw at each other, their mouths locked in continual battle, their soft cries alternately signaling advance and surrender, a language of conquest and capitulation they spoke without words.

A pang of indefinable ache pressed into her chest as she fled farther up the stairs, away from the sounds of the lovers on the landing. How could they find something so seemingly filled with passion and joy in the dank shadows of the tower stairs when she could not secure such pleasure after hours of ceremony on freshly woven sheets of silk?

She reached the top of the tower where the stairs gave way to the castle wall. She saw one guard, his head bent forward in sleep, a bottle dangling from his hand. She ignored him and stepped to the outer wall, looking down to the dark, serpentine waters of the Foal River that comprised the rear defensive feature of the castle. She set her brother's hunting sack down and pulled from it the red silken scarf and her slippers. She set the slippers side-by-side near the wall and laid the scarf across the stone between the crenellations.

She took a deep breath as she looked out over the moon-shadowed land, wondering how much of it she would see. Then she sneaked back down the stairs, past the still amorous lovers, out into the main courtyard, and hid beneath the canvas tarp of a wagon loaded with empty wine barrels. There she waited for morning, dozing until she heard the voices of the wagon master as he hitched the horses to the yoke. She held her breath until the cart pulled into motion, rolling across the cobbles of the inner yard through the gate, and along the main estate road. She risked a peek through the gap between wagon rail and tarp, looking back at the castle estate as the sun rose over the last view she would ever have of her family home.

Her husband would wake soon and find her absent from the bed. He would be unconcerned, because little concerned him beyond his own self. Eventually, she would be found missing, and a search would find her slippers and scarf on the castle wall above the river. Her sentiments against her marriage and her well-known stubborn nature would commend the notion of her death, taken at her own behest, to every heart and mind. Her father would rage, her mother would weep, her brothers would mourn, and her husband would fume at his misfortune.

Palla, in contrast, cried no tears as the wagon finally stopped later that day in a small town. She experienced no anger, only joy as she slid from the wagon bed and disappeared into the town, into the countryside, into a new life.

THE PRESENT

PALLA WIPED her knuckles at her eyes, silently cursing the dusty ground of the castle courtyard. She thought about all that had transpired in the past year. She had left her home and husband in order to see the world and fashion a new life. She had found both in the carnival. A home and a life. However, only sitting there, holding Ranna's hand, praying with a spiral of pilgrims, did she realize she had been seeking not so much a new life as a destiny to be lived within that life. While Leotin gave her a home on the road and on the stage, she felt now, having witnessed the power of the new goddess with her own eyes, having experienced a miracle meant to save her, that she had discovered that destiny.

She looked up, rubbing at her eyes again to see a young girl atop the wall near the west tower. She thought for a moment that her memories still clouded her vision, that she viewed some reflection of her former self atop a different rampart in a far-off castle long ago. Then she saw the yellow of the girl's dress against the golden sky of sunset, the darkness of her hair, and knew she observed something in the present.

What could the girl be doing there? Palla did not need to be told to know the answer of that question. She released Ranna's hand. The woman, so enraptured in her prayers, barely seemed to notice. Palla stood and walked calmly to the west tower. While she attracted a few looks, she held no one's attention for any length of time. She walked up the tower stairs to find the guard posted by Leotin, a carnival hand, dozing in a chair. She shook her head and walked past him, out to the wall, out to where a young girl of fifteen leaned far out from the edge.

Palla stepped up beside the girl, making certain to create enough noise to warn of her presence, but not so much as to alarm. She saw the tears falling from the girl's face to stain the stones of the parapet. The silky tassels of corn in the field beyond glowed like fire in the light of the setting sun. Two militiamen watched the wall from the field below, one at each corner. They were wholly uninterested in the women atop the battlements.

"The fall will kill you, but it will not change anything." Palla stood a few paces from the girl, not wanting to spook her into action — a bird startled into taking flight.

"I will be dead." The girl gulped back a sob, leaning a little farther over the edge.

“That will change things for you, but nothing will alter for the rest of us.” Palla clenched her hands, trying to calm her racing heart and heavy breath as she gauged the girl’s tone. How did one convince a girl one did not know to spare her own life when all seemed lost?

“It is my fault. If I am gone, it might all change.” The girl pressed her palms against her temple as though to force back dark thoughts attempting to escape.

“This day’s events lie at the feet of many people, but you are not one of them.” Palla edged a little closer to the girl.

“But I am. It is my fault.” The girl shook as she sobbed.

“Tell me, then. Tell me how this is all your doing.” Palla reached out a hand and placed it gently on the girl’s shoulder. The girl jumped and spun to face her.

“You’re one of them.” The girl looked frightened. And relieved.

“One of the carnival, yes,” Palla said.

“One of the pilgrims,” the girl stated rather than asked.

Palla found it odd how slowly she replied to the girl’s words. Her response identified a transformation in her life, a shift from spring to summer, seasons turning so subtly that only the extremes of weather signaled the change.

“Yes. I am a pilgrim.”

“Then you will understand.” The girl shuddered slightly as she leaned against the wall.

“I do not know if I will understand, but I will listen,” Palla said.

“I am, too.” The girl glanced around as though someone nearby might grab her. “I am a pilgrim, too. Or I would be. I have the dreams. I have them every night. I told my brother, and he said Ni-Kam-Djen would damn me. I wanted to tell my father and mother, to show them that anyone might have the dreams. Then the militia came and burned our people. I wanted to speak, but I didn’t. And now they are dead. If I had told them when the militia came this time, if I had confessed before everyone, they might not have set Pi-Gento to attack the pilgrims and everyone might still be alive. I am a coward, but if I am dead, my brother may see the effects of what his belief drives him to do.”

Palla struggled to keep her hand on the girl’s shoulder. She noted now the refinement of the dress, the quality of the cotton, the trim, and the line of the stitching. A dress for a tahn’s daughter. The tahn Leotin had killed. The sister of the Kam-Djen priest who urged the burning of the pilgrims for heresy. A girl deprived of mother and father, a brother set against her, her own heart torn between duty to family and the call of the Great Goddess.

“What is your name?” Palla did not wish to continue thinking of her as “the girl”.

“Yang-Nega.” The girl bit her lip to keep it from quivering.

“I am called Palla.” She swallowed, her throat constricting as she said aloud the secrets of her life to a girl she did not know. “My full name is Tanella Palla Vardan. My father is a tsentey, what you call a tahn, in northern Atheton near the White Sea. I was married at my father’s behest to another noble from a wealthy estate. I was raised to be dutiful to my family, but I was not. I left my home and husband and ran away. I came across a carnival, and they took me in. We came across the pilgrims, and we took them in. What I am telling you is that even if you have lost your

family, you can find a new one. And I also tell you that I have seen with my own eyes the miracles the Goddess can work in our lives. She will make this right. She will protect us. She will protect you. Even if you dive from this wall, she will shelter you in the world beyond this one. But if you make that leap, you will deprive her of the chance to work miracles in your own life, and you will never have the opportunity to express your love for her in your actions in this world.”

Yang-Nega shook with the attempt to control her emotions. Palla pulled the girl into her arms, Yang-Nega’s slender frame trembling with her sobs. Tears fell from her own eyes to dampen the girl’s night-black hair. The girl clung to her, resting her head against Palla’s chest until well after both their tears had ceased.

As she looked from the wall out over the lands beyond, a sliver of sun still visible at the horizon, she noted a line of men moving from the nearby forest, an object hauled across the tops of three wagons. She squinted in the darkness, trying to focus on the men and what they transported. She recognized their garb. The militiamen laying siege to the castle. What did they haul? A tree trunk? Several trees? What would they...

Palla pushed the girl away and held her by the shoulders.

“We must go back down.” Palla dabbed the girl’s wet cheeks with the sleeve of her dress. “We have grave news for the others.”

“What news?” Yang-Nega wiped her eyes.

“There.” Palla pointed out toward the road leading from the forest. “The militia is building a battering ram.”

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Palla’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE FUGITIVES



SAO-TAUNA

BRIGHT YELLOW raced pale green, the legs beneath the lemon-sun creature rolling in sequence as they matched those of its lime-sky opponent. The caterpillars charged side by side across the cleared span of forest ground. The two girls watched, enraptured by the contest taking place before them as they squatted in the leaf-matted earth between the trees. Neither girl called out. Neither cheered her larval steed toward victory. Both merely observed the insects crawl along the parallel lines dug finger-deep through the dirt.

Sao-Tauna decided she liked this game. It had been Gao-Pai's idea, showing Sao-Tauna how to pick the caterpillars from the leaves. She had seen caterpillars in the gardens of the palace at home, but she had not been allowed to play with them. *Little tahneffs do not play with bugs*, her mother always said.

That thought made her miss her mother. And her father.

She focused on the legs climbing across the chips of rotted wood and small stones. Occasionally, the caterpillars got confused and she or Gao-Pai needed to poke them gently with a stick to get back on track. You had to be careful, though. If you poked them too hard, they curled up and stayed that way and you lost the race. Sao-Tauna wondered which caterpillar would win, but didn't care so much about the race. She liked being with Gao-Pai. The girl did not talk much and did not like to be touched. Sao-Tauna accepted this easily, as she did not like to speak and did not like to be touched either. Even tight clothes bothered her sometimes. She recognized that her dislike of these things differed from Gao-Pai's. She had been this way for as long as she could remember, but she could tell by the way Gao-Pai sat beneath her mother's arm at meal times that the girl had once enjoyed the sensation of touch.

The snap of a twig not far away brought Sao-Tauna's attention away from the race.

"There ya is."

Sao-Tauna knew that voice. So did Gao-Pai. The girl looked up, startled. She turned to Sao-Tauna, her face pale from fear.

"Run." Gao-Pai bounced to her feet and dashed off between the trees, disappearing behind a clump of bushes.

Sao-Tauna watched her friend go as two legs stepped before her, a booted foot crushing the caterpillars. She frowned. Now she would never know who won the race. She looked up, her lips still turned down, to find the owner of the voice. She did not like that voice, or the man it

belonged to. She did not blame Gao-Pai for running away. It must be hard to hear that voice all day long.

“Why the frown, lil’ apple?” Gao-Pai’s father knelt in front of her.

Sao-Tauna said nothing. She did not like to speak. Speaking made the insides become outsides, and people never seemed to understand her insides once they were outside. Lee-Nin did. Sometimes. But she was special. And Sha-Kutan. But he was special in different ways.

“Where’d Gao-Pai get off to?” Gao-Pai’s father looked around, then back to Sao-Tauna.

Sao-Tauna shrugged. She did not know where Gao-Pai went, but she began to think that she should have gone with her when she ran away. It would be better to be finding new caterpillars to race than listening to the girl’s father talk. She did not like him, mostly because Gao-Pai did not like him. The girl had not said so, but Sao-Tauna could tell. She noticed things. People did not think she did, but she did.

“Ya don’t talk much, do ya?” Gao-Pai’s father smiled.

Sao-Tauna said nothing. He made it sound like he had noticed something no one else ever had. Silly. To notice things that no one else saw, you needed to see them properly. Everyone knew Sao-Tauna didn’t talk. It would be like walking up to Sha-Kutan and saying how big he was. Thinking of Sha-Kutan nearly made her smile, then she remembered Gao-Pai’s father still knelt before her. She sighed instead.

“It’s good ya don’t talk.” Gao-Pai’s father looked around the forest.

Sao-Tauna wrinkled her nose at his breath. It stank of stale wine. The pilgrims did not drink wine, but she had seen Gao-Pai’s father gulping from a wine skin several times. He didn’t see her. He didn’t seem to see things as clearly as he thought he did. She saw things. She saw who he was. He tried to hide it with his smile, but he couldn’t hide what lurked behind his eyes.

“Whatcha doin’ out here? Playing some kinda game?” Gao-Pai’s father looked back to her.

Sao-Tauna looked to where his boot still crushed the caterpillars. She decided that she did not like Gao-Pai’s father almost as much as she did not like the wardens who were chasing her. She frowned again at that thought. She crushed it like the boot crushing the caterpillars.

“I know a game.” Gao-Pai’s father smiled even wider. “Ya want me ta teach ya ta play?”

Sao-Tauna shook her head. She did not want to play a game with Gao-Pai’s father. She stood up to go find Gao-Pai.

“Aw, it’s an easy game. Here, I’ll show ya.” Gao-Pai’s father reached out and grabbed both Sao-Tauna’s thin arms in his big hands, squeezing them, hurting them, pulling her close to him, the stink of his breath making her nose curl in disgust. Gao-Pai’s father grinned and leaned his open stinking mouth toward her face.

Sao-Tauna frowned in anger as she did the thing she had told herself she would not do again.

Gao-Pai’s father’s eyes widened and blinked, and his hands released her arms as he stumbled backward into a tree.

“What the tuss!”

Sao-Tauna clenched her jaw, thinking about how much she did not like Gao-Pai's father and how much Gao-Pai did not like him and why she did not like him and how much Sao-Tauna wanted him to be far away from her and someplace else, someplace bad, someplace for bad people because Gao-Pai's father was a bad man for hurting her arms and for hurting Gao-Pai.

Gao-Pai's father tried to scream, the strangled sound of a man's terror echoing among the trees and rocks and suddenly fading away to silence.

Sao-Tauna panted, counting her numbers in ancient Shen as Lee-Nin had taught her to do when she got upset. By the time she reached the number twenty-three, she felt better and ran off into the forest in search of Gao-Pai.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

SEAGULLS SWOOPED and dove to feed in the ocher-tinted waters as the glowing ember of the sun sank toward the edge of the ocean. Junari stood on the pier of the small fishing town, once abandoned from storms, now housing an ever-growing population of pilgrims passing through Tanjii and up the coast. She watched the last of the day's laborers leave their toiling work on the pilgrim fleet in the water and dry docks along the shore.

Events had unfolded quickly over the past several days. Junari's negotiations with the Tanjii Circle of Elders, as well as the fund offered by her pilgrims, provided for eight vessels. Unfortunately, only three of them were yet seaworthy, the others in various states of disrepair. She had hired teams of skilled boatswains to lead her eager pilgrims in readying the ships for their eventual journey, a voyage whose date looked much farther away now than it did the day she stood before Kuth-Von and the Circle of Elders. The ships needed too much work, and the village the pilgrims lived in required too much effort to rebuild, both of which would take time and cost coin. In the many Pashist texts she read in her training, she never once heard tell of the importance of finance in pursuing one's faith.

She knew better than to make promises of when the ships might depart. Her speeches to the flock consisted of more important revelations. How the Goddess wished them to pray. How the Goddess wished them to act. How the Goddess wished them to eat. How the Goddess wished them to wed. The ideas and actions that forged a cohesive community from a disparate band of women and men and children from different lands and original faiths. Speaking only the Mumtiba language of Juparti and Punderra, as well as a little Shen, she relied on translators to repeat her words to those who did not understand them. She wondered whether it might make sense to demand the faithful adopt a single tongue, but decided to worry about that later. Most would eventually learn Mumtiba, as Raedalus wrote his *Red Book of Revelations* of the Goddess's transmissions in the script of that language.

As the sun sank into the waters at the edge of the world, turning fire-orange waves slate-black, a voice spoke up beside her.

"Lovely sunset."

Junari turned to the now familiar voice speaking Mumtiba rather than his customary Shen. Bon-Tao stood beside her, his leather armor freshly polished, the scent of sweat and oil clinging to him. He had surprised her by offering to make himself her personal liaison to the city and the

Circle of Elders and Kuth-Von. He confided having the dreams and feeling compelled to join the pilgrims after seeing the effect of her prayers in defending the Goddess's believers. Her guards, Jupiterus and Kantula, stood not far away. They did not trust him, but they tolerated his daily presence. Raedalus welcomed Bon-Tao as useful, but his eyes betrayed the jealousy and suspicion behind his open acceptance. Only Taksati seemed genuinely happy for the former commander's help.

"I did not know you to be a lover of sunsets." Junari smiled at the man who had risked himself to save her.

"Sunset lovers?" Bon-Tao squinted his eyes in question, seeming confused and suddenly uneasy.

"What?" The heat of a blush rose in Junari's cheeks. "No. I mean ... I did not know you enjoyed watching sunsets." She pointed to her eyes and then the horizon.

"Ah." Bon-Tao nodded in understanding, looking simultaneously relieved and saddened. He continued in Shen. "Perhaps we should speak a language we both understand."

"Yes." Although it limited Junari's potential responses, speaking Shen also narrowed the possible misinterpretations.

"Your ships will be ready soon." Bon-Tao looked at the men climbing down from a vessel dry docked nearby.

"Not my ships. The Goddess's ships." Junari wondered how many weeks would be required to finish the work. The foreman's estimates changed daily.

"You are her voice in this world, so it means the same thing to most." Bon-Tao turned back to her. "But I see why you do not claim the ships as your own."

"Do you?" Junari marveled at the man's statement. She often felt that no one understood her position in relation to the Goddess. She barely seemed to understand it herself.

"I see you and the way you are with the pilgrims." Bon-Tao looked to the small village of people getting ready for a late meal. "You never claim to act of your own will. In the priests I know, this is to cover the actions of their own desires. But you never voice your desires. Or your own needs. You devote yourself to the requirements of your flock. You are the Mother Shepherd. You act as though you have nothing of your own, that all belongs to the Goddess, but I see you sometimes when you look at sunsets, and I know you have desires that are wholly your own."

Junari blushed again. How did this man see something she rarely admitted to herself? She did have desires. Lately, the most recurring of those desires entailed spending more time with her personal liaison to Tanjii.

"I..." Junari did not know what she intended to say in reply to Bon-Tao's observation of her nature and never found out.

An explosion buffeted the air, a blaze drawing both their eyes to the ship dry-docked farthest from the pier. More explosions and flames followed. Bon-Tao ran toward the fires and she reached out for him, to hold him back, but the strong hands of Jupiterus and Kantula clasped her shoulders and pulled her away. She heard men shout and saw them run past, armed with swords and hammers and axes.

The Kamite fanatics must have circumvented the guards set around the town. There had been incursions before, but none had been successful. Another ship caught flame, but pilgrims raced to throw sand and water on the fires. Her people chased the Kamite fanatics back along the shoreline, throwing rocks at them as the flames spread and consumed the ship. The second largest of the fleet, the ship would have carried several hundred pilgrims to their destiny. Now it would burn through the night and collapse in a wrecked hulk of ash and char.

She forced herself not to take that image as an omen. She would not allow it to be a prophetic event shaping the course of the Goddess's plans. She would shape it to her will in the service of the Goddess Moaratana's needs, regardless of the costs. Her needs were the Goddess's needs, even if her desires were her own.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Junari's storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE CARNIVAL



TARAK

FIREFLIES FLITTED through the evening air, their luminescence illuminating faces in the shadows not eaten by the light of the fires. Tarak watched a firefly hover near Yeth's long face before floating down to inspect Shifhuul. The wyrin shooed the insect away in annoyance. The outlanders still guarded the gate to discourage any locals from attempting to escape and allow the militia access to the castle.

Tarak looked back to the courtyard, small fires blazing at the edge of the three separated groups — townspeople, pilgrims, and carnival folk. Fires also burned in iron braziers atop the castle towers fighting back the encroaching darkness of the moonless sky and providing light for the guards to watch for any endeavor by the militia to scale the walls.

"Everyone. Listen. I have news."

Tarak followed Leotin with his eyes as the carnival leader walked to the middle of the courtyard, the castle soldier, Pi-Gento, and Palla at his side. The three had stood with Tarak, Yeth, and Shifhuul moments before, discussing the best options for dealing with Palla's revelation.

"Quiet!" Leotin waited for the various conversations and prayers to cease. "I have ill news. The militia is building a battering ram." A few of the townspeople cheered, but Leotin raised his hands and continued. "We do not know how long it will take them to complete the ram, but they could attack the gate before dawn."

"Good."

"Raise the gate an' burn the trash."

The townspeople barked their opinions as the pilgrims began to pray again.

"If the gate is broken, they'll kill us all." Pi-Gento stepped before Leotin and shouted to the crowd. "They've seen the tahn fall from the walls. They'll consider everyone inside a heretic. You saw what the last lot did. If they come through that gate, it's swords for the men, rape for the women, and the fires for the children."

The townspeople fell silent, looking to their neighbors for guidance that they did not find.

"Pi-Gento is correct." Leotin raised his voice again. "They will kill everyone if they breach the gate. But we can stop them."

"With what?" a townswoman cried. "Our bare hands?"

“Yes. With your bare hands.” Leotin pointed to the stables behind the crowd of townspeople. The castle walls comprised the back of the stable, but the sides were built of large stones. “We need to reinforce the gate against the ram. We’re going to pull down the stable walls and pile the stones before the gate.”

The townspeople turned to look behind them at the stables, a murmur running through the crowd as they considered the idea. The notion had been Shifhuul’s, a suggestion he took only moments to make upon learning of the militia’s ram. The wyrin showed a surprising ingenuity at times for a creature who seemed intent on ignoring most events around him.

“We will stay divided in three groups.” Leotin drew the townspeople’s attention back to himself with his voice. “You townsfolk will tear down the stables and separate the stones. My carnival folk will haul the stones to the gate and the pilgrims will pile them up. I know none of you have eaten, but we have made preparations for food, and a meal will be brought out shortly.”

The courtyard fell silent with the end of Leotin’s speech. He turned slowly as he looked around. The priest raised his voice in the silence.

“Do not help them,” the priest shouted. “Ni-Kam-Djen will guide the swords of the militiamen and spare the faithful.”

“We can survive this if we work together.” Leotin looked to the priest. “If we do not, we will likely all die.”

“Only you heretics will perish when the gate comes down and The True God’s soldiers smite you.” The priest pointed to the gate, the townspeople following his hand.

“You are wrong, brother.” A girl of fifteen in a canary-colored dress turned to the priest from where she stood beside him. Tarak had seen the girl with Palla not long ago and wondered who she might be. He understood the priest to be the dead tahn’s son. This seemed the dead man’s daughter. “They will kill us all as heretics, and me especially, as I am one of them.”

The girl walked away from her brother to stand beside Palla and the pilgrims. The brother priest stood motionless, shocked into silence, not knowing what to say or do.

“Enough words. There’s work to do.” Pi-Gento’s voice boomed across the courtyard, a commander’s shout instilling action. “Get the horses out of the stable and find some rope.” Pi-Gento marched through the close-pressed townsfolk toward the stables.

“We work do also.”

Tarak looked down to Shifhuul beside him. “What work?”

“The wall up we go.” Shifhuul pointed to the top of the castle walls. “Look look for good thing.”

“He is right.” Yeth raised her eyes to Tarak. “We may find a weakness in the militia’s deployment. Or an unknown strength in the castle walls.”

“Yes. Another good idea.” Tarak spread his lips wide to show his teeth, resisting the urge to pet the wyrin on the head. The creature would doubtless be displeased.

They left Palla and a few of her armed carnival companions to guard the gate from potential traitors among the townspeople who might attempt to turn the priest’s words into actions. By the time they assailed the south tower stairs to the top of the wall, the castle soldier, Pi-Gento, stood

with several men from the town hauling tripods of steel and large cauldrons of iron to the edge of the parapet. Other men carried buckets from the east tower to set beside the cauldrons. Tarak could smell the stale cooking oil in the buckets even from ten paces away. He noticed clay jars of what smelled like tamak seed lamp oil stacked along the wall.

“Good good,” Shifhuul said as he watched the humans work. “Burn the down men.”

“Yes. And scald them if they get close enough to the wall.” Yeth leaned over the side of the parapet.

Tarak imitated her action, seeing now the intended result of the humans’ endeavors. He noted drains reaching out from the wall over the gate. The cauldrons of heated oil could be poured through the drains and down over the assailants below. The hot cooking oil would not catch fire, but it would gravely injure the militiamen touched by it. He assumed the tamak seed oil, which caught flame easily and burned bright and hot, would be cast upon the militiamen farther from the wall before being lit by flaming arrows or torches thrown by hand.

Tarak marveled at the violent thinking, feeling his usefulness wane in light of their circumstances. The roagg peoples did not build castles and fortifications. When the urris liberated them from the sheetoo, their human creators and betrayers, they had retreated to the sanctuary of the Stone Realm, abandoning almost wholly the martial ways of their past. They lived in small clans or larger tribes, migrating with the weather across the plains and mountain ranges in search of fertile lands to graze their sheep and plentiful forests to hunt. A few tribes established small permanent communities for farming or to mine and smelt the iron ore of the mountains into steel for trade. Some tribes also fashioned gold and silver from the mountains into simple jewelry for ornamentation and ritual. Tribes might clash over territory from time to time, but such matters were settled with symbolic combat rather than open warfare. Few roaggs took the life of another, seeking peace instead of dominance in their dealings.

Among all the roaggs he knew, Tarak had been the only one to take another’s life. An act that led to his travels in the Iron Realm, which led to the taking of more lives, and now left him standing atop a stone mountain of sheetoo creation, waiting to take lives yet again. As the spirit talkers said, each choice begets many lives — more and more choices demanding still more and more choices in turn. How many times would he choose to kill? How many times would his first choice echo down through the canyon of his life to force that same choice again and again?

“They work quickly.” Yeth pointed into the darkness of the nearby town where the militia labored by the light of several torches.

“Too quick.” Shifhuul shook his head. “Stones for gate not enough fast.”

Tarak agreed. His eyes saw better in the dark than the yutan’s, if not as well as the wyrin’s. The militia bound together the tree trunks they had logged from the nearby forest, creating one massive ram the width of three men. While some of the soldiers worked to shave the fronts of the logs into immense, pointed spears, others constructed a wooden roof atop posts attached to the sides of the three wagons supporting the logs. He had no experience with which to judge the effectiveness of the ram, but did not see how the gate could sustain the intended blows without Shifhuul’s stones in place to strengthen it.

They needed to find a way to slow the militia's work, to give time to the people working below in the courtyard. He stepped to the inner wall and looked down at the humans swarming around the stable, hacking at the stones with picks and pulling at the support beams with long ropes. His strength could be useful there, but it could just as easily frighten the humans into unpredictable action. He found it hard to know what sheetoo would do. They were in many ways far stranger than the wyrin or yutan, their motivations less obvious and potential decisions unclear. He had not expected Leotin to kill the tahn of the castle. Had not anticipated Palla joining the pilgrims. Had not foreseen that the castle soldier, Pi-Gento, would help his people by helping Leotin against the militia.

"They won't reinforce the gate in time." Yeth spoke from beside him as she looked down at the humans struggling to defeat their oncoming deaths.

"Fire arrows to burn ram?" Shifhuul scratched the fur of his head as he stared at the nearby brazier filled with glowing coals.

"It is too far." Tarak thought about the idea. "I could reach it with my bow, but the human bows are too weak. A few arrows lit with flame would not be enough. It would take hundreds. And the shield they build atop the ram will protect it when it is closer."

"We should help them move the stones then." Yeth shook her head. "Even a few extra hands will help."

"Stones too big. Time waste. Save strength for to fight." Shifhuul nearly growled his words.

"It was your idea," Tarak said.

"Good idea for not this day," Shifhuul replied.

Tarak watched one of the carnival folk pulling at a rope disappearing down into the castle well. The man hauled up a wooden pail filled with water and poured it into a metal pot. As the man cast the bucket and rope down into the stone-lined well, Tarak thought of another rope and another wall of stone.

TEN MONTHS AGO

HARD-EDGED STEEL bit into thick flesh beneath long fur, blood welling up to stain brown hairs black. Tarak stumbled back, blocking the returning ax blade with his own, his arm shuddering under the impact. He regained his footing and swung both hands, both axes together, seeking to drive his opponent back.

Tarak battled a large roagg male half a paw taller than himself. They fought at the edge of a wide mountain plateau, a steep cliff dropping away beside them. Twenty or so roagg males and females gathered nearby, observing silently the warring contestants before them. One of the roagg females watched more intently than those around her.

Tarak glanced at Reeshka briefly, reading the concern in her face. He fought for her. For them both. For their future. He pushed the roagg he faced, a male named Korrat, back toward the cliff edge under a barrage of ax blows. Korrat blocked each blow even as he lost ground. Tarak

swung at the roagg's leg, drawing blood and a growl of anger. He backed away, both males breathing hard as they sized up their adversary.

The rules of the contest stated that the winner must claim blood three times. Each had drawn only once in the ten minutes of their duel. As they tired, it would likely be the more skilled warrior who prevailed. Tarak possessed greater experience in mock battle, but Korrat had superior speed and strength on his side. The victor took away nothing beyond regained honor, but both males fought desperately for that prize.

Korrat charged, bellowing in rage and throwing an ax toward Tarak's chest. He twisted to the side, the blade slashing his arm, as intended, just before Korrat crashed into him. The two roagg males fell to the ground, hitting and biting at one another as they rolled toward the edge of the cliff. Tarak slammed his ax into the rocky earth, attempting to arrest his motion. It only served to wedge the blade between two stones and yank the handle from his grasp as he continued to tumble and battle Korrat toward the ledge.

Tarak tried again to halt their roll toward the cliff, but Korrat seemed unconcerned with the danger, continuing to slash at Tarak with his claws and pummel his head. Tarak reached out, grasping at a jagged stone to grip, but the combined momentum of the two massive bodies sent them careening over the edge of the cliff, spinning as they fell.

A small ledge of rock broke their descent, cracking under their weight. Both roaggs still clutched an ax and both used it to try and subdue their opponent. Tarak realized now that Korrat did not care to draw more blood.

"Stop, Korrat." Tarak growled. "This does not reclaim honor for either of us."

"The spirits shit on your honor." Foamed spittle flew from Korrat's muzzle as he raged. "If she will not have me, then she will not have you."

Korrat roared as he shoved his ax blade into Tarak's chest, casting him over the edge of the small ledge, stone crumbling away beneath him. Tarak bellowed as he pushed back against Korrat, shocked at finally understanding the other male's true intent in requesting a contest of combat. He did not want to regain honor for the loss of his mate. He desired revenge on the two who had cost him that honor. To lure away another roagg's mate, whether male or female, caused dishonor for both parties, only one of whom could regain that honor through the drawing of blood three times in battle. Korrat clearly decided that blood alone would not heal his wounds. Only the death of Tarak, depriving Reeshka of her new love, could accomplish that.

Anger and fear roiled in Tarak's mind. He felt an uncontrollable longing to see his new mate, the female he stole from another with kind words and thoughtful actions. He knew that if his opponent succeeded, he would perish and never hold her again. Never confess again in panted breath his love of her. Never feel her holding close to him in the deep chill of winter nights. Never hunt the summer fields together. Never bring forth cubs to teach the roagg ways of the mountains.

Tarak roared in fear and anger as he turned sideways, letting the edge of the ax slide across his chest and dig into his arm, giving his opponent the third blood of the contest. Korrat did not stop fighting and neither did Tarak, as he used his now free arm and the turn of his body to swing

his ax into his adversary's head. The thick skull of the roagg did not shatter against the steel, but the blow stunned Korrat, giving Tarak the opportunity to twist free of the other male's grasp. He swung the ax again, this time into the side of the cliff, driving the blade deep into a fissure between two rocks. Continuing to yank his body from underneath the larger roagg, he got a foot beneath Korrat's belly and shoved with all his might.

Korrat rolled toward open sky, over the edge of the precipice, clinging to Tarak's arm, the ground hundreds of paces below. Tarak held tight to the handle of the ax, looking to see the blade sliding free of the rock. He realized now the error of his anger. Intent on taking both lives, Korrat would not release the grasp on Tarak's arm. He should have continued to strike Korrat with the ax and rendered him unconscious. His rage led him to the impetuosity of trying to kill his opponent, the very sort of action being taken against him, the very act the ancient Granag Stones warned against. Now he faced a new choice that determined his honor.

"With your death, I will spare you the inevitable betrayal she visited upon me." Korrat's eyes glowed with wild anguish as he reached up another hand to pull at Tarak's arm.

"She betrayed only her heart when she came to your tent." Tarak kicked at Korrat's face, smashing the heel of his boot into the other male's muzzle.

Korrat's head snapped back, and Tarak kicked at him again and again, swinging his leg sideways to drive the toe of his boot into the roagg's temple. Korrat's grip loosened on his arm as Tarak kicked harder. Korrat raised an arm to block the impact of Tarak's leg. Tarak used this opening to lash out with his other foot, striking his opponent in the chest. Korrat's paws slid along Tarak's arm, and then he fell from view.

A silence of small noises came over Tarak. He expected to hear Korrat roar in anger, but he only heard his own panting breath, the tumble of rocks settling after the battle of the two roaggs, the whistle of wind along the cliff face, the hum of a bee inspecting a flower blooming from between a nearby crevice of stone. Then he heard the sound of bone and flesh tearing against rock and cracking to a halt.

He rolled away from the edge of the rock ledge, unwilling to lean over and see the consequences of his choices sprawled in blood among the rocks. He looked up instead, seeing the face of Reeshka staring in confusion and horror as the rest of the roaggs around her murmured among themselves. They spoke for a long time, Reeshka adding her voice to the debate. Tarak could have heard them if he chose, but his mind seemed incapable of clear thought. He had killed a fellow roagg. One who had wanted to end his life, but one whose life he did not need to take. His quest for honor, or to at least restore honor to another, had ended in even greater dishonor.

Motion brought his eyes away from the sky to see a rope being lowered down to him from above.

THE PRESENT

THE ROPE snaked over the edge of the stone-walled well, trailing the plummeting bucket, ceasing its movement as a splash echoed up from the bottom. Tarak turned from the sight to his wyrin and yutan companions.

“Come. There may be another way to slow the humans outside the walls.” Tarak walked back through the tower and then along the western wall. Shifhuul and Yeth followed him.

“What plan you have?” Shifhuul struggled to keep up with Tarak’s long, swift strides.

“No plan yet. Merely a notion.” Tarak turned through the north tower and onto the north wall where a human from the carnival stood watch in the shadows beside one of the fire-filled iron braziers. He recognized the man as Lhando, the actor who took the more romantic roles in the plays the humans performed.

“Is all well?” Lhando asked as they approached. “What’s happening? Have they completed the ram?” He shrank back from them, an instinctive reaction for most of the humans in the presence of the outlanders, Tarak in particular.

“They have not finished building the ram, but they will soon.” Tarak looked out over the field beyond the rampart wall. “How many humans watch this side of the castle?”

Lhando turned toward the darkness, the stars of the moonless night giving little illumination to the land.

“There were two earlier in the day, but I can’t see anything now.” Lhando squinted.

“I see no one either.” Yeth swept her eyes across the murky landscape.

“How you no see? Man there and there.” Shifhuul pointed with an outstretched paw.

Tarak saw the men easily, his vision well attuned to the night, but he took the time to scan the surrounding area in case more men hid in the shadows of trees. The two guards stood in the field at the corners of the castle to remain in sight of one another. That would make things difficult, but not impossible.

“Maybe we hunt this problem from the wrong direction.” Yeth glanced back at the castle gate. “Instead of trying to keep them out, maybe we let them. Open the gate as a trap. Archers from the walls. Pits with stakes in the courtyard. Clay jars of tamak seed lamp oil thrown and lit to set them aflame. In the confusion, we three could kill many of the human militia before they knew what befell them.”

“Wicked mind.” Shifhuul smiled approvingly. “Smart for yutan.”

“Smart indeed, but it would take longer than we have to set that trap.” Tarak looked again at the sheetoo militiamen watching the castle from the edges of the cornfield. “We need to strike them before they can strike us. We need to go over the wall.”

Tarak looked to the ground a hundred paces below, feeling an echo of another moment and place fill him with dread. He hoped he made the honorable choice this time.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

THE SHADOWS of night crept across the river as the sun sank behind the trees.

Where?

Nearby.

Impossible.

Sha-Kutan stood. He had been repairing a wagon wheel beside a fire at the edge of the riverside camp. The sensation had been nearly imperceptible, practically instantaneous, but unmistakable in its nature, something he had not sensed in more than twenty years.

Could it be her?

She would not warn of her presence in such a way.

Then what?

Sha-Kutan scanned the campsite, looking for Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. What he had perceived might mean danger. It might mean they needed to flee quickly. His eyes easily found Lee-Nin still tending to the dinner pot, preparing to serve the pilgrims just beginning to line up for the evening meal. He did not see Sao-Tauna. He looked again. He did not spot the girl Gao-Pai either. The two often played together. Maybe they had wandered into the forest. His jaw clenched as he realized the other person missing from the riverside camp — Chu-Ki.

Sha-Kutan reached out with the essence of himself, searching for the girl. He found her effortlessly enough. In the forest. Not far from camp. He left the broken wheel, the man working with him complaining at his silent departure. He pushed through the branches and strode between the trees, heading straight for where he sensed he would find the girl.

Surely she would scream if in danger. The thought of something happening to Sao-Tauna arose an anger in his heart as he had never experienced. The knowledge of what he would do to the man Chu-Ki made his hands clench, nails digging deep into the flesh of his palms.

If he harms her...

He will die.

Sha-Kutan nearly snapped a limb from the side of a tree in the haste of his passing, coming to a stop in a small clearing of low grass beneath a wooded temple of arched branches. Sao-Tauna and the girl, Gao-Pai, sat in the leaves holding caterpillars in their hands in the fading light. He stopped, staring at the girls, marveling at the insects in their tiny palms.

Coincidence?

Or omen?

"It is dark and almost time for the evening meal." Sha-Kutan stared down at the girls.

Sao-Tauna and Gao-Pai stood slowly, still cupping the larva in their hands.

"What are you doing here?" Sha-Kutan asked.

Sao-Tauna held up her hand with the caterpillar. He did not understand the answer, but knew it to be an evasion.

"You are too far from camp. Your mother does not like you to be too far away, especially at such a late hour." Sha-Kutan ignored the feeling of his own deception that came with his words.

The girls shrugged. Not an apology, but with two girls who barely spoke, he did not expect contrition.

"Have you seen Chu-Ki?" Sha-Kutan looked to Gao-Pai. "Your father."

Gao-Pai paused a moment and then shook her head. Sao-Tauna remained still and silent.

"Do you know where he is?" Sha-Kutan ignored Gao-Pai, turning his attention entirely toward Sao-Tauna.

Sao-Tauna stared back at him, saying nothing, her eyes speaking in whispers that could not be heard by human senses.

She knows.

She more than knows.

How is it possible?

I do not know.

"Dinner is soon. We should get back to camp." Sha-Kutan turned to walk back to the camp, hearing and sensing the girls fall in behind him.

What does it mean?

It means we know why they wish the girl dead.

She is a danger.

To us more so than others.

What do we do?

Should we leave them?

Sha-Kutan stopped at the edge of the forest as his senses relayed a presence to his mind. He looked up river. Far beyond the bridge and the pilgrim campsite, near a bend in the waterway two spans away, a boat came into view. He did not need to see the occupants to distinguish who they were.

"We must talk to your mother," Sha-Kutan said to Sao-Tauna. He moved his eyes to Gao-Pai. "And you must rejoin your own mother." The girl nodded.

Sha-Kutan walked slowly through the camp, knowing the haste he needed to display would only attract attention. When he reached Lee-Nin, serving scoops of soup to the hungry pilgrims, he leaned close to her ear.

"We must leave."

“Certainly, my husband.” Lee-Nin calmly ladled another bowl of soup and handed it to a man with a smile. She turned to the woman beside her, Gao-Pai’s mother, and passed her the ladle. “Can you help? My husband needs me for a moment.”

Lee-Nin reached down to hold Sao-Tauna’s hand as they followed Sha-Kutan to the woods. He stopped by their space in the camp and picked up the canvas bag with their few possessions, carrying it low to avoid attention. He glanced back to see Gao-Pai standing beside her mother, the girl the only one who seemed to notice them as they walked out of the camp.

“What is it?” Lee-Nin whispered as she smiled at a pilgrim woman passing along the riverside.

“The men come again. Up river. In a boat. They will be here soon.” Sha-Kutan looked toward the river, and Lee-Nin turned to see where he stared.

“We could steal two of the horses.” Lee-Nin glanced to the wagons near the bridge and the horses tied there. “We could gain at least an hour down the road before they realize we’re gone and steal horses themselves.”

“I have another plan.” Sha-Kutan pushed the branch of a tree aside as he made a path for Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna to follow into the forest.

If it works.

It will work.

He held the branch aside as Lee-Nin picked Sao-Tauna up into her arms. The girl went slightly rigid at the woman’s touch, as she always did, but she spared a smile for Sha-Kutan.

If we were wise, we would leave the dangerous girl.

If we were wise, we would have hidden better in the woods behind the house.

And they would not have found us.

And the girl would be dead.

So what good...

...Is wisdom?

Sha-Kutan led Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna into the forest, hoping he had time to make his plan work, anxious for the full darkness of night to engulf the camp.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sha-Kutan’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

A SQUIRREL dug in the ground, burying an acorn in the short grass of a Tanshen palace garden. Hashel watched the animal conceal its treasure and scamper off across the walking path and into the nearby bushes. He sat beneath an oak tree in the gardens, leaning against the trunk, eating a cold chicken leg and waiting for the night to settle, for sleep to take him somewhere far away, a new place with new people and new things. Ondromead sat to the side, licking his fingers after finishing his portion of the chicken they had found in the palace kitchens.

“An odd day.” Ondromead tapped the leather satchel containing the book at his side. “No deaths. No births. No fires. No accidents. No storms. Nothing unusual. Nothing memorable. Perhaps I missed something. Did I miss something?”

Hashel shrugged at Ondromead’s question. He had not seen anything particularly interesting throughout the day, but that did not mean something hadn’t happened. He did appreciate not needing to witness another death. Especially after the town where they tried to burn those people. Did they burn people in palaces?

“Very strange.” Ondromead looked up at the sky as though speaking to himself. As Hashel never answered, he really did speak to himself. “Maybe something will happen in the night. Something before we fall asleep. A comet possibly. I once had a day where I thought nothing would be worth recording until a meteor shower lit up the night sky. I eventually saw many of the people affected by that meteor shower. The widow of a man who died when a flaming rock from the sky struck their home. The soldier fighting in a war triggered by priests who thought the meteors a sign from their gods to attack their ancestral enemies. A girl who found one of the meteors years later. The smith who forged a blade from the sky steel. A king who wielded the blade in battle. Yes. Perchance a meteor shower. Or maybe a comet.”

Hashel raised his eyes to the sky as well, searching for something among the stars that might move or signal the arrival of a celestial message. The sound of footsteps on the nearby path brought his eyes back to the ground. A man walked along the path. Two men with swords at their waists followed several paces behind him.

“Hmm.” Ondromead scrutinized the men. “I know that man. Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi. I saw him ... twenty years ago. He was a young man then. His uncle did something remarkable. Terrifying, but remarkable.”

Another man approached the tahn from the opposite direction. He knelt on one knee and bowed his head.

"You have news?" Tahn Lin-Pi asked in Shen as he stopped before the kneeling man, speaking in a tone too low for the men behind to hear, but not so quiet as to escape Hashel's ears in the near shadows of the tree branches. He found he understood all the languages of the people they witnessed. He assumed it to be something gifted to him by being near Ondromead. Like the words of the songs that came to him in many tongues when he sang. He understood Shen and could sing it when they were in Daeshen and Tanshen, or Easad in Atheton and Nevaeo, or Muntiba in Juparti and Punderra. Even more reason to stay close to the old man. Strange gifts that he did not fear because they seemed intended for him alone. Who would grant such blessings for wicked reasons?

"I do, my tahn." The man stood up. Hashel guessed him to be a soldier of some significant standing. He wore ornate robes and a finely decorated scabbard beside his legs. "A message by night jay from Commander Ing-Ku."

"Has he managed to lose more men?" The tahn's voice sounded angry.

"No, my tahn." The soldier seemed embarrassed by the tahn's question.

"Has he found my daughter?" Tahn Lin-Pi looked away from the soldier.

"He writes that he is close, my tahn." The soldier lowered his eyes. "He says that the woman helping her has recruited the assistance of a man."

"What man?" The tahn turned back to the soldier.

"He believes him to be a former warden or soldier. They travel together as a family and hide among the pilgrim bands." Hashel noted how the man's voice filled with disgust at the mention of the pilgrims.

"Two heresies combined." Tahn Lin-Pi appeared disturbed.

Hashel wondered if the woman had stolen the tahn's daughter. How awful to be held captive and separated from one's family. Why would the woman do such a thing? Did she want coin? Had she lost her own child? As Hashel pondered these questions, he noticed Ondromead scribbling down the conversation in his black book.

"Commander Ing-Ku will not fail, my tahn."

"If he does not kill my daughter, he should not return."

Kill his daughter? Hashel dropped the bone of the chicken leg and sat up straight. The tahn had sent a man to kill his daughter? Why would he do such a thing? Did the woman flee with the girl to save her?

"Ahh, I see," Ondromead muttered beside him.

"And when he returns, you know what must happen to the commander and his men," the tahn said.

"Upon their return, they will be killed before they reach the palace." The soldier nodded his understanding.

"My brother must never hear a hint that my daughter did not die of fever." Tahn Lin-Pi held the man's eyes.

“His Ascendancy will never learn such things from my lips.” The soldier bowed to emphasize his words.

“Good. My brother would have my head and those of my family as quickly as he would take those of a Daeshen heretic,” Tahn Lin-Pi said. “My brother’s devotion is great and is unbounded by familial loyalty. What he would do to someone not of the family to keep this secret is unmentionable.”

“I understand, my tahn.” The soldier bowed again.

The tahn waited a moment and then walked on, following a different path through the palace garden than the soldier. After the guards trailing the tahn passed out of earshot, Ondromead sighed loudly.

“We can fall asleep now.” Ondromead sounded sad as he packed his book back in his satchel. “There won’t be any meteor storms or comets tonight.”

Hashel watched Ondromead curl up on the grass beside the gnarled roots of the tree. He didn’t feel like sleeping yet, but lay down beside Ondromead just the same. He didn’t know when the traveling occurred each night, but he knew it happened while he slept, and he didn’t want Ondromead to travel alone without him. That would make him sad beyond words, and he already spoke no words in his sadness. He drifted off to sleep, dreaming of a girl and a woman and a man running from soldiers through woods and fields and towns and along a river.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Hashel’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE THRONE



RHOG-KAN

“WORD HAS come. It is official. The Tanshen army crossed the border two days ago, my zhan.”

“How many?”

“They crossed in three places, my zhan. Two thousand men in each company.”

Tigan Rhog-Kan clenched his fists behind his back, knuckles popping loudly. He stood beside Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee in Zhan Tin-Tsu’s private study, the calls of crickets in the palace gardens filtering through an open window. Tin-Tsu sat behind a large poda wood desk, his chin sitting on his fists as though in deep thought. The sconces along the wall cast his face in a contrast of soft light and harsh shadows.

Rhog-Kan resisted the urge to frown. The young zhan *should* think deeply. He had much to contemplate, such as the fact that if he had allowed Rhog-Kan to fortify the castles along the border with extra men after his coronation, the Tanshen Tigans might have considered against a new incursion in the south.

“What are their goals?” Zhan Tin-Tsu looked up from the map of the realm on his desk.

“They will attack the castles of the lesser tahns along the border, Your Ascendancy.” Rhog-Kan kept his tone even, the ignorance of the question making him want to shout his reply. The Tanshen wanted to invade their nation, kill the leaders, and rule it as their own. How could this not be clear? He tried to simplify the situation for the priest turned zhan. “They will try to claim the castles as their own and hold them to use as bases for further incursions. They have done this many times in the past twenty years.”

“Have we not done the same?” Zhan Tin-Tsu tilted his head to the side with the question.

Rhog-Kan thought the young zhan looked like a dog confused about where its next meal might come from. He would prefer a dog sat on the throne. He had found that as the days since the coronation passed, the new zhan’s limited understanding of the war caused his patience to flee him more readily than at any time in his life. The future of the dominion rested in the hands of a man who issued proclamations protecting heretics rather than persecuting those who might be agents of their enemy. Fortunately, Kao-Rhee spared him the necessity of a reply.

“Both sides have attempted to lay hold of the land of the other throughout the years, my zhan, but only the throne you sit upon holds the rightful claim to the greater Shen dominion.” Kao-Rhee looked at the map. “Our borders have changed many times in the past two decades,

but we must ensure that if they alter from the lines of the Old Border Road, that they do so in our favor.”

“Our troops are close, yes?” Zhan Tin-Tsu traced the line of the Old Border Road along the map with his finger.

“Tigan Yan-Lo commands five thousand men gathered from three eastern strongholds and he marches south with all haste, Your Ascendancy.” Rhog-Kan ignored the urge to rub the man’s face in the map as one did with a dog that had wet the floor. “He should reach the border around the same time as the Tanshen companies.”

“Then our troops are outnumbered.” Zhan Tin-Tsu looked up from the map again.

“I advised weeks ago to send more soldiers south to man the strongholds, my zhan.” Rhog-Kan did not conceal from his voice the annoyance he felt. “You believed it would send the wrong signal to our adversary and encourage conflict.”

“I should have heeded your counsel.” Zhan Tin-Tsu smoothed the wrinkles of the map with his open palms. “What more can we do now? Can we move troops from more eastern strongholds?”

Rhog-Kan took a breath to pause before speaking, surprised that Zhan Tin-Tsu admitted to error and curious how far he might now be pushed from his previous stance of abeyance.

“If we shift our troops from their defensive positions in the strongholds along the Old Boarder Road to the east, we risk inviting further incursions from the Tanshen in that region, my zhan.” Rhog-Kan stepped forward and drew a finger across the area of the map, indicating the northern territories of the Daeshen Dominion. “We can call no more men-at-arms from the tahns in the north. They have already sent all the men they can south and for far more years than expected. We can, however, call a draft of able-bodied men to form new militias, and leave them in the north where they may continue to work the farms and tend their duties in the cities, but bed down in company and train together. This will send a signal to the usurper of the south that we stand ready to escalate the war should they not retreat after their inevitable defeat north of the border.”

Zhan Tin-Tsu sighed and looked from the map out the window to the shadow-drenched palace gardens. Rhog-Kan wondered if the guileless man would ever realize the depth of his error in leaving the castles along the border empty enough to invite attack by the Tanshen armies to the south. Would it ever dawn on him that the men-at-arms from those castles now stationed at strongholds farther north could have dissuaded this military incursion they now needed to rectify? The soldiers had been stationed two days’ march from the border as part of a truce negotiated with the Tanshen army a year prior. A truce whose terms had ended months ago. Rhog-Kan doubted such thoughts would ever cross the man’s feeble mind. No doubt Kao-Rhee understood the reasons for their current quandary and the necessary remedies. It sounded as such when he spoke.

“Might I suggest, my zhan, that if you do call a draft, that you hold off until after the royal wedding?” Kao-Rhee smiled as he stepped closer to the table to once more stand beside Rhog-

Kan. "The people will be more open to serving their nation after a great festivity, which will allow you to call a greater range of men into service."

Kao-Rhee understood the needs of the situation exactly. Would the man-child-priest grasp things so quickly, or would he need to be dragged to the conclusion like all other matters placed before him?

"Should the wedding be postponed?" Zhan Tin-Tsu asked.

"I think not, Your Ascendancy," Kao-Rhee replied. "It would display a lack of confidence in our forces' inevitable victory."

"Yes. A militia draft announced after the wedding, then." Zhan Tin-Tsu looked back from the gardens. "Draw up the papers that I may sign them. I assume this will require an increase in taxes to pay for the new militias?"

"Unless you wish to borrow more money from the banks of Punderra, Your Ascendancy." Kao-Rhee indicated through his tone which alternative he found preferable.

Rhog-Kan agreed with the prime councilor. The nation already carried too great a debt to the Punderra usurers. The tax would be a strain, but Kao-Rhee would spread it around to bear less weight in one place.

"Let it be so. Show me the papers when you have finished with them. Is there more, gentlemen?" Zhan Tin-Tsu looked between his prime tigan and his prime councilor.

"No, Your Ascendancy." Rhog-Kan wondered if the man rushed them out to get back to his prayers. They could use prayers, but they more urgently needed a zhan who made his fortune rather than relying on divine intervention for salvation. This thought brought his mind back to the events of the coronation. If Zhan Tin-Tsu could call down divine assistance, why did he not request it for the resumption of the whole Shen nation and the end to the indeterminable war?

"I will bring you the papers when they are ready, my zhan." Kao-Rhee bowed and made to leave. Rhog-Kan mimicked him, but Zhan Tin-Tsu raised a hand.

"Tigan Rhog-Kan, remain for a moment." Zhan Tin-Tsu nodded to a curious Kao-Rhee as the man closed the door to the study.

"My zhan?" Rhog-Kan arched an eyebrow in curiosity. What could Zhan Tin-Tsu want of him alone?

"We have, both of us, been reticent to take necessary action, Tigan." Zhan Tin-Tsu stood and walked to the open window, beckoning Rhog-Kan to join him.

Rhog-Kan followed the younger man to the window, saying nothing, knowing it best to hear the zhan's complaint before making comment on it. What action had he not taken? Could the feckless man-child have seen some tactical advantage that escaped his own greatly experienced eyes? He nearly laughed aloud at the idea.

"It is sometimes difficult to admit the things we must do." Zhan Tin-Tsu held his hands behind his back as he looked out at the herons standing in the shallows of the garden pond, illuminated by lanterns set along the path. "Often it is because what we must do goes against our training and our natural inclinations. I had hoped that sending signals of restraint would be seen

as potential openings toward peace rather than as weakness to be exploited. I misjudged the situation, and now men will die to rectify my errors.”

Zhan Tin-Tsu fell silent as they watched the long-limbed birds standing motionless in the still pond, the light of the torches casting elongated shadows over the water — a nocturnal version of an ancient [Shen landscape painting](#) come to life. Rhog-Kan wondered at the man’s words. Could this zhan be turned from stubborn ignorance and educated in the ways of the state and of war? Did Rhog-Kan need to proceed with the plan he had set in motion after the failure of his first endeavor before the coronation?

“Other times, we avoid action because of uncertainty. Uncertainty in our minds or our hearts.” Zhan Tin-Tsu turned from the window to stare at Rhog-Kan. “My sister informed me some time ago of the nature of your relationship with her and of your intentions. Now either you hesitate to ask for her hand in marriage because your mind tells you this would be improper, or that it would distract from my own marriage, or you evade action because your heart does not allow you to move against its true desires. Which is it to be? Do you wish to wed my sister or not? Do you follow your head or your heart?”

Rhog-Kan swallowed, resisting the twin urges to either step away or slap the man before him, the heat in his face feeling hot enough to light the room. Dju-Tesha had spoken to her brother. When? What had she said? She had been distant from him of late. Not in words, but in deeds. Where she once seduced him at the faintest opportunity of solitude together, she now merely held his hands. And while she had once spoken of marriage and repeatedly intoned her desire for him to approach her family with the official request, she had not broached the subject in some time. If she spoke with her brother, it likely occurred before her recent reticence. What must she think of him, having secured her brother’s blessing in advance while he sat silent and inactive before her like a common stable boy lacking confidence in asking for the hand of a farmer’s daughter? Moreover, what must Zhan Tin-Tsu think of him? Did the former priest consider him indecisive? Had he guessed at the more carnal nature of his relations with the man’s sister? Did he suspect unromantic intentions behind the overtures toward the only other heir to the ascendancy? What could he say to explain himself? Why had he failed to ask for Dju-Tesha’s hand? Why did he procrastinate?

“My zhan...” Rhog-Kan realized he had begun to speak before knowing what to say. “...I love your sister and wish to make her my wife.”

“We are both prompted to action this day, and for our betterment.” Zhan Tin-Tsu smiled. “I would be honored to count you among my family, Tigan.”

“Thank you, my zhan.” Rhog-Kan found his head unexpectedly light. He had avoided the entanglement of remarriage after his wife’s death, and now he begged a man he hated to allow him to be engaged. The senseless irony of existence in the world numbed him.

“I grant my blessing to you on two conditions.” Zhan Tin-Tsu’s smile dimmed a little.

Rhog-Kan blinked at the notion of conditions. The suggestion surprised him.

“What conditions, my zhan?”

“Firstly, you must never mention to my sister that I broached this subject with you rather than the other way around. It will not go well with either of us if she suspects that.” Zhan Tin-Tsu’s smile brightened again. “Secondly, with your wedding, you must think of me as your brother. You have no siblings, and I have lost a brother. It is good to have family bonds. Those you can depend upon. Those you can trust beyond doubt when others might turn against you.”

Rhog-Kan held the swallow in his throat. How could the man not see his dislike for him? How could he not sense the lack of respect between them? How could Zhan Tin-Tsu wish to be brothers? He experienced a slight pang of guilt mixed with a sense of pity for the hapless former priest. But he would take this new opportunity and use it to serve his ends, and serve the nation, as best he could.

“I would consider it a great honor to think of you as a brother, my zhan.”

Rhog-Kan found he believed these words, even as he knew he would, if necessary, take his new brother’s life to assure the future of the dominion.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

THE CARNIVAL



SHIFHUUL

FLETCHING FEATHERS hummed in the still night air, the black shaft sailing through darkness to find its mark, a soft, distant thud telling of its success. A second arrow departed string and bow a moment later, another quiet crack indicating its accuracy. Shifhuul watched the two human militia guards in the field fall to the ground, arrows sprouting like branches from their heads. Tarak's marksmanship exceeded his assertions. While Yeth likely held claim to being the superior archer, her feeble night vision rendered her useless for the task. Shifhuul identified the human males easily enough in the dark, but his bow simply did not have the draw necessary to strike with sufficient force at such distance.

"Quickly." Tarak motioned to those assembled atop the wall as he tossed one of two long ropes over the edge of the parapet.

Yeth threw the second rope over the wall as Shifhuul slung his strung bow over his back and began to shimmy down the first. Two humans followed him. Men from the carnival. He should have known their names, but did not remember them. One had been standing on the wall when Tarak came up with his strategy. The second had volunteered when the roagg later explained the idea to Leotin and the others. A risky idea, but necessary given the circumstances. The besieged occupants of the castle worked tirelessly to enact Shifhuul's plan to barricade the gate, but the task required more hours and more hands than were available.

Shifhuul's feet touched the ground, and he stepped away to make room for the humans sliding down the rope behind him. He looked over to see Tarak and Yeth descending the second rope. He marveled at the dexterity of their controlled falls. While the ease with which the yutan rappelled along the wall did not surprise him, he had not expected the roagg to be so nimble.

As the humans touched down, they each ran in opposite directions along the base of the wall to take up the positions of the dead militiamen. They would be the decoys, impostor militia guards to deflect suspicion from the dead men's comrades. Tarak dropped the last two paces from the ground, the rocky earth vibrating with the impact of his massive boots. The outlanders ran across the tall grass north of the castle and into the field of corn. Tarak crouched low, leading the way, the stalks separating before him — a green sea parting before a rolling boulder.

Shifhuul let his larger companions clear the path. They headed straight north for several hundred paces, then turned westward, curving toward the nearby forest. They wanted to avoid all possibility of detection by the real militia guards, especially if any hid out of sight. Shifhuul

thought the precaution unnecessary. The humans possessed woefully poor night vision for a supposedly higher people. Nocturnal by nature, the wyrin saw perfectly well in the shadowed dark of night. For this reason, he took the lead as they silently marched into the woods, the yutan behind him and the roagg at the rear.

He padded quietly through the vegetation, sliding between trees and under low-hanging branches. He noted that Yeth made little to no noise in his wake, but that Tarak could not avoid rubbing against closely set trunks. The roagg lived among mountains, not forests. Shifhuul thanked the spirits of his ancestors for keeping the roagg's boots from breaking any twigs.

It did not take long for the outlander scouts to reach the town and the encampment where the militia worked by the light of two bonfires to fashion the battering ram for their assault on the castle gate. Shifhuul and his companions snuck from the forest and through a shadowed garden to crouch down beside a brick house with a thatched roof. They spread out, each moving to their assigned task, taking cover behind separate houses.

Tarak disappeared around a barn as Yeth crept beneath the edge of a stone fence, carrying a canvas pack in her hands as she worked her way closer to the staging area of the battering ram. Shifhuul took up a position behind a house near the open street where the humans worked. He quietly unslung his bow from his back and drew an arrow from the quiver, nocking the shaft on the string. He peeked around the side of the house, squinting his eyes to better conceal them, knowing they reflected like jewels in the firelight, easy to spot in the shadows.

He counted the men as he waited for the signal, noting their locations and estimating the time it would take the closest of them to reach his position. Fifteen human males worked to fashion a battering ram from the fallen logs strapped across three wagons. The commander of the militia moved among them, giving orders. A small group of seven men clustered near one of the fires, talking and drinking. Earlier in the day, from the top of the wall, he had calculated that there were at least fifty militiamen in the town. A few would watch the castle, but he suspected the remainder rested in the townspeople's houses, catching some sleep before the expected slaughter. He wondered how many of them had the pilgrim dreams. To speak of it would mark them for death at the hands of their comrades.

He felt thankful he did not have the dreams, did not possess the human sickness. He knew the roagg did. He heard the creature mumbling in his slumber. He could not tell if the yutan did. Her reserved nature made reading her moods and intentions difficult. He placed the thoughts of the dreams aside and drew the arrow back to his cheek, aiming at nothing in the sky. While he could easily hold the draw for a minute or more without loss of accuracy from muscle fatigue, he doubted he would need to wait that long.

A cry rose from one of the houses on the main street. A man fell through the doorway of the building, clutching his back. Tarak burst through the door a second later to roar in the middle of the street before dashing behind another house. As the militiamen near the partially constructed battering ram spun their heads toward the commotion, Shifhuul swung from behind the wall of the hut where he hid, took careful aim, and loosed his arrow.

The shaft struck true, a stalk of feathered wood erupting from the militia commander's bloody eye. Shifhuul nocked and released another arrow before the commander fell dead to the ground. His second shot found home in the throat of a human just reaching for his sword. The man's hands clutched instead at his neck.

The remaining men yelled and charged down the road as he slipped behind the house and ran through the small vegetable garden to the next dwelling. He heard the crash and crack of clay on wood and knew Yeth had begun her portion of the plan. Her idea to throw clay jars of tamak seed oil at the militia had been revised to target the battering ram instead.

Shifhuul jumped to the top of a stone wall beside a brick house, running along the narrow surface to leap up and clamber atop the thatched roof of the home. The humans below would be looking for him. Standing atop the roof of the house, he nocked another arrow and took aim at a man running, sword drawn, toward where Tarak battled two militiamen. He released the arrow and drew another, noting as he searched for a new target the motion of the first man falling to the ground. He let fly three more arrows, bringing two certain deaths and a wound that would claim its owner by morning. A human called out and pointed to the roof.

Shifhuul took this as his signal to find new ground. He slid down the side of the roof, rolling as he struck the ground, holding a hand out to keep his sword from jamming into the soil. He leapt to his feet and raced to a nearby barn. He saw the street easily, hiding only twenty paces from the rear of the battering ram. He heard no more shattering clay and knew Yeth must have exhausted her supply. The plan had been for her to set the logs of the battering ram ablaze with The Sight, once doused with oil. She had claimed not to be strong enough to burn the ram with The Sight alone. The sound of clashing steel told him why she had not yet lit the oil-soaked wood.

He slid from behind the barn and released an arrow, taking down one of the three men Yeth fought near the battering ram. She held the sword of a fallen militiaman in her hand, using it as best she could. Deadly with a spear or bow, the yutan had little understanding of how to use a sword effectively. Only her size and speed kept her from losing ground. Tarak roared again from down the street as Shifhuul reached back to draw another arrow. Why did she not use The Sight to defend herself?

His hand never made contact with the arrow shaft, his instincts overriding his desired motion in reaction to the shadow on the wood-planked wall beside him. Shifhuul ducked and rolled as a militiaman's sword bit into the side of the barn. The man screamed in shock at the sight of him. Shifhuul bared his teeth and drew his own curved blade.

The man yanked his sword free of the wall, but Shifhuul rolled beneath the swing of the long, heavy blade, coming up well within the reach of the human, thrusting his own sword into the man's chest. The man's eyes went wide as blood gurgled from his mouth and his legs collapsed beneath him. The man fell forward onto Shifhuul, who tried to roll and push the human while extracting the blade from his chest.

Shifhuul fell to the ground, half trapped under the torso of the dying human. The man flailed and shook, as though trying to hold on to something slipping inexorably away from his

grasp. Shifhuul kicked and pushed to get his legs free. Finally, he stood and reached for his bow, only to find it snapped in half by the weight of man's impact on the hard dirt. He grabbed his blade from the man's chest and ran around the edge of the barn, halting as he saw Yeth wildly swinging a sword at five militiamen while she attempted to retreat.

He saw a clear path to the bonfire. He could light the flame. By then, Yeth would fall to the five men.

Five...

So many...

TWO YEARS AGO

“SO MANY.”

Black shapes darted from shadow to light to tree to shadow, steel flashing in lamplight, cries clinging to the moist summer air. Shifhuul reached out his arms to pull his mate and daughter away from the edge of the railing where the family looked down on the assault assailing their forest town.

“So many and no warning,” Shifhuul said in reply to his mate's statement.

The neighboring wyrin Liniff territory had been threatening war for months if previous border agreements were not honored, but he had not expected the traitorous northerners to attack just before dawn when most of the town's families would finally have gone to bed. His five-year-old daughter, Whinara, trembled beneath his arms as the screams of his fellow townspeople rose through the branches to their home.

“What will we do?” His mate, Shahana, clung close to him, pulling their daughter between them as though she might protect her from the sounds below.

What to do indeed? The town guards were likely dead. The cries of the dying forest dwellers had awoken his family, not the horns calling alarm. The militia would take time to assemble if they made it from their houses before being slaughtered. Their only salvation would be to hold out until reinforcements from the nearby river army reached them, assuming someone had managed to flee and alert the local commander of the attack. Shifhuul could do nothing about that. He could only hope to protect his family.

“Back into the house.” Shifhuul pulled his mate and daughter through the doorway and into their sleeping chamber. He looked to his mate. “Both of you hide beneath the bed. No. Too obvious. It must look like others have been here.”

Shifhuul tugged at the edge of the mattress, pulling it from the bed frame, linens piling on the hardwood floor. He knocked over a chair and pulled over a dressing cabinet.

“Hide beneath the blankets. Make it appear as though they are piled accidentally. I will return soon.” Shifhuul pulled on a pair of pants and slipped on his boots, ignoring the laces.

“What will you do?” Shahana asked as Shifhuul grabbed his sword belt from the wall and tightened it around his waist.

“I will douse the lights on this level and cut free the bridge.” Shifhuul kissed his mate and daughter quickly. “They will come first to the houses with lights.”

Shifhuul ran from the room as his mate and daughter made to hide themselves beneath the bed covers piled by the wall. He left the door open, as no supposed intruder would close it after ransacking the room. His mother’s house sat among the branches of three of the most massive red-barked jedket trees, comprising a total of four levels. The sleeping chambers rested in the branches of the uppermost level. The hardest to reach. His mother had designed it that way so that the bridge from the level below could be separated and cast away. Shifhuul, for once, appreciated his mother’s ingeniousness and forethought. His mother would not return from her merchant trading journey for days yet. She would no doubt chide him for abandoning the fight to save the town in order to preserve one small portion of it.

Shifhuul raced through the rooms of the sleeping level, blowing out lanterns where they sat on large metal trays, an extravagance his mother complained about but which he indulged in whenever possible. As nocturnal people, most wyrins kept only a single lantern burning through the night. Shifhuul found this uncivilized, luxuriating in the glow of multiple lamps throughout the dark hours. Dousing the tenth and final lamp among five rooms, he cursed the practice, swearing to abandon it.

He ran to the bridge connecting the sleeping level to the rest of the tree home, finding black clad wyrin males bursting through the door. He threw himself around a corner as he heard a scream. His mate’s angry shouts joined his daughter’s cries. He lunged from behind the corner and raced down the hall, his sword already drawn, swinging out to strike the first soldier in the back of the neck before taking the second in the back of the leg, sending them both to the ground.

Shifhuul swore against his stupidity as he ran from the hall to the bedchambers. He should have cut free the bridge first before dousing the lamps. He had thought he had more time, that the lights would lure the attackers. That they might climb the trunk the great tree if they found the bridge cut and the lights still glowing. He had been correct, but had judged the situation wrongly.

He ran through the doorway to the main hall and found his mate and daughter being pulled in opposite directions each by two wyrin soldiers. Two men dragged and beat his mate as they pulled her back toward the bedroom while the other two soldiers yanked his daughter toward the southern breakfast balcony. He slid to a stop between the two doors, frozen in fear and confusion. Whinara cried out to him from the balcony as one of the soldiers punched her in the head. Shahana screamed out their daughter’s name. He found himself unable to move, his mind unable to think, incapable of processing the choice he faced.

Then his feet moved, as though willed by some other mind, carrying him through the door to the breakfast balcony, blade lashing out. A sword blocked his own as he watched his daughter tumble from the balcony edge, thrown over by the soldier who had held her. Shifhuul’s thoughts fell quiet, seeing all but feeling nothing. He should have yelled in rage. Should have felt his heart tearing and burning like the fires dotting the tree houses beyond the balcony. Should have ached

with unfathomable loss. Instead, he felt utterly empty, devoid of all possible emotion — a riverbed drained dry and baked hard to stone beneath an unforgiving sun.

The soldiers before him attacked.

Shifhuul had never wanted to excel at anything, but his natural inclinations led him to the sword and the bow. Both required a great deal of practice to master, and as a wyrin with little inclination for the work of his mother's merchant trade, he invested his time where he enjoyed it most. He found archery more gentlemanly and refined than swordsmanship, but against any great desire, he had become one of the best sword wielders in the southern territories.

His killed the two soldiers before they knew they were likely to die. He left them and walked in a strange, eerie calm to his bedchamber, where two more soldiers held his mate to the floor, one attempting to mount her. He killed them as well, his blade severing their heads before they knew to turn, their blood spraying across his chest, his mate, the mattress of the bed, and his boots.

"Where is she?" Shahana clutched at him as he stared back with dead eyes.

"Gone." The word took more effort to speak than any act in his entire life.

"No!" Shahana pounded at his chest and ran through the door to the breakfast balcony, leaning over to scream into the black air.

Shifhuul walked to the hallway and stood looking at his mate. When she finally turned to him, he cast his eyes away.

"Hide," he said.

"Where are you going?" Shahana sobbed as she spoke.

A distant part of him wanted to go to her, to hold her, to comfort her in her sorrow. A part of him wanted to share in that sorrow. He did not deserve to feel loss and pain. He deserved only regret and shame.

"To kill as many of them as I can."

Shifhuul turned from his mate, walked along the halls across the bridge to the main house, down the winding spiral stairs to the street below, and fulfilled that vow and pledge again and again until the sun warmed the rising air to send the dew falling from the leaves and signal the dawn of a new day and the end of his known life.

THE PRESENT

COLD STILLNESS, fired by memory, filled Shifhuul's mind and body, ceasing all linear thought and guiding his limbs in every lightning-swift motion. He did not yell a childish battle cry as the humans did; he simply ran, sword swinging and cutting and swinging again. He did not try to fight in some noble manner. He slashed at the backs of the human's knees as he ran behind them, and stabbed at their necks as they fell backward to the ground. He saw Yeth cry out as she took a blade to the arm she'd been wound in earlier that day. He heard a pounding of footsteps and the crunch of hard leather on packed earth behind him.

He ducked a blade and thrust upward into his assailant's groin, hearing a squeal of pain. He rolled to the side to avoid one blade, swinging his curved sword into the path of another. His arms rattled, and the metal of his sword bent against the impact of the larger, heavier steel.

Shifhuul slashed at the knee of a human and jumped up to swing at his head. His sword blade flew from his hands as pain exploded in his chest. He tumbled through the air, striking the wall of a house, his head slamming to the ground.

He could not think, the cold emptiness of his mind replaced with a hot agony from his chest. He reached his paw to his breastbone, feeling a damp, gaping gash. He struggled to breathe and fought to think. He had been wounded. A human had struck him. What human? Where?

He saw flames at the edge of his vision. Heard the calls of the yutan and the roagg. Saw the roagg above him, bleeding from the neck. Had they both been injured? Should they run? They should run. Back to the castle.

He did not think he could run.

The roagg spoke and lifted him up in his arms. He tried to reply, to complain at being carried like a pet squirrel, but his lungs did not work to give him air.

Rest. He would rest while the roagg hauled him back to the castle. He would need his strength to climb the rope. He had been good at climbing as a child. Yes, he would rest until they reached ... where were they going? It did not matter.

He thought about the things he missed as he waited to reach ... wherever they went. His daughter. He missed his daughter. Sweet Whinara, always asking to ride his back as a little one, always into mischief, so much like himself. Smart and quick to tease and to care. So much like his mate. His mate. He missed his mate. He wished she had not left him as she did, had not taken her life on the same balcony their daughter died falling from, but he did not blame her. How could she continue with life when the daughter she cherished so much lived no more, and the mate she loved had died inside, leaving her to grieve alone?

He missed ... what did he miss?

Where was he?

Who was he?

Blackness ate all thought and devoured all cares, leaving him once more in a place of cold emptiness.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Shifhuul's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE FUGITIVES



OGTANKAA

A ROILING cloud of blackness, churning and undulating, humming to vibrate the air, exploded in single-minded fervor as stale darkness opened to fresh air and firelight. Ogtankaa stepped back from the barn door as the swarm of black flies erupted into the glow of the lantern she held high above her head. She waited for the dark swarm to dissipate before entering the slat-walled barn. The smell that drew her to the barn pulled her toward the cellar, revealing what she expected to find — decomposed bodies, flesh eaten away by rodents and insects, maggots turned to flies in the remains. Five men. Soldiers. Weapons tossed in a pile near the corpses.

She left the barn, enjoying the scent from the untended vegetable garden nearby. She checked the house next, again finding what she expected. Stains that spoke of a bloody fight. A pantry raided quickly for supplies. The stink of her quarry lingered strongly, permeating the walls, emanating in waves from the bed and blanket in the corner. The odor of the soldiers hung in the air as well, rising even through the reek of lamp oil that covered the dried blood on the floorboards. Another aroma remained in the small farmhouse, one that Ogtankaa did not expect — two females.

What did that mean? Why would he travel with two women? Did he force them to accompany him? Had he killed them later? Would she find their bodies molting their flesh like the soldiers in the barn?

She sniffed the air again.

A woman and a girl, not two women. How could that be? Did he have a family? The females' smells did not emanate from the farmhouse the way the scent of her prey did. Not a family, then. A wave of relief spread through Ogtankaa at that realization. It would have implied things for which she had no explanation.

She searched the house for clues about her prey's life there and his possible destination after his departure. She checked a chest and found clothes. Rummaged the bed and discovered a Pashist prayer book. What did that mean? Did it belong to the woman? It clearly did not belong to her prey. Had he taken a Pashist priest or nun as captive? To what end? And why a girl? Was the girl the woman's child?

She found the false wall next, noting a dustless spot on the floor that had obviously once been occupied by a bag of some sort. Planning ahead, then. She knew him to be cunning, so this did not surprise her. He had not eluded her for so many years by being reckless. How had he

managed to curb his instincts and desires for so long? Had he discovered a way to cloak his essence?

Ogtankaa left the farmhouse, stuffing a few ripe tomatoes and carrots from the garden in her riding pouch. A snack for the road. She climbed into the saddle of one of her three mounts and headed back down the thin lane toward the dirt road, the horses strung together by ropes. She alternated the steeds every few hours to keep them from tiring too greatly. It allowed her to cover more ground in a day. It occasionally attracted the attention of bandits and once a greedy militia commander, but she dissuaded them of their interest easily.

Back on the road, she followed the narrow dirt path through the forest and fields of local farms. The town looked like the others in that region — clay bricks and thatched roofs. A few hundred people living close together, patches of land divided by rows of rocks in strips behind the houses. She spied a tower of stone farther up the road. A local tahn's small dominion within the Dominion. A crowd of pilgrims gathered at the edge of the town, making camp from their westward march. She had seen many pilgrim bands, both living and buried, along the roads she had traveled over the long weeks since redirecting her hunt. She understood what drove them, even if she could not share the dreams that motivated their journey. To seek something unseen and reveal it. The star that shone each night troubled her, but much less than the thought of losing her prey.

A near forgotten sense tingled at the back of her mind, dissimilar from the one that had resumed her hunt, but one she remembered instantly. It lasted only a moment, blinking in and out of existence. She looked northwest, facing the direction from where the sensation emanated. She turned back to look at the pilgrims, who were eating and talking by their campfires.

Ogtankaa smiled. She did not know the meaning of what she had experienced, but knew it to be related to her prey. How, she could not be certain, but she did not doubt the connection. She also knew now in what direction she needed to proceed.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link.](#)

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

“ARE YOU certain you can do this?”

“Yes.”

“What if they see you?”

“Then I will lead them away, and you will follow the river north.”

“Then what?”

“Then I will find you.”

Lee-Nin slapped quietly at a water gnat buzzing in her ear. She and Sao-Tauna crouched with Sha-Kutan behind a red viper bush growing along the shore near a bend in the river. The long shadows of early night hung over the water and darkened the forest around them. She saw the fishing boat with the wardens approaching the riverside pilgrim camp. Two men rowed while the others sat ready to disembark. Two dogs leaned out over the prow of the small vessel, enjoying the wind in their ears. The pilgrims noticed the wardens’ boat and sat watching the arrival as they finished their evening meal.

“You said you can always find us. How?” Lee-Nin had asked the question before, continually receiving vague answers. Her mind ached under the weight of Sha-Kutan’s ambiguous replies. She wanted to know how he could find them when he needed. How he had found her at the bottom of the river. Another part of her desired to know why she cared so much that he might find them again rather than simply fleeing with Sao-Tauna on her own. She ignored that inward inquiry.

“It is a gift.” Sha-Kutan did not take his eyes from the river. “It is impossible to explain. I sense where you are. That is all you need know.”

“Are you a seer?” Lee-Nin knew the big, ugly farmer to be more than he claimed. Farmers didn’t kill five wardens with their bare hands. A seer hiding as a farmer might. She’d watched him for signs that he possessed The Sight, but did not really know what to look for.

“No.” Sha-Kutan pulled his shirt over his head and kicked off his boots. The smell of male sweat and something else, something odd that always clung to the man, wafted through the air. She noted again the shiny skin of multiple scars that marked his chest, arms, and back. What had he done to gain such wounds? Had he been a soldier? A deserter escaped from the army, hiding as a farmer? She looked away with a slight blush as she realized how long she had been staring at the powerful brown flesh of his torso and arms. He handed her the clothes and boots.

“What do you think the pilgrims will say?” Lee-Nin looked back to the riverside camp, seeing the boat with their hunters nearing the shore.

“They will lie.” Sha-Kutan pulled off his socks and sat them atop the pile in Lee-Nin’s hands.

She wrinkled her nose at the odor, but said nothing. He clearly intended her to hold them until he returned, but it occurred to her that if he did not return, she could use the clothes to send the dogs on the wrong trail. She glanced again at the scars across his back. She’d prepare to flee alone, but she realized how much she appreciated the big, silent farmer’s company. And the added protection he provided for Sao-Tauna. He would not admit as much, but he seemed genuinely concerned for her.

“Why would they lie to wardens?” Lee-Nin watched as the men rowed the boat up to the sand and rocks of the river’s edge.

“Because they look like militiamen or bandits,” Sha-Kutan said. “They will not speak the truth to such men.”

“What about Chu-Ki?” Lee-Nin scanned the riverbank for the man in question. “That pile of fetid feces will easily betray us, especially if they offer a reward.”

“Chu-Ki went into the forest.” Sha-Kutan glanced back at her and Sao-Tauna. “He will not return from his walk.”

“What do you mean?” Lee-Nin turned to Sha-Kutan as he faced her.

“He will not rejoin the pilgrims,” Sha-Kutan said.

“What did you do?” Lee-Nin found her heart beating even faster than the pace set by the arrival of the wardens. Had there been a confrontation between Sha-Kutan and Chu-Ki? Had he threatened the man or told him to leave? Had he done something to the man? Would their disappearance and Chu-Ki’s be tied together in the pilgrims’ minds? These questions faded in importance as she realized the true significance of Sha-Kutan’s words. Fao-Ashi and Gao-Pai would never need to fear that loathsome man again.

“I did nothing.” Sha-Kutan glanced again at Sao-Tauna, then turned his eyes back to Lee-Nin. “I must go. If I do not succeed, I will make certain the men cannot follow you. Take the girl and find another pilgrim band.”

“Take care,” Lee-Nin said.

Sao-Tauna reached out to briefly touch the big man’s hand. He nodded to them both, then turned and slid into the river, taking a deep breath and sinking beneath the water. Lee-Nin scanned the water’s surface, looking for any sign of his progress, but he swam too deeply to be seen in the shadowed waters. As she watched the wardens step from the boat and pull it up onto the shoreline, she wondered how he hoped to swim such a distance without surfacing for air. She sat the clothes on the ground and took Sao-Tauna’s hand in her own, counting the seconds since Sha-Kutan entered the water. As the numbers accumulated in her mind, she thought about his words regarding Chu-Ki. Had he killed the man? She would feel no sorrow if he had. She had strived to forget the ways she had known men like Chu-Ki. The world would not notice the absence of one black-hearted man, but the woman and girl he terrorized would. She could not

forget, either, what it felt like to have such a man hold power over her, and how an unexpected death could change the course of one's life.

SEVEN YEARS AGO

STARS GLISTENED through the haze of a thin, early autumn fog, the smoke of thousands of chimneys blurring the stars bright enough to burn through the mist above the roofs. Bon-Daanka watched the stars through the open window, focusing on the brightest one, the Fortune Star, the star sailors used to guide them on nights like these, when heavy air closed in around their ships and trimmed visibility to naught. She imagined what it would be like to sail on a ship, to cross a sea, ignoring the moment she lived in so she might live another for a brief time.

She disregarded the low flickering of a lamp with too little oil in its basin, the dank stink of sweat in the room, the lumpy mattress beneath her back, the grunting of the man atop her, the stench of ale and rotten teeth wafting from his mouth. She ignored all this to think about the legend of Ju-Nee, the woman pirate of the southern seas, a story she had read many times by lamplight in the small hours of the night, one of the stories in the old book hidden beneath the floorboards under the bed.

The man finished his rutting, disengaged himself from her, and sat on the edge of the mattress. He said nothing, standing to pull up his trousers, taking a coin from a pouch and tossing it in the clay jar on the stand by the window. He nodded to her and left, failing to close the door.

Bon-Daanka wiped herself clean and pulled a plain, faded blue cotton dress over her head. No one new entered, which meant the night grew late and the men too drunk to seek satisfaction for their other desires. She gathered up the coins from the jar, tucked them in the hidden pouch in the folded skirt of her dress. She did not need to count the money. It did not belong to her. Nothing belonged to her. Not the bed, not her dress, not her own body. Even the book beneath the floorboards had been stolen.

At age ten, her father sold her to a wealthy merchant family as a servant. She learned to read by eavesdropping on the lessons the tutor gave the merchant's sons. After four years, she grew tired of the beatings and reading the same books and ran away, stealing her favorite collection of tales to take with her. To-Dang found her not long after her escape, living on the streets, thieving food from vendors during the days and hiding in alleys at night. He had offered her a bed and a meal in return for work cleaning. Accustomed to hard work, she accepted the offer. As the days passed, the labor her new master demanded of her changed. When she did not understand what he required of her, he took the time to show her. He showed her often. Other men showed her as well, and paid To-Dang for the privilege.

It did not take long for Bon-Daanka to run away and it did not take long for To-Dang to track her down. He beat her so badly that it took a week for her to recover. He did not care, as much of her work took place while lying in bed. The second time she fled, he found her again and it took two weeks to recuperate. The third time, he nearly killed her and promised to do so if she ran away again.

She did not run again, and as the days turned to months and the months to years, she forgot about the girl who ran away, did not remember what she looked like or thought like or desired. She became the husk of an abandoned fruit — the inner world of her mind growing to replace the outer world her body inhabited.

Bon-Daanka walked down the stairs of the small, two-story house, hearing familiar noises from the other rooms. She skipped the bottom stair, as if it didn't exist, and headed through the door into the street. She wanted to find To-Dang and give him his money so he had no excuse to come looking for her later. He did not drink as much as other men and had appetites less easily sated than most.

She crossed the street, ignoring the calls of two men propping each other up as they stumbled over the uneven stones of the lane. Bon-Daanka headed for the alley directly across from the door of the tuss house, as the locals caustically named it. To-Dang would be there, making appointments for still sober customers, selling jinla weed to those looking for something other than ale to dull their existence for a few hours, and dealing with his other business endeavors while seated on an old ale barrel.

Bon-Daanka sensed a wrongness with her first footstep into the shadows. To-Dang did not sit at his customary place on the barrel at the opening of the alley. As her eyes adjusted to the darkness, her ears told her two people stood farther into the narrow path between houses. She heard someone struggling, fingernails scraping against stone, a gurgled breath.

"To-Dang?" She walked past the barrel into the alley, the scent of rotten wood and stale piss stinging her nose. She saw a woman pressed against the wall, To-Dang's arm jammed against her neck, his hand squeezing at her throat. "To-Dang!"

Bon-Daanka did not know why her master strangled the woman, but she knew she needed to intercede. As she ran down the alley, she saw the cut of the woman's dress in the dim light and realized To-Dang did not assault one of the other girls from the house. The trim of the cloth looked too fine, even in near darkness, to be a tuss girl's attire. The woman must have gotten lost in the warren of streets on the west side of the town and ended up in the wrong alley.

"The coin, bitch, the coin!" To-Dang shook an empty leather bag in his other hand. The woman grasped at the man's fingers on her neck, but could not breathe enough to speak. Bon-Daanka noticed books and clothes lying in the dirt of the alley at the woman's feet.

"To-Dang, yer kill'n her." Bon-Daanka stepped forward, placing her hand on her master's arm, hoping to calm him. When he got in a rage, he often did not think clearly. She had seen him beat a man to death once for not paying a girl. It had not been about the money but some other matter earlier in the day that left him angry.

"I'll be killing you if ya don't piss off." To-Dang released the woman long enough to turn and punch Bon-Daanka in the stomach.

She crumpled to the ground, gasping for air. Through teary eyes, she watched To-Dang grab the woman and beat her about the head with one hand while strangling her with another. The woman went limp after the second blow.

“I knows ya gots more coin than that. Where’s it?” To-Dang shook the near unconscious woman. “That dress. The books. Ya got the coin. Is it under yer skirts?” To-Dang pulled up the woman’s dress, her pale legs flashing in the dim light.

Bon-Daanka struggled to climb back to her feet, pushing at the ground with her hands. As she rose, her fingers found something square and hard beside them. She clasped it in her hand as she stood to her feet, swinging her arm at To-Dang’s head. The brick came to an arm-shuddering stop, a wet cracking sound preceding To-Dang’s collapse to the ground, his hat flying from his head. She stared at To-Dang as he blinked and held his head.

“Yer dead, bitch!” To-Dang pulled his hand away from his scalp, red-black wetness oozing between his fingers.

Bon-Daanka’s limbs shook, fire burning her skin as ice numbed her muscles. What had she done? She looked into To-Dang’s eyes and her bladder went weak, urine dribbling down her inner thigh as he leaned forward to push himself up to his knees. In that moment, that half breath between thoughts and actions, a voice spoke in her mind, a voice long forgotten but with a tone and character that resonated within her. A voice that had once been hers. A voice that had once told her what she desired and what to say and what to do. That voice spoke to her with a simple command.

Hit him again.

Bon-Daanka swung the brick in her hand with all her strength, hitting To-Dang in the temple. He fell back to the ground, cursing. Bon-Daanka knelt swiftly at his side, bringing the brick once more down upon his skull. She hit him for every time he had beaten her. She hit him for every time he had raped her. She hit him for every time he took money to let other men rape her. She hit him until she realized he no longer moved, no longer had a face, and that blood now covered her arms.

She looked at To-Dang, but did not recognize his features. Little of his head remained intact. She dropped the brick and leaned back on her heels, her breath ragged and uneven. To-Dang no longer owned her. He lay dead before her. She had killed him. She no longer had a master.

Bon-Daanka’s heart beat faster at the thought of freedom. Could she run again? Would To-Dang’s associates try to find her? Could she get far enough away? It took her a moment to remember the woman, the reason she had begun this strange new journey.

She went to the woman, checking her breathing, placing her ear to the woman’s chest. The woman’s lungs did not move. Her heart did not beat. Her eyes did not see Bon-Daanka’s tears or her shaking hands as they closed the woman’s eyes.

As she turned away, Bon-Daanka noticed the books and clothes that had fallen from the woman’s leather bag. She wiped her bloody hands on her dress and slowly examined the books. She could barely read the ink on the inner pages in the dim alley light, but the words set her mind afire. *The History of the First Dominion, The Philosophies of Fin-Han-Ro, The Pillars of Heaven, Grammar Rules and Forms, Legends and Fables of Hin-Ma-Ter.* This last she recognized. The floorboard in her room hid a copy of the same text.

A folded piece of paper fell from between two of the books as she held them in her hands. A letter. She opened it carefully, using the edges of her dress sleeves to make sure she did not get blood on it. She held the paper up close to her eyes, straining to read the flowing script and sound out their words in the meager light of the alley.

“Mizen Lee-Nin. I have received your letter and those of your sponsors with great pleasure. Your services are much required. Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi’s children are in need of a tutor of high learning, superior breeding, and eloquent elocution. I believe you are the perfect candidate for the position and request you make all haste to arrive as quickly as possible so the children’s betterment may begin in earnest. Yours in all appreciation, Hu Pell-Nan, personal assistant to Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi.”

Bon-Daanka lowered the letter, looking down as her mind assessed its contents. The dead woman, Mizen Lee-Nin, slumped against the wall. *A tutor.* Her books and clothes sat piled in the ground. *For children.* To-Dang’s bloodied body lay crumpled in dust.

A phrase came to her mind. One To-Dang often repeated. Something he had picked up from a wealthy client. *Best to quickly clasp Father Fortune’s surreptitious bounty and abscond before Mother Fate arrives with an offering of her own.*

Bon-Daanka considered these words from a new perspective.

He cannot follow.

A tutor with a position.

I could disappear.

Clothes and books and a letter.

I could become this woman.

Bon-Daanka touched the money in the pouch of her skirts. She bent down and felt along To-Dang’s waist, finding his coin purse in his pocket. Two coin purses. The woman’s as well. She judged the weight of all the coins she held. Enough to rent a room in an inn on a better side of town. Bathe. Clean the woman’s clothes and hire a carriage to the capital city of Tsee-Kaanlin.

She cleaned herself with water from a nearby alleyway rain barrel. Then she pulled her dress off over her head and began to tug the woman’s clothes and boots free from her dead body. Once dressed in the woman’s clothes, and her own dress yanked haphazardly onto the dead woman’s limbs, she packed the clothes and books and letter into the leather bag. She took enough coins for a room, put them in one of the purses, placed it on top of the bag, and closed the flaps. She took the rest of the coins, put them in the second purse, and strapped it tightly to her inner knee, making sure it did not jingle.

Bon-Daanka looked down again at the bodies of the woman and To-Dang, her stomach souring as she realized the flaw in her plan. She hoped to leave the impression that robbers attacked herself and To-Dang, leaving both dead. Unfortunately, while she and the woman were of roughly equal size, no one who knew her would mistake the woman for her corpse. She bit her lip, dizziness making her swoon for a moment before she regathered her fortitude.

She picked up To-Dang's hat, placed it over the woman's face, and grasped hold of the brick. A few moments later, she pulled back the hat, retching, her mouth filling with bile as she saw the effects of her efforts. The dead woman could now be any girl, could be Bon-Daanka.

She stood up, straightening her skirt, the dress of a dead woman. She would take more than the dead woman's dress and money and books.

"Ya can do this, Bon-Daanka," she said aloud to firm her nerve. She stopped, took a deep breath, remembering the way her old merchant masters from her childhood used to speak, and breathed her words again.

"You can accomplish this, Lee-Nin."

She followed the alley toward the back, carrying the leather bag, wincing at the pinch of the dead woman's boots, walking out into the street, into the night, into her new life.

THE PRESENT

CAMPFIRES CAST ripples of flickering orange across dark, swift water, beneath a dun-black sky. Lee-Nin watched as the wardens spoke with the first group of pilgrims near a campfire. She recognized the warden commander's face in the firelight. A persistent man. Too much so. Too often, men had determined her future. Her father. Her first master. To-Dang. Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi. And this warden commander. She determined her own future now, although she might accept help from one man.

She looked back to the river. Sha-Kutan still had not surfaced from his swim. How could the man hold his breath so long? She noticed something in the water near the back of the wardens' boat. Sha-Kutan's head looked like a massive turtle risen from the depths of the river to bob beside the fishing vessel. As she watched, the boat slid away from the shore and into the current.

She flicked her eyes to the wardens at the campfire. The commander spoke to several of the pilgrim men. The majority of the pilgrims hung back, creating a ring around the armed men. Sha-Kutan appeared correct in his assessment of the pilgrims' response to interrogation about a man, a woman, and a girl. She saw the men shaking their heads at the wardens and casting their arms wide to indicate the whole band of pilgrims. None of the wardens noticed the boat drifting downstream. The pilgrims kept their eyes turned away from the water to focus on the men with the swords standing in their camp.

The fishing boat floated a hundred paces downriver before the wardens discovered its absence. The commander shouted, and his men ran to the riverbank. Lee-Nin strained her eyes, but saw no sign of Sha-Kutan. She could not tell if he swam below the boat, or on the far side of it where the wardens could not see.

She clutched the big man's clothes and boots to her chest, and slung the canvas bag over her shoulder, grunting slightly at the weight. It held little more than Sha-Kutan's sword, but that weighed plenty. She took Sao-Tauna's hand and led the girl through the trees along the water, farther north from the bend. She risked a glance back to see that the wardens had apparently

abandoned the boat, turning their concerns and anger toward the pilgrims. She saw one of the wardens marching to where the pilgrims tied their horses for the night. They would likely steal the mounts they needed. As she led Sao-Tauna through the woods, she said a short, silent prayer that the wardens did not harm the pilgrims. Only after she prayed did she wonder what god she petitioned.

At the water's edge, Sao-Tauna squeezed her hand tightly. The girl did not like to swim. Lee-Nin picked her up and waded into the water as the fishing boat approached. She looked again toward the pilgrim campsite, seeing nothing but the occasional flicker of firelight through the shadowed trees. The bend in the river protected them completely from view. Sha-Kutan stood up in the shallows next to the boat and guided it near the shore. Lee-Nin sat Sao-Tauna on one of the two benches and placed the clothes and canvas sack beside her. Five paces long and two paces wide, the boat held benches at either end with a wide-open middle piled with old nets. Two oars tilted from the oarlocks in the hull to rest inside the boat. Several leather bags also sat in the space normally occupied by fish. The wardens' supplies, no doubt. Lee-Nin smiled at the small victory of robbing the men who wished her and Sao-Tauna dead.

As she placed her palms on the edge of the boat, preparing to heave herself inside, she felt two hands around her waist and stiffened. Sha-Kutan lifted her up out of the water, and she raised her knees over the hull of the boat. He sat her down on the bench beside Sao-Tauna, giving balancing weight as he lifted a leg over the side and climbed aboard.

The craft sank noticeably under the large man's weight. He grabbed the oars, easing them quietly into the water and pulling hard against them. The boat lurched into motion, Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna both leaning back as Sha-Kutan propelled them downriver.

"Do you want your clothes?" Lee-Nin held up his shirt.

"When I am dry." Sha-Kutan pulled at the oars with the same effortless strength he had displayed in hefting her into the boat.

She did not like to admit it, but occasionally, it proved helpful to have the ugly brute around. Maybe more often than occasionally.

"I'm glad your plan worked." She ignored the rippling of his muscles glistening damp in the pale light of the stars, focusing on his mangled face. "And we have their supplies."

"Yes." Sha-Kutan looked upriver. "They will steal the pilgrims' horses and the supplies they need and head north before dawn. They know where we are headed. They cannot fail to note how often we have been with the pilgrims."

"True." Lee-Nin glanced up the river as well. Travel with the pilgrims offered a certain protection and anonymity that traveling alone would not provide the three fugitives, but it also made any pilgrim band a target for their pursuers. "We could try to travel alone. We are not that far from Tanjii."

"We could change our destination." Sha-Kutan's eyes found hers, revealing nothing of the thoughts behind them.

"Star people." Sao-Tauna looked back at Sha-Kutan. He squinted at the girl but said nothing, continuing to row.

Lee-Nin made no comment either. It seemed madness to let a young, strangely quiet and reserved child determine the course of their proposed escape, but she had no better idea of where to hide than Tanjii, or a pilgrim ship to the Forbidden Realm. At least there, far across the ocean, she would likely die at the hands of the urris for violating the millennium-old Pact rather than a warden seeking to slit her throat for helping Sao-Tauna survive her father's murderous rage. She pondered again why the tahn wanted his daughter dead. What threat did the girl pose? She could not imagine the child to be more dangerous than the man who sat rowing them downriver. She wondered whether he suspected how dangerous Lee-Nin could be. Best to make sure that he didn't, in the event she needed to defend her life, and the girl's future, as she had all those years ago.

She smiled at him. He nodded back, and she suddenly experienced a wave of shame for thinking about killing him, the one man in all her life who had not tried to harm or use her in any way. The one man who actually risked himself to save her and Sao-Tauna. The shame turned to curiosity as she again wondered what motivated him to help them when someone else likely pursued him. Could it be merely convenient self-interest? Could it be compassion?

She let these thoughts fill her mind as the sound of the oars repeatedly dipping into the water lulled her to sleep. She curled up on the fishing nets beside Sao-Tauna, trusting Sha-Kutan to keep them safe until dawn, realizing as she fell asleep that she had never trusted anyone and how odd it felt that he should be the one she finally found faith in.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Lee-Nin's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE CARNIVAL



YETH

SHADOW-BLACK LEAVES and branches shuddered and swayed, slapping fur and flesh in hasty passage. Yeth looked back through the trees of the forest as she ran. The humans followed. Not close, but too close to stop. Ahead of her, Tarak carried the wounded Shifhuul in his arms as they crashed through the woods, taking no heed to conceal their trail. They needed to return to the castle with all haste. While they could potentially hide in the woods if they got far enough away, their absence would unbalance and undermine Leotin's leadership.

They also required time for Yeth to use The Sight to heal the wound sapping the life from the diminutive wyrin. The gash in Shifhuul's chest would take considerable time and effort for her to alter through The Sight. More time than available to them if they tried to stop and hide. Their only hope to save the wyrin lay in getting back to the castle and finding someplace secluded for her to heal him.

"How close?" Tarak spoke over his shoulder, his voice ragged with anger.

Yeth looked back again. The torches of the human militiamen wavered through the trees several hundred paces behind her.

"They are closing the gap. We are making our trail too easy to follow." Yeth considered taking the wyrin from the roagg's arms, as she had more experience in hiding her trail in a forest, but she knew the roagg could bear the added weight much easier at the speed they ran. The thought of splitting up to divide and confuse their pursuers also occurred to her, but she discarded it. If they did not both reach the castle in time, the wyrin would surely die. And he had risked his life to save hers. Without his actions, she had no doubt she would be dead, skewered by a human sword like the one she had so poorly wielded. If the wyrin lived, she would ask him to teach her the weapon. As the past minutes showed her, she might not always have her spear at hand to rely upon. And she simply did not command the concentration necessary to use The Sight while defending against an armed opponent and brandishing an unfamiliar weapon.

Yeth followed Tarak as they ran from the forest and into the cornfield behind the castle. They did not bother to hunch down, and they raced straight for the north-facing wall. Haste concerned them more than concealment. She could hear the shouts of the humans behind her, but did not waste the time to look back. It would not change the distance between hunter and quarry, and they could run no faster without fear of further damaging the wyrin's racked body.

As they broke from the cover of the corn stalks, she saw slender black shapes darting above her in the sky. She looked up to find the humans along the castle wall firing arrows at the militiamen chasing her and the roagg. The two humans who had pretended to be militiamen stationed in the field ascended the ropes dangling down the side of the castle.

Tarak reached the wall first, slinging the unconscious wyrin over his shoulder as he clasped both massive paws around the rope. He pulled himself up, using his feet to scrabble against the uneven stone of the fortification and assist in his ascent.

Yeth grabbed the second rope, pulling herself up arm over arm, using her feet to balance herself, favoring her doubly wounded left shoulder. The cut she'd sustained during the attack of the castle soldiers had been easy to staunch and bandage. However, she'd lost considerable blood from where the militiaman's blade slid through the flesh of the same arm, the pain and the weakness of the limb slowing her. While she had made the same sort of climb many times as a Sight Scout, and in her training years ago, the act still left her muscles burning halfway up. Tarak did not slow beside her, the strength in his arms seeming inexhaustible. She saw more arrows fly from the top of the wall as one from the pursuing militia shattered against the stone beside her head.

"Hurry!"

Yeth looked up again at the sound of Palla's voice. The human female and Leotin tugged at the rope holding her, hoping to aid her climb. She saw the castle commander, Pi-Gento, and two other humans pulling at the rope Tarak climbed. As she yanked at the rope in her hands, an arrow lodged in Tarak's back. He grunted but ignored it, continuing to pull himself up the wall.

Another arrow clattered against the stones beside Yeth as she reached the top of the wall. Palla grasped her hand and pulled her up between the crenellations of the parapet. She landed on her knees and crawled along the walkway atop the wall to where Tarak laid Shifhuul on the flagstones. She placed her hands on the wyrin's side, pulling his shirt back to examine the wound. Blood stained his fur and clothes. Too much blood. She rested her hand on his chest, feeling for a heartbeat. She found a weak pulse, noting the shallowness of his breath. She glanced up to find a ring of eyes looking down at her.

"What happened?" Palla asked as she knelt beside Yeth.

"A sword. He fought bravely. He saved me." Yeth looked back to Shifhuul's chest, watching as the movement of his lungs slowed.

"Will he live?" Tarak placed a wide paw on the wyrin's small head.

"He is fading." Yeth looked deep into Tarak's eyes. The roagg said nothing. He knew what it would mean for her to use The Sight in the presence of so many humans, especially the locals. The humans of the Kam-Djen faith abhorred The Sight. They would see her as worse than the pilgrims they named heretics and sought to burn alive. Leotin might be able to protect her for a time, but it would make travel in the carnival difficult if not impossible.

Yeth looked down to Shifhuul, her hand still resting on his chest. She recognized this moment as one she had already lived. The blood ... The wound ... The choice.

ONE YEAR AGO

THE ACRID smoke of damp wood tinged with burnt moss drifted between the leaves of low-hanging branches. The smell tickled Yeth's nose as she crouched silently behind the trunk of a garn tree, the acidic sap of the rough bark abrading and burning the exposed flesh of her arm. She ignored the pain and watched the yutan male seated ten paces away by a fire in a small clearing.

She calmed her breath, stilled her mind, and held The Sight. In her hands, she clasped an arrow nocked to the string of a red yew bow. The vision of The Sight helped her see how to land the arrowhead exactly where she wished even as The Will would assist in its placement. She needed only to await the proper moment. A moment she determined through the soft counting of numbers within her mind. When she reached 100, she would act in unison with her two fellow Sight Scouts, who even now held positions around the yutan male's camp.

They had tracked the male named Fell for three months through forests and fields and marshes, nearly losing him twice. Yeth did not believe in losing a quarry and both times reconnected with the trail. Moreover, she did not believe in allowing a yutan so dangerous to run free. For more than twenty years, she had tracked and retained criminals with the help of her Sight Scout comrades, but never one as vile and violent as Fell. Larger than most yutan males, well skilled in combat, and possessed of a frightening ability with The Sight, Fell had set himself up as leader over a remote pod in the Western Panth region, killing those who stood in the way of his rule. The Great Western Pod had cast a decree against him, sending a band of Sight Scouts to take him into custody. He fled before they arrived, leading to the long weeks of pursuit Yeth now hoped to finish. She preferred to close the chase by ending Fell's life, but the Supreme Pod had laws, and its agents followed those laws. Criminals faced justice in all cases. Even though she had lost three of the scouts under her command to an encounter with Fell a week prior, she would uphold the Supreme Pod's laws. The loss of her yutan comrades stung her pride, and the deaths of close friends wounded her heart. It would require great restraint not to kill Fell.

As the count in her mind neared the hundred mark, an arrow flashed through the firelight to graze the leather of Fell's jerkin where he sat by the fire. From the position the arrow originated, Yeth knew the archer to be Lanth, the youngest of the scouts, and the most skittish in the field. He had counted too quickly, setting the plan in motion in pieces rather than a united action. Fell rolled to the ground as another arrow flew toward him, striking a log in the fire instead of his chest. An arrow from Joth, the second scout left in Yeth's band. He should have waited for Fell to attack the known intruder. More impatience and more problems.

As Fell stood and reached out his arms, two large shapes flew through the trees, branches breaking in their tumbling path. Yeth watched in amazement at Fell's power. Lanth and Joth flew to his hands as though someone had tossed him two kitith balls. The scouts fought back with The Sight, attempting to arrest their flight with little result. They slowed, but did not stop until Fell's hands clasped their throats.

Yeth stood and drew the arrow to her cheek in a single, silent motion, aiming carefully as Fell grasped the two scouts about the neck with each hand. As he held them at arm's length, squeezing the life from them, their hands clawing at his fingers, Yeth took aim. Patience had only ever been possible for her in relation to the hunt, but within that singular aspect of her life, she abandoned herself to it. She waited for Fell to move slightly as Joth and Lanth struggled. Seeing her mark, she let the arrow fly, adding The Will to The Sight, increasing the speed and force of the arrow's trajectory.

The steel arrowhead slammed into Fell, driving through leather armor and flesh to lodge in his shoulder. Yeth ignored the temptation to add the power that would push the arrow clean through. She needed the poison on the arrowhead to enter Fell's blood. He roared in pain, using The Sight to fling Lanth and Joth into nearby trees. The two scouts struck the trunks head first, falling to the forest floor, motionless.

Yeth ignored her concern for her fellow scouts and friends and nocked another arrow as Fell yanked her first shaft from his shoulder. The poison needed time to work, and she needed to get at least one more arrow into him before he would succumb to the toxin and fall unconscious. As Yeth made to raise the bow and draw the string, her feet slid from beneath her, and her body leapt into the air. Fell had found her location in the forest glade and, hands outstretched, hauled her to him with The Sight.

Branches lashed at her face and limbs, knocking the bow from her hand. She disregarded the impulse to try and fight the momentum of her flight with The Sight, instead adding to it, pushing herself faster toward the yutan killer she had hunted for so many months. As she broke through the trees and into the clearing, she grasped the hilt of her belt dagger with the will of her mind, sending it flying free of the sheath, its blade slamming into Fell's chest even as she collided with his hands.

The double impact of Yeth's body and the blade of her dagger sent Fell crashing to the ground, Yeth atop him, rolling through the small campfire, embers bursting into the air. They came to rest with Fell astride Yeth, his eyes blinking in wonderment as he looked to the dagger hilt poking from his chest. Yeth focused her mind and will, pushing him away with The Sight. Wounded, the blade likely piercing his heart, Fell rolled away to lie on his back, staring up at the branches of the trees.

Yeth leapt to her feet and stood beside the criminal, keeping a safe distance from his hands. She used The Sight to pull a long hunting knife from the scabbard at his waist, the hilt soaring quickly into her fingers. As she watched him, he turned his eyes to her.

"I'll kill you. All of you." The color drained from Fell's face as blood continued to throb from the wound in his chest, his thick leather vest becoming slick with blood.

Yeth said nothing. She glanced at Lanth and Joth, their motionless bodies illuminated by the still burning logs of the campfire now scattered around the clearing. Joth's neck bent at an unnatural angle, his eyes unfocused, seeing nothing. She could not see Lanth's face, but his chest moved with breath, indicating he still lived. She looked back to Fell, knowing what she should do, what her training and the laws of the Supreme Pod demanded.

“I know your plan.” Fell’s hand rose to rest on the blade in his chest. “Heal me. Keep me sleeping with The Sight and potions. It won’t work. You’re too far from home. I’ll wake one night and kill you as you slumber, and take you after you’re dead.”

Yeth knelt beside Fell, placing the tip of the hunting knife in the soft forest loam. She watched him fade from consciousness as she considered his words. She harbored no doubt he would attempt to kill her and Lanth again if he could. She also knew he would likely succeed. Observing the rise and fall of his chest, she thought about the Supreme Pod and the laws she had sworn to enforce — the male and female yutan scouts she had lost tracking the criminal dying before her — the innocent yutans he had killed over the years. The law demanded she heal him and bring him back to face trial. She could do that. Her strength in The Sight had always been stronger in healing than wounding or warping reality in large ways. She could repair Fell’s wounds and try to keep him in a mindless sleep for the weeks it would take to carry him to the city of Gerhanach and the Great Pod Court. Could, but would not.

Yeth noted the cessation of Fell’s breathing, his chest falling still, the air growing quiet in the glade. She watched him die and then pulled her dagger from his ribs, wiping the blade clean on his trousers. Then she tended to Lanth, the young yutan waking to weep at the loss of yet another companion, his eyes wide as she recounted her decision to let the criminal die instead of facing trial.

As the sun rose, giving a dim light to the forest, they buried the criminal and their friend in graves on opposite sides of the glade, speaking the [Aasho death prayer](#), petitioning Kiv the Destroyer to claim the yutans and guide them to Onn the Creator to be reborn into better lives, guided by Tam the Sustainer. Burial ended, they began the long journey home for Yeth to face the consequences of her choice.

THE PRESENT

“HE FOUGHT well and died with honor.”

Yeth heard Tarak’s voice but did not look to it, keeping her eyes on the slender, breathless chest of the wyrin.

Shifhuul’s death — her choice.

Patience.

“We must build a pyre.” Yeth looked up to the faces of Leotin and Palla. “The wyrins burn their dead within the hour.”

“A militia is still outside the gate wanting in.” Pi-Gento spoke from where he stood by the wall, a bow clutched in his hand.

“It is their custom, and he saved my life.” Yeth rose to her feet, looking down at the human soldier. “I will tend to his pyre and make the preparations.”

“I will assist you.” Tarak made to stand, his black lips pulling tight across his muzzle, teeth glinting in the dim light as he winced with the pain of the arrow in his back right shoulder.

“I will help as well.” Palla stepped forward from the others. Among all the humans, she had always been most comfortable around the outlanders.

“No.” Yeth scooped up the wyrin’s limp body in her arms. She looked to Tarak. “You are injured. Tend to your wound.” She turned her gaze to Palla. “Help him remove the arrow. Stich the wound. And Pi-Gento is correct. The militia has lost their leader and the battering ram, but they still can do much to attack us, and we have much work yet to set our defenses. Help the others. I will tend to the wyrin’s funeral pyre. I am familiar with the rituals from my travels.”

Palla and Tarak nodded. The other humans looked on in silence as Leotin placed a hand on her shoulder, the first time he had ever made physical contact with any of the outlanders.

“Thank you for what you have done.” Leotin placed his other hand on Tarak’s massive forearm. “You have saved us at a great cost.” Leotin took his hands from Yeth and Tarak to briefly hold Shifhuul’s paw as it dangled from the side of his lifeless body.

Yeth said nothing, walking back along the wall with Shifhuul’s corpse in her arms. She had made her choice, and she would live with it and all the consequences that arose from that decision. She would because she had to. Because she did not follow laws and did not obey customs. She did what needed to be done in the moment for the greater good, for the good of the whole, a wider vision that could not be embraced from the confinement of a single pod or a scout pack. She did what she knew to be right, even when it felt as wrong as every evil she had ever encountered.

Yeth carried Shifhuul down the stairs of the tower, bearing the wyrin’s dead body and her own dark thoughts into the castle cellars to find what she required.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

THE SEER



KELLATRA

“HE WILL come for you soon.”

“I hope to be gone by then.”

Kellatra brushed a firefly from her arm as she watched the stars slowly dance across the black night sky, a cotillion of constellations outshone by a lone luminous ruby light pirouetting among them. She sat on the porch of the cabin in an old chair beside Tamateraa, her former mentor, as she had each night since her arrival three days prior. Each day, she and the old woman pored over *The Unseen Codex*, attempting to pry the book’s secrets into the open. Tamateraa had spent much of her fifty years of study at the Academy of Sight investigating the codex, reading about it in dusty tomes, hunting down scraps of rumors in far dominions. Kellatra had studied under her for three years before her retirement. While rumors had always persisted that the Academy of Sight held *The Unseen Codex* in secret, neither ever found evidence of its existence in the library vaults.

A friend in the City of Leaves had sent the elder scholar a night jay detailing the publicly known and alleged events of Kellatra’s departure. Most of these allegations focused on her and the fires that killed the council members. Tamateraa had been surprised and elated beyond expression when Kellatra presented *The Unseen Codex*. Days of fruitlessly examining the book’s 108 pages turned that elation to annoyance. She knew her father had teams of seers searching for the codex. He no doubt already had men out searching for Tamateraa’s cabin. Only the fact that she enjoyed her privacy and never publicly announced the location of her retirement helped conceal them, for the moment.

“You should consider leaving soon.” Tamateraa sipped at a warm cup of tea. “We are making no progress together that you cannot make alone.”

“You’ve helped greatly.” Kellatra looked back through the window of the house. Jadaloo and Abananthus cleaned up from the evening meal by candlelight while Rankarus told stories to Lantili and Luntadus, lulling them to sleep on rolled blankets near the dead fireplace. “And the respite has been good for my family.”

“I have given you nothing but the same history lesson I offered fifteen years ago.” Tamateraa frowned at her tea as though the taste had grown suddenly bitter. “My knowledge helps you little.”

“There may be a clue in the history of the book that breaks the cipher.” Kellatra frowned as well. She had hoped Tamateraa’s knowledge of the text would assist in unraveling its secrets. It became clear after the first day poring over the pages that the key to the codex lay in decrypting its writing.

“We have been assuming it is a cipher for a common language,” Tamateraa said. “It is possible that it is written in a language never heard of, or one so old no record of it survives. Or, worse, that it is a cipher of such a language.”

“There must be a key to understanding it within the book itself.” Kellatra sipped at her own cup of tea, relaxing slightly as the warmth ran down her throat. “Why write something in such detail if you didn’t want anyone else to read it? We need to find a Kanhalla Stele.”

“We must consider what I always avoided contemplating,” Tamateraa looked to Kellatra, her eyes sad, the wrinkles of her face creased with concern. “The book may simply be a jest. An elaborate hoax to coax a ransom of coin from a gullible rhaga.”

“I don’t believe that.” Kellatra had not confided her suspicions that the book had something to do with the dreams and the new star. “The codex first shows up in the personal library of Rhaga Toranachlee more than six hundred years ago, but there is no suggestion he paid for it. The records show his father, Rhaga Koranachlee, a man of reputedly great learning and even greater frugality, acquired it somehow. I doubt such a man would fall for a hoax.”

“We all see what we want to see,” Tamateraa said with a sigh. “I waited all my life to hold this book, thinking I would view some deep secret of The Sight revealed in its pages. Now that I hold it, all I see is sadness. Sadness to know I will never live long enough to understand the meaning of these strange words and images, and sorrow knowing you may lose your life attempting to clasp on to it for the same reasons I should have released my desire for it long ago.”

“What do you mean?”

“I lost myself in investigating a mystery, turning away from the greater mysteries of life.” Tamateraa glanced over her shoulder toward the cabin and its occupants. “I became so obsessed in my quest that I abandoned my other desires for love and family. You have found both love and a family, yet you risk them all to pursue the unknown knowledge of a book you cannot read.”

Kellatra watched clumps of plum-colored clouds obscure patches of stars across the night sky — all save the brightest and reddest among them. Tamateraa’s words stung at her for their truthfulness. Did she risk too much?

“I am a danger to them.” Kellatra looked to see Rankarus stroking the children’s hair as he wooed them to slumber with some fantastical tale he no doubt invented as he spoke.

“No.” Tamateraa’s voice sounded firm. “The codex is a danger to them. You are their protector.”

Kellatra thought about this. What it implied. What she wanted to do. What she needed to do. What would be possible. What would be necessary.

“Two more days,” Kellatra said. “Two more days to study the book with you and then we’ll leave.”

“One day.” Tamateraa sipped her tea again and grimaced at the flavor. “One more day, and you leave at sunset and you take that damnable book with you.”

Kellatra looked to her old mentor, feeling a sadness birthing within her heart at departing from the woman. Tamateraa spoke the truth. She could not stay. Could not risk the lives of her family as a target for her father’s anger. Could no longer rekindle the lost friendship interrupted by a decade spent hiding in another land. Could no longer hear the comforting and encouraging words of a woman who became a mother to her with her true mother’s passing. Could no longer look into the eyes of one of the few who had supported her when she sought revenge on her mother’s murderer. She had to leave, but she would do her best to depart with happy memories for them both. It would be the last time they saw each other in these lives.

“Come.” Kellatra rose and offered her hand to Tamateraa. “A last game of koris.”

“Ah, good.” Tamateraa stood slowly, sighing with the creaking of her bones, her smile wrinkled but broad. “It has been years since I have taken all your cubes from the board.”

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Kellatra’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

THE SONGS of crickets and cicadas competed among the forest trees, the night shadows of the road spreading outward — ink spilled upon the land, soaking in for the night. The light of a lone fire fought back the blackness. Kadmallin walked toward the flames, noting the position of the men gathered around them. He did not need to count the men. He and Sketkee had scouted the camp an hour ago. There were ten bandits left from the group that had attacked their pilgrim band and stolen the artifact.

He approached the bandit camp slowly, giving the men time to hear his footsteps along the road, making certain he did not startle them. He kept his hands at his sides, away from the hilt of the sword at his waist. He wore only one blade that evening, Sketkee holding hers elsewhere. The bandits talked and laughed among themselves, eating pheasants roasted over the fire and drinking wine from a shared skin.

“Evening,” Kadmallin called out in the Shen language well before they could see him in the shadows. It seemed they felt it too early to post a guard.

“Who’s there?” one of the men yelled while two others stood to their feet, drawing swords.

“A traveler with a proposition.” Kadmallin raised his hands as he walked into the flickering light. “Nothing to fear but opportunity.”

“Whatcha want?” The man who had called out stood up and stepped forward. He appeared to be the leader of the bandit band. His beard held remnants of the pheasant he had been eating. He still clutched a leg bone in his hand.

“I come to offer a trade.” Kadmallin spoke evenly in soothing tones. The conversation would get tense all too soon.

“We look like tussin’ merchants to ya?” One of the seated men laughed.

“Aye, we’re merchants.” The bandit leader gave the seated man a hard glare, and the laughter died away. “Whatcha lookin’ ta trade?”

“A few nights ago, you attacked a pilgrim band and you took something I wish to acquire.” Kadmallin kept his eyes on the leader, but let his vision take in the rest of the men, noting how they tensed at the mention of the pilgrims.

“Ya must be confused, friend.” The bandit leader smiled, revealing yellowed teeth.

“I am not confused.” Kadmallin remained where he stood, hands in the air, resisting the urge to grab his sword as several more of the men rose to their feet. “You stole something from

one of the tents. A large crystal.” The men traded murmurs and cautious looks at the mention of the artifact. “I wish to purchase it from you. I will give you twenty gold coins for it. A fair deal.”

“Let’s say yer right.” The bandit leader pulled at his greasy beard. “Let’s say we got a crystal ball like ya says. What’s ta keep us from takin’ the coin from ya and keepin’ the crystal ball?” The bandit leader smiled his yellow smile again.

“Two things.” Kadmallin raised his voice slightly to make sure all the men heard him clearly. “Firstly, I do not have the coin on me. Only a fool approaches known bandits with coin in his purse. Secondly, you are familiar with the individual from whom you stole the crystal. You will, no doubt, remember a large rakthor, a lizard woman who killed your companions, who breathed fire and roasted them like pheasants on a spit.” Kadmallin pointedly turned his eyes toward the fire and the remains of the bandits’ meal.

“Aye. We remember.” The bandit leader fingered the hilt of the dagger in his belt.

“She is in the dark.” Kadmallin glanced back over his shoulder. “She wanted to wait until you were asleep. To attack in the night, kill you all, and take the crystal from your dead hands. I convinced her it would be best to negotiate and buy the crystal back.” Kadmallin saw a shadow move by the bandit’s stolen wagon but ignored it. The shadow did what it needed to do.

“We ain’t got it.” The bandit leader stepped back a pace, looking around Kadmallin, down the night-shrouded road. “We sold it.”

“When?” Kadmallin asked. “To whom?”

“A day ago.” The bandit leader eyed Kadmallin, clearly reappraising the danger the stranger represented. “We sold it to a merchant we know. Big man named Lan-Dal. He was in a town called Pai-Jowdee. Don’t know where he’s at now.”

Kadmallin stared at the man, judging his prevarication. He did not doubt the story; the fear in the bandit leader’s eyes gave weight to the truth of his words. His men seemed to share that dread. None wanted to face a fire-breathing lizard warrior to defend something they didn’t possess. Kadmallin reached into the narrow pocket of the vest he wore and removed a single gold coin. He held it up in two fingers and then tossed it to the bandit leader.

“For your trouble and the information.” Kadmallin did not wait to continue the conversation, turning and walking back into the darkness of the road. The bandit men did not call after him or make to follow. The coin insured that. They would feel compensated for their fear.

He walked for a thousand paces before a coal black shape a head taller than himself emerged from the woods to walk beside him.

“That worked quite easily.” Sketkee pulled the hood of her cloak back as they approached the tree where they had tethered the horses they purchased two days prior.

“I liked my plan better.” Kadmallin stroked the neck of his horse.

“Attacking to kill them in their sleep would have posed an unnecessary risk to both of us and wasted considerable time.” Sketkee’s horse shied away from her, and she raised her hood again. “Moreover, had we not managed to keep one alive to interrogate, we would not now know where to look for the artifact.”

“It doesn’t feel right to leave those bastards walking around.” Kadmallin put his foot in the stirrup and pulled himself into the saddle. “They’ll only kill more pilgrims. Rape more women and children. It’d be better if they were dead.”

“Did you not see me at the wagon?” Sketkee rose into the saddle, her horse nervously skittering sideways at her presence on its back.

“Of course.” Kadmallin pinched his legs against his horse’s side, and the beast began to trot along the road. “You searched their things as we planned.”

“Did you not notice the cask of wine in the wagon?” Sketkee brought her horse into line with Kadmallin’s with great difficulty.

“I had other things to concentrate on.” Kadmallin glanced sideways, amused at Sketkee’s riding skills and her obvious discomfort atop the horse. The rakhors did not like horses and horses did not like her, but the need to travel swiftly demanded steeds.

“The acuity of your observational skills seems to have diminished over the years.” Sketkee looked reprovingly at Kadmallin. “If you did not notice the wine then you clearly did not see me pouring poison into it.”

“Poison?” Kadmallin’s head snapped toward Sketkee. “What poison?”

“I discovered a bush near where we camped two days ago of kerikt berries, called ni-diang berries locally.” Sketkee’s voice displayed no hint of the smugness a human’s would have. “The berries are very deadly to your kind. I distilled them down into a concentrated poison while you slept. I thought it might be useful to have another, more subtle weapon at our disposal. The men will drink from the wine cask tonight, find themselves quietly sleepy, and be dead by morning.”

Kadmallin rode in silence for a while, considering what Sketkee told him. Why hadn’t she mentioned the full extent of her plan? Had she thought he might disapprove? Did she simply not think it important to explain that she intended to poison ten men? Even after so many years, he still did not know what she would do or why, even if he nearly always agreed with the result.

“Your plan was better.”

“Thank you.” Sketkee nodded toward Kadmallin. “Now we will need another plan to find this merchant Lan-Dal and retrieve the artifact.”

Kadmallin wondered if that plan would entail poisoning a merchant caravan and whether Sketkee could find berries that merely induced sleep rather than death.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kadmallin’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE CARNIVAL



SHIFHUUL

BLACKNESS, deep and seemingly eternal — an absence of light but not sensation. The musty aroma of subterranean depths. The fragrance of stale grain and aged root vegetables mixed with the pungent smell of rodent droppings. The distant sound of some indefinable action endeavored at by many hands echoing through corridors of stone. The taste of sour bile and blood. The firmness of wood beneath the spine, pressing into the bones and muscle weighing upon it.

The elation of expected endless release faded as coherent thoughts coalesced in Shifhuul's mind. This did not seem like death. He raised a paw in the darkness, seeing its vague outline before his eyes. He placed that paw upon his chest, remembering the sword that cut open his fur and flesh. He touched no wound, only the dull ache of a healing scar. His head hurt, but it still felt better than any of the long days on the ship from his homeland spent heaving his undigested food over the railing or shivering in his cabin as the intoxicating remnants of the loat seed oil he had smoked daily for months slowly left his blood.

The yutan. He had seen her use The Sight to send and receive reports from their masters, but had not expected her capable of such subtle seeing and willing. He did not remember much after the battle with the militia, but he had certainly *felt* dead. Now he lived. In darkness.

Why had they put him in the cellar and left him in the dark? An insult? For his protection? To give him time to heal? The yutan had unpredictable ways of repaying a debt.

He sat up slowly, his eyes drinking in the faint glow from beneath the door. Best to discover where his quarters were before finding out why he resided in them. To his surprise, the door opened when he pulled at it. A lantern hung on the stone wall far down a narrow corridor with several doors on both sides. He looked at himself in the light, seeing that his shirt had been removed, his pants and fur stained with blood. His blood. It made him long for a bath or a long dip in a pond. Even a rain shower would do. He detested filth, especially when it clung to his pelt.

He noted the absence of his sword belt and dagger, and felt thankful his boots still remained on his feet. Knowing that he had only two choices, walk above and discover what he could, or wait for someone to come and tell him the meaning of his dark confinement, he chose the one path his nature allowed. As he walked along the corridor, his stomach rumbled, confirming the wisdom of his decision.

The corridors ended in a stairwell, a dark mountain of stone steps spiraling upward toward the light. As he climbed, it became clear that the light did not emit from the sun but merely another lantern. At the first level, where the stairs met the inner grounds of the castle, he paused and looked out the door. He stood in the shadows of the southern tower, where he had been earlier that day. That day? How long had he slept? How long had he been dead? Why had they brought him back? Why did no one ever leave well enough alone?

He saw a few humans around the courtyard working by the light of fires burning in iron braziers. They seemed to be digging holes in the ground. Most of the others slept. From the placement of the two slivered moons at the lip of the castle wall, Shifhuul guessed the hour to be just before dawn.

He ignored the impulse to cross the yard and demand answers and a hot meal. He instead followed an instinct that drew him upward. He climbed to the head of the spiral stair, avoiding the sight of the human guards on the wall and continuing his ascent up a ladder and through the wooden hatch to the platform atop the tower. He silently closed the trapdoor and walked to stand at the edge of the tower behind a large crenellation to shield his body from the view of the guards below on the wall.

He looked down upon the courtyard to see the humans still divided into three camps, a contingent of pilgrims holding hands in prayer even in the predawn hours. They had completed his project of disassembling the stable and piling the stones before the castle gate. It did not look impregnable, but it would hold against the kind of battering ram the militia had been fashioning during the outlander's attack. It gave him a foreign sense of pride to see a product of his imagination given form and purpose. Would that he could so easily fashion purpose in the rest of his being.

This thought brought him back to the battle in the town. He looked out to see the shadowed forms of the human militiamen stationed near the gate. He counted ten and wondered how many still lived and who now commanded them. He vaguely made out the remains of the battering ram and an abandoned attempt to construct another near it.

Contemplations of the battle carried him to the memories of his choices and his actions that brought him to death — or near enough. These memories fetched other, silhouetted thoughts representing the real events and actual persons he struggled against bringing to mind. His daughter tumbling over the edge of the balcony. His mate screaming in agony. Her tears and wails for months afterward. Seeing her hanging from the branch over the breakfast balcony, the knot tight around her neck.

He shook his head, forcing away the memories and the tears. He heard the wooden hatch rising behind him and turned, wiping his eyes as he prepared ... for what, he did not know.

Yeth's head rose through the opening, a look of relief washing over her. She climbed up the ladder and closed the door. He watched her, saying nothing, wondering what would come next. She stepped to stand beside him and stared out at the courtyard. He moved to follow her gaze.

“You worried me.” Yeth placed both her hands on the stones of the parapet around the top of the tower. “I went down to the cellar to check on you and found it empty. Did anyone see you?”

“I wyrin.” Shifhuul let that statement explain what needed to be explained. He could hide from the view of inattentive and easily distracted humans with ease.

“You should remain unseen then,” Yeth said.

“Why?” Shifhuul had many questions he wanted to ask of the yutan, but he would start with the simplest.

“They all believe you to be dead.” Yeth glanced down at him. “It would be awkward if you came back to life now.”

“How?” Shifhuul touched his uncovered chest, running his paw through the fine fur over the scar across his breastbone.

“I healed you.” Yeth frowned. “After I let you die.”

“Dead.” Shifhuul had been correct. Odd that he had no memory of the death. No knowledge to bring back from beyond the veil between worlds.

“The humans were atop the wall in number when we returned,” Yeth said. “I could not use The Sight to heal you without revealing my ability. To do so would have jeopardized my life and our mission. I had to wait for you to die and take you away to heal you. A risk existed that you would be out of breath for too long, but I was able to revive you after only a few minutes. Too long and the mind of one brought back is never right. Even a great seer can only heal so much, and I am only middling with The Sight. Fortunately, the one thing I possess some skill in is healing. I cannot easily burn a giant log with fire, but I can make wounded flesh whole again. It took the remainder of the night and a good part of the next day, but you are complete once more.”

“Body?” While Shifhuul did not doubt that most of the humans in the castle would little notice the absence of a body at his death, he knew Leotin to be far too observant to miss something so obvious.

“Yes, the body.” Yeth frowned again. “Tarak and I took the bones of a roasted piglet with a few hocks of flesh, wrapped them in a blanket, and burned them on a small pyre. I even said a few prayers. I made them up, of course. I have no idea how wyrins treat their dead. Palla and Leotin said nice words about you. Tarak sang a roagg death hymn. A good funeral.”

Shifhuul scowled at Yeth’s reply. He could not decide which he found more offensive — the fabricated funeral rites or the notion that the bones of a roasted piglet might be mistaken for his remains. A pyre! He shook his head at the notion. The wyrins lived in forests. If they burned their dead, they’d risk torching their villages and towns. The wyrins buried their deceased in sacred groves of trees tended for centuries, feeding with their useless bodies the lives of the forest’s greatest citizens. More annoyingly, the thought of the piglet who took his place on the fire elicited another rumble of his stomach. Better to focus on the question Shifhuul most wanted answered — why not leave him dead? Why not let him go? Could she not see this to be his true

mission? To make right what he had wrongly fashioned in his ignorance. To heal the rift within himself that ran deeper than the cut of any blade.

“Why?”

“You saved my life.” Yeth looked down into Shifhuul’s eyes, her own blinking, wet with emotion. “You gave your life for mine, and I could not honor that debt by abandoning you to the great darkness that becomes us all.”

“No wish come back,” Shifhuul voiced in the mangled verbiage of a tainted language the thought he could not speak in his own tongue. He had not sacrificed himself thinking of collecting a debt. He had hoped to die with the honor he lost a year past when he failed to act, when he froze in fear and confusion, when he allowed his love for his mate and daughter to help strangers kill them — his daughter that night and his mate later of wounds that could not be seen from without. Better that he had remained in Mannis, the endless dark desert that awaits the wicked and black of heart in death.

“I know.” Yeth reached out a hand and rested it on Shifhuul’s shoulder. “I know the look in your eyes. I held that look myself once, long ago, staring into the blackness, wishing it would envelop me and carry me into some eternal place where no memory and no pain could reach me. You are better than that blackness. You do not deserve it.”

“Thank you.” Shifhuul did not feel certain he knew the nature of his gratitude — whether for his life or the yutan’s words. It did not matter. He lived, and he would need to live with the fact of living.

“Thank you.” Yeth gently patted Shifhuul’s shoulder.

He noted she did not stroke his fur and appreciated her restraint. He intended to speak, to voice his need to fill his stomach, and ask how long he had been asleep, when a cry arose from the road leading to the castle gate. He and Yeth looked to the ground, finding the entire militia of humans assembled in the dim light of the sun just cresting the eastern edge of the world. He counted twenty-two human males. Fewer than he expected. He smiled in spite of his dour mood.

“Open the gate!” one of the militiamen called up to the man on the wall above the entrance. “Hurry! Open the gate!”

“Come to fight?” Shifhuul did not have a great deal of familiarity with human intonation, but the man sounded frightened rather than angry.

“I do not believe so.” Yeth leaned on the pointed stones of the tower ledge.

“In the mercy of Ni-Kam-Djen, open the gate!” A militiaman stepped forward from his comrades. “The Tanshen army is coming and they will kill us all!”

Shifhuul listened to the human’s words, wondering what they meant for the castle, for the carnival, for the outlanders, for himself. As he considered the implications, he began to realize that the eternal darkness of Mannis might be preferable to the future that looked likely to form around them with the light of the coming dawn.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

“TOO MANY.”

“Yes. Far too many.”

“We could sneak into their camp at night.”

“We have no alternative available to us.”

Sketkee raised a scaly brow in frustration and stepped back into the shadows between the houses in the small town. Kadmallin stood beside her, continuing to watch the merchant convoy preparing to leave. Five wagons, five drivers, and ten hired guards — one for each of the wagons with the other five mounted on horses. They had observed the caravan closely for nearly half an hour as it prepared to depart, uncertain they had the right merchant until a worker loaded a small chest with multiple locks onto the middle wagon. The worker had called out for the merchant by name to assure him it would be safe. Lan-Dal. The man they sought.

“We should have ridden through the night.” Kadmallin stepped back beside her. “If we arrived even an hour earlier, we might have had a chance.”

“You were dozing on that ridiculous beast as it was.” Sketkee did not blame Kadmallin for the misfortune of missing an opportunity to steal back the artifact. He would do that himself. Humans were oddly inefficient in knowing where to place the culpability of a situation gone wrong. But then, they were oddly inefficient in most things.

“A night raid will be tricky,” Kadmallin said. “Hopefully, they will leave the chest in the same wagon. It’s easy to spot. It was painted black once, years ago. You can see some of the paint still holding near the back right wheel.”

“You could create a distraction now, and I could poison their wine,” Sketkee said.

“You’re not serious, are you?” Kadmallin turned to her, his face twisted in surprise. “They’re merchants, not bandits. Wait. Is that a joke?”

“No.” Sketkee shook her head in mild confusion. Even after years in Kadmallin’s company, she did not understand the human concept of *humor* well enough to attempt making a joke, even if for some inexplicable reason she desired to do so. “I meant that I could dilute the poison so that it would only make them sick.”

“I see.” Kadmallin frowned. “Difficult to make sure they all drink it. Hard to insure the right dose. Risky given the numbers.”

“I agree. It is not an entirely viable notion.” Sketkee returned her attention to the merchant caravan. They would track it through the day and wait for the men to make camp. Then they would steal what had been stolen from her — what she had stolen from others. She reflected that too much of her life of late revolved around theft. It could not be an indication of thorough planning. She would endeavor to devise a more rational means of progress toward understanding the nature of the artifact once she had it back in her possession. She hoped that would be soon. She found that the more time she spent with humans, the more she imitated their impatience.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee’s storyline [follow this link](#).

INTERLUDE



AN ITINERANT wind skips across the ocean crests, pushing shallow waves to lap along the Sunset Coast of the Wood Realm before it skitters through the maze of forest trees surrounding and supporting the small town, calmed and gentled to an early morning summer breeze that ripples the turnip leaves and shuffles the sweet garlic shoots of a garden ripe with yellow summer squash and green oak-peas.

Wyrin paws tend the soil, pulling weeds and crushing insect eggs between folded leaves. A female of advancing years, stripes of gray in the fur of her face, bends over the tilled earth.

A male wyrin anxiously holds a wooden tube in his paws as he watches the female work.

Dirt grubbers and their plants, the male thinks. *Is what I hold not more important than gardening?*

“The essence of growing a garden is very simple.” The female stands straight. “To pull that which you cannot eat from the ground in order to allow that which can fill your belly to grow.”

Riddles. The male stifles a sigh. *Why must these forest chiefs always speak in riddles?*

“I must decide if the plant you present is a weed or a rare herb.”

No, the male thinks, *you must decide whether to grant me a contract for the hauling of the town spice surplus in return for what I offer you.*

“It is valid.” The male swallows deeply.

“It seems a remarkable coincidence that it should come to you when your debts threaten to take your ship from you.” The female chief squints at the male in the early morning sun.

“The sea spirits favor me.” The male smiles.

Though I know not why, it is true. The male’s smile falters. *Unless the human fooled me.*

The female wyrin brushes off her hands and steps closer to face the male, her eyes resting just slightly taller than his.

He is desperate, she thinks, *but not fool enough to cross me with a forgery such as this. That is unfortunate, for I wish it were not true.*

The female takes the wooden tube from the hands of the male.

“You shall have your shipping agreement.”

The male smiles again.

“And as part of that accord, you shall transport me along with your first shipment to the Stone Realm.”

The male frowns.

“Of course.”

“You should make ready your ship. We will depart with the dawn.”

The male swallows. Nods. Then he departs the garden with a slight bow.

The female turns to look again at her rows of cultivated vegetables and herbs and flowers no longer wild.

This will endanger my son in the Iron Realm, she thinks. This will endanger us all. I must speak with the roagg and the others, and hope they will agree with me.

To continue reading the storyline of the Interludes [follow this link.](#)



EPISODE SIX



THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

SLENDER FINGERS of wood gloved and intertwined — branches of brown and leaves of green intermingled beneath skies of blue. Sketkee pulled her eye away from the glass of the distance magnifier and watched the scene with her unaided eyes. The merchant caravan stood to the eastern side of a crossroads in the middle of a grassy stretch of hills between two forests. Four trees grew at the edges of the crossroads, their limbs interlocking to create a canopy of leaves above the intersection of the two dirt paths.

She and Kadmallin had tracked the merchant and his wagons all day, finding them at the crossroads near sunset. Kadmallin wisely suggested taking up an observational position on a nearby hill, assuming the men below would break to make camp for the night. But the men did not make camp. They relieved themselves along the roadside, watered the horses, but gave no indication they intended to do more than stop and rest.

“They’re meeting someone.” Kadmallin reached over with an open hand. Sketkee placed the distance magnifier in his palm.

“Yes. A buyer for the artifact, no doubt.” Sketkee brushed away a small bee that buzzed around a wildflower near her head where she lay in the grass atop the hill.

“Someone else to track and rob.” Kadmallin held the tube of metal and glass to his eye and scanned along the three possible roads from which the potential buyer might arrive.

“If we are fortunate, it will be someone with fewer armed men at their disposal.” Sketkee had hoped to reclaim the artifact after nightfall, but a transfer of ownership could complicate things, especially if the new owner held residence nearby and did not need to make camp before returning home.

“The gods have not favored us with fortune so far.” Kadmallin adjusted the focus on the two tubes and the lenses of the device in his hands.

“There are no gods.” Sketkee frowned at her companion. “Events occur through the random action of natural processes or the willful choices of sentient beings. There are no unseen actors driving circumstances toward a predetermined conclusion.”

“You know what I mean.” Kadmallin continued to scan the roads.

“Yes. Of late, we have not been the beneficiaries of random occurrence.” Sketkee still experienced great annoyance for being foolish enough to leave the artifact unguarded, even with

the pilgrim camp under attack. A lack of foresight that threatened to upend her plans permanently.

“You still think there is a natural cause for the dreams and the star?” Kadmallin lowered the glass from his eye as he looked to Sketkee.

“Possibly not natural, but certainly rational,” Sketkee said. “While the most likely explanation is simple random occurrence confused with divine will and magnified by the human propensity for mimicked thought patterns, it is possible the dreams were put in motion by a seer or a group of seers. A number of well-planted dreams might be taken up by other humans, who might then have similar dreams due to the suggestibility of the human mind.”

“I might have the dream once or twice, but not every night.” Kadmallin looked back to the road. “I’m not that suggestible.”

“Do you have a better explanation?” Sketkee wondered at her own experience of the dream. She still had not shared that with Kadmallin. It troubled her too greatly. Rakthors did not dream. They might see arbitrary images while asleep, but not the way humans did. A rakthor experiencing something resembling a human dream suggested a brain failing to function properly. If her mind had been corrupted by some illness, it might affect her judgment in waking matters as well.

“And the star?” Kadmallin asked.

“New stars appear in the night sky,” Sketkee replied. “This is a known fact.”

“Well, I’m not as worried about why the dreams occur as what might happen next.” Kadmallin placed the distance magnifier to his eye again. “If it’s seers behind the dreams and the star and not some ... what did you call it once ... some *deviant natural phenomenon*, then those seers may have plans for even more inexplicable events.”

Sketkee considered this. Her focus on using the pilgrims as a surreptitious means of reaching the Forbidden Realm, and hopefully unlocking the secrets of the artifact, had led her to largely ignore the dreams, the star, and the events set in motion by them. She had experienced the dream, but she saw no causal relation between it or the new star and the artifact and so spent little time considering its impact on her plans. However, if seers, human or otherwise, lay behind the dreams, they might eventually take actions that disrupted her goals even more than the theft of the artifact itself.

Among the many peoples of Onaia, only rakthors did not normally possess the ability to use The Sight. In Sketkee’s many years of schooling, she had studied the various explanations for this difference. Natural philosophers had dissected the brains of the different peoples to compare them, finding a significant variance in the structure of the rakthor mental organ. While all the brains held two discrete halves, human, wyrin, roagg, and yutan brains appeared structured from three distinct areas, whereas the rakthor brain possessed two. Some philosophers speculated that this explained the lesser people’s difficulty with rational behavior, as the sections of their brains required for it were atrophied to provide space for less useful tissue, likely those dealing with what these peoples called *feelings*. It seemed possible that this area of the brain, this *feeling* part of the organ, allowed humans and others to perceive reality in the way necessary for The Sight.

Only a few rakthors throughout history had learned to mimic this perception and alter the nature of reality with their will. Unfortunately for the annals of natural philosophy, no one had been able to preserve the brains of these rare individuals for study.

Sketkee personally suspected, based on her extensive time spent with the lesser peoples, that this unique flaw in their brains allowed them to make leaps of cognition that rakthors rarely did — making use of what the humans called *imagination*. The lesser peoples all created stories of things that had not happened, revolving around people who never existed. The rakthors did not do this and found no need to. The stories of history, of real people and real events, were far more interesting and useful to study. While the humans and other lesser peoples frequently embraced wild speculation, rakthors followed a methodical approach to understanding the world. She believed rakthors were simply too rational to create the frame of mind required to see what did not appear to the eyes, which from what she had gathered, seemed essential to The Sight.

“Dust.”

Kadmallin’s voice refocused Sketkee’s attention on the crossroads and away from philosophical ruminations on the natural mental differences between rakthors and the lesser peoples.

“A wagon. One driver and five men in the back.” Kadmallin handed the distance magnifier to Sketkee.

She watched the wagon approach from the north, making certain to shield the lens of the distance magnifier with her hand. She did not want to alert the members of the rendezvous to her presence through the glint of sunlight on glass. All five men in the wagon wore hooded cloaks. That the buyer might wish to conceal her or his identity made sense, but why the effort to protect the faces of the guards?

She followed the progress of the wagon until it came to a stop near the trees enclosing the crossroads. The driver stepped from the wagon and the four guards climbed out of the back, removing a small wooden chest with a large lock. Sketkee frowned, seeing now that her plans were indeed to be upturned by random events.

“What do you see?” She handed the distance magnifier to Kadmallin.

“Those are rakthors in that wagon.” Kadmallin waved the sight glass away. “I don’t need to be any closer to see that. They do not move as humans would.”

“No, they do not.” Sketkee watched with her bare eyes as the merchant, followed by four of his guards carrying the artifact in a chest, walked to meet the buyer beneath the leaves of the trees.

She raised the distance magnifier to her eye again, but the density of the foliage prevented seeing what transpired under the branches of the four trees. A minute passed and both parties exited the tree cover, each carrying a different wooden chest. The merchant and his guards climbed back in their wagons and urged their horses into motion, rolling ahead along the road toward the western forest. The buyer and accompanying guards waited until the merchant train left, then removed their hoods as they mounted the wagon and drove southward.

Sketkee raised the glass to her eye. Five rakthors sat in the wagon as it passed under the trees and down the southern road. The presence of rakthors disturbed her. Then she caught a clear sight of the driver, and her disturbance became dread.

“Who are they, do you think?” Kadmallin shielded his eyes against the sun as he watched the wagon.

“I know who they are.” Sketkee sat the brass distance magnifier on the ground. “The driver is the rakthor who originally found the artifact before I stole it.”

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

THE LIGHT of the twin quarter-moons washed across the valley, forest trees looking black against the pale gray of the open fields of summer wheat, the stones of the small castle glowing near white beneath the luminescent orbs. Kadmallin leaned against a tree as he raised the distance magnifier to his eye, as much to steady his hands as to rest his weary back. They had tracked the rakthor buyer and his guards all day and well after sunset. The buyer, a rakthor ambassador named Viktik, entered the castle outside the small Tanshen city of Tsee-Jowdee shortly after sunset. An hour later, Kadmallin and Sketkee stood at the edge of a nearby forest observing the stronghold and discussing their options, which had diminished throughout the day's journey. Once they had realized that five rakthor, four of them armed and well-trained guards, transported the artifact, it became clear they could not hope to attack them en route. However, neither Kadmallin nor Sketkee anticipated the destination to be a fortress.

"A castle with high walls and a moat." Kadmallin lowered the distance magnifier. "We would have had better luck trying to take them on the road."

"Particularly as an embassy will undoubtedly have more than four rakthor guards." Sketkee took the brass tube from his hand.

"I thought there were only two embassies in Tanshen." Kadmallin looked at the castle again. He'd assumed Viktik leased it from a local tahn. Normally, rakthors tried to rent space where they were safe from attack by locals who took them for lizard demons. An embassy posed greater problems. It would be staffed almost entirely with rakthors.

"I believed so as well." Sketkee raised the glass to her eye. "Viktik seems to have expanded the Tanshen mission. You can see the rakthor ambassadorial flag on the south tower. It would only be flown above an embassy."

"You said Viktik was the Punderra ambassador." Kadmallin swatted away a mosquito. It must have rained earlier in the day. The forest smelled earthy and damp, and the insects seemed more than usually plentiful.

"Viktik discovered the artifact while ambassador in Punderra, but resigned his position upon his return to the Sun Realm." Sketkee lowered the distance magnifier and frowned. "He has evidently managed to obtain a placement here in Tanshen. I doubt he had the political connections to oust Ambassador Gakkat, which means he must have taken a posting of lesser status."

“Which means he came here to hunt you and the artifact.” Kadmallin shook his head at their continued stretch of bad luck. “And the only reason he would know to stalk you is if he had discovered the artifact had been stolen and replaced with a fake.”

“Your reasoning is sound.” Sketkee did not sound happy about the accuracy of his reasoning. Then again, while one could easily tell when a rakthor happened to be displeased, discerning more positive states of mind took a great deal of skill and experience.

“How do you think he discovered the imitation?” Kadmallin asked.

“The most likely explanation is that he attempted to steal the artifact himself.” Sketkee turned away from the castle toward Kadmallin. “Once he realized a replica replaced the original artifact, he would no doubt suspect me as the culprit, and once he discovered my departure for the Iron Realm, he followed. The important question is whether he pursues me secretly, or at the behest of the rakthor [Central Governing Committee](#).”

“And we should hope he acts on his own, because the Central Governing Committee will not stop at the recovery of the artifact, but will likely seek your capture, if not your death.” Kadmallin sighed. “If he is acting on his own, he may stop looking for it if it disappears again, while the central committee will merely send more rakthors to hunt you if you regain the artifact.” He hated rakthor politics. So much of this journey with Sketkee made him question his decision to join her on it.

“You are stating the obvious again,” Sketkee said.

“It helps calm my nerves.” Kadmallin looked away from Sketkee and back to the castle as the two fell silent.

They didn’t seem to have many options. Even if they could somehow manage to leap the moat and scale the walls of the castle-embassy, they had no way of knowing where Viktik stored the artifact. They could wait until he left, presumably to head toward the coast and eventually back to the Sun Realm, but he would likely travel with at least as many guards as he had when retrieving the artifact, potentially more. They could not risk attacking them. They might hope to use the same trick Sketkee had played on the bandits and poison them, but it seemed unlikely. From his years of experience in rakthor politics and anatomy, they did not poison as easily as humans. He pondered the possibility of inciting a town or a militia to attack the potential rakthor caravan in transit, but doubted it would work. The most probable result would be a lot of dead humans, a few dead rakthor, and an artifact just as impossible to recover.

He looked up at the sky as he considered the problem, seeing a streak of light flash across the mosaic of constellations above him. The stripe of light shot past the constellation of Sunat Sange, the Punderra god of jests. A meteor. Another fiery line cut across the stars composing the constellation of Ginjurati, the goddess of love and devotion. As he watched, thin wisps of light smeared the sky, a meteor shower flying over the castle. The juxtaposition of falling streams of fire and the Goddess Ginjurati reminded him of another sky on another summer night when embers rained down to touch the earth.

THIRTY YEARS AGO

RUST-ORANGE WHEAT bent and shed its kernels in the swift passing of the runner dashing through the darkness. Kadmallin breathed deeply of the cool night air, hunched low to the ground as he ran through the field. As he approached the first house of the small town, he stopped and knelt, pulling the mask up over his face, tugging at the straps to hold it tight. As he stood and entered the road, the ears of the mask drooped, the trunk dangling down, the tusks of white bone glowing in the pale light of the stars.

The elephant god, Tathee, strode down the road and stopped at the edge of the town. The people of the town gathered in the streets between the houses, looking upon the man in the elephant mask, their eyes milk-white, their faces pale, their interest absent. They turned away and continued to do as they had before the interloper's arrival — shuffle aimlessly across the ground, limbs stiff with the effects of the illness that possessed them.

Kadmallin checked the straps of the mask again, the scent of lavender and cinnamon and rosemary filling his nostrils. The flowers and herbs stuffed in the trunk of the mask were said to purify the air before breathing. He doubted it worked, and had heard that the illness moved through touch, not breath, but he did not desire to take the risk.

He walked past the afflicted, checking the faces, hoping not to recognize anyone, praying to be wrong in his assumptions. The illness — the [Living Death](#), the healers called it — struck quickly, moving from village to town as easily as a merchant traveling from market to inn. Twenty towns in the region had been stricken in the last month, leading the local rhaga to issue a quarantine and purge of all the infected locations.

The illness took several days to reach full bloom and most did not notice its effects at first. Those afflicted began to forget things in the first day — names of loved ones or where they had placed things. In the second day, they became confused about who they were, who others might be, and where they lived. On the third day, they started to have trouble using their limbs. Walking became difficult, their arms too heavy to lift. This effect of the illness saved many by limiting the spread of the sickness. On the third night, the poor souls with the disease did not sleep, and by the dawn of the fourth day, they were as walking corpses: eyes glazed over and pus-white, their bodies meandering aimlessly, their minds faded into oblivion, never to return.

To touch the infected brought the same death not long afterward. Whole towns, whole territories, could become populated with living corpses within a week. The afflicted could live on in this way for days, sometimes weeks, their constantly emaciating bodies no longer needing food or water the way they once did. Their minds still retained instinctual desires, and they would eat if they stumbled upon food, drink if they fell into water, but eventually, they became motionless and expired. The dead rarely exhibited aggression, the danger of them resting more in their ability to spread the plague that took their minds and lives with such speed. They could not be treated. Even skilled seers could not heal the illness after the second day. Only one remedy existed, one possible course of action to restore balance to nature.

Kadmallin moved among the tottering cadavers — minds dead, but bodies still in motion — making certain not to accidentally touch one, or let any bump into him. He looked from face to

face, ignoring the shambling deceased who had been men or children mere days before, sparing his attention for the women. He passed an open window to one of the houses. Inside, he glimpsed motion. A carrion-like village woman bumped against the wall, her nose smeared with dried black blood, unable to get out, trapped in the clay brick house, incapable of knowing how to open the door.

He turned away. The standing dead woman did not possess the face he sought. Hope began to kindle in his heart. Maybe she had fled before the sickness came. Maybe she had left the village on some errand that took her far away. Maybe she...

She stood staring at the ground as he turned the corner of the street.

Kadmallin stopped, coughing on the suddenly too pungent odor of cinnamon and clove and rose and lavender and a dozen other scents. He steadied his breathing and approached her cautiously, leaning forward to see her face more clearly. Her oyster-pale eyes caught sight of his face and lifted to follow his motion as he stood straight once more. The dead did not understand what they saw, but their eyes tracked movement nonetheless, a vestigial reflex from a time when their minds once functioned.

She raised a hand toward him, and he stood back, just out of reach. She lumbered forward, and he continued to retreat until he bumped into the wall of a house. With a panicked start, he leapt to the side as the dead woman walked into the wall of the home, bouncing back from the impact, then continuing forward once more, only to bounce back in an endless cycle.

Kadmallin stepped back, fighting the urge to rip the elephant mask from his face and wipe away the tears that streamed down to dampen the flower petals and herb leaves beneath his nose. He had promised to protect her. To protect them. He had sworn to her that he would always...

Kadmallin turned aside. He had failed. When he had promised to return after he left with her father's merchant caravan a month prior, it never occurred to him she might not be alive for that homecoming. Had he stayed, he might have...

Had he stayed, he would have died. He would be stumbling around the street beside her, a mindless corpse still animated but empty of life. He would have shared her fate. That had always been his intention regardless of the circumstances.

A part of him wished still to share her fate. To yank the mask from his face. To go to her. To embrace her. To let the illness gather in him and carry away the pain and sorrow and remorse to leave him a husk to be consumed by the coming cleansing. She would not have wanted that. Would have wept at the notion of such a meaningless sacrifice.

Fire pierced the sky in a thousand flames. Kadmallin ducked beneath the awning of the house as the flaming arrows sank from the black night to strike the roofs of the homes, the bodies of the dead ambling in the street, and the open ground of the lane. It had begun. The cleansing fire. The only way to ensure the illness did not spread: burn it out. Torch town and townspeople alike.

Kadmallin turned to see an arrow sticking from her back, flame spreading up her rough spun dress to set her hair smoldering. She made a moaning sound as the pain from the arrow and the heat of the fire began to register in what little remained of her mind. He drew his sword. He

had not protected her and could not save her, but he would not let her suffer any longer than she already had. In a single swift motion, he severed her head from her shoulders, looking away before he could see her eyes stare back up at him from the ground. He dropped the contaminated blade to the dirt as her body continued to bang against the wall for a moment before falling to the street, stiff and motionless.

He ran from his childhood home as the second wave of flaming arrows fell from the night sky. By the time he crossed the wheat field and looked back, the town blazed, flames leaping toward the stars — the bonfire of a summer festival set to burn away evil spirits and bring good fortune. As he watched the archers across the field launch more arrows, he stared at the inferno eating the town and wondered if she had thought of him in her last days. Had he been the final memory to fade from her mind before her body took to moving of its own volition? Had she called out for him? Had she whispered his name in the hope that he would come to rescue her?

He pulled the elephant mask from his face and breathed in the chill air tinged with the scent of smoke. Breathing out, he said her name aloud, a prayer in a single word, blessing for her soul and a plea for a favorable recasting in her next life.

“Nennea.”

THE PRESENT

“WHO?”

Kadmallin blinked as he looked down from the meteor shower scraping the sky with talons of light.

“No one.” Kadmallin took a deep breath to cleanse his mind. “I was thinking.”

“I have been considering our options as well.” Sketkee collapsed the brass tube of the distance magnifier and slid it into her satchel.

“If we cannot break in and we cannot attack once they come out, we must do the unexpected.” Kadmallin looked to the castle again.

“I agree.” Sketkee sounded curious.

“We need to be invited in.” Kadmallin turned back to Sketkee, noting the look of intrigue in her eyes.

“Indeed.” Sketkee placed the four digits of her hand to her chin. “The fact that we have both reached the same conclusion independently is both reassuring and unexpectedly troubling.”

“I know exactly how you feel.” Kadmallin stared up at Sketkee, struggling to keep his mind focused on the present, to keep the memories of the past from clouding and filtering his perceptions. He required a clear head for what they needed to do next. A clear head and a great deal of luck. They were due for some beneficial random occurrence.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kadmallin’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE SEER



KELLATRA

CHALK-WHITE WINGS flapped and fluttered in the flickering light of the quivering candle flame, filament-thin membranes touching briefly the miniature blaze, turning life to fire and ash in the passing of the warm breath that stirred the air. Kellatra watched the burning moth fall to the table from where it had circled the candle. Stupid creature. She stared at the codex spread open on the table before her and reconsidered that thought. Could she claim to be any wiser?

Her eyes drooped and her head nodded as she looked at the flowing arcane script. She blinked her eyes and breathed deeply, trying to awaken herself. She turned to Tamateraa, already snoring quietly in a blanket-padded chair by the cold hearth. She'd dozed off an hour ago, claiming age and exhaustion.

Kellatra sighed and admitted to herself that she would make no more progress that night. Not that she had made any real advancement in the preceding days. She and Tamateraa pored over the book, looking for clues to its decipherment, with no result. They had no idea what language or cipher might compose the pages of the text. They had no notion what the illustrations referred to. Determining that a single hand wrote all the text comprised their sole achievement.

Kellatra closed the covers of the codex and placed it in the protective wooden box, lowering the lid to seal it away from her. Her frustration only helped to dim her thoughts. She would leave in the morning and take the book with her, but without Tamateraa, she doubted her ability to unravel the riddles of the tome. Possibly, if she had access to the libraries in the City of Leaves, she might have hoped to understand it, but what chance did she stand to crack open the mysteries of the book while on the run? And she would be running for as long as she could foresee. Her father would not rest until the book had been returned to The Academy of Sight, or he had confirmation of its destruction — and her death.

This made her wonder if the best way forward might not be to fake her death and the destruction of the codex. It would not help her understand it, but it might provide her with the time — the years — she suspected would be necessary to do so. How could she accomplish such a thing? She would need to lure her father or his men into some manner of confrontation. Someplace of her choosing. And they would need a book to burn in place of the codex, something that would look enough like it to leave evidence after its annihilation. They also

would need a way to fake not only Kellatra's death, but those of her family and friends as well. A fire? They would need the right-sized corpses to be found after the flames died down. Where did one find a family of cadavers? They'd heard of militia in the Shen dominions attacking pilgrims, but that would mean getting to one of those nations before trying to enact the ruse. Could there not be a way to pull off the plan here in Juparti? Maybe she should just give the book back. Maybe she...

Old stone wore down by wind and rain and overgrown with ancient vine. Women and men digging, hauling, carving, building. Hands heaving rock and wood. Her hands. Sunset fading to twilight and a star bright above as song fills the air, calling out to the Goddess to come forth, for Moaratana to...

Kellatra's eyes snapped open from the dream as the sensation of something pricked against the hollow of her throat. She saw the long, steel blade glowing yellow in the candlelight. She did not move her body or her head, but her eyes scanned the room.

"Do not think to gain The Sight, or these men will kill you. They are more dangerous than their swords."

Kellatra's eyes turned to her father's voice. He stood beside the table. An Academy guard stood beside him, holding the sword to her throat. Another stood with a blade held to Tamateraa's neck, her eyes open and filled with fear.

"I knew you would come to Tamateraa." Her father stepped closer to her. "I did not suspect how long it would take to locate her."

"Father..." Kellatra did not know what to say to the man standing before her, her life in his hands. The lives of all she loved in his control. The guard with the blade to her neck, trained in The Sight as much as martial skills, leaned closer. He would not sense her obtaining The Sight, but he would be able to discern any attempt to use it — and would likely kill her before she could do so. She did not need to worry longer about what to say to her father as he interrupted her before she uttered more than his name.

"Do not squander words in defense of your actions or pleas for mercy on the basis of familial relations." Her father's voice matched the contempt exhibited on his face. He placed a small bottle on the table. "You will tell me where the codex resides, then you will drink this sleeping draught and return with me to the City of Leaves, where you and the man you call your husband will stand trial for the murder of most the Academy Council."

"My children?" Kellatra's only real fear concerned what would happen to Lantili and Luntadus.

"They are of my blood, and as such, they will be cared for." Her father glanced toward the open door of the cabin. "In time, hopefully, they will forget the murderous traitor who birthed them."

Kellatra shifted her eyes to the cabin door. She did not see anyone in the yard outside, but the shuffling of feet came to her ears, and she thought she heard the soft whine of a young boy's voice. She fought back the tears that threatened to cascade down her cheeks. The children would

be afraid. They would be without a mother and a father because of her choices. Her actions. Her selfishness would leave them orphans. Orphans of executed murderers.

“Where is the codex?” Her father’s words brought her eyes to him once more.

Kellatra said nothing. She had no words for her shame and anger and none she could voice to the man she wanted to blame for so much of it, but could not. She looked to the box on the table. Her father pulled it to him and opened it.

“This is not the time for jests.” Her father’s eyes blazed with anger as he tilted the box toward Kellatra.

“I don’t understand.” Kellatra stared at the empty box, her throat constricting as her mind contemplated the possibilities. Where could it be? Who could have taken it? What would happen to her and Rankarus and the children if her father did not believe her? Had Tamateraa moved it while she slept?

“Do not test my resolve in locating the codex.” Her father closed the box and slammed it on the table. “Where is it?”

“I swear to you, I put it in that box before I...” Kellatra wondered briefly at the dream of the temple in the Forbidden Realm. Could that have something to do with the book’s disappearance? Could such a thing be possible?

“Before you what?” her father asked.

“Before I fell asleep.” Kellatra looked to Tamateraa, hoping for some indication she might know what had happened. Her father followed her eyes.

“Where is it?” Her father stepped closer to the old scholar as he questioned her.

“I do not know, Teneeris.” Tamateraa looked up. “I have been asleep for some time. Search the house if you must. I am sure it will turn up somewhere. We would not hide it from you now. While I am too old to care what you might do to me, can you not see how your daughter fears for her children? Your grandchildren?”

“Do not attempt to play upon my sympathies for my daughter. I have none.” Her father appeared to resist the urge to look at her while he spoke. “Now, where is the codex?”

A noise outside caught Kellatra’s attention, and she cast her eyes to the door. A scuffle seemed to be taking place. Were Rankarus and Abananthus fighting her father’s guards? The fools. Did they not see...?

“We gots the family. Yer men is dead. We wants the book.”

Kellatra shuddered as she realized who must now be outside the cabin holding her family captive. How did they find the cabin? How did they know where to look? The fear of being found by her father rapidly transformed to anger at those holding her husband and children.

Her father walked to the door and stared out. He looked back to her, his face filled with confusion and fury. He turned to the guards.

“Bring them outside.”

As her father stepped onto the porch of the cabin, the guard moved behind her, placing a dagger blade to her throat as he pulled her to her feet. The guard beside Tamateraa did the same. Kellatra walked across the solid floorboards and out the door. Her father stood at the edge of the

porch, and the guard pushed her to stand beside him. Tamateraa stepped beside her. Kellatra's guard stood slightly in front of her as he held the knife blade, no doubt to better see her face and any indication she might attempt to use The Sight.

Kellatra suppressed a gasp as she looked out at the moonlit yard, the twin quarter-moons casting long, double shadows. Armed men held knives to the throats of Rankarus, Lantili, Luntadus, and Jadaloo. Three dead men in black uniforms lay still on the ground, crossbow bolts sticking from the chests of two, while another stared upward, a gash across his neck glistening black-red in the moonlight. Two more men stood to the side with loaded crossbows aimed at the porch. A seventh man leveled a sword at Rankarus's stomach. It took Kellatra a second to realize that she didn't see Abananthus among those held captive. This gave her a glimmer of hope that faded with the realization that there was little one man could do to upend the balance of the situation.

"We don't want no trouble." The man with the sword pointed toward Rankarus and spoke loudly, his voice carrying easily across the yard. "We want this one, and we want the book."

Kellatra knew who the man must be, even though she had never seen him. Kinorus. The thief Rankarus stole from all those years ago. A thief who wanted revenge and a chance to steal an arcane treasure, it seemed. How had he found them? How did he know about the codex? More importantly, with the book missing, how could Kellatra free her family unharmed and hope to escape either the thief's retribution or her father's justice?

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Kellatra's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

A WING-CLOUD of crows burst from the branches of the moonlit tree as the two horses and their riders trotted past them. The birds circled the air in looped patterns, a soot-black frenzy flowing in between the stone towers before alighting in new tree limbs to watch the riders approach the castle gate. Sketkee raised her eyes as she and Kadmallin neared the lowered drawbridge and open wood and iron gate of the fortified rakthor embassy.

“If, for some reason, this plan does not succeed and untoward events arise, I would like to thank you now for your support.” Sketkee glanced to Kadmallin on the horse beside her. Her own steed seemed much more complacent than usual. The result, no doubt, of the many wearying hours of travel.

“You mean in the event we end up dead?” Kadmallin raised an eyebrow at her.

“That is the most probable outcome.” Sketkee continued to stare at Kadmallin. She did not entirely understand his steadfastness, but she appreciated it nonetheless. A fully rational individual would have calculated that she simply did not pay enough for the services to be rendered in the coming hours and demanded either more coin or departed to pursue less risky endeavors. Kadmallin, as usual, had not hinted at either possible course of action.

“I couldn’t let you walk in there alone.” Kadmallin grinned suddenly. “You might do something irrational without me around to keep you in line.”

“I might once have considered that to be highly improbable.” Sketkee frowned and looked to the guards at the castle gate. “The events leading to our present circumstances lead me to suspect your presence may be essential in that regard.”

“That was intended as humor.”

“Ah.”

She did wonder how her decisions led to the current set of choices she planned to make. The series of judgments seemed rational at the time, but when examined in their fullness from a distance, they varied considerably from the orthodoxy of rakthor rules and customs. She would worry about the stability of her thought processes after she retrieved the device, assuming she survived the attempt.

“State your business.” The rakthor to the right of the gate spoke in Shen with a heavy Rakthorian accent. Both guards wore hooded cloaks similar to Sketkee’s. Lanterns hung on the

walls beside them, the cloaks keeping their faces in shadow. Both held steel-tipped spears in their hands.

“We seek shelter for a night under the rakthor flag.” Sketkee spoke in Rakthorian as she lowered the cowl of her hood to reveal her face. The two guards looked to each other, then back to Sketkee, and finally to Kadmallin.

“Name?” the first guard asked in rakthor.

“Sketkee Jhaknat, former ambassador and traveling natural philosopher.” Sketkee nodded politely. “And my human companion.” Kadmallin, long used to being namelessly introduced to fellow rakthors, made no sign of taking insult.

“Enter.” The rakthor on the right gestured with his spear toward the inner courtyard of the castle and led the way while the other remained at the gate. Inside the courtyard, the guard turned to them and issued a single command.

“Wait.”

The guard spoke to another rakthor nearby, one of the tanakk breed, half the size of Sketkee. Her own kinakk ancestors tended to be the largest of the rakthor peoples. While this tanakk rakthor appeared to be a servant, rakthors held no caste system as the humans and other peoples often did. Rakthor society prized clarity of thought and action above all qualities, regardless of one’s bloodline.

The servant nodded to the guard and ran off across the courtyard and up a flight of stairs. Sketkee said nothing to Kadmallin, and he made no effort to speak. His ability to remain quiet with danger nearby stood as one of the chief reasons she appreciated his company. She knew too many humans who tended to vocalize every inner thought when faced with dire circumstances.

Sketkee scanned the inner buildings of the castle, lit by lanterns hung in strategic places around the courtyard. The structure did not look large enough to house more than a hundred. From what she could see, she doubted more than twenty rakthors lived here. The castle had clearly been purchased or leased from a human tahn and renovated to meet rakthor requirements. She noted that the masonry around the doorways all looked relatively new. Even a rakthor could forget to duck when passing through the shorter human doors.

She noted a stable with several horses. Unsurprisingly, a human groom tended to them. Likely one of the few humans in the castle, he provided a function the rakthors could not easily perform themselves. Horses simply did not tolerate rakthors well enough to be tended by one on a regular basis.

The main keep of the castle only rose three stories, just slightly taller than the walls surrounding the structure. A door on a balcony of the third floor opened, and a green-gray face stepped into the cool moonlight, a face she recognized easily. Viktik. He looked directly at her, showing no surprise. Whether he had anticipated this move on her part, or whether he had time to recover after the servant’s mention of Sketkee’s name, she could not surmise. She feigned surprise herself as she leaned her head back. Viktik turned from the balcony, and Sketkee watched him disappear into the shadows of the room, remembering the last time she had seen him and her conflicted thoughts at betraying him.

SIX MONTHS AGO

“AS HAS been stated repeatedly, that would be an irrational course of action.”

“On the contrary, it is the *only* rational course of action.”

“It risks the destruction of the very thing we seek to understand.”

“Better the risk of its destruction than the risk of never learning its secrets.”

Sketkee listened to the debate over the fate of the crystal device sitting in a small glass box in the center of the round, granite table. Around the table sat the panel created by the Central Governing Committee to investigate the object’s origins and purpose. Ambassador Viktik had discovered the artifact by chance while on duty in the Iron Realm. Upon his return, he requested that the Central Governing Committee form a panel of natural philosophers to investigate the device’s properties. He had specifically asked for her to attend the panel. While they had engaged in a lengthy period of mating octads ago when they were both studying at the ambassadorial academy, she doubted that had influenced his request for her to join the panel. She accepted his statement that he thought it best to have someone involved who was both unorthodox and well-schooled in urris history, or what little that was known.

The three other panel members had not been nearly as enthusiastic at her presence among them. Her switch from ambassador to natural philosopher left many concerned about her mental stability. Raktors rarely sought to change their trades and professions. The investment of time in learning a particular set of skills weighed against doing so again in another field. Most raktors considered it an irrational waste of effort. Fortunately, Viktik did not agree, and his having discovered the device gave him some weight in determining how it would be examined. Not enough, however, to sway the majority of the panel from their intended course of action.

“The technical mastery simply does not exist.” Philosopher Nagkak, a slender male of the tanakk breed, splayed his hands on the table in frustration.

“Then we can invent the technical skills required to the task.” Viktik calmly looked between the three other philosophers. He did not need to convince Sketkee of his position and knew it.

“Doing so would consume considerable resources better spent on more immediate concerns.” Philosopher Barkak, an uncharacteristically heavysset female, shook her head in visible frustration.

While adept at plumbing the secrets of chemical reactions, Barkak lacked the social skills Sketkee and Viktik had honed over octads as ambassadors. Sketkee listened as Viktik tried to use those talents to sway his fellow panel members.

“The benefits of continuing to research the device are twofold.” Viktik gestured toward the crystal sitting between them all. “The technical and mechanical knowledge that we would need to develop could lead not only to revealing the secrets of this crystal, but might help us understand the greater natural world as well. The resources expended would have cascading effects on other fields. More powerful magnifiers would show us in greater detail the intricacies of the gears and the more mysterious objects we can observe in the device, but they would also

grant us clearer impressions of other natural phenomena, leading to a deeper knowledge of the natural world, living and inanimate.”

Sketkee knew this line of reasoning well. She had made the identical comment to Viktik only a few days prior, when they both began to suspect the intentions of the other panel members. The panel would vote, and they both hoped to sway at least one of the philosophers to their position.

“While it is no doubt true that such an increase in technical mastery would benefit all natural philosophical studies, that is always the case for the investigation of most natural phenomena.” Philosopher Pgakat, a male of considerable age, looked to the device as he spoke. “This object, however, is not a natural occurrence. It has been fashioned with far greater technical precision than anything ever accomplished in rakthor history. We could attempt to disassemble it, as you suggest, and devote all the resources of our nation to it, and still not fathom its workings and purpose for many years. We could bankrupt our coffers merely to glean the faintest understanding of its function. There are some mysteries we must wait, as a people, to develop the means of understanding, even if that requires octads or even octuries of patience.”

The other two philosophers nodded in agreement at Pgakat’s words. Sketkee did not sigh or in any other way express her frustration at the unified perspective of the other panel members. She had not expected to alter their opinions.

“I have expended too much time and devoted too much of my own resources acquiring this device to let it gather dust in some Central Governing Committee vault until well after I am dead.” Viktik stared at the device, his face finally showing some of the anger he must feel.

“We understand that, which is why you were asked to add your knowledge and experience to this panel,” Philosopher Pgakat said. “However, you have made your case, and now it is time to vote. Those in favor of placing the device in the vaults to be held until such time as the technical mastery of the rakthor people is capable of understanding it, raise your hand.”

Three hands rose, presenting no need to vote on the alternative.

Sketkee, who had remained silent throughout the entire meeting, finally spoke up.

“There is a third option we should consider and vote upon.” Sketkee noted the look of curiosity in Viktik’s eyes. She had not discussed this with him. The other members of the panel displayed no such inquisitiveness, looking more annoyed than intrigued.

“We are all in agreement that the device is most likely of urris origin.” Sketkee looked around at the members of the panel. She would need to convince at least two of them to follow her plan and hoped that Viktik would be one of them. “Simply because we do not possess the technical mastery to fathom the crystal does not mean such mastery does not exist. If the device is an urris creation, the most likely place to uncover its purpose is in the Forbidden Realm.”

Viktik frowned and the other members of the panel scowled. Sketkee ignored them.

“We have all heard stories of the humans in the Iron Realm being possessed by some mass delusion of a shared dream of a new human god.” Sketkee pointed to the device. “From the reports I have read, these pilgrims, as the human dreamers call themselves, are intent upon reaching the western coast of the Iron Realm and setting sail for the Forbidden Realm. The cover

of such a mass movement of people would potentially allow a small group of rakthor philosophers to gain passage with the human pilgrims. Once in the Forbidden Realm, they would be free to locate the urris, establish contact, and learn the purpose of the device.”

“Risky and irrational,” Philosopher Barkak said.

“To take the device to the Forbidden Realm risks its loss, as well as the loss of the philosophers who would accompany it.” Philosopher Nagkak shook his head. “No expedition of any of the peoples of the five inhabited realms has ever returned from the Forbidden Realm. It violates The Pact.”

“The human pilgrims would act as a decoy, a distraction, allowing the rakthor team to make landfall and pursue their mission.” Sketkee realized the idea carried significant dangers and held numerous unknown uncertainties, the urris and their reaction primary among them. “The urris have not been sighted in many octads, and no one has attempted a voyage to the Forbidden Realm in over two octuries. The potential reward far outweighs the possible liabilities.”

Philosopher Pgakat stared at her as though observing a strange creature in the wild for the first time. He sighed as he spoke.

“All in favor of Philosopher Sketkee’s plan.”

Sketkee raised her hand into the air. She noted with detached disappointment that Viktik’s hand did not join hers. This outcome did not surprise her, but explaining her alternative fulfilled two purposes. First, it gave the panel the opportunity to agree with her, and secondly, it would give explanation to her subsequent actions.

“If there is no other business, this philosophical panel is officially disbanded.” Pgakat stood up and picked up the case with the crystal sphere. “I will place the device in the vaults myself.”

After Pgakat and the other two philosophers left the room, Viktik walked around the table to Sketkee.

“A bold proposal.” Viktik placed his hands behind his back. “Why did you not mention it earlier?”

“It had not occurred to me until I heard you attempting to convince the others of the rational course of action,” Sketkee lied with practiced ease. Several octads as an ambassador left her well prepared for deception. “I must agree with the decision. It is not a rational plan. The risk to the device itself would be too great. However, the more I consider it, the notion of attempting to reach the Forbidden Realm to search out the device’s nature does seem a sensible choice for someone with the proper skills.”

“You intend to go?” Viktik studied her closely as though looking for some signs of illness.

“I am not certain, but I believe so.” Another lie. Sketkee had already purchased passage on a vessel headed for the Iron Realm the following morning. “Would you wish to accompany me?” She had not considered that notion, and her surprise at uttering it aloud no doubt registered on her face.

“I think not.” Viktik did not seem to give the invitation much consideration. “I will return to the Iron Realm, but I think my time will be best spent in searching for another artifact rather than risking death by abrogating The Pact with the urris.”

“You are no doubt correct.” Sketkee experienced an odd sensation at her betrayal of Viktik. As he departed, she wondered if her long association with Kadmallin and other humans had something to do with it. She looked forward to seeing her human companion again after so many years. Her letter to him should have reached him by now. Her plan had been in place for more than eight days.

While the panel had spent months investigating and researching the urris device, it became clear to her very early on what the majority of the panel would recommend. While she would have agreed with Viktik’s planned path of greater resources being devoted to the investigation, she, too, worried that any attempt to disassemble the device might damage it beyond further understanding. A common laborer who took apart an intricate timepiece would be unlikely to reassemble it in a functioning manner. So, too, a rakthor philosopher with an urris device of unfathomable complexity.

She had made her decision based on words from her father, the same words that had caused her to abandon her ambassadorship and return to academic study to become a natural philosopher. Words that encouraged her to do what rakthors did not do — ignore the Prime Statutes. It took her a week of work with a well-remunerated glass blower to fashion a replica of the device that would withstand casual scrutiny. She had switched it with the real artifact in the glass case before the final panel meeting convened. As she had surmised, none of the other panel members looked at it closely. Now, no one would likely look at it for many octads, if not longer.

As she walked out of the panel chamber, she resisted the urge to slide her hand into the canvas satchel she slung over her neck and touch the urris device within it. There would be plenty of time to study the device before reaching the shores of the Forbidden Realm and finding its makers.

THE PRESENT

SKETKEE BOWED, following custom and protocol, as Viktik crossed the lantern-lit castle courtyard. Beside her, Kadmallin bowed as well.

“He is handsome.” Kadmallin smiled as he whispered. “For a rakthor.”

“That is irrelevant.” Sketkee marveled at Kadmallin’s seemingly inexhaustible capacity for tangential conversation.

“Philosopher Sketkee,” Viktik said in Rakthorian as he returned her bow and came to stand before her. “I knew you to be in the Iron Realm, but your arrival is both unexpected and pleasing. What brings you to this outpost of rakthor civility?”

“I have been traveling with some of the human pilgrims in preparation for accompanying them to the Forbidden Realm.” Sketkee hewed her answers as close to the truth as possible. “I have been studying their dreams and their reactions to the arrival of this new star. It makes for an edifying diversion until I reach the land of the urris.”

“You still believe you can learn more about the device in the Forbidden Realm?” Viktik asked.

“I do,” Sketkee replied. “I hope to find answers to a great many things.”

“I see your human still accompanies you.” Viktik nodded toward Kadmallin. Kadmallin nodded back. “He does not appear to age well.”

“Humans possess unfortunately inefficient bodies.” Sketkee hoped Kadmallin would not respond in any way to her words. He spoke and understood Rakthorian fluently, but it would be best if he appeared less capable. “He will still provide several years of service before he is too old. Plenty of time for the journey ahead of us. Might I inquire as to your presence here in Tanshen? You were ambassador to Punderra, I thought.”

“My position became reassigned when I joined the panel to investigate the device.” Viktik displayed no hint of annoyance at his circumstance, which led Sketkee to suspect it to be of his own choosing. Viktik did not possess the cognitive constitution to easily consent to demotion. “I accepted this position when a new secondary embassy opened. The Central Governing Committee believes that having a representative closer to the battle between the Tanshen and Daeshen Dominions may give us greater influence in resolving the conflict. An end to the long war would be a great advantage for trade.”

“I see. A position of potentially significant importance.” She doubted Viktik had any interest in the human war and suspected him to be the one to have proposed the ambassadorial extension to the Central Governing Committee.

“All positions hold potential if wisely utilized.” Viktik clasped his hands behind his back. Sketkee recognized the gesture as one he made when feeling confident. “How may I assist you?”

“We saw the rakthor ambassadorial flag and hoped to find shelter for the night before we pressed on,” Sketkee said. “The band of pilgrims we traveled with were attacked by bandits and killed. We plan to find another group headed west.”

“It is a dangerous land, especially for our people.” Viktik gestured with one hand to indicate the castle walls. “You are welcome to remain as long as you require. My servant, Jhatka, will find you a room. You are in time for the nightly meal. I insist that you join me. Your company will be much appreciated. Your human may attend as well, though I suspect he will find the conversation difficult to follow.” Viktik again nodded to Kadmallin, who dutifully nodded back. “I have matters to attend to. I will see you in the dining hall shortly.” Viktik bowed again to Sketkee and turned to walk back into the castle keep.

Sketkee returned the bow, more out of habit than custom as Viktik could not see it. Kadmallin did not bother. He looked at her, eyes filled with uninterpretable human *emotion*, but said nothing.

“The groomsman will care for your horse.” The servant, Jhatka, beckoned the human in the stables to come forward and claim their mounts. As the man led the horses away, Jhatka pointed toward a side door of the keep. “This way. There are empty rooms in the east wing.”

Sketkee followed the servant, Kadmallin walking beside her. With the first part of their plan executed, they were now committed to implementing the others. She judged the odds of their success at less than four in eight. Not the best odds, but better than those she would face upon arriving in the Forbidden Realm if this portion of her journey did not leave her dead.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

DRIPPING FAT crackled on hot coals, flames leaping up to send saliva-inducing aromas into the air. Sha-Kutan slowly rotated the rabbit carcass on the wooden spit over the fire. Beside him, Sao-Tauna watched the rabbit, silently licking her lips as she gnawed on the hard crust of an old loaf of dinbao. Lee-Nin sat next to the girl, stirring a pot of beans hanging from the other side of the spit. The campfire sat a hundred paces from a thin road through an unnamed forest.

Sha-Kutan had rowed all the previous night and most of the day. They finally stopped in the late afternoon in a small village beside the river and sold the boat to a local fisherman. They used the coin to purchase supplies. An iron pot, some dried foodstuffs like the beans, and some early summer root vegetables, things they could easily carry as they walked the road heading northwest from the village.

“Soon?” Sao-Tauna did not take her eyes from the rabbit. They had eaten little all day.

“Soon,” Sha-Kutan said. He, too, hungered to have the rabbit’s roasted flesh in his mouth. His body ached from the rowing, but not excessively so. His strength came from elsewhere when necessary. Although his muscles did not weary quickly, his stomach grew empty just as rapidly as the woman’s and the girl’s.

“The beans will soon be ready as well.” Lee-Nin stirred the pot again, more it seemed for something to do rather than the usefulness of the action.

The three sat in silence for a moment, the girl’s head nodding forward as she began to doze, exhaustion overpowering her hunger. Lee-Nin guided the girl’s head down to her lap. Sha-Kutan watched them.

Do you think she suspects the girl?

She would show more fear if she did.

Perhaps we should show more fear.

“How long do you think?” Lee-Nin looked up from Sao-Tauna and returned to stirring the beans.

“A few days at most.” Sha-Kutan turned to the east. Something approached on the road. Something that needed to be dealt with. “It will depend on whether they find the boat or not.”

“I did not mean the soldiers,” Lee-Nin said. “I meant the one hunting you.”

"I do not know. Possibly days as well." Sha-Kutan returned his attention to the fire and the rabbit. She had not yet been so direct in her questions, nor her stated assumptions for why he accompanied her and the girl.

"You said a woman hunts you." Lee-Nin's voice barely rose above the crackling of the fire.

Why does she speak of this now?

Because she knows to fear what comes for us.

"Yes," Sha-Kutan replied.

"What did you do?" Lee-Nin had stopped stirring the beans, the spoon held in her hand.

"She does not hunt me for what I have done; she hunts me for what I am."

More truth than need be spoken.

She may see more truth than that soon.

"What are you?" Lee-Nin looked into his eyes, seeming to search for an answer to her question.

"That is not important unless she finds me." Sha-Kutan lifted the side of the spit axle and removed the pot of beans with a twig.

"Did you kill people?" Lee-Nin stared at him.

"Many people." Sha-Kutan stared back at her.

"Why didn't you kill us?" Her eyes did not leave him.

So many questions now and not before.

She has carried these questions for a considerable distance.

"I am trying to be something other than what I have been," Sha-Kutan said.

"That is no easy thing." Lee-Nin looked at the fire, seeming to lose herself in thought.

"No, it is not," Sha-Kutan said.

It comes too close.

It might pass on.

And then who would stop it?

True.

"Someone approaches." Sha-Kutan stood to his feet, looking at Lee-Nin. "Tend the rabbit. Do not follow no matter what you hear."

"What? I don't hear anything." Lee-Nin stared into the darkness between the trees beyond the fire.

Sha-Kutan said nothing as he stepped into the forest and walked toward the road. He left his sword behind at the fire. It would be of no use to him. He did not worry about making noise. The one he approached knew of his presence. It likely explained its own.

Followed from the village?

Or the farm we passed.

He knew what he would find, but not what he would do. Offer a choice? The same choice that had been put to him years ago?

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

BUTTERFLIES SKIMMED the tops of flowers along the roadside, riding warm breezes beneath the shadowed tree branches arching over the lane. Sha-Kutan walked the narrow road, staff in one hand, the other thumbing a chain of lapis prayer stones. With each step, he imagined the Eternal Light of All Existence flowing down into his heart, eating up all the darkness there and consuming it to breathe out an ever brighter light into the world, blessing all beings, from the butterflies and horseflies to the trees and flowers, even to the man he knew lay in wait not far along the path.

May all beings bathe in the light of peace — may their fears and sorrows be washed from them.

He recognized the bend of the high grass near the darkest shadows of the road. He'd seen grass affected the same way many times before he took up the robes of a monk. Always from the dark shadows, rather than the road itself.

"Manasto, friend," Sha-Kutan called out as he placed the staff down firmly on the road. He only leaned on it a little. He'd been traveling all day, and his feet ached, but he had not reached the point where the walking staff became more than ornamental.

A man stepped from behind a tree trunk and onto the road to stand five paces from him. Sha-Kutan maintained his breathing, imagining the light filling him up, but the recitation of his prayer ceased as he saw the man's eyes. A head and a half shorter than Sha-Kutan, his clothes worn, his face and arms scarred, he looked and smelled, even from upwind, as though he had not bathed in weeks. Sha-Kutan had no doubt the man could kill him, but wondered if he would be so lucky.

"I have little to offer you." Sha-Kutan spread his arms wide. "Pashist monks carry only their staff, their beads, and [*The Golden Book of Great Fortune*](#)." Sha-Kutan patted the satchel hanging from his shoulder. "I have some stale rice cakes I can share, though."

"What about your body?" The man's voice sounded rough, as though he had been eating smoke and gravel for days. He spoke the Juparti language of the dominion they stood in, but with a slight slur.

"The sage Wantarus asked that very question more than two thousand years ago." Sha-Kutan watched the pronounced lean of the man's body, as though he might charge at any moment. He knew he could not defeat the man, but it might be possible to outrun him. Another option might exist as well. "Sage Wantarus also said that we cannot own our body because neither we nor it exist in the manner we believe they do."

"Then if you're not using it, I'll take it." The man began to step forward, a hungry look on his face.

"How did you escape the Taksa Kranee for so long?" Sha-Kutan stood still as the man halted. He would not run. Running would only trigger the response of the hunter in the man. He understood the blood lust of the hunt. He did not need to present himself as prey.

"You know what I am?" The man slowed to a stop three paces from Sha-Kutan.

"I do."

Sha-Kutan had seen the man's kind five years previously, before meeting the Pashist monk Nukapan, who had become his teacher, guide, companion, and only friend, until his death three months prior. Tanshen Dominion soldiers had taken Sha-Kutan captive and were transporting him for trial when the sub-commander decided to take a less known path and cut through a small field to save time. Unfortunately, the field stood surrounded by more soldiers, the zhan's elite wardens. They guarded a handful of priests in robes and a high tahn. From the color of the man's garments, Sha-Kutan took the man to be a member of the royal family.

The wardens had turned the prison wagon around, telling the sub-commander to leave. They did leave, but not quickly enough. A light rent the night sky above the field. Sha-Kutan had gripped the bars of the prison wagon in awe, staring at the shifting light in wonder. What could it be? Did the priests create it? How? With The Sight? The Sight was forbidden in the Tanshen Dominion. Some natural event?

Sha-Kutan's questions had ended when he saw what emerged from the fissure in the sky. Moving shadows so black they absorbed light as they descended upon the field, attacking the wardens and the priests. Hundreds poured forth from the blazing crack of light. Sha-Kutan had never known terror until then, trapped in a jail on wheels, the shadows spreading out — living tar pouring over the land. The creatures swarmed over the wardens and the soldiers around the field and those guarding Sha-Kutan.

He had moved to the center of the wagon, thankful to be safe inside its iron bars. The creatures killed swiftly, men's swords having no effect on their wispy black bodies. They shook the wagon but could not enter. The iron of the bars thwarted their smoke-like forms. Sha-Kutan watched as one of them became as a viscous fog and entered the body of one of the dead men through his open mouth. A moment later, the dead man rose, his eyes obsidian dark, his gait uncertain as he stumbled into the field.

By chance, the sub-commander had been killed near the wagon cell. Sha-Kutan had reached his arm through the bars and pulled the body close, knowing he needed to get the man's keys before one of the shadow creatures could inhabit the corpse. As he opened the cell door, he looked to the sky and saw beings of immaculate brilliance flood from the still-blazing opening in the air. Not as many as the shadows. Only a handful. But they chased and attacked the dark things, turning them to disintegrating vapor with a touch. Sha-Kutan had escaped into the fields, running for the woods.

He encountered the dark things several times over the following days, avoiding them in every instance. There were three kinds. The first and weakest existed only in their unnatural ephemeral form. The second, a little stronger, could possess the bodies of the dead, willing them into motion and using them to kill more effectively. The last kind, the strongest, could enter and control the living, using their bodies like puppets as they overpowered their minds. These creatures conferred a strength to the host's body that matched that of a dozen men.

Sha-Kutan knew which manner of shadow creature he faced and what it wanted. Whatever they were, and wherever they came from, those that possessed the living did not seem to care what happened to their stolen bodies. Why care for a pillaged house when you could easily find

another? The man before him on the road looked as though he had been hosting the Kaya Kranee for more than a month.

“If you know what I am, why do you not run?” The man, the shadow creature, eyed Sha-Kutan with curiosity.

“Because I know what you desire, and I know that you can take it no matter what I do.” Sha-Kutan stared at the man, holding to the meditative inner light that filled him. “And I know that I can offer you something you have never had.”

“I have taken men and woman and children,” the man said, sneering. “What can you possibly offer?”

“A willing host.” Sha-Kutan smiled as he spoke, but his throat tightened with his words. There would be no coming back from them. He felt his fearlessness dissipating and continued before it could wholly evaporate. “And I can offer you a change in your nature you did not even know you yearned for.”

“I only need your body.” The man stepped forward again.

“That is not true, and you know it.” Sha-Kutan resisted the powerful urge to turn and flee. The man the creature possessed needed his help, as did the creature itself. “How long can you continue to run, hopping from body to body before the Taksa Kranee find you? You do not belong here, but I can help you find a way to exist here.”

“How?” The man halted, his eyes shifting constantly as he examined Sha-Kutan.

“Do you not weary of the constant killing?” Sha-Kutan touched his own chest. “Has your time in these bodies not taught you something about the importance of life?”

“Yes.” The man made no indication which question he answered.

“I can show you how to abandon the craving to kill. I can teach you how to worship life in its every form and every moment.” Sha-Kutan could not send the creature back where it came from, but he could potentially keep it from killing or possessing anyone else.

“Why should I care for such things?” The man stepped forward once more.

“Because we are not defined by what we are, or what we have been, or what we have done, or what has been done to us. We are defined by what we seek to be. How we seek to live. What we seek to do.” Sha-Kutan smiled again. “Where you come from, you may have no choice in what to be, but here, in this world, you can choose your path. I am offering you a different path.”

“How?” The man stopped just before Sha-Kutan.

“Free the man you inhabit and possess me.” Sha-Kutan spread his arms wide again. He wrinkled his nose at the smell of the man, but kept his smile. He silently prayed that he would be strong enough for what came next.

The air fell chill as darkness came to life, wisps of black vapor reaching from the man, wings of shadow spreading out to encompass Sha-Kutan. The creature poured from the man’s chest, pressing open Sha-Kutan’s mouth, and entering him. The man before him fell to the ground.

Sha-Kutan’s body went rigid as the creature possessed him. He felt it within his mind, pressing to take control of him, of his limbs, of his thoughts, of his personhood.

Submit.

I agreed to become your host. I did not agree to submit.

Submit.

Sha-Kutan focused his mind on the light, the Eternal Light of All Existence, imagining it drawing down into his body, filling his every fiber with luminescence, purifying his mind.

What is that?

It is the light that will transform and purify you.

How can you resist me?

I have trained my mind. As I will teach you to train yours.

I do not understand.

You will in time. Now we must take this man to a village or he will die.

Why should I care if he dies?

Because we are all manifestations of The Light.

I will leave.

You will not.

How do you restrain me?

I told you. A wise man taught me to control my mind.

I will kill you.

You will not. You will harm no one again.

Sha-Kutan picked up the body of the unconscious man and slung it over his shoulder. No longer of one mind, possessed of two competing intellects, he found the act challenging — two drivers urging a horse in separate directions. The part of him that had been a man imposed his will upon his body, overriding the part of him composed of living shadow. Sha-Kutan carried the unconscious man down the road, a silent conversation playing out in his head, two voices competing for dominance, a dialogue that would last for years.

THE PRESENT

IF WE destroy it, She will sense us clearly.

If we leave it alone, it will kill others.

How has it escaped her notice?

Maybe it, maybe they, are like us.

Sha-Kutan stepped into the road, seeing the man who approached in the moonlight come to a halt. They stared at each other a moment, both knowing the other for what they truly were.

“Evening, brother,” the man said.

Sha-Kutan noted the state of the man’s body and clothes, both clean and well kept. Either the shadow creature had recently possessed the man’s body, or he had been living in it for years, passing as human.

“*She* is close,” Sha-Kutan said. He did not bother with pleasantries.

"I know," the man said. "But *She* believes I am dead. *She* follows you. And that disturbance. Was that you as well?"

"No." Sha-Kutan tried to judge the strength of the creature inhabiting the man. It must be considerable for it to have lasted so long in one form.

"I see you have also taken to wearing a single body." The man gestured to Sha-Kutan.

"You must release the man." Sha-Kutan raised his hands, a gesture of truce that placed them nearer for defense.

"I have worn this body for many years." The man's voice filled with anger. "Why should you keep yours and I surrender mine?"

"This host is willing." Sha-Kutan put one hand on his chest. "We are partners."

"And how do you know I do not partner with my host?" The man's smile curled tightly at the corners of his mouth.

"I know." Sha-Kutan gave no further explanation.

"I see." The man's smile faded. "And how do you propose to force me out? A battle will only bring her more swiftly."

"I know this as well." Sha-Kutan's sadness colored his words.

"And you think yourself strong enough to the task?" the man asked.

"There is another way." Sha-Kutan allowed hope to kindle in his heart, even though he knew it to be a hopeless situation. "Leave willingly. Join us in this body."

"No." The man shook his head. "However, I may take the body after I kill you."

"Sha-Kutan?"

Sha-Kutan glanced to the side to see Lee-Nin emerging from the trees, a dagger blade in one hand, his sword and belt slung over her shoulder.

"I told you to tend the rabbit." Sha-Kutan frowned at Lee-Nin.

"You have a woman. Interesting." The man leered at Lee-Nin. "I'll examine her more closely when you are dead."

Sha-Kutan had barely enough time to note the emergence of Sao-Tauna from the forest before the shadow creature attacked. Coal black wings of intangible mist spread out as the creature leapt from the man's chest. Sha-Kutan responded in kind, expanding the shadow nature of his being out from his human body, clashing with the dark creature, battling for dominance in the middle of the road, moonlight giving the two entities an inky, pearlescent sheen.

The body of the formerly possessed man fell to the ground, his eyes fluttering, hands grasping at his chest. Sha-Kutan, the human portion of him, held himself upright, watching as the shadow aspect of himself fought for its life. The other shadow creature proved more powerful than expected. Claws of obsidian energy tore at near formless limbs of onyx vapor. The shadow facet of Sha-Kutan, the side that had come to this world by accident, the side that had spent years killing and hiding before meeting the human monk who taught him self-mastery, that part of him raged at the beast he battled. The anger and hatred he had once dissolved reformed in a wave of destructive power aimed at the creature who sought to kill him and Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna.

A ribbon of light cracked open in the night air above the road. The human part of Sha-Kutan raised his hand to shield his eyes, even as the shadow aspects reeled back from the brilliance. The shadow creature that had possessed the man tried to flee the expanding fissure of light but proved too slow. As the rent of light engulfed the shadow creature, another world became visible through its luminescent walls — a land of slate-gray clouds and black fires burning across ashen desert sands. The shadow creature's wail ended abruptly as the cleft of brilliant light collapsed and disappeared.

Sha-Kutan turned as his shadow-self reunited with his human body. Sao-Tauna stood beside Lee-Nin, her small hand raised, slender index finger extended. She smiled at him but said nothing.

Lee-Nin stood stunned, eyes wide, her face filled with fear, her hands trembling. Sha-Kutan felt sorry for her, only just now realizing who she protected and who protected her in their mutual flight.

"What are you?" Lee-Nin looked between Sao-Tauna and Sha-Kutan. "What are you both?"

"We are what you have seen." Sha-Kutan crossed the road to take Sao-Tauna's hand. "This is why we are hunted."

"I ... I don't understand." Tears welled in Lee-Nin's eyes as she stared at Sao-Tauna.

"I will explain." Sha-Kutan looked back to the man collapsed on the road, his arms twitching uncontrollably. "First, we must tend that man. After a meal, we will need to find a safe place to leave him. Then we will need to flee swiftly. The one who hunts me will hunt her as well."

He looked to see Sao-Tauna staring up at him, a smile still on her face.

"Star people," she said.

"Yes. Star people." Sha-Kutan owed her more than merely his existence, and he would see her safely to the star people, even if he needed to confront the one who hunted him in order to do so.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [follow this link.](#)

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

ROASTED PORK and wine. The black smoke of lamp oil curled up through the rafters of the vast dining hall even as the lamps cast light downward on the musty tapestries and narrow dinner table. The discordant aromas unsettled Kadmallin's nose but did nothing to hinder his appetite. The long tabletop of polished hickory held dishes of pork, chicken, and beef, spread along a green embroidered table runner. Rakthors did not eat a particularly varied diet, focusing mainly on meat. The disadvantage of rakthor cooking came in the lack of spices. They simply saw no rational need to alter the flavor of their food.

He used a knife to slice off another hunk of pork loin and skewered it with a steel rakthor eating spike, using the utensil to place the meat in his mouth. He savored its juicy flesh as he listened to Sketkee and Viktik converse in the rakthorian language. The ambassador spoke with a northern Sun Realm accent, as opposed to Sketkee's southern-tinged words, but he understood them both well enough. It had been twenty years since he'd studied the language, but it came back fairly quickly.

Most of the conversation so far revolved around news from the Sun Realm. With a regular and established line of communication to the rakthor Central Governing Committee, Viktik informed Sketkee of the various shifts in the political landscape after the recent elections. Kadmallin had always marveled at the rakthor system of governance and the relative scarcity of violence that accompanied changes in leadership. While Punderra and Juparti both elected leaders, the pool of those who could vote was restricted to land owners alone rather than the entire population, as in the elections of the Sun Realm. Kadmallin had often dreamed about seeing a rakthor election, but now doubted he would live long enough to ever set foot in the Sun Realm again.

As the conversation turned to the potential causes of the human *pilgrim phenomenon*, as Sketkee called it, Kadmallin did not find himself surprised that neither rakthor thought of asking the only human at the table what he might think. He did not really mind this intellectual slight. He'd grown accustomed to it. Rakthors generally believed humans and other peoples to be less developed by nature, and therefore incapable of complex analysis. In truth, being left out of the discussion didn't bother him because he did not know what he thought of the dreams and the star and stories of miracles. While he had the dream of the new goddess and the Forbidden Realm

and the temple nearly every night, he treated it as he did most things he had no control over — ignoring them until he might one day understand how to put a stop to them.

He also didn't know what to believe about the new goddess. He had been a man of strong faith in his youth, but years at Sketkee's side listening to her rational dissections of human thought and belief in the unseen provided him with a skepticism that eventually led to seeing the gods as mere stories told to pacify human minds throughout the ages. Dreaming of the new goddess changed that in ways he could not clearly elucidate.

How could all these different people spread so far apart have the same visions each evening they closed their eyes? And how could they dream of a star, and how could such a star arrive in the night sky? It could be coincidence, but that did seem like a weak explanation for a difficult to understand occurrence. He only knew a few things for certain — he would follow Sketkee wherever she went regardless of the costs, for reasons he would not voice aloud. And he knew that if a god had managed to enter the world in a way that could affect dreams and create stars, then that meant other gods might do the same, which implied an entirely different world than the one where he thought he lived.

"It is a shame the panel did not endorse your proposal for the device." Viktik's mention of the crystal artifact brought Kadmallin's attention back to the conversation at the table.

"I thought you preferred to disassemble it to learn its secrets." Sketkee paused in placing a bite of meat in her mouth.

"True, I would, but your discourse about the Forbidden Realm and the urris made me consider what might have been possible." Viktik wiped his hands on a meal cloth. "At least someone would be investigating the device in some manner, rather than having it sit in the vaults of the Central Governing Committee for generations."

Kadmallin focused his eyes on his food but concentrated on what the two rakthors said. The direction the conversation took in the next few minutes would determine the success or failure of their plan. Viktik undoubtedly knew Sketkee had stolen the device and that she now hoped to reclaim it after its recent return to his possession. He could only know this if he himself had attempted to steal the artifact after her return to the Iron Realm. The key to their strategy revolved around making a plausible case that she had not taken the artifact.

"May I confide in you?" Sketkee placed her hands in her lap.

"Of course." Viktik looked across the table at Sketkee with obvious curiosity.

"I attempted to steal the device before I left the Sun Realm." Sketkee's voice remained even.

Kadmallin noticed her hands did not fidget as his own might have in a similar circumstance.

"Really?" Viktik leaned back in his chair, the look of inquisitiveness on his face deepening.

Kadmallin doubted the rakthor had anticipated a confession.

"Yes," Sketkee said. "Unfortunately, it had already been stolen and replaced with a facsimile by the time I attempted my theft."

"May I confide in you in return?" Viktik held Sketkee's eyes in a steady stare.

"Certainly." Sketkee leaned forward.

Kadmallin expected what came next, which made it easier to pretend he didn't understand the conversation taking place.

"I, too, attempted to steal the device, only to find a replica in its stead." Viktik continued to stare at Sketkee.

"Intriguing." Sketkee looked up as though considering the possibilities exposed by the revelation.

Kadmallin wondered what she actually considered.

"Indeed." Viktik did not take his eyes from Sketkee and barely seemed to breathe.

Kadmallin worried briefly that the rakthor ambassador saw through Sketkee's ruse.

"Who do you suspect is the thief?" Sketkee looked down from the lanterns among the rafters and directly at Viktik once again.

"I suspected you." Viktik glanced at Kadmallin.

Kadmallin kept his face blank, chewing his pork loin and imagining he watched a game of koris being played.

"A reasonable deduction, given my departure for the Iron Realm." Sketkee placed her fingers under her chin as though contemplating other possibilities.

"I thought so." Viktik looked back to Sketkee.

"I suspect it was Pgakat," Sketkee said. "He has always had a fascination with the urris. I was surprised when he argued so thoroughly to place the device in long storage."

"May I further burden you with an additional revelation?" Viktik placed his hands on the table.

"You have my utmost attention and discretion." Sketkee once again leaned forward.

Kadmallin grabbed another piece of meat, feigning ignorance of Viktik's words while hoping they would lead to the desired occurrence.

"I have found another device just yesterday." Viktik's words echoed in the room with the slight increase in volume he gave them.

Silence. Sketkee said nothing. Kadmallin glanced between the two rakthors, taking a bite of pork fat and looking as though he wondered at their sudden cease in conversation.

"That seems highly unlikely." Sketkee's voice seeped with skepticism.

"I found the first. Why not a second?" Viktik sounded almost defensive.

Kadmallin took a sip of wine to avoid appearing more interested than would be likely for a simple-minded human companion.

"I am referring to the coincidence of you acquiring another device the day before my arrival at this outpost," Sketkee said.

"Your appearance did seem to confirm my suspicions that you were the thief," Viktik replied.

"An understandable, if mistaken, conclusion," Sketkee said.

"Would you like to see it?" Viktik's voice took on a silky, almost seductive quality.

Kadmallin looked down at his plate, restraining a smile. The fish took the bait.

"I very much would." Sketkee's voice filled with thinly restrained excitement.

“Come this way.” Viktik stood from the table and began to walk toward the entrance. “Bring your human if you wish.”

“Thank you.” Sketkee nodded her appreciation to Viktik before turning and unnecessarily speaking in Punderrese-accented Mumtiba for Kadmallin. “Follow us. I will explain later.”

“Of course.” Kadmallin trailed after Sketkee, noting how casually she claimed two of the meat spears from the table and slipped them into the sleeve of her shirt.

Viktik led them out of the dining hall and into a passage of stone lit by lanterns. They followed him to the entrance foyer and down a wide spiral stone staircase into the cellars. There, he took an oil lamp hanging on the wall and walked to the end of a long, dim hall. He stopped before a wooden door reinforced with bands of steel and hung the lamp on a hook. He then produced a ring of keys from a pocket in his rakthorian vest and proceeded to open the three locks restraining the portal. The shine of the metal locks spoke to their newness. With the locks open, he grabbed the lantern from the wall and entered the room.

Sketkee and Kadmallin followed Viktik into a large storeroom piled with empty crates and barrels of various sizes. He pushed one of the barrels over and bent down to pull up a palm-thick flagstone the size of his torso. He lifted the stone tile with ease, placing it aside and removing a small wooden chest from the hole dug into the earth beneath the floor. Kadmallin had seen that chest through a distance magnifier the day prior.

Viktik stood and placed the chest on a barrel and then used one of the keys on his chain to open it. Inside sat a ball fashioned from sheets of leather. He peeled the leather flaps away a layer at a time, eventually revealing the crystal device. He held it in his hand a moment and then passed it over to Sketkee.

Kadmallin watched, forming a face of feigned curiosity and wonder. He needed to appear to be seeing the crystal sphere for the first time. He leaned in a little closer as Sketkee held the device up to the light of the lantern.

“Yes.” Sketkee squinted as she looked more carefully. “It is clearly a different device. You can see here the patterns of these gears are not the same as the other one. They are in different positions and have a different coloring.”

Sketkee’s voice and look of astonishment impressed Kadmallin in its genuineness. He ruminated that if they failed in their journey to the Forbidden Realm, she could always find employment as an actor in a traveling carnival. He made a mental note never to voice that suggestion to her.

“I had not noticed that.” Viktik reached for the device, nearly snatching it from Sketkee’s hands. He held it to the light and looked closely. “Yes. You are right. It is different.”

“It is not entirely surprising.” Sketkee stepped back from the device and Viktik. “It should only be expected that different devices have dissimilar patterns. They may even serve completely separate purposes.”

“Yes, indeed.” Viktik looked up from the device and placed it back in the box. “Possibly you will be willing to discuss the device and examine it in more detail tomorrow.”

“Certainly.” Sketkee bowed slightly at the invitation. “I would be greatly honored.”

“Good.” Viktik wrapped the device in leather again and replaced it in the chest, putting it back in the ground with the stone and barrel covering it.

He led them out of the room, locked the door, and guided them back to the upper reaches of the castle, leaving them on the third floor where their rooms stood at the end of the hall.

“You must be weary from your travels. I will leave you until morning. I have a few matters to attend to.” Viktik bowed and headed up the stairs.

Kadmallin and Sketkee walked along the hall to their adjacent rooms. He noted the angle of her shoulders and the pinch of her face around the lips and eyes, signs that something troubled her.

“What is wrong?” Kadmallin whispered. The evening had seemed to proceed exactly as they had planned.

“The device has changed.” Sketkee’s voice sounded quiet.

“It’s been damaged?” Kadmallin looked around the hall, his voice instinctively lowering in volume.

“No.” Sketkee stopped by the door to her chamber and turned to Kadmallin. “Its internal structure has altered since it was stolen by the bandits. I had previously noticed what I suspected to be a slight variation of its inner configuration, but its components are too intricate to map in detail. I might have been mistaken. This new transformation is too obvious to doubt.”

“What could cause it to change?” Kadmallin considered the question, wondering if the bandits or the merchant could have tampered with the device.

“What indeed?”

The tone of Sketkee’s voice and the look on her face set Kadmallin’s heart racing. Few humans ever saw that face on a rakthor, and those who did learned to heed its import. Rakthors did not experience the emotions humans did, but they did feel fear, and Kadmallin knew when fear gripped Sketkee’s mind. If she had cause to be afraid, their situation had become significantly more complicated.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Kadmallin’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE SEER



RANKARUS

SHADOW BRANCHES cast by twin moons ambled back and forth across the canvas in the summer night breeze — slender hands scrabbling for impossible purchase on a surface they could only reach for yet never touch. Rankarus stared at the roof of the small tent, hands behind his head, wondering if he had waited long enough. He'd tried counting numbers, but that made him drowsy. And counting also left him thinking of all the things he'd once had to count that were now lost to him. The number of coins from a day's business at the inn. The number of rooms and beds and tables and chairs. The number of days and weeks and years beside the woman he loved. The number of times they'd stayed in bed feigning mutual illness to express that love in the most exhausting manner possible. The number of years since his daughter's birth. The number of years since his son's birth. The number of ways he'd been blessed by gods he'd never worshiped.

Best not to count.

He sat up beneath the tent, crouching low as he pushed the flap aside and stepped into the humid night air. He stretched as he looked at the moons. Why two, he'd wondered as a boy. Why not three? Why not one? With so many stars, why only two moons? He'd stopped wondering such things when his little brother had died of the Red Fever. Who cared how many moons there were when people could die in days from an illness that swept through a town's children, burning them up — a wildfire ravaging in a forest of saplings.

He'd had the fever himself, but he had survived. Still had the red splotches on his back as evidence of his endurance. His luck. Most children in the town he grew up in had not been so lucky. He wondered at the fortune of his own children as he looked to the second tent where they slept with Jadaloo. Would they prove hardy enough to survive the plague with which their mother and father had infected their lives?

Time to make plans to ensure they did.

He looked to the cabin and saw Abananthus, stretched out on his back at the edge of the porch, a rolled blanket beneath his head. Tamateraa had offered to let him sleep on the floor in the cabin, but he had insisted he preferred the open air. Said it reminded him of his days in the merchant caravans.

Rankarus breathed out slowly, clearing his mind, letting it adjust to the sounds of the night and the sense of his own body, a ritual he'd adopted by chance years ago. He padded quietly

along the thin dirt path through the knee-high wild grass of the yard. He saw Kellatra through the open window, her head tilted back in her chair at the table, mouth slack as she dozed. Tamateraa huddled in slumber in another chair by the fireplace. They had both fallen asleep in much the same positions the last several nights. Hours he had used to complete his plan.

At the edge of the porch, he removed his boots and stockings, listening to Abananthus's gentle snores. After wriggling his toes in the cool air, he crept across the porch and eased the door open, leaving it ajar as he slid inside the cabin. He cautiously crossed the old wooden floor, his feet feeling out the bend and give of each board, anticipating and avoiding every potential squeak of the aged lumber. He kept his breath even, his ears and eyes alert to all things around him. The sensation mimicked the plunge into sudden wakefulness after a night of deep sleep. As he approached the table where Kellatra slept, he wondered if The Sight mirrored his current frame of mind. It didn't matter if it did, he supposed. He couldn't imagine willing the lid of the box on the table before him to open, much less something more complicated.

He kept his eyes on Kellatra as his hands sought the box and gently lifted the lid. He did not open it all the way, only far enough to reach in and remove the leather-bound book. He closed the box and backed out of the cabin. On the porch, Abananthus had moved, one arm now slung over his eyes, his mouth still open as a guttural snore escaped his throat.

Rankarus stepped from the porch and collected his boots and stockings before walking back to the tent. Once inside, he knelt and rummaged in his leather pack, removing a candle and a flint box. It took a few tries, but eventually, he lit the wick, retrieved his supplies, and set about his work. Although the single flame did not provide a great deal of light, he found that as his eyes adjusted to the illumination, it proved more than sufficient.

He worked for more than an hour, losing track of time as his mind held to the task before him, his concentration complete. This depth of focus explained why he did not hear the approaching footsteps until they were only paces from the tent. Thinking it to be Kellatra, he knew that blowing out the candle would look suspicious, so he hastily closed the cover of the book, hiding it and his supplies beneath a folded blanket at the back of the tent. He smiled as the tent flap opened, expecting to see his tired wife, seeking his arms to curl into for the rest of the night. Instead, the tip of a sword, a bone-white blade in moonlight, thrust into the tent, and the face of a man confronted him.

Rankarus instinctively raised his hands and suppressed the desire to call out an alarm. Not only might he end up with a blade through the chest, but it could lead to fighting that resulted in the children being harmed. He needed to rely on his wits, and his wife's proclivities to escape this predicament.

The man gestured with a black uniformed arm for Rankarus to exit the tent. He complied with the order, keeping his hands held high as he stepped out into the moonlight once more. Six men stood around the tent, five with drawn swords. Academy guards. Rankarus recognized the uniforms. He also knew the sixth man, a blue cloak draped over his shoulders. The back of Rankarus's throat began to burn as his stomach churned.

"Where is my daughter?" Kellatra's father spoke quietly but firmly.

“The cabin.” Rankarus pointed to the house, trying to ignore the tip of the sword digging through his shirt and into his skin.

“The other tent?” Kellatra’s father asked.

“Our children and a servant.”

The seer pulled the flap of the tent back to inspect for himself. Rankarus craned his neck to look inside the tent. Luntadus and Lantili slept curled up beside Jadaloo’s slumbering form.

“If they wake, keep them quiet. If this one makes a noise, kill him.” Kellatra’s father spoke to one of the armed men, ignoring Rankarus. The seer turned and walked toward the cabin. He gestured toward two of the other guards, and they accompanied him up the dirt path. Rankarus followed them with his eyes, belatedly noticing that Abananthus no longer slept on the porch. Where had the man gotten off to? Hope and fear warred in Rankarus’s mind. Abananthus might present their best chance at escape, but a wrong move would get them all killed.

Rankarus glanced again at the children and Jadaloo sleeping in the tent. He wished he could think of something to do. He could not disarm the guards. If rumors were true, these Academy guards were as skilled with The Sight as with swords. He could call out to warn Kellatra, but the guards would likely kill him for it. And what then would happen to the children and Jadaloo? And what would Kellatra do? He remembered the councilmembers burning in her father’s study with a shudder. With her family threatened, she might set the entire mountain ablaze.

He watched as Kellatra’s father opened the door and entered the cabin with the two guards close behind him. He strained his ears to hear anything, any words, any commotion, any sign of what transpired inside those log-lined walls. He did not attempt to communicate with the guard holding him captive. The look on the man’s face suggested he’d happily kill Rankarus if provoked. He needed to stay alive to protect the children. He considered again the possibility of attacking the guards in hopes that Jadaloo and the children might escape, potentially with the help of Abananthus, wherever the man might be. He rejected it as too risky and likely to end with him dead and the children caught soon afterward.

He tried to casually watch the woods near the cabin, hoping to catch a glance of a shadow that might reveal Abananthus’s location. Maybe his friend could sneak the children out the back of their tent and into the woods.

A shadow by a tree seemed to move, and Rankarus breathed quickly as optimism welled in his mind. The two guards near the children’s tent grunted and fell to their knees. Rankarus watched them kneel as they raised their hands to the arrowheads bursting from their chests, blood dripping down their hands as they moaned and collapsed to the ground. The guard beside him turned to look around, a flash of reflected moonlight streaking across his throat. The guard dropped his sword, hands clutching to his neck, blood gushing over the leather of his gloves. Rankarus stumbled back as the guard fell to the ground. Another man now stood before him. One he knew.

“Good ta see ya again, Rankarus.”

Rankarus’s legs went weak, and he had to clench his lower muscles to keep the urge to release his bladder at bay. How could he be standing there with a dead guard’s blood on his

dagger? Where had he come from? How had he followed them? He realized the answer to the last question as he watched yet another a man step from behind the wagon while two more approached from the woods.

“Wish I could agree, Kinorus.” Rankarus cursed his lack of foresight. Kinorus knew from Jantipur that he had returned to Juparti and the City of Leaves. He had likely heard about the deaths of the Academy Council members. It would have not taken long for his spies and informants throughout the city to mention the missing codex and even less time for him to realize the connection with Rankarus. From there, it would have been a matter of paying enough money to locate the surviving Academy Council member and follow him and his guards as they left the city. They should never have stayed so long at Tamateraa’s cabin. They should have consulted the old woman and set to running again. It was a mistake he blamed himself for as much as Kellatra. She had the excuse of being obsessed with the codex. He had no such defense for his foolishness.

“What’s in the tents?” Kinorus held the blade of his dagger to Rankarus’s throat.

“Nothing.” Rankarus found he had trouble speaking, his airway dry and constricted.

“Get the nothin’s out here.” Kinorus swept his free hand outward and the three other men began to search the tents. Finding the first one empty, they quickly pulled Jadaloo and the children from the second, hands covering their captives’ mouths.

“It’s all going to be fine,” Rankarus said to Luntadus and Lantili, their eyes wide with terror. He saw that Luntadus had wet himself in fright. The sight filled him with anger. He wanted to take the blade from Kinorus’s hand and drive it up into the man’s skull. He should have done so ten years past when he had the chance. He’d been a fool to think the criminal would forget the debt of a theft so great, even if he had been stealing what belonged him.

“It’ll all be fine for some, that’s fer certain.” Kinorus spun Rankarus around and held the blade to his throat before shouting at the cabin. “We gots the family. Yer men is dead. We wants the book.”

Rankarus held his breath, waiting to see how their lives would get worse, as they had every day since the fire at the inn and the arrival of that damnable book. A moment or two passed and Kellatra’s father stepped onto the porch. He said something too quiet to hear to the men inside, and a few moments later, the guards brought Kellatra and Tamateraa outside, blades at their throats. Rankarus realized that all he loved hovered at the edge of death, steel pressed to tender flesh, blood waiting to flow.

“We don’t wants no trouble,” Kinorus yelled beside Rankarus’s ear, shoving him slightly to emphasize his coming words. “We wants this one, and we wants the book.”

Rankarus’s heavy breath filled his ears in the silence that followed. Kellatra’s father stared at Kinorus, two strangers seeking the same thing, each willing to kill for it, Rankarus and his family caught between them.

“Who are you?” Kellatra’s father stepped forward to the edge of the porch.

“I’m the one tellin’ ya what’s what and what to do, and that’s all ya need ta know.” Kinorus’s breath smelled as rancid as his words as they passed from behind Rankarus’s ear.

“I do not have the book, so killing them will provide you no leverage.” Kellatra’s father’s voice rang with a barely controlled anger. “Proceed if you wish.”

“Don’t tuss with me, old man,” Kinorus shouted at Kellatra’s father, spittle spraying across Rankarus’s cheek.

“Do you know whom you address?” Kellatra’s father straightened his shoulders.

“The man what’s gonna gives me the book I wants, Councilman.” Rankarus heard the smile in Kinorus’s words. “Now give me the book or we’ll toss the house and take it.”

“It’s not in the house.” Kellatra stared at Rankarus as she spoke. He wondered if she suspected what he’d done. “We would give it to you if we had it.”

“It’s in the tent.” Rankarus licked his lips and swallowed. “I took it from the house. It’s in the tent.” He pointed to the tent he shared with Kellatra. “Just take it and go.”

“We’ll be takin’ more than just the book. You and me gots business to settle.” He turned to the man holding Luntadus. “Check it.”

The man passed Luntadus to his companion holding Lantili and grabbed the canvas of the tent, yanking to pull it from the ground. He kicked through the blankets and bedrolls, opening the leather packs and emptying them to the matted grass. Rankarus’s heart held motionless between beats. He did not see the book. Or his supplies. How could that be possible?

“Nothin’.” The man turned back to Kinorus.

“Ya said the book was in the tent.” Kinorus pressed the blade into Rankarus’s neck, blood dribbling down his chest. “Where is it?”

“I don’t know.” Rankarus noticed the panic in his own voice, but it sounded as though it came from another man a thousand paces away. Where could the book be?

“I told ya not to tuss with me.” Kinorus turned to the man holding the children. “Kill ’em both.”

“No!” Rankarus made to grab at the metal biting into his neck, hoping to reach the children before the man holding them used a similar blade to end their lives.

Kellatra cried out from the porch as Lantili screamed and Jadaloo fought with the man holding her.

Then light filled the night, blinding him with its sudden brilliance, the intense heat forcing his free hand to cover his eyes. The man who had held Lantili and Luntadus screamed and flailed, fire consuming every finger’s width of him, a ball of howling, bursting amber staggering back and rolling on the ground.

The confusion that followed advantaged those with swift minds.

“Kill ’em all,” Kinorus shouted as he made to drag the blade across Rankarus’s neck.

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link](#).

THE CARNIVAL



LEOTIN

FLAMES, NEAR and far, filled the blackness of night, the stationary flickering of campfires in the distance competing with the illuminating dance of fireflies near at hand. Leotin watched the luminous insects float away as he continued to count the campfires surrounding the castle in the fields below the wall. He stood in the shadows of the western tower. No need to attract an arrow. When he reached a hundred and saw still more to tally, he stopped, the endeavor becoming too unsettling. It had taken a day for the Tanshen army to arrive and make camp to initiate its siege. They would, no doubt, begin to build battering rams and stone casters to break down the stronghold walls come morning. He did not know how long the castle and its volatile concoction of newly merged inhabitants could hold against a dedicated siege. He suspected it numbered days, not weeks.

He turned from the fires of the fields and town to study those demarcating the four regions within the courtyard. He had taken Pi-Gento's well-argued advice to allow the remnants of the militia into the castle. As Pi-Gento had pointed out, once under siege, they needed more men to mount the walls for defense. Without the militia to fight for them, they would be swiftly overwhelmed.

While Leotin agreed with this reasoning, he wanted to ensure it did not lead to a battle within the walls that would leave the one outside them superfluous. To that end, he ordered the militia to abandon their arms before being hoisted over the walls of the castle. Once inside, townspeople and carnival folk were dispatched via ropes over the walls to round up as many foodstuffs and supplies as possible from the town before the impending arrival of the Tanshen Army. The barricade of the castle gate had been too thorough to easily reverse, but the castle held enough pulleys and winches to make the task manageable, if somewhat time consuming. A few of the townspeople had run off, hoping to take their chances on the road before the army arrived. Leotin wished them luck, although they would not likely find it.

The castle courtyard now held four factions, each assigned its own corner, meeting only minimally for meals and defensive projects. So far, the carnival folk, especially Palla and the outlanders, had managed to keep the townspeople, the pilgrims, and the militia from more than baring teeth at one another. It helped that Leotin had Pi-Gento hide the wine and ale. It also helped to have the roagg and yutan patrolling the grounds between the four groups.

Leotin felt an odd sadness about the passing of the wyrin. He had not known Shifhuul well, and the creature's surly disposition rankled many, but he recognized something in him. Something familiar. Regardless, he had balanced the other outlanders as a fighting unit, and his death reduced considerably Leotin's leverage with the townspeople and the militia. It would require all his skill and showmanship to keep the castle from becoming a bloodbath. It could prove a wasted effort, as the army beyond the walls might cause that blood to flow nonetheless, but for now, an external threat helped create bonds that would otherwise be impossible.

"Do you think they'll kill us?"

Leotin turned to find Donjeon standing nearby in the shadows, staring out over the wall at the army. He'd been thinking too deeply if the boy could approach him unawares. It would not do to die of a knife blade slipped between his ribs by one of those in the courtyard who might wish to see him replaced. There were certainly many such people in the castle.

"They may have to fight the militia for that honor." Leotin joined Donjeon to look at the army once more.

"The militia didn't have so many men." Donjeon's voice squeaked slightly. The boy had been transforming into a man the last few years, his limbs getting long and gangly, his voice deepening, only to break pitch when least expected.

"No matter how many enemies you face, they can only kill you once." As he spoke the words, Leotin realized they did not hold the comfort he'd intended.

"I'd rather not face them at all." Donjeon shivered as his eyes followed one of the fireflies.

"Neither would I." Leotin sighed. When would he once again be allowed to be nothing more than a carnival barker? Not a spy for a distant master. Not the impromptu tahn of a castle under siege. Merely a man trying to entertain folk for a few coins. He did not think it would be soon. Realizing his statement did not strengthen the boy's fortitude, he spoke again.

"I won't let them kill you."

"You have a plan?" Donjeon looked over to him, their eyes of a similar height.

When had the boy grown so tall?

"When have you known me to allow circumstances to dictate what happens in this carnival?" Leotin had, of course, allowed circumstances to do just that, which had directly led to their being trapped in a castle under siege. He kept the sentiment behind that thought from entering his voice. A showman did not reveal his true disposition.

"Never." Donjeon's smile bespoke unreasonable reassurance, but a glint in his eyes hinted at darker thoughts.

"Exactly." Leotin noted the boy's smile and the look in his eyes as he placed a hand on Donjeon's shoulder, feeling a surge of emotion rise in his chest. The boy had become a son these last eight years. Raised by the carnival, true, but Leotin considered himself father to them all, and especially Donjeon. A boy needed to know someone in particular cared for him, not merely that a crowd held concern for his welfare. He did not know if he could keep the promise to protect Donjeon, but he would certainly sacrifice what might be necessary to do so.

“I forgot. Sorry.” Donjeon shook his head as though to clear the straw from it and opened his hand. A small wooden cylinder sat in his palm. “A night jay came.”

“Let me see.” Leotin took the message tube from the boy, pulling the small slip of paper free and translating the coded language. Only Donjeon knew of the night jays and the messages from the carnival’s secret *benefactor*.

When two cats hunt the pantry, the wise mouse flees while they fight.

The wise mouse *would* flee — if it hadn’t built its own trap.

“Shall I fetch you ink and paper?” Donjeon glanced back as though he might dash down the stairs of the wall.

“No.” Leotin looked out at the army beyond the castle crenellations. “I’ll stay here a while longer.”

Leotin decided to respond to the dispatch at a later date, after he knew what final situation he faced. While he normally would have written a reply immediately, he found he could not sufficiently fear his master’s wrath for a delayed response. His master held the threat of death over his head, but would have to wait behind an army, a fanatic militia, and an angry town. Oddly, although trapped inside the walls of a castle with thousands of armed men surrounding it, he suddenly felt more in control of his life and destiny than he had in years.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena [follow this link](#).

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

THIN SHADOWS flicked across the stone wall as the air twisted the candle flame, darkness overwhelming the pale yellow light. Sketkee walked cautiously down the stairs to the castle cellars. Rakthors did not have exceptionally good night vision. She would have preferred the greater illumination of a lantern, but feared its additional light might draw attention. As she stepped from stair to stair farther into the earth, a part of her mind slowly counted down from one thousand. When the count finished, Kadmallin would begin his portion of the plan elsewhere.

She passed the number 800 as she reached the bottom of the stairs and headed along the cellar hall. She found the door she needed easily enough and sat the candleholder on the stones of the floor as she knelt in front of the first of the three large metal padlocks holding the door secure. She reached into the inner pocket of her cloak and removed two slender metal meat spears she had stolen from the dinner table earlier that night.

She closed her eyes to help focus her mind as she slipped the two thin shafts into the keyhole of the first lock. A rakthor ambassador needed a wide set of skills, lock picking being one of the minor arts required for the position. While she had once been proficient at the task, it had been nearly three octads since her last attempt to open a lock.

She counted numbers as she visualized the locking mechanism inside the metal casing. She'd reached 555 before the shank of the lock popped up. While pleased with her success, she did not let it distract her as she proceeded to pick the remaining two locks. She'd reached 424 by the time she picked up the candleholder and opened the door to the storage room.

Inside the dank-smelling room, Sketkee placed the candleholder on a crate and pulled aside the barrel concealing the chest. She knelt in the dim light, feeling with her hands more than seeing with her eyes as she yanked loose the covering flagstone and retrieved the wooden chest from the ground. After placing the chest on the same barrel she had moved, she set to work picking its lock. The meat skewers were slightly too large for the padlock of the chest, and it took far longer than she'd planned to open it. Her count reached 157 before the lock came free.

Sketkee raised the lid of the chest and gently lifted the leather-wrapped device into her hands. She unwrapped the crystal sphere, taking a moment to thoroughly examine it and determine she did not hold a replica. Satisfied she had the actual artifact, she slid it into a cloth in the satchel over her shoulder and turned to examine the room.

Finding what she needed, she picked up a spongy-looking turnip from a crate and wrapped it up in the protective leather skins. Inserting the leather-encased root into the chest, she locked it up, dropped it in its hole, slid the flagstone back in place, and returned the barrel into position atop it. Her count ran out as she picked up the candleholder and headed toward the door.

As she stood outside the storeroom door re-securing the padlocks, Sketkee marveled at how greatly her life had diverged from its original course. She recognized the thrilling sensation she experienced as she snapped the last lock closed — the excitement that filled her when approaching something new, something unknown, something dangerous. As irrational as it seemed, she had to admit that she enjoyed sneaking through cellars and picking locks. In that moment, she realized that the journey to the Forbidden Realm revolved as much around her desire for adventure as the hopes of revealing the mysteries of the device she had once more stolen. How different her life might have been had she not heeded her father's final words.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

METAL SQUEALED against metal, rubber-coated steel wheels shuddering across asphalt paved streets. Sketkee stepped down to the street as the trolley car came to a halt. Fellow rakthor travelers, similarly dressed in close-fitting utilitarian pants and shirts and vests of colors varying from black to gray, quickly disembarked and set out toward their final destinations on foot. As Sketkee walked onto the wide sidewalk, the trolley car jerked into motion, propelled forward by the metal cable recessed in the middle of the street.

The car latched on to the cable with a series of metal pads for momentum or released its grip in order to stop. The cable itself remained in constant motion, hauled over the length of the street by massive steam engines in steel-reinforced caverns beneath the city's avenues. Passenger cars alternated with cargo trolleys to allow distribution of goods to nearby establishments. A wonder of mechanical engineering and applied philosophy from the Third Age, the cable cars had survived two Great Contractions to continue serving the citizens of Taknaht, the capital of the Sun Realm and seat of the Central Governing Committee.

Sketkee strode along the sidewalk, ignoring the shop windows of the red brick buildings she passed. Her mind focused on more important matters than food to eat or clothes to wear or books to read. She crossed another street at an intersection and left the shopping district for the residential side of the neighborhood. She did not need to look at the numbers or names indicating the occupants of the three-story white brick homes. She had spent her childhood in the house she sought. The buildings abutted the sidewalks, stone stairs leading up to the entrance level of each dwelling. She walked up the steps to her father's home and opened the door.

Inside the high-ceilinged foyer, she allowed her eyes to adjust to the darkness within before proceeding. A servant met her at the door. She recognized the female, even though age had grayed and loosened her flesh. Tagket, a jinakk rakthor of medium build who had served her father since before her own birth.

"Mistress Sketkee. It is pleasing to see you again." Tagket bowed slightly.

“Thank you. You as well.” Sketkee returned the bow. “My father?”

“Resting in his bedchamber. He has chosen sunset as his hour of death. He is easily unsettled. I will announce you.” Tagket turned and led Sketkee up the wooden stairs to the second level and along the plain gray walls of the hallway to her father’s sleeping chamber.

Her father lay dozing in a large, wood-framed bed covered in simple white sheets. He looked as ill as described in his letter requesting her presence at his chosen death time. The room, contrary to typical rakthor custom, held artifacts from various realms and peoples. A roagg statue of a bearlike female holding a cub sat on a table, a human painting of the Shen god Ni-Kam-Djen touching the head of the first prophet hung on the wall, a yutan ceremonial chair stood in the corner beside an intricately carved wyrin walking stick. Items from her father’s octads of ambassadorial travel, she suspected. They had not been there when she last saw the room twenty years prior. The presence of objects that served no rational function suggested her father’s state of mind to be less than optimal.

“Master Jivik. Your offspring is here.” Tagket gently shook the sleeping rakthor’s arm.

Her father slowly opened his eyes and looked around the room, his gaze settling on Sketkee standing beside his bed. He wheezed as he breathed in and sighed as he exhaled. Tagket helped him sit up and propped several pillows behind him.

“Thank you, Tagket. You may go.” Jivik nodded his head toward Tagket. She returned the nod with a bow and silently left the room.

Sketkee looked at her father as he stared up at her. She did not know why he had requested her presence. He had not attempted to communicate with her in more than three octads, since shortly after she entered the ambassadorial academy. Her letters had been returned or ignored. She had seen him several times at diplomatic functions over the years, but they had not spoken. While his silence toward her intrigued her, it did not disturb her. He had always been a diligent sire, and his reticence to communicate clearly had some rational explanation that simply eluded her.

“It is pleasing to see you again, Sketkee.” Her father coughed into his hand.

“It is pleasing to see you as well, Father.” Sketkee noticed that she used his title in their relationship rather than his name. She wondered at that. An artifact of speech influenced by her years in the Iron Realm among humans?

“My body is failing me, and I near my death.” Her father wiped at his breathing slit with a handkerchief held in his hand.

“So you mentioned in your letter.” Sketkee noted how weak and frail her father appeared. A distinct contrast to when she left his house to pursue her education as a diplomat.

“Yes. My apologies. My memory is fading along with my flesh.” Her father looked to her. “I wish for you to be present when I end my life. To assist me if I am not strong enough to complete the task.”

“It would be my honor.” Sketkee bowed to indicate her acceptance and the importance of the request. Rakthor custom held that the spouse or the most valued offspring assisted when one

ended one's life. Her father had performed the same function for her mother as she died of a wasting fever in Sketkee's ninth year.

"Thank you. You will not have long to wait." Her father turned away.

"Shall I wait with you?" Sketkee looked around the room, briefly considering claiming the yutan ceremonial chair as a seat before deciding to stand.

"That would be pleasing. Thank you."

Sketkee stood in silence for some time as her father dozed in and out of consciousness. She noted the death blade waiting on a bedside table, its onyx handle protruding from a silver sheath with sophisticated geometric patterns embossed along its surface. The hands of the brass clock ticking beside the blade indicated two more hours before sunset. Her arrival had not been fortuitous. She had arrived at exactly the time requested in her father's letter. Still, a part of her wished she had come earlier, that she might spend more time with him before he ceased to exist. These would be the last two hours where they might converse.

"I must apologize to you." Her father's voice brought Sketkee's attention to his weary eyes.

"I have taken no offense, so I cannot see a reason for an apology." Sketkee noted the odd look on her father's face.

"I should not have ceased communication with you after you departed for your schooling." Her father's voice sounded weak and distant. "You no doubt believe I did so to protect my standing from your reputation as erratic and unpredictable."

"It would be a rational decision." Sketkee's choices and actions in the Iron Realm often drew reprobation from her peers. It would reflect poorly on her father's own professional record. She found no offense in the sensible decision to shield his position in the diplomatic community.

"That would be rational, but it is not my rationale." Her father wiped at his breathing slit again. "I chose to distance myself from you in order to safeguard your reputation, not mine."

Sketkee leaned closer. Her father's reputation among their peers had few equals.

"I am unclear as to your meaning," Sketkee said.

"I will explain." Her father coughed into the cloth in his hand. "My public appearance is at great variance with my private existence."

Sketkee frowned. Did her father imply that he had behaved in an illegal manner during his ambassadorial tenure? The notion struck her as ridiculous. Her father had always reinforced the importance of following the Prime Statutes, the laws of the nation, as well as the Principles of Mind as laid out by the philosopher Rantak at the start of the First Age.

"You will remember that shortly after your mother's death, I spent several years as ambassador to the yutans of the Sky Realm," her father said. "During that time, I encountered a yutan female named Wen, a member of a regional governing pod at the time. I found her company exceptional for one of the lesser peoples. We started to spend a great deal of time together when not engaged in diplomatic activities. After a time, we began mating for pleasure."

Sketkee blinked and stepped back in surprise at her father's declaration. Rakthors considered mingling with the lesser peoples an activity only engaged in out of necessity. The

notion of mating with one, of any breed, indicated a deeply irrational mind. To actually enact such behavior encouraged censure from all reason-minded rakthors.

“You are no doubt shocked and quite possibly unsettled by my confession.” Her father coughed again, but his weakened hand did not rise fast enough to cover his mouth.

“Indeed.” Sketkee could not properly assess her reaction to her father’s revelation. It shattered the inner image she had held of him her entire life. “How long?”

“Until her recent death. Nineteen years.”

Sketkee’s head snapped back in surprise. She had expected an answer of days or weeks. An ongoing sexual relationship with a yutan female for nearly two and a half octads? While the irrationality of it confounded her attempts to comprehend his behavior, her father’s news did explain his subsequent actions toward her.

“Thank you.” Sketkee bowed, more out of habit than as a sign of respect. How did one maintain respect for a rakthor who behaved so irrationally? “For protecting my record of service from potential contamination.” Her own irregular actions as ambassador paled before her father’s unorthodoxy. Had his activities been revealed during his life, the various committees would have suspected her of possessing an ancestral tendency toward irrational behavior and likely stripped her of her post.

“I could do no less.” Her father held his sick cloth in both hands. “The affair gave an unexpected perspective.”

“Affair?” Sketkee raised her eye ridges at the word.

“It is what Wen called our secret arrangement,” her father said. “Its exposure would have been as damaging for her standing with her own people as for me with mine. But knowing her so closely for so long let me understand the world through her eyes for a time. You may have encountered this experience yourself among the humans you have frequent contact with.”

Sketkee knew exactly what her father described and found that knowledge troubling. She spent more hours with Kadmallin, her personal guard, than with anyone else, rakthor or human. She had noted her gradually increasing ability to predict his behaviors and moods, however irrational they might be. Did this suggest that she, too, might one day behave as her father had? Did that mean she might abandon rationality for some physical satiation of an unnatural desire?

“What I have come to see is that rationality is more complex than we rakthors generally assume.” Her father stared at her with piercing eyes, his voice suddenly strong, sounding in her ears like that of the rakthor she had once known. “The Guiding Principles exist to maintain our society, to harness the impulses of the individual and balance them against the needs of the wider collective. They are necessary, as the frequency of the Great Contractions indicate. However, it is possible to act in a manner that seems irrational to the individuals who comprise the collective, yet actually benefits the greater whole.”

“I am not certain I understand.” Sketkee found her father’s words more obfuscating than illuminating.

“Then, as I have little time left with which to explain, let me be clear.” Her father did not look away from her as he spoke. “You do not have the natural disposition to be an ambassador.

While it made rational sense to pursue a profession your family has entered for centuries, it will not profit you to follow that path any longer. You must learn to examine a situation, every situation, from all sides, to see it clearly, and make your choices and decisions based on what is best for you and for the collective. My affair with Wen gave me great pleasure and considerable insight into the lesser peoples. So much so that I realized they were not lesser at all, merely different. That perspective gifted me with an ability to communicate with the peoples of the various realms in a way my fellow ambassadors could not. This, in turn, benefited the Central Governing Committee and our realm as a whole. Had I followed ambassadorial protocols, I would have ignored my physical and intellectual attraction to Wen with the result of being a far less effective ambassador.”

Her father grabbed at her nearby hand and held it firmly.

“I have monitored your record. It is varied and shows initiative, but is marred by the perception that you fail to follow the Guiding Principles when engaging with the peoples of the other realms. I believe you have an innate tendency to see things as I have learned to do, but not a natural inclination toward diplomacy. You must find a new path. A way to follow the Guiding Principles without letting them constrict your potential.”

Sketkee continued to hold her father’s hand, noting the oddity of the gesture. No doubt learned from the yutan female. She had seen humans do the same for emphasis of their statements. She had taken it to denote an increased *emotional* state likely to lead to irrationality. She could not begin to guess what it might imply with her father. The failing of a once great mind near death?

“Do you have a suggestion?” Sketkee spoke more to avoid acknowledging the awkwardness of the conversation and her father holding her hand. She did not really need to hear her father’s opinion on the matter. The answer had come to her before the question, as she listened to her father’s plea.

“A philosopher perhaps.” Her father released her hand as his body sagged with exhaustion.

“That is...” Sketkee did not bother to finish her statement, watching as her father’s eyes slid closed and he drifted off to sleep.

He did not recover to consciousness, even when shaken as the sun touched the horizon outside the window. Sketkee followed her father’s wishes, sliding the death blade between his ribs and into his heart before the sun faded from the world, plunging him into the final darkness as the city attendants lit the gaslights of the streets outside, casting back the night until dawn. She remained awake next to his body all night, not from any rakthor custom, but simply to ruminate on what he had told her and what he had suggested. When the sun came up, she used the desk in his study to write out her resignation to the Ambassadorial Committee, the first choice in a series of decisions others considered irrational and that led her to do things few rakthors would ever contemplate.

THE PRESENT

SKETKEE RAN up the stone staircase from the cellars, hearing the shouts of rakthors throughout the castle. As she exited the cellar stairs to the ground floor of the keep, the chaotic voices collapsed into words of “fire” and “hurry.” Kadmallin’s part of the plan had already played out. She ducked behind the corner of a wall as a servant passed, then calmly walked to the front entrance.

As she stepped into the courtyard, she smelled smoke and turned to see the tower farthest from the gate alight with fire. As she walked toward the gate, she idly wondered what Kadmallin had set to burning so readily in the confines of the stone tower’s upper floor. She saw Kadmallin standing in the shadows beside the gate, holding the reins of their horses. She saw no evidence of a rakthor guard until she got closer and noted the large, motionless mass near the counter-weighted gate-wheel.

“Trouble with the locks?” Kadmallin asked as he handed Sketkee the reins of her mount and climbed atop the back of his own.

“Rakthor meat skewers make poor lock picks.” Sketkee ignored her mount’s skittish prancing as she climbed into the saddle. She glanced to the flaming tower across the courtyard. “I see your distraction went well.”

“It is surprising how much fire a tapestry can produce.” Kadmallin reached down to yank the stop lever holding the gears of the gate in place. As the lever left the gear, the counter weight plunged toward the ground, the attached chains running along pulleys to raise the gate. He tugged at a second nearby lever, sending another counter weight upward as the drawbridge slowly lowered.

“The mechanicals make a considerable amount of noise.” Sketkee frowned at the clanging racket of the gate and drawbridge.

“Lack of oil and care.” Kadmallin looked back to the tower. “Hopefully, no one will hear over the commotion of the fire.”

“Let us not wait to find out.” Sketkee dug her heels into her horse’s sides, urging the beast forward over the moat.

Kadmallin followed beside her, both of them reining their mounts to a halt as four large shapes emerged from the shadows at the edge of the moat and drawbridge. The shadows doffed their black cloaks to unveil rakthor guards armed with long curved swords glinting in the wan light of the slivered moons in the sky above.

“Stealthy and efficient.” Sketkee raised her hands, keeping them far away from the sword strapped to her horse.

“I’m surprised we made it this far.” Kadmallin raised his arms as well.

“Indeed.” Sketkee watched as the four guards approached across the bridge.

She allowed the guards to pull her from the horse, bind ropes around her wrists, and lead her back into the castle where Viktik waited by the open gate. He said nothing and she made no attempt to speak as the guards pulled her toward the blacksmith’s shed near the stables.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee's storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

INK-LEADEN SHEAVES of parchment lined the wide, age-worn planks of the floor, the stacks casting slender shadows in the candlelight. Raedalus placed a sheet of parchment in one stack, then picked it up and placed it on another. He sighed. He had unbound the pages of *The Red Book of Revelations*, the collection of Moaratana's pronouncements, in hopes of ordering them more appropriately. A seemingly pointless process he had begun to regret beginning. How did they fit together? It reminded him of trying to assemble one of those wooden puzzles his father used to fashion for him as a child.

He leaned back where he sat on the floor beside the candleholder and sighed. The day had been long and tasking. Dealing with the charred remains of the ship the Kam-Djen fanatics torched ate most of the daylight hours. Then there came the haggling to procure a replacement vessel. Then discussions on how to ensure such a thing could not happen again. Where to post guards. How many. How to arm them. And the prayers. Prayers for protection. Prayers for guidance. Prayers for swift completion of their fleet.

It did not escape Raedalus that none of the prayers the night before to douse the flames devouring the ship had provoked a response. The Goddess seemed content to let them deal with their own affairs unless lives might be in danger. And even then, she often remained silent. He found no code of order that indicated when the Goddess may or may not intervene in the world. He had hoped to find it in the revelations, the prophetic statements the Mother Shepherd uttered while in trance, but it had not been forthcoming. Neither, of late, had the revelations. The Mother Shepherd had not spoken in trance in a week. Ten days of silence. It worried him, but she thought nothing of it. She said the Goddess would provide them the words they needed when they needed them.

But how to order those words? Raedalus stared at the papers spread across the floor of his tiny house and sighed again. The second home repaired in the once abandoned coastal village that now housed the pilgrims, it sat just beside the one used by the Mother Shepherd. It allowed him to be nearby if she should sense a revelation approaching, and in the event she needed assistance of any other kind. A vision of what that assistance might one day entail arose in his mind, and he shooed it away with an irritated wave of his hand. He had more important things to do than daydream of impossibilities.

A soft knock at the door brought his eyes up from the papers on the floor.

“Enter.”

Taksati opened the door and stepped inside. She bore a small clay cup in her wrinkled hands.

“I saw that you were up late, and I thought you might need some fortification.” She raised the cup, a gesture of truce between two adversaries working on the same side.

“Thank you.” Raedalus pointed to a table nearby. “You may set it down there.”

What did the woman want to arrive so late?

“What task keeps you up at such hours?” Taksati placed the cup on the table.

“I am attempting to order the revelations.” Raedalus stood, stretching his back. He told himself that he stood to relieve his cramped legs, but he knew that truthfully, he could not abide to sit while the old dried rag of flesh hovered over him.

“Is their order not the order in which they were revealed?” Taksati stared around the floor at the stacks of parchment.

“I had thought as much at first, but they are far more difficult to understand in the order the Mother Shepherd spoke them.” Raedalus took the cup of tea and sipped at it. Hayflower and hesop. His favorite. The liquid eased his mind as it warmed his throat and stomach.

“They do tend to carry many buckets at once,” Taksati said.

Raedalus stifled a frown. Servant aphorisms. How helpful.

“I had hoped to arrange them by the nature of the revelation.” Raedalus looked at the parchments once more, again frustrated that the manner of assembling them did not appear clearly to him. “I had thought to put conduct for laity with vows for the priests, to set instructive parables side by side, and to place prophecy alone. However, doing so requires breaking the revelations apart, which seems wrong.”

“I am certain you will find a way.” Taksati nodded as she folded her hands before her.

“Yes. Eventually.” Raedalus looked to the old woman. “Why do you linger, Taksati?”

“I wished to speak with you on a delicate matter.” She met his eyes.

“Proceed.” Raedalus wondered what problem might require a midnight visit and a peace offering of tea. He suspected he knew, but did not want to know.

“You have no doubt noticed the increase in hours that Junari spends in the company of Bon-Tao.” Taksati spoke quietly and softly, as though treading verbally through rough terrain.

“I have.” Raedalus narrowed his eyes. Why would the woman raise such a subject? Surely it could be no concern of hers. Or his, to be honest.

“I wish to ask you not to interfere in whatever may arise from those meetings.” Taksati continued to look at him — a statue of aged black leather, dried by years in the sun.

“What gives you cause to think I would?” Raedalus swallowed, then took a sip of tea to mask his growing discomfort at the conversation.

“I am old, my bones weary, my hands weak, my hearing dim, but my eyes see clearly.” Taksati smiled and put a finger to the side of one eye.

“Do they?” Raedalus could not quite think of a better response, even though he knew it to be appallingly inadequate.

“Yes.” Taksati’s smile faded as she lowered her hand to once more clasp it with its companion at her waist. “And I also see that Junari needs more than we two alone can offer. She is a woman of greatness, and she must have those she can rely upon close to her. We are all her servants, and we each serve her in different ways. You give her things I could never hope to, and I provide others that you do not possess. Bon-Tao can assist her in ways that you and I cannot.”

Raetalus looked down at the clay cup of tea in his hand, his chest constricting with conflicting feelings, a tension growing along his jaw. The old woman spoke truth. A truth he did not wish to hear. A truth that drained away the reservoir of his dreams and left it baking dry in the hot sun of reality. Generally, he found that while reality proved necessary and vital, it gave little comfort in the small hours of the night when all alone in one’s bed. At those times, dreams, especially the waking ones, provided better succor.

“I will not interfere. But if he betrays her...”

“If he betrays her, he will find my teeth at his throat.”

The tone of the old woman’s voice gave no doubt of her sincerity. They might dislike one another, but they agreed on the truly important matters.

“Is that all?” Raetalus handed her the cup.

“Yes.” Taksati took the cup in her hands and made to leave. She paused and looked again at the papers carpeting the wooden floor. “In the temple storerooms, when we could not sort items by their likeness, by their color or shape, we often arranged them by their size.”

Raetalus looked again at the revelations spread at his feet, a sudden wave of dizziness engulfing him. As it passed, he saw the subtle truth in the old woman’s suggestion. He thought through the words of the revelations, the subjects upon which they touched. If placed in the order of their length, shortest first, they became a more coherent whole — passages at first obscure revealing their meaning when juxtaposed with the following revelation of the appropriate size.

“Thank you, Taksati.” Raetalus knelt to the floor and began picking up sheaves of parchment, reordering them by the length of the text.

“Thank you, Raetalus.”

Taksati closed the door as she departed, but he did not notice. He spent the rest of the night aligning the revelations, checking the number of words in each, placing them in the order they had always been intended to be read. By the time the candles burned down to their wicks, he lay upon the floor, fast asleep as he cradled the completed *Red Book of Revelations*, the perfectly ordered pronouncements of the Goddess Moaratana.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

ANCIENT RUINS and a ruby star became a glittering ocean of diamonds floating in blackness beside two shards of pale, pearly light illuminating a distant azure sphere below. Abananthus blinked his eyes, sleep and wakefulness seeming to merge into some third reality. He rubbed his face as he stared up at the twin moons cresting in the sky. He hated the feeling of not knowing whether he dreamed and slumbered or woke and thought in the real world. The pressing pain in his bladder led him to believe he beheld the realm of real rather than imaginary problems.

He sat up and looked around the yard. He saw the tent, candlelight casting a shadow across the canvas of a man hunched over something. He frowned. Rankarus and his secret project. The task he mentioned to no one and only worked on in the dead of night while the others slept. Abananthus did not need to check to know that Kellatra and the old woman scholar had fallen asleep in the cabin. If they had not, Rankarus would not be working in the tent.

Abananthus pulled his boots on and used the support post of the porch roof to pull himself to his feet, bones and joints creaking with the effort. He really had grown too old for slumbering out of doors. He probably should have accepted the old woman's offer to sleep in the house. Or at least he should have sought a softer resting place in the high grass of the clearing in front of the cabin. But in the first case, he would need to intrude on the old woman's routine, and in the second, he would have to contend with the morning mountain dew. Better to have a hard bed on the porch. And he did enjoy dozing in the night air, the stars above watching over him as he slept. And it wouldn't matter where he slept; the damnable dreams would still come. Nothing could be done about that, regardless of how stiff his back became.

He wandered off the porch and around the house. It would not be polite to piss on the old woman's front lawn, even if she would not know. A thin-shingled outhouse sat away from the cabin near the tree line, but one did not endure that fetid aroma unless the task required it. He stepped over to the wall of tree trunks rising up behind the cabin and began to undo the belt holding his britches up. His legs started to dance uncontrollably as his bladder sensed the impending release of pressure. He managed to free his member without drenching himself with urine. He sighed quietly, listening to the peaceful sound of water striking dead pine needles. It reminded him of the summer rains of his childhood. Odd what memories came unbidden as he aged.

A man truly carries naught but his memories, and even these treasure sacks must eventually be put down in the final stretch of the road.

He hoped his own approach to that final stretch of road lay a number of years off. The uncharitable thought occurred to him that the longer he stayed with Kellatra and Rankarus, the more likely that road might come to an abrupt end. He hiked up his trousers and buckled his belt once more. As he turned to walk around the cabin, a sound stopped him. The sound of footsteps. A single pair of boots softly padding in the night would indicate Rankarus heading back to the cabin after completing work on his project for the evening. There were far more than a single pair of feet making noise in the darkness.

Abananthus quietly eased around to the side of the cabin, clinging to the wall. As he neared the edge, he leaned his head out slightly to get a look at the yard. He grimaced as he saw the six men standing near the tents. As he watched, they pulled Rankarus out into the moonlight. He couldn't hear what they said, but he didn't need to. The uniforms of five of the men told him what he needed to know. Kellatra's father had found them. How he'd done so presented a mystery Abananthus had no interest just then in solving. How they had found the family did not matter as much as how the family might once more escape.

He slowly backed away along the side of the cabin and cautiously stepped into the woods. His best chance at helping the others would be to surprise their adversaries at the proper moment. The problem, of course, came in knowing when that moment arrived.

The wise man knows when to sow the seeds of his destiny and when to leave the field fallow for another season.

Abananthus crouched low as he patiently guided his bulky frame between the trunks of the trees, thankful that so little vegetation grew beneath the wide branches of the conifers populating the mountainside. As he slowly walked, he kept an eye on the ground, both to ensure he did not step on a twig and announce his presence as well as to search for a suitable weapon. While he had a small dagger at his belt, he needed something more formidable to provide his friends with assistance. He found a fairly straight log from a fallen branch. Twice the length of his arm and nearly as thick, it would service as a crude club. He made his way through the woods to a position where he could see the cabin and yard again from the opposite side near the tents and wagon. As he crouched into a position that gave him a good view, two of the men holding Rankarus fell to the ground. It took Abananthus a moment to realize that crossbow bolts protruded from their ribs. As he watched, seven men emerged from the shadows, two from behind the wagon, and one not far from him in the woods. They killed the remaining guard holding Rankarus and proceeded to take him captive again. The thieves who wanted Rankarus, no doubt. How had these men also found the family? Had the children left a trail of sunflower seeds like in that bedtime tale of the Dark Sight witch and the lost twin princes?

He wiped the sweat from his face with a hand covered in the powder of dried tree bark. He noticed the smell of pine clinging to him as he saw the new arrivals pull Jadaloo and the children from the second tent. Fear and anger made his hands shake. He wanted to leap from the trees and

smash at the men who pressed blades to the children's necks. He looked to his fingers and willed them to stillness.

What could he do? How could he change the circumstances of the situation to his advantage? What did all the men want?

Abananthus crept to the edge of the woods, staying low, aligning himself with the back of Rankarus's tent, out of view of the men standing in front of it. He heard one of the men call out.

"We gots the family. Yer men is dead. We wants the book."

Abananthus crossed the short span of knee-high grass and crouched behind Rankarus and Kellatra's tent. He lifted the back edge of the canvas and peeked inside. Rankarus could not have had time to return the book. It must be somewhere in the tent. He slowly reached around inside, finding what he sought under a folded blanket. His hand found something else there as well. A small wooden box and a stack of papers. Ah. As he had expected. Rankarus's midnight project.

He heard a man he assumed to be Kellatra's father speaking from the porch and ignored him, concentrating on his task. He carefully pulled the book out of the tent and then retrieved the wooden box and the papers. Just as he retreated to the cover of the woods again, the leader of the thieves ordered one of the others to search the tent. He knelt on one knee behind a wide pine trunk and watched the man yank the canvas from the ground and rummage through the contents.

Abananthus listened to Rankarus and the leader of the thieves argue about the location of the book. Now that he had it, how could he use it to shift the balance of power between the parties and bargain for the family's lives? His consideration of a means to barter with the thieves and Kellatra's father ceased as the leader of the thieves yelled out an order that chilled his heart.

"I told ya not to tuss with me," the thief yelled. "Kill 'em both."

Abananthus yelled out, leaping up and running forward, his voice and the commotion he made lost among the screams of Rankarus and Kellatra and Jadaloo and Lantili and Luntadus. As he ran from the woods, the man holding the children erupted in a blinding flame. Abananthus staggered and raised his hand before his face, hearing the thief call out to his men.

"Kill 'em all."

Events transpired in multiple places, yet Abananthus's mind collected them all and presented them in sequence as he dashed from the woods, the log in his hands held high. The two men with crossbows loosed their bolts as Rankarus struggled with the leader of the thieves. Kellatra's father fell back, a steel shaft sticking from his chest as the guard holding Kellatra collapsed from a similar bolt to the neck. The guard holding the old woman seemed frozen as he watched his companions dying before him. Abananthus neared the man holding Jadaloo as the man who had been restraining the children wailed in pain and rolled across the grass, setting it aflame from his burning body. The horse reared and brayed at the sight the flaming man, pulling at the tether holding it fast to a tree.

Abananthus brought the log crashing into the back of the skull of the man clutching at Jadaloo. The man crumpled to his knees. Blood stained Jadaloo's hands where she had kept the thief's blade from slicing her neck. Rankarus struggled with the leader of the thieves, knocking the dagger from the man's hand.

As Abananthus pulled his arm back to strike again, all the thieves screamed, crying out in unspeakable pain, clutching at their chests as they began to glow from within — harvest pumpkins carved and lit with candles blazing inside them. The fire in the men's chests burned bright white, shining out, casting tight beams of light into the darkness. Then the flames in the men's hearts died, their screams ceased, and their bodies fell to the grass. Abananthus looked to the porch to see Kellatra, arms outstretched, staring at the dead men, a look of passionate anger coloring her face. She had taught the thieves what happened to those who threatened her family — a lesson they could now only recount from beyond the veil of death.

Silence sat thick in the clearing around the cabin — no voices spoke, no insects called their songs to the night, no night jays sang to their mates — only the heavy breaths of the survivors competed with the sound of the breeze rustling the grass and the branches of the trees.

Rankarus knelt and wrapped the crying children in his embrace. Abananthus went to Jadaloo, taking her in his arms as she sobbed. He handed her a kerchief from his pocket to wrap her wounded hand as he looked to the porch. Kellatra sat speaking unheard words beside her father. Tamateraa stood beside her. The guard that had held the old woman sat slumped against the side of the cabin, felled by some unseen force. The other guard lay on the porch, motionless.

“Thank you.”

Abananthus looked down to see Jadaloo wiping tears from her eyes.

“See to the children.” Abananthus gently pushed her toward Lantili and Luntadus, still holding to their father. He looked at Rankarus, the man's chest heaving with the tearful expression of his fears failing to fall upon those he loved. Abananthus understood the sentiment. He wiped at his eyes as he realized what needed to be done to secure their further safety.

He left Jadaloo and the others and returned to the woods, finding the book where he had propped it against a tree. He took it from the forest, walking past Rankarus, ignoring the look of surprise on his face. He did not know if his friend had finished his project, and he did not care. He carried the book to the edge of the porch, hearing Kellatra's firm tone as she spoke with her father. The man's eyes blinked with the strain to remain conscious. The bloodied crossbow bolt lay on the wooden planks beside them.

“I have healed you some, and Tamateraa will heal you further once we are gone,” Kellatra said.

“Here.” Abananthus handed Kellatra the book. She looked at him, curiosity twisting her face. He said no more as she took the codex into her hands. He could not say the words that needed to be said. Only she could do that. It needed to be her choice, even if no other choice remained.

“Take it.” Kellatra dropped the book on the porch near her father. He looked up at her, unable yet to speak, wincing at the pain in his chest as he clasped a hand over his ribs. “You have what you want. Do not follow us. We will go far away. And if I see you again, I will forget that you are my father.”

Kellatra turned to Abananthus as her father slipped into wounded slumber. She cupped his chin with her hand but said nothing. Then she ran across the yard to her husband and children.

Abananthus looked up at the old woman on the porch.

“True character is shown in hospitality, in the open giving of one’s home and cupboard.” Abananthus did not remember where that saying came from but knew it applied to the old woman scholar. “Thank you.”

“Thank you for giving her a choice,” the old woman said. “I wasn’t sure she’d make it, but it’s good that it’s hers.”

Abananthus turned from the porch and went back down the slope of the yard to begin packing the family’s things into the wagon. Several hours later, after hastily digging graves for the thieves and soldiers, and making tearful goodbyes to the old woman at the edge of the yard, they started on their way down the mountain, thankful for the light of the quarter-moons to illuminate the path.

Abananthus led the horse by the bridle as Jadaloo and the children dozed in the wagon. Rankarus and Kellatra walked beside him. The three continued down the mountainside in silence for a long time. Finally, Abananthus decided he could not allow the two to follow the same paths they had taken individually for so long. They needed to learn to speak aloud the things they wished none to hear.

“Are you going to tell her or is it to be my duty?” Abananthus directed his question to Rankarus.

“Tell me what?” Kellatra wearily glanced between the two men, seeming too tired to muster curiosity.

“Yes, tell her what?” Rankarus looked up at Abananthus.

“About the midnight hours spent in the tent with the candle,” Abananthus said.

“I...” Rankarus appeared too exhausted or too surprised to easily create a lie.

“About the forgery.” Abananthus sighed and reached around the satchel slung over his shoulder. He had taken the time to surreptitiously retrieve Rankarus’s project from the woods near the cabin before they had departed. He opened the satchel, pulled out the loose papers, and handed them to Kellatra.

“What is this? Wait. How...?” Kellatra nearly stumbled as she stared at the sheaves of paper in the dim moonlight.

“A copy of the book.” Rankarus reached out a hand to steady Kellatra.

“A copy? How?” Kellatra looked from the papers to Rankarus and back again.

“It would not be the first time I forged a document.” Rankarus looked at Abananthus with annoyance. Abananthus smiled back. “I took the book each night after you fell asleep and put it back before you awoke.”

“You even have the drawings?” Kellatra flipped through the pages of the forged codex.

“Not all of them.” Rankarus frowned. “I managed to get all the text, but the paintings took too much time. The best I could do was sketch them. It will never fool anyone who has seen it, but it’s good enough to work from.”

“And might have been good enough to sell if you’d had time to finish.” Kellatra gave Rankarus a knowing look.

“Why would I want to do that?” Rankarus sighed and turned to Abananthus. “How did you know?”

“*A man does not see merely by opening his eyes.*” Abananthus chuckled as he accepted the papers of the copied book from Kellatra and slipped them back into the satchel. “Now when are you going to tell him?”

“Tell him what?” Kellatra looked puzzled, but not genuinely so.

“Yes, tell me what?” Rankarus turned from Abananthus to Kellatra and back.

“That you did not set the man holding the children aflame.” Abananthus lowered his voice and glanced over his shoulder to the wagon.

“What does he mean?” Rankarus reached out and took Kellatra’s hand.

Kellatra frowned at Abananthus and then turned to the wagon as well.

“He means we need to keep an eye on Luntadus.”

Abananthus sighed in satisfaction. The truth had been spoken. Now it could be dealt with. Wherever they went and whatever came next, they would face it knowing all that they needed to know. This comforted him until he remembered a saying from his youth, one his grandfather had often spoken.

The truth changes those who hear it — some for better, some for worse, but all are remade from it.

How would these truths alter Kellatra and Rankarus? How would they change him or Jadaloo or the children? And more importantly, what truth still lay ahead to be uncovered and how would it refashion their lives?

To continue reading the Seer story arena [follow this link.](#)

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

THE SMOKE of wood and the scent of stale sweat and fear blended in the increasingly warm air. The smoke belonged to the fire in the forge, the sweat to the human blacksmith pumping the bellows, and the fear to Kadmallin himself. He had not asked Sketkee for her calculated odds of their success. He preferred not to dwell on conditions he could not alter. He preferred to focus on events and situations he could directly control and ignore estimates of achievement or failure. Held on his toes by a rope from the rafters tied to his wrists, he wondered exactly what circumstances, if any, he still might influence.

“So,” Kadmallin whispered to Sketkee in Punderrese, “you never mentioned that rakthors use hot metal to torture prisoners.”

“Rakthors have a high tolerance for pain, so it is not common in our land.” Sketkee’s voice sounded annoyingly even-toned to Kadmallin’s ears. “We generally use chemical concoctions to unhinge the mind when we need to interrogate a reluctant prisoner.”

“So that fire is intended for me.” Kadmallin eyed the blacksmith as he worked the bellows. The man had not glanced in their direction once while heating the forge coals to an orange-white glow.

“It seems Viktik is improvising, hoping harming you will induce me to greater honesty.” Sketkee looked over from where she hung by her wrists beside him.

“I’m hoping he’ll believe us before that point.”

“I don’t know that my honesty will be more convincing than my deception.”

“The problem with being a good liar.”

“Quite.” Sketkee held his eyes with hers. “Again, should we die as a result of this encounter, you have my apologies for not anticipating the complexity of this mission when I engaged you to accompany me.”

“I’m sorry as well,” Kadmallin said.

“For what?” Sketkee asked.

“For not talking you out of it,” Kadmallin replied.

“There is no need for you to be remorseful for that,” Sketkee said.

“I’m sorry anyway.”

THIRTY YEARS AGO

“I’M SORRY.”

“You say that every time you leave.”

“I mean it every time I leave.”

Kadmallin lay atop a small hillside, grass tickling his neck, staring up at bone-white clouds drifting across a pale-blue sky. He rolled over on his side, propping his head up on his forearm while reaching out to clasp Nennea’s hand in his own. She lay beside him, smiling as she stared upward, her long, black hair washing over the grass. She turned to gaze at him with eyes the color of the sky and smiled, her mouth wide and full of joy. Kadmallin’s heart swelled within his chest as his throat tightened. It happened to him sometimes when looking at her, his love momentarily overwhelming him.

“It is good that you leave.” Nennea rolled on her side as well. “How else would I obtain new books to read?”

“If we spend all my earnings on books, we will have no coin for a house.” Kadmallin frowned at the paradox imposed by Nennea’s love for reading, and his love of her for her knowledge, and the cost of the books he brought back from his travels guarding her father’s merchant caravans.

“My father will help us build a place to live.” Nennea looked up at the branches of the tree above them, rolling on her back again.

“I cannot rely on your father to provide everything for me.” He had worked for her father for two years guarding cargo wagons, an employment he had fallen into by chance after a brief stint as a soldier in the Punderrese army. A soldier required the ability to follow orders without questioning his commanders. Kadmallin lacked this essential ability, even as he excelled at the more practical martial skills.

“For us,” Nennea corrected. “Besides, my father adores you.”

“Will he adore me when we tell him?” Kadmallin wondered about that question and how it would affect his interactions with her father over the coming weeks of the caravan run.

“He will be pleased.” Nennea sounded absolutely certain. Kadmallin wished he possessed such confidence about the matter.

“When your father and I return, we will tell him and go to the priest.” Kadmallin tried to make his voice sound firm and decisive, but his tone projected more anxiety than authoritativeness.

“My father will want a celebration.” Nennea plucked a blade of grass and slipped it between her lips.

“Celebrations cost coin.” Kadmallin worried how he could support a merchant’s daughter on the wages of a mere guard. He might expect a raise if he were captain of the guards, but the current captain did not appear ready to retire.

“You are the only man I know who would seek to marry into a family of wealth and refuse to spend any of it.” Nennea turned her head and smiled at him.

“I suspect this is one of the reasons you wish to marry me.” Kadmallin tried not to sound defensive about being unable to offer her all that she wished for and that he knew she deserved.

“It is very far down on a very long list.”

“You and your lists.” Kadmallin sighed. Nennea helped her father manage the coin of his merchant trade. She tended to write out lists of all that needed doing, a habit she extended to the rest of her life as well. “What is at the top of the list?”

“The way you look at me when you return from the road.” Nennea rolled once more on her side and untangled her fingers from his to place her palm on his cheek. “And the things we do afterward.”

“Ah.” Kadmallin leaned in and kissed her. After a time, their lips parted. “Do you wish to know what is at the top of my list?”

“You don’t make lists.” Nennea laughed and teased. “You can barely write.”

“I write often.” Kadmallin adopted the tone of indigence, then confession. “Just not legibly.”

“What is at the top of your list?” Nennea squinted at him in curiosity.

“This.” Kadmallin gestured with his hand to include her and the hillside and the sky.

“Lying on a hillside after a roll in the grass?” Nennea raised an eyebrow.

“No.” Kadmallin looked in her eyes. “Being with you. It’s all I ever want to do. It’s the only thing on the list.”

“You’re a charmer when you want to be.” Nennea kissed him again.

“I practice saying charming things when you’re not around,” Kadmallin said before Nennea pulled him into another kiss.

“When you come back from [Kanhalla](#), we’ll tell my father, and we’ll see the priest.” Nennea snuggled close to Kadmallin.

“And then we’ll choose a name.” Kadmallin placed a hand on Nennea’s belly.

“We don’t know what it will be yet.” Nennea shook her head playfully.

“It’s a boy.” Kadmallin said, certain of it.

“And if it’s not?” Nennea asked.

“Then we’ll choose two. In case I’m wrong.” He could be wrong. It would not be bad to be mistaken in such matters.

“When are you ever wrong?” Nennea’s smile matched her mocking tone as she wrapped her arms around Kadmallin’s neck and kissed him again.

THE PRESENT

“I WAS WRONG.” Kadmallin ignored the bite of the ropes against his wrists and the blood trickling down his arms. “I’m supposed to protect you, not allow us to be captured and trussed up like deer from a hunt.”

“We did what we could with the circumstances before us.” Sketkee looked at Kadmallin.

“It still feels like failure.” Kadmallin heard footsteps approaching from the courtyard and turned to see Viktik and two rakthor guards. Viktik gestured dismissively toward the human operating the bellows, and the man skittered off into the night, looking grateful to be gone.

“Your actions are irrational and disappointing.” Viktik stepped forward to address Sketkee. He ignored Kadmallin, staring at his former colleague with curiosity and anger.

“My actions were necessary.” Sketkee’s tone implied a calmness Kadmallin did not share.

He watched the two rakthors, one his friend, one his adversary, following their conversation while attempting to appear that he could not. When he and Sketkee outlined their plan, he had not anticipated the possibility of being strung up and tortured with hot metal implements. The helplessness of the situation brought Nennea to his mind again as it had repeatedly the last day. It had been years since he had thought of her so often. He hated feeling helpless, knowing he had failed. At least if Sketkee died, there would be no chance of his own survival and the life of guilt that would come with it.

“Why would you attempt to steal the device when I would have allowed you to help investigate it?” Viktik leaned near to Sketkee, as though closer examination of her might unveil her truthfulness.

“The panel to research the device voted correctly,” Sketkee replied. “We do not possess the mechanical or philosophical mastery to understand what the device does and how it operates. I had already lost the opportunity to study the first device. I did not wish to lose a second.”

“And you planned to carry the device to the Forbidden Realm in hopes of finding an urris willing to explain it to you?” Viktik turned away. “Ridiculous.”

“Locating the urris, in and of itself, would be a significant advance in our knowledge of them.” Sketkee’s eyes followed Viktik as he walked to stand near the forge. “What they might teach us in general would be invaluable, regardless of whether they revealed the secrets of the device.”

Kadmallin watched Viktik pick a long shaft of iron from the coals, the first hand-length glowing red-white. He calmed his breath and focused his thoughts as he did when entering a fight. He might not be able to defend himself, but he could brace his mind.

“How did you know I had the device?” Viktik held the iron rod casually in one hand. “How did you know to arrive the day after I found it?”

“Good fortune and bad,” Sketkee said. “We had heard a rumor that the merchant you met with had an interesting artifact that matched the description of the devices. Unfortunately, by the time we were able to track him down, you had already made contact with him. We witnessed your exchange at the crossroads and followed you here.”

“That seems...” Viktik paused. “...implausible.”

“The truth is often the most difficult thing to believe because it presents simplicity where the mind seeks complexity.” Sketkee’s tone indicated that she quoted from some rakthor philosopher, but Kadmallin did not recognize the words.

“I am tempted to use this on your human to determine the truthfulness of your statements.” Viktik pointed the glowing tip of the shaft of iron at Kadmallin.

Kadmallin ignored the hot metal warming the air near his face and concentrated on Viktik. He preferred to hope the ambassador bluffed, but discerning rakthor facial expressions could prove difficult, even for someone with as much experience as Kadmallin.

“Inflicting pain on him will not change the facts.” Sketkee glanced at Kadmallin, her expression unreadable.

“No, but it may confirm the facts.” Viktik held the hot metal near Kadmallin’s forehead.

Kadmallin had no desire to have a scar in the middle of his head, and even less desire to experience the pain that would grant him that wound. The only way to avoid that result would be for Sketkee to admit the truth of the situation. He saw her begin to open her mouth when an alternative occurred to him. A small amount of surprise and misdirection might achieve the same ends.

“Maybe it’s not a device.” Kadmallin spoke in rakthorian with a southern accent.

Viktik stepped back, clearly puzzled, whether by Kadmallin’s words or the fact that he spoke to them in rakthorian, Kadmallin could not tell.

“I suspected you might understand the language, but not that you spoke it.” Viktik turned to Sketkee. “What does he mean?”

“I have no idea.” Sketkee’s surprise at Kadmallin’s pronouncement appeared entirely genuine.

“I mean, possibly neither of you are as bright as you like to think.” Kadmallin looked between Viktik and Sketkee. “You find a couple a glass spheres with a bunch of shiny bits inside, and you immediately assume they must be mechanical devices that do something made by the urris or someone else with vastly superior technical skill.”

“What other deduction is possible?” Viktik lowered the metal shaft in his hand, but stepped closer to Kadmallin.

“You two must be the worst ambassadors in the history of the Sun Realm.” Kadmallin laughed. A little louder than he’d intended, but he found himself enjoying the opportunity before him more than he’d expected. “You have both traveled to other realms, seen other peoples, spent time here in the Iron Realm with humans. Did it not occur to either of you that instead of a device made to do something, the crystals might simply be pieces of art meant to be pretty to look at?”

Sketkee and Viktik looked at each other in a silence that stretched on until Kadmallin laughed aloud again.

“I had not considered that possibility.” Sketkee frowned and looked down.

“Neither, I admit, had I.” Viktik looked from Kadmallin to Sketkee. “However, there is only one way to determine the accuracy of the human’s suggestion, and that is to disassemble the crystal and examine the contents within.”

Kadmallin watched as Viktik placed the iron shaft back in the forge and picked up a wide headed hammer. He gestured to one of the guards who brought forth a small black bag containing the device. Kadmallin winced as Viktik removed the crystal and held it in his hand, the other gripping the handle of the hammer.

“Do not do that.” Sketkee’s voice rang loudly.

Kadmallin did not know if the rakthor ambassador attempted to bluff them into revealing the depth of their deception, or if he really intended to follow through with such a crude investigative method.

“It was worth a try.” Kadmallin sighed and turned to Sketkee, still speaking in rakthorian. “Tell him. If he smashes it, you’ve lost everything. And if he sticks me with that hot iron, I’ll tell him everything. We don’t have any choice.”

“What does the human mean?” Viktik walked toward Sketkee.

“The device is real.” Sketkee glanced at Kadmallin. He wondered what she intended to convey with that look, but could not easily tell. Annoyance? Gratitude? Relief? He had no more time to ponder as she turned back to Viktik.

“That is the first device you found,” Sketkee said. “The only device. I did steal it before I fled. We were traveling with pilgrims, as I claimed, and we were attacked by bandits. However, the bandits stole the device and sold it to the merchant from whom you purchased it. We tracked the device to you.”

“If this is the one and only device, then it has changed.” Viktik sat the hammer down and held the device in both hands as he stared at it.

“Indeed.” Sketkee’s eyes followed the crystal in Viktik’s hands as he held it up to the light of a nearby lantern. “The device has altered its internal configuration, and that is why you will take it to the Forbidden Realm and why you will bring me along to study it.”

“It would make more sense to kill you or take you back to Taknaht to face charges for the theft.” Viktik lowered the crystal from the light.

“The device has responded to something that induced it to change, something that has happened the last few days, something that had happened here in the Iron Realm.” Sketkee stared at Viktik, her face calm but filled with certainty. “I suspect that something to do with the pilgrims, and the phenomenon associated with them, has caused the alteration in the device. I also suspect that it will continue to do so as future events unfold, particularly once it is again in the Forbidden Realm. You do not possess the skill or knowledge to unlock the device’s secrets. I do. You will keep me alive because you require my talents. You will keep Kadmallin alive because I require his. If you make haste, we can be on the road by midday, if not sooner.”

Kadmallin found himself grinning as Sketkee spoke. He would not voice or define his feelings for her. The object of such potential affection could not return it, and she simply did not possess the ability to experience such things the way a human might. It did not change the nature of his heart, but he would not speak of his feelings, even to himself. So he grinned, enjoying as he always did, her confidence when filled with a rational passion for an idea.

Viktik said no more, staring at them for a moment longer before walking back out into the courtyard. The guards remained outside, leaving Kadmallin and Sketkee hanging — two slabs of meat trussed but still alive.

“That went better than we expected,” Kadmallin said in whispered Punderrese.

“Yes, with an admirable distraction in the middle.” Sketkee gave him an approving look. “I truly never did consider that it might be a piece of art.”

“I’d hoped he’d accept the idea and let us go,” Kadmallin said. “Sorry to insult your ambassadorial skills.”

“I perceived no real offense. It was a good bluff were it not for the fact that he wishes to learn the secrets of the device not in order to gain knowledge from it, but to gain power.” Sketkee looked out the doorway to where Viktik had disappeared into the darkness.

“Then we must make sure that doesn’t happen.” Kadmallin thought about what Viktik might gain in political influence in the Sun Realm for mastering the device, regardless of the powers the crystal might hold. If Sketkee’s suspicion that the device might play some part in the events driving the pilgrims toward the Forbidden Realm held true, it also implied a great potential in the device. He realized, suddenly, that it might one day be he and Sketkee who would need to smash the device with a hammer.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link.](#)

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

CRUMBS OF crust, caught in the stiff wind, blew across the planks of the old dock, and fell into the waters to be hungrily eaten by a cluster of sea ducks bobbing atop the rhythmic waves, moonlight reflecting in ripples beneath their feathers. Ondromead noted the birds eating the water-sopped bread as Hashel munched on the large dinbao loaf that provided the source of the bird's meal. They sat on crates along the docks of the free city of Tanjii, watching the men unload one last vessel by lantern light. A wide ship with wider sails disgorged its cargo of melons to take on a shipment of spices and glazed bowls.

The dock master, a man with short trimmed gray hair atop his head and below his chin, manufactured order from the chaos, holding a chalk and slate in one hand while waving to men with the other as he shouted the destination of each item. Ondromead found the process fascinating, as he always did. He had observed this dance of men and cargo all afternoon and past sunset, and it filled him with a sense of calm to see work done on such a scale with clear efficiency. He enjoyed it more than seeing cathedrals or palaces being constructed. Those required multiple viewings over many years to observe the results of the labors devoted to them. This vessel would be loaded in another hour, ready to sail once more.

"A fine day for witnessing," he said aloud to Hashel. He often found himself speaking for the two of them, as the boy did not contribute to conversation. "I wonder what we shall see. The wrong crate set upon a ship and sailed to an unlikely destination perhaps. Or smugglers caught attempting to circumvent the tariffs. Or the arrival of a vessel all had thought lost."

He sliced a thin piece of cheese from the large hunk sitting on a wooden crate between himself and Hashel. The blade of the small knife passed easily through the tough rind of the cheese. The blade never dulled. He'd had it as long as the book and the ink well and quill. The cheese and bread, however, had been picked up while walking through the city market earlier that afternoon. He'd walked the streets of Tanjii many times, but never with someone at his side. He had told Hashel the history of the city and the events he had witnessed there over the years, from the tsunami that had flooded the streets and nearly destroyed the walls 535 years prior, to the Tanshen invasion 322 years ago, and the great earthquake three generations past that closed off the valley for more than a year.

After so many events and so many years, he had developed a sense of when he needed to be in a particular place to see what he had been placed there to observe. He'd sensed an undefinable

pull to the city docks around later afternoon. As he sat eating his cheese, watching the boy inadvertently feeding the ducks, he noted two men walking along the pier from opposite directions. He knew they would stop nearby the same way he knew to remove the book and ink and quill from his bag. He did not worry about being seen. Few people noticed him during the act of witnessing and recording an event.

“It seems our repast is over and our work has begun.” Ondromead explained as he opened the book to a fresh page. Hashel watched him with a calm curiosity, turning his head to the men nearby. “That man on the left I’ve seen before. He sits on the Circle of Elders.”

“Kuth-Von.” The second man, slightly portly and well dressed in robes of red and green, bowed to the first man.

“Kai-Mando, what brings you to my docks?” Kuth-Von did not return the bow, but smiled broadly at the second man.

“I thought they were the city’s docks.” Kai-Mando smiled back at Kuth-Von.

“The difference is indistinguishable,” Kuth-Von said.

“Just so.” Kai-Mando smiled wider.

“Checking on your investments?” Kuth-Von asked. “We see few bankers here by the water.”

“My investments here are not what concern me,” Kai-Mando said. He looked past Kuth-Von and the docks, up the shoreline of the coast beyond the city.

“It was only one ship and not the most expensive of their fleet.” Kuth-Von looked concerned, but not overly so.

Ondromead wondered what ship and what fleet they spoke of, and what had happened that it might lead to him witnessing this conversation.

“One ship set aflame can set others to fire.” Kai-Mando gripped his hands together.

“True,” Kuth-Von said. “However, one ship set to fire can prevent a city from burning.”

“I should think the opposite to be true, considering what has transpired and what the demon woman has threatened.” Kai-Mando glanced again up the coast. “My profits on this venture of yours are thin enough as it is without her fleet becoming a pyre to melt my coin.”

“You mistake my meaning,” Kuth-Von said, his smile returning. “There is more than one manner of profiting from this venture, as you call it.”

“I care about the profit that keeps my vaults filled,” Kai-Mando said.

“That profit is encompassed in my calculations,” Kuth-Von replied. “Other factors are included as well. The Shen dominions are rekindling the war. You have no doubt heard that Tanshen troops have crossed the border. I believe we will see a resumption of full open conflict between the Shen north and south. And, as always, this will excite the Zatolin and Ketolin fanatics in our own city. We have seen this tear our home apart in the past. Houses and business burned. People dragged into the street and stoned. Retaliation following retaliation. The city soldiers caught between factions set to kill one another. A diversion will help them forget their animosity toward one another.”

“A diversion?” Kai-Mando asked.

“I did not encourage the Circle of Elders to accept the heretic prophet’s proposal because I felt we had no choice,” Kuth-Von said. “No, she unwittingly helped us solve a problem that we have struggled with for centuries. How to keep the two Kam-Djen sects from each other’s throats. The Daeshen and Tanshen armies will be too busy fighting each other to worry that we allow heretics to pass through our walls and help fund their journey to the Forbidden Realm. And while these pilgrims cross our gates on their way to their new village up the coast, we profit in coin and stability. What better way to keep the most rabid elements of the Zatolin and Ketolin factions from burning our city attempting to mimic the war between the dominions than to give them something else to burn?”

“Yes, the burning of a single heretic ship will cost me far less than the burning of our city streets.” Kai-Mando nodded to Kuth-Von. “We are very fortunate to have your wisdom to guide the Circle and the city.”

“You are more fortunate to have my funds available to your bank,” Kuth-Von said. “That is what you came to request, is it not?”

“Perceptive as well as wise.” Kai-Mando bowed once more.

“I will back the purchase of a new vessel through you,” Kuth-Von said. “The heretics must not know of my involvement, nor must anyone else.”

“I assure you of my discretion,” Kai-Mando said. “Thank you.”

“Whatever the city requires.” Kuth-Von nodded to the shorter man and turned, walking back along the docks toward a warehouse.

The banker named Kai-Mando watched Kuth-Von for a moment, then turned and walked back along the pier toward the gate that led into the city. Ondromead closed the book and returned it to the satchel with the ink and quill. He had discovered countless years ago that he did not need to let the ink dry before closing the pages. The ink from the inexhaustible bottle never smudged. He saw a ship preparing to leave dock and smiled as an idea bloomed in his mind.

“Have you ever been to sea?” Ondromead put one hand on Hashel’s shoulder and used the other to point to the ship. The boy shook his head. “How would you like to see the city at night from a ship at sail?” The boy nodded. “Then let us see if anyone notices an old man and a boy walking aboard.”

Ondromead and Hashel gathered up the remnants of their meal, hefted their bags over their shoulders, and started down the pier toward a ship that looked ready to depart. The ships often left the dock at night to anchor in the harbor before setting sail in the morning. It made clearing a busy pier come daybreak unnecessary and ensured the crew did not get lost while drinking and carousing in the city. He did not worry that anyone would stop them stowing away. He had learned how and when to best board a ship over the years. And it did not matter if they were eventually discovered, for they would not be aboard come morning.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Ondromead’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE THRONE



TONKEN-WU

TWO STEWARDS walked side by side, chatting of the previous day's events as they wound through the garden paths, trees and flowers painted in the golden shades of early morning. The garden master and his two apprentices dug in the soft soil near a labyrinth of flowers, each corridor lined with blooms of a different color, cool blues and purples along the outer rim and warm oranges and reds at the center. Three cook's maids from the palace kitchens picked herbs from a small plot planted for that purpose. The palace physician and herbalist did the same from a more medicinal plot across from them. Two lesser tahns lounged on a balcony, no doubt plotting their futures and the downfall of a common rival.

A window stood open three stories above the garden, the shadows within providing a potential hiding place for an archer of skill. The tahneff, Rin-Lahee, intended bride of the zhan, walked with her two ladies-in-waiting through the flagstone garden paths. The zhan himself sat on a bench, discussing matters of state with Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee.

Tonken-Wu stood at attention, hands behind his back, feet together, spine straight. While he faced the zhan, he had placed himself where he could see the entire palace garden, a blank stretch of wall behind him. He attentively watched those working in and passing through the grounds. A threat might come from anywhere. His detail of men waited at four corners around Zhan Tin-Tsu, a respectful distance away. The zhan preferred to take meetings in the garden when possible. Tonken-Wu had tried to impress upon him the difficulty in securing the garden to no avail. He had resorted to paying the garden master from his own allowance to inform him of unusual behavior on the grounds. The old man spent every day in the gardens, rain, shine, snow, or sleet. He would know if someone unfamiliar appeared there.

Tahneff Rin-Lahee paused with her attendants several paces away. She seemed intent upon speaking with the zhan when he had completed his business with the councilor. She spoke briefly with the women and then walked toward Tonken-Wu. Curious what she might wish to say to him, he straightened himself as she approached. When she stopped before him, he bowed, placing his arms at his sides.

"My tahneff, how may I assist you?" Tonken-Wu rose from the bow and looked into the young woman's face, attempting to judge her intent.

He had been pondering for some time the potential threat the soon-to-be zhan consort might pose. She would sleep with the zhan alone in their bedchamber. Poison drops in the ears, a blade

stabbed into a chest in slumber. An open door or window to allow night daggers entrance. A traitorous spouse presented many ways to end a zhan's life.

"Commander Tonken-Wu, may I speak with you a moment?" The tahneff briefly looked to the zhan.

"Certainly, my tahneff." Tonken-Wu wondered what might bring the future wife of the zhan to speak with him.

"I must ask something of you." Tahneff Rin-Lahee's lips tightened as she spoke.

"How may I help you, my tahneff?" Tonken-Wu's curiosity seemed a creature that might crawl out of his chest to question the woman. What did she want of him? What could he provide her?

"Where I grew up in the north, we did not have such a wide circle of acquaintances." Tahneff Rin-Lahee gestured to the trees and flowers and ponds around them. "Our castle could fit in the gardens of the palace with room to spare. A small place for small people. Provincial is the word I hear whispered as I pass through the halls. An accurate appellation. I know no one here, with the exception of my family, most of whom will depart after the wedding ceremony. The few who will remain in palace posts are largely cousins I have hardly seen all my life. I have only one brother, and with my father's death, he must return to our estate."

Tahneff Rin-Lahee stopped, seeming to consider the direction of her words and what destination she truly intended for them.

"I do not understand, my tahneff." Tonken-Wu resisted the urge to shake his head in confusion. It would be impolite to respond thus to a tahneff.

"Here in the palace court, I am a fawn among wolves." Tahneff Rin-Lahee spoke with a smile, but her voice sounded weary and sad.

"I see, my tahneff." Tonken-Wu did see, but did not know whether to believe his ears.

"Do you truly?" Tahneff Rin-Lahee lowered her voice as she stared at him. "I trust my future husband, because I must. And I trust him, because he appears to be exactly the man he presents himself as. Honorable. Devout. Generous of spirit. And I see the trust he places in you. I have decided to trust you, because he does so."

"Thank you, my tahneff." Tonken-Wu bowed his head, a sign of respect for her trust. Could he believe that trust or might it be a ruse to convince the zhan's protector to lower his guard?

"Do not thank me." Tahneff Rin-Lahee's voice and face hardened, seeming to transform her from a young woman to an experienced matron. "To be trusted in these times is a burden, not a blessing. There has been an attempt on my future husband's life and there will be more. My own life will no doubt be in danger as well. This does not worry me as much as the thought that the lives of our children may be threatened. While I will become the zhan consort, one of my children will eventually assume the ascendancy. I must ensure that they live long enough to do so. And so that means I must rely upon others. I must place my trust in them. But I am new to court and have no friends here. I would ask you to be the first of those friends."

"I would be honored to be that trusted friend, my tahneff." Tonken-Wu bowed his head slightly again. He did not know if he should trust the young woman set to become the most

powerful female in the dominion, but he found that he desperately wanted to. He wanted to believe that another could be relied upon to put Zhan Tin-Tsu's interests before all else. He hoped that reciprocation of trust would not prove a grave error of judgment.

"Thank you." Tahneff Rin-Lahee inclined her head toward Tonken-Wu, a sign of appreciation.

"As that friend, I ask that you do what I cannot, my tahneff." Tonken-Wu did not know if his words might give offense, but now seemed the time to establish the parameters of their new alliance.

"And what might that be?" The pitch of Tahneff Rin-Lahee's voice rose in curiosity.

"That you watch over the zhan when I cannot." Tonken-Wu looked to the Zhan Tin-Tsu still seated on the bench with Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee. "There are places and times where he will be with you alone, and where I cannot protect him."

"As that is already my duty as his future wife, I assure you I will do all I can to keep him from all manner of harm." Tahneff Rin-Lahee smiled as Tonken-Wu turned back to her.

"Thank you, my tahneff," Tonken-Wu said. "That eases my mind greatly."

"As you have eased mine." Tahneff Rin-Lahee looked to the zhan, then back to Tonken-Wu. "It seems my future husband will be engaged with his adviser for some time to come. Please tell him I will find him later. There are wedding details I must attend to with the mother zhan."

"As you wish, my tahneff." Tonken-Wu bowed formally with the tahneff's departure and return to her attendants. They walked with her as she continued through the garden and back into the palace halls. Tonken-Wu watched them go, wondering what pact he had entered into with the future zhan consort. He decided it did not matter. Whatever it turned out to be, he would use it to fulfill his duty. To protect the Zhan Tin-Tsu from all potential foes, and from himself when necessary. Not that the man could not protect himself, but even a man such as Zhan Tin-Tsu could only fight so many adversaries at once. Tonken-Wu saw it as his responsibility to battle those the zhan could not, particularly those who might attack before being seen. Which raised again the question that the tahneff's conversation had echoed — who in the palace could Zhan Tin-Tsu trust, and who would attempt to kill him next?

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

A FLY buzzed in the warm air, trapped beneath the canvas arched over the wooden rims covering the wagon that jostled along the pockmarked lane. Sketkee ignored a dark, primal urge to snatch the insect from the air and swallow it whole. Such things were marks of a savage rakthor that had reverted to unenlightened ways. She leaned back against the wall of the covered wagon, stretching her legs out between two crates and several sacks of supplies. Kadmallin sat next to her, his eyes closed, not dozing, but resting from a long night spent before a blacksmith's forge.

"Not long now." Kadmallin did not open his eyes as he spoke.

"Yes. Soon." Sketkee found it best to respond briefly when Kadmallin followed his human inclination to verbally narrate the events transpiring around him. "I believe..."

"Don't tell me," Kadmallin interrupted.

"You do not know what I was about to say." Sketkee marveled at his presumptuousness.

"You were going to tell me the odds that our plan worked." Kadmallin lowered his voice.

"Yes." Sketkee frowned. Were her actions becoming predictable? An unsettling thought. "How did you know?"

"You find calculating odds reassuring," Kadmallin said. "I find it depressing. Especially since our odds are rarely better than forty-forty."

She noted his use of the rakthor numerical system but did not comment. He did so no doubt to surprise her.

"I suspect our odds are better than that this time," Sketkee said.

"Humpf." Kadmallin adjusted his position against a crate as the wobble of the wagon's passage over the rough road cast a sack onto his head. "It might have been easier if we simply tried to steal it for real."

"Those odds looked long indeed." Sketkee's plan had required Viktik to believe they intended to steal the device when in actuality, they hoped to be taken captive and transported along with it. Originally, she had assumed Viktik would travel back to Taknaht, but since the discovery that the device had been altered, a more promising possibility existed. Soon the wagon would reach a forking in the road and either proceed south to the coast and eventually a vessel back to her home realm, or west toward the Forbidden Realm. The direction would determine how the second phase of Sketkee and Kadmallin's plan would advance.

“So, if we head south at the fork, what do you think happens to me?” Kadmallin raised an eyelid as he turned his head to Sketkee.

“That is uncertain.” She had been pondering that very question herself, ever since Viktik left them in the blacksmith’s shop the previous night. “There is no precedence that I am aware of for someone from the Iron Realm being tried for a crime against the Central Governing Committee of the Sun Realm that allegedly occurred while in the Iron Realm. There may even be a case to make that the crimes were actually against Viktik as an individual, not as a representative of the Sun Realm, and therefore must be adjudicated in the Iron Realm. Unfortunately, my knowledge of rakthor legal philosophy is slender.”

“So he might just kill me.” Kadmallin opened both eyes.

“That is a possibility, although I suspect he would wait until reaching the Sun Realm so as to ensure my cooperation in transit.” Sketkee began to calculate the chances of Viktik killing Kadmallin at some point before reaching the Sun Realm, if they headed in that direction. She abandoned the effort after a moment, as much because Kadmallin would not wish to hear the odds, as because she did not herself entirely wish to know them.

“If he kills me, make sure you roast him alive.” Kadmallin closed his eyes again.

“If he kills you, that will be the last of many things I will do to him.” Sketkee found the notion of Kadmallin’s death oddly unsettling. She greatly enjoyed his presence and realized his absence, unlike that of anyone else she had ever known, would be actively unpleasant.

“I thought rakthors didn’t believe in revenge,” Kadmallin said.

“Revenge, no. Justice, yes. Your death would be a great injustice.” Sketkee decided to stop considering such possibilities. The disturbing nature of the exercise did not warrant continuation.

“That’s sweet of you.” Kadmallin’s lips seemed to quiver on the verge of a smile.

“It is neither sweet nor any other taste.” Sketkee shook her head, suspecting that Kadmallin deliberately chose incongruous things to say in an attempt to vex her.

As she readied a more critical reply, the wagon shifted direction. Kadmallin opened his eyes again and turned to face her, a wide smile dividing his face. They headed west. Toward the city of Tanjii and the Zha Ocean and the Forbidden Realm. The first part of the plan had worked. Now they would need to implement the second part of the plan — steal the device for real and escape. She had a good idea of when and how to accomplish that goal, but it would have to wait for the proper moment. Fortunately, rakthors tended to be extremely patient.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Sketkee’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

BIRD CALLS and bright sun chased away dreams of far-off lands and unknown people and stars and stones, revealing instead the sight of a forest valley — green dew-misted leaves sparkling in the golden light of dawn. Hashel woke to the reassuring solidity of firm ground, a welcome change from the stomach-churning rhythms of the waves beneath the ship he and Ondromead had fallen asleep upon the previous night.

“A beautiful day to awaken on dry land.” Ondromead seemed to voice the thought in Hashel’s head. That happened often, but Hashel didn’t mind. He didn’t speak his thoughts aloud himself, so he appreciated it when the old man occasionally expressed them.

Hashel sat up, Ondromead beside him, the broad branches of a tree shielding them from the sun at the edge of a mountain clearing. A valley below stretched out for several leaps, a river flowing along the course between the mountains. Two towns sprawled along either side of the river, stretching nearly the length of the valley. He noticed that women worked the fields and tended the animals, distinguished by their dresses. The men swung swords at each other in open mountain fields or marched in large groups.

Hashel watched as Ondromead took the black book from his satchel and began to write.

“Any guesses where we are?” Ondromead dipped the quill in the bottle of ink. Hashel shook his head at the question.

“See those two mountain peaks there?” The old man pointed with the metal tip of the quill. “Those are called Patnontes and Motnontes. It means Father Mountain and Mother Mountain. The valley is said to be their offspring. Can you guess which dominion we are in?”

Hashel nodded his head. He remembered his parents mentioning the mother and father mountains up north. He started to feel the wave of black sadness engulf him as he thought of his parents. He held his breath and blinked and focused on Ondromead’s voice until the wave receded and it felt safe to exhale and breathe again.

“Indeed, we are in northern Atheton.” Ondromead spoke as though Hashel had voiced his conclusion as to their whereabouts. “Any guesses what we are seeing?”

Hashel shook his head again. The sight in the valley below made no sense.

“Do you remember the tales we overheard in that inn about a plague striking towns in Atheton and leaving the inhabitants wandering in a living death, and how the towns were purged with fire to cleanse the land and spare others from the same fate?”

Hashel nodded. He had found those stories profoundly sad and had been very happy they had not awoken to witness any villagers dying of sickness.

“I had wondered why we heard accounts of the dead but had not seen the deaths for ourselves.” Ondromead put quill to paper again, his odd scratches decorating the page in circles and lines of black. “It is because they are not dead. They have been spirited away to this remote valley to form an army. A secret army. Now what do you think that will mean?”

Ondromead looked up from the book, and Hashel sighed.

“Yes. Indeed. More war. On top of the war that already rages for years. Which is the point, I suspect.”

Ondromead closed the book, sealed up the bottle of ink, and returned them with the quill to the satchel.

“Well, we have the whole of the day to ourselves, I believe. This is what we were intended to see, I think. Let us wander down to that endless town straddling the river and see if we cannot find something to eat.”

Hashel stood up and then helped the old man to his feet. This had become a morning ritual, Hashel first to his feet and then helping the old man to his. Hashel started it to be useful, so the old man would not leave him behind, so he would not wake alone one morning in the same place he had fallen asleep. While he now knew the old man would not willingly abandon him, he liked to help Ondromead all the same.

After performing their morning stretches, they walked down the mountainside, hand in hand. Hashel wondered if all the things they saw would make sense to him one day. As he looked up at Ondromead, he decided he didn't care. Having a friend to rely on held more importance than understanding the world.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Hashel's storyline [follow this link](#).

INTERLUDE



FOUR SAILING vessels anchor beyond the wind-sheltering bay of an uncharted island in the middle of the Nang Ocean, far off the eastern coast of the Iron Realm — a tiny smudge of emerald in a vast cerulean plain beneath an all-enveloping cinereal sky. A rakthor, a wyrin, a yutan, and a roagg stand on the small island near four rowboats lodged against the rocks of the slender coast.

The wyrin female looks between her companions. *There has been enough talk. It is time for deeds and the planning of deeds.*

“We are in agreement, then?” the wyrin says.

The elderly yutan female folds her hands behind her back. *How can such a thing be decided by a mere four people?* She sighs. Because they must.

“Our options are few.” The rakthor male nods in apparent agreement. *The survival of all peoples depends upon what we do here today.*

“It is the only course of action.” The roagg male straightens to his full height, chest thrust out. *A harsh sacrifice in hopes of salvation with little forbearance for mistakes.*

“If it is to be done, it must be done swiftly.” The wyrin female looks once more at each of the others. They nod to her in turn.

“Then we are all in agreement.” The wyrin female looks from her companion conspirators toward the ocean and the Iron Realm far over the horizon. “May the future dead forgive us for what we will do to save those who survive our war.”

To continue reading the storyline of the Interludes [*follow this link.*](#)



EPISODE SEVEN



THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

DAWN BIRDS and a damp beard. Morning songs and a slow drizzle. Ondromead wiped his face as he opened his eyes to find himself lying on a wooden bench beneath low branches, trimmed grass and manicured flowers all around him. He sat up with a start. He did not concern himself with where he might be, but rather that he did not see the boy. Could he have awoken without the boy? Might Hashel have been left behind when whatever powers cast him across the world in his nightly transit? He rubbed his damp face again and looked about him. Gardens of some sort. A palace. One he had seen before. He recognized the ornamental arches of the doorways and the sinuous railings of the balconies. The Daeshen Palace in Tagu-Lan. But where...?

A rustle of grass drew his attention toward the ground. He bent over to see the boy staring back at him from beneath the bench. The boy blinked, rubbed his eyes, and rolled forward to climb up and sit beside Ondromead.

“Gave me a start.” Ondromead patted the boy on the back. “Wise to hide from the rain.”

The boy pushed his damp hair back from his face and pointed to a nearby hall in the palace proper.

“Yes. Another wise idea.” Ondromead stood, slinging the strap of his satchel over his shoulder. Getting out of the rain would be good. Then maybe they could get their bearings and try to find something to eat. Surely a palace had food left unattended.

As they walked toward the double-curved arch of the nearest hallway, he noticed that the garden held more than the typical trees, flowers, and ponds. Tents, chairs, and tables sat in clusters along the open patches of grass. A party of some sort? A celebration? What might the Daeshen zhan be celebrating?

He looked up, trying to judge the time of day, but the gray wash of clouds lent no indication of the sun’s location in its climb across the sky. Morning, but how late or how early, he could not tell.

They stopped just inside the shelter of the stone walls of the entrance to the corridor, wiping mist from their faces in unison. The hallway stretched back a hundred paces, ending in a large, wooden portal, cross-corridors breaking its path along with doors and open arches. They walked along the hall. He had a vague memory of the palace layout, but in truth, after so many castles and palaces and citadels and temples, they all began to look alike. He had a nebulous inclination that the kitchens might lie somewhere to the south. They turned a corner, only to find themselves

staring down a corridor at the gardens again. Odd. Did the palace have two gardens so close? Had he gotten turned around?

“We seem to have become disoriented.” He looked at the boy. The boy stared up, his expression unreadable. He might have been concerned. He might also simply have been hungry.

He turned around, the boy at his side, and walked back down the hall. He rounded a corner in hopes of heading in the direction he believed would be south, but instead discovered himself walking out of an archway and onto a balcony overlooking the garden from the second floor.

Ondromead stood still in the misting rain, his heartbeat ringing in his ears. He had experienced this previously. Not often, but occasionally through the years. He thought of them as daylight dislocations. Abrupt shifts in place while waking, similar to what happened each night as he slept. He reached down and took the boy’s hand. It would be easy to get separated with such displacements taking place so rapidly. As he looked down to the boy, he heard voices from below in the gardens.

“Everything is ready?”

“The blocks are all set upon the board.”

Ondromead looked over the side of the railing. Two men stood under the shelter of another balcony not far away. They were mismatched in all ways. The shorter man wore fine robes while the taller man wore the trousers and shirt of a servant. The shorter man’s neatly trimmed beard highlighted the handsome angles of his face, whereas the taller man’s over-round head made him look distorted by warped glass. Oddly, from the conversation, it appeared the shorter man answered to the taller one.

“Make certain you are in place at the appropriate time,” the taller man said.

“I will fulfill my duty,” the shorter man replied.

“The game is lost with one wrong move,” the larger man said.

“The stone block will fall with the drinking of the wine,” the smaller man said.

“I do not doubt that,” the larger man said. “But the piece responsible must be removed from the board as well.”

“It will be done,” the smaller man said. “I will see to it, as I have sworn.”

“Good,” the taller man said. “We will not speak again.”

Before the smaller man could reply, the larger man turned and lumbered into the gardens. The shorter man lingered a moment and then walked through a nearby doorway into the palace halls.

Ondromead looked down at Hashel to find him staring back up, eyes questioning. While the conversation might not be clear to a young boy, Ondromead had heard enough variations of similar exchanges over the centuries.

“It seems we are here to witness the slaying of the zhan.” Ondromead tried to keep his voice even, but noticed the sadness that overtook the boy’s features. “Stay close today. The halls seem to project us where they will. It would be best that we are still together come nightfall.”

Hashel smiled slightly and nodded. The boy had a quick grasp of things. A helpful trait in a ... in a what? A companion? Yes. A companion.

Ondromead turned to walk back into the palace. As he crossed the threshold of the entrance from the balcony, his hand went empty. He looked to see that Hashel no longer stood beside him, and he no longer stood near a balcony. He had walked into a room with tall glass windows between columns of stone, and purple and green tapestries with embroidered images of battles hanging at regular intervals. A long table with chairs filled one side of the room, one chair larger than the others. An audience chamber of some manner. Not large enough to hold more than a hundred people.

He turned, seeing one closed door and no sign of Hashel. His jaw clenched in anger. Why now? Why should they be separated now? It did not matter. He needed to find Hashel before nightfall and keep the boy close, even if they needed to stay in one place for the remainder of the day.

He strode toward the door, opened it wide, and walked into yet another part of the palace.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Ondromead's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

A SINGLE buttressed stone wall, painted white and circling back upon itself, rose to a domed ceiling, a mosaic of blue and gold and black tiles mimicking a heavenly sky of stars and twin moons. Hashel lowered his eyes, wondering how he had stepped from the gardens to the upper level of what he took to be a temple. And where had Ondromead gone?

Slender windows of painted glass sat at regular intervals around the curved wall. At one end of the circular chamber, a door led to a hall. At the opposite side, a raised dais held an altar. A few priests and monks set banners and arrangements of flowers about the room. He watched the men below as he tried to figure out if he should leave or wait for Ondromead to arrive. Ondromead would be looking for him. Wouldn't he? Should he stay in one spot in hopes of being found, or should he search the palace in an attempt to find the old man? Knowing he might not end up where he intended made the decision complicated and annoying.

He saw two men enter the upper level, not far from him. He did not know who they were, but it would be best not to be seen by them. He slid behind a large statue of a man with a beard. There were several such statues around the temple. He risked a peek at the two men. One wore beautiful white silk robes with a red sash. The other wore black trousers and a hard black leather vest with a sword at his side. Hashel listened closely. He did not think this exchange to be another event they were supposed to witness. Surely Ondromead would be present if it were. However, he had grown accustomed to watching and listening to all that occurred around him. He momentarily marveled once more at the fact that he could understand the words the men said without ever learning to do so. Would he lose that gift, and the gift of the songs, if he once more spoke aloud his thoughts and feelings as others did? Would he lose them if he lost Ondromead? He could not worry about such questions while the men's conversation continued.

"...will be placed at several points around this level and below, my zhan," the man in black said. "There will also be men posing as guests on the lower level and in the grounds of the gardens during the celebration."

"It sounds as though you have everything well in hand," the man in the robes said.

Hashel now knew this man to be the zhan of the dominion. He had heard his name before, but could not remember it. He found it hard enough to recall the names of the leaders in the dominion where he had been raised.

"It would be easier if there were not so many people present for the ceremony, my zhan," the man in black said. "It is too easy for a potential murderer to blend in among the guests."

“Commander, my bride and I cannot be married in a private temple with only a handful in attendance,” the zhan said. “Particularly after the previous attempts on my life.”

“I would think that to be the very reason you should have a smaller ceremony, my zhan,” the commander said. “It is still not too late. The ceremony could be held in the old private family sanctuary, and you could make only a brief appearance at the celebration. We could use the battle to the south as an excuse.”

“I must be seen as fearless in the face of these threats.” The zhan put his hand on the stone railing overlooking the temple proper. “There is a danger not simply to my life, but to my ability to rule. If I appear to fear for my life, if I give the impression of weakness, not only will this embolden my enemies, both within court and in the Tanshen Dominion, it will grant my allies pause, and they may turn from me to someone they believe more capable of defending their interests.”

“I apologize, my zhan.” The commander bowed deeply. “The circumstances are more complicated than I presumed.”

“Apologies are unnecessary.” The zhan continued to stare down at the temple altar. “I did not fully understand the complexities myself until Councilor Pang Kao-Rhee explained them to me. We are, both of us, new to our positions, and must expect that it will take time to master them.”

“Unfortunately, my zhan, failure to grasp them may lead to utter catastrophe.” The man in black placed his hands behind his back.

“It is lamentable that two so unproven should need to accomplish so much.” The zhan smiled at the commander. “There is something else you will be charged with accomplishing as well, which will vex you, I am sure.”

“I am yours to command, Your Ascendancy,” the commander said.

“This battle in the south is the first of many to come.” The zhan turned to look at the commander. “The war will be re-inflamed. I will need to lead the coming battles, which will leave me vulnerable to attack once more. However, as I go, my new wife will be left here in the palace. And if she should be with child, she will be an even greater target than myself. When I depart, I wish for you to remain here to safeguard the future zhan consort from harm.”

“My zhan...” The commander brought his hands from behind his back in a gesture of consternation and pleading.

“I can defend myself, if required.” The zhan raised a hand to quiet the commander’s objections. “As you have seen. And I trust in Ni-Kam-Djen to protect me if I fail. As you have also seen.”

The commander lowered his hands and his head.

“I do not know what I have seen, my zhan.” The commander ran a finger down a thin scar along his right cheek. “I can believe The True God reached down his hand to stay the falling rubble the day of your coronation, but the night of the attack in your chambers, I do not understand how it was possible.”

“Years of training and the good fortune of your arrival to create the necessary distraction.” The zhan stepped closer to the commander and lowered his voice.

Hashel held his breath where he crouched behind the statue, straining to hear the zhan’s whispered words to the commander.

“The temple where I lived and studied is unique,” the zhan said. “It is the home of a two sects. The first is little known, and the second is held in secret by its members. I was initiated into both. The first, the Djen-Kyru sect, protects the world and the faithful through prayer. The second, the Kan-Djen sect, The Warriors of God, protect through action. They are an ancient faction, hidden from the world, and empowered with the divine mission to defend the faith from the most dangerous foes. From the age of seventeen, I trained as a Kan-Djen, and later as a Djen-Kyru. The second is a stringent endeavor. The first is unmerciful in its regimen. I suspect my father sent me to the temple in the hopes I would become a Kan-Djen. That I might one day return to defend my brother and the family. But I did not return. I placed my own concerns ahead of those of my family and the dominion. My brother fell in battle, but he also fell because I did not stand beside him to offer protection. I will not see my bride and consort, nor my future children, suffer the same fate because I am not there to defend them. To that end, I must have someone I can trust without question at their side.”

“I understand, my zhan.” The commander bowed deeply.

“Good.” The zhan nodded his head. “I will allow you to continue your preparations. I believe Councilor Pang Kao-Rhee wishes to speak with me before the ceremony. I will take my usual guards.” The zhan pointed to two men standing by one of the entrances.

As Hashel looked to the guards, he saw another man on the other side of the circular balcony, across the open space of the temple chamber. The skin prickled along the back of his neck. He had seen the man not long ago. The tall man plotting to kill the zhan. Hashel frowned as he watched the zhan walk toward the guards. What should he do? Should he warn the zhan? How? Ondromead would be very unhappy if he interfered in events once more. Ondromead. He needed to find Ondromead. If they were present in the palace to witness the murder of the zhan, would Ondromead be easier to find by following the intended victim or the man who schemed for his death?

Hashel bit his lip as he watched from the shadows behind the statue. The zhan left through one doorway with his two guards and the commander alone through another. The tall would-be murderer turned and walked toward a third door on the far side of the balcony.

Making his decision, and hoping it proved correct, Hashel ran beside the railing, staying low to avoid being seen. He dashed around the curve of the balcony as the tall man walked through a door and closed it behind himself. Hashel’s thin leather boots skidded silently across the marble floor as he came to a stop before the door. He opened it slowly, seeing the man pass through yet another entrance at the end of a corridor.

The man slipped inside the hallway and pulled the door closed. Hashel ran along the corridor as quietly as he could, halting before the second door he had seen the man enter. He opened it a crack and listened as he peered inside the room.

Light shone through from a slender window, illuminating a well-decorated room. A large desk. An empty fireplace. Tables. Chairs. Books on the walls. He did not see the tall man. Taking a deep breath, he decided to risk exposing himself and opened the door slightly wider. He slipped through the door and...

“Who are you now, boy?”

A firm hand gripped Hashel’s arm, yanking him off his feet. He gasped as he looked up into the face of the tall man. As ever, he said nothing, the fear in his eyes his only communication.

“Why are you following me, boy?” the tall man growled into Hashel’s face. “Who do you work for? Tonken-Wu?”

The man shook Hashel and slapped him hard across the face. Hashel’s eyes watered and his head rang. The man pulled him toward a door at the far end of the room.

“Won’t talk? Then I’ll make sure you never talk.”

Hashel struggled as the man pulled him toward the door. He tugged at the man’s fingers on his arm with his free hand to no avail. His feet barely touched the ground as the man hauled him across the stone floor, opened the door, and yanked him into a dimly lit corridor.

Hashel found himself alone.

He froze in place, rabbit-still, heart thundering in his chest, tears streaking his face, his body tingling with terror as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. He stood in a small clay-walled hut, a fire hearth in the center, an open hole in the thatched roof above it letting in light. A small table and two chairs sat opposite a bed with a blanket covering a mound of straw. A roughhewn wooden door sat partway open. Noises came to his ears as his heart raced faster. The noises sounded like men fighting. He heard steel smashing against steel, men shouting, men screaming in pain, horses snorting in fear.

His hand trembling, Hashel reached out and pulled the door closed to a crack. He saw a dusty lane between homes similar to the one he stood in, men in armor fighting each other, identifiable only by the colors of the sashes draped from their shoulders.

As he watched a man with a green sash fight four men with red sashes, he began to cry. The green-sashed soldier’s sword cut through the blades of the men he battled, slicing open their armor — a honed razor cleaving thin paper. Where could he be? How far from the palace had he come when the tall man pulled him through that doorway? Thankfully, the tall man had not also traveled along. But how could he get back to the palace? How could he find Ondromead?

The soldier in the green sash ran after the last of the men he fought, cutting him down in the street with a stroke that severed his armored arm from his body. Hashel left the door slightly open, but stepped back into the straw-covered dirt floor of the hut and sank to his knees and sobbed.

Alone. Alone again and no one to protect him. Somehow, he had to find a way back to the palace, back to Ondromead. But how?

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Hashel’s storyline [follow this link](#).

THE THRONE



KAO-RHEE

“AS WE agreed?”

“Yes, my zhan. After the wedding.”

“Good.”

Kao-Rhee pulled the door to the study closed as Zhan Tin-Tsu crossed the room and opened the glass doors to the balcony. The man always kept the doors open when in the room. Possibly he missed the mountain air of his former temple. Kao-Rhee did not mind. He preferred the warm breeze from the gardens to the slightly musty smell of the books lining the back wall.

“There is something else we must discuss, however briefly.” Kao-Rhee crossed the carpet with the repeated circular pattern, a subtle reminder of the true reasons they fought a war with the Tanshen Dominion.

“Can it not wait until tomorrow?” Zhan Tin-Tsu placed his hands behind his back as he stared out the window. “I dress in my wedding robes soon.”

“It will not take long, Your Ascendancy.” Kao-Rhee clasped his hands behind his back as well and stood beside the desk. “It is about the plague in Atheton. I have received word that there have been further outbreaks. More villages burned and people fleeing north for safety.”

“We should close the border roads then.” Zhan Tin-Tsu turned from the balcony with a frown. “We cannot afford for the Living Death to strike us as we build up to fight the Tanshen.”

“Normally, I would agree with you, my zhan.” Kao-Rhee stepped closer and lowered his voice, adopting a physical posture of subservience. He found that rulers were often more open to notions other than their own when presented by someone they did not consider a threat. “However, just as we cannot risk an illness spreading to kill our people, we cannot risk angering the Teyett of Atheton and our greatest trade partner. We will need those trade routes more than ever as the war with the Tanshen once again boils to a froth.”

“And if sickness fells our men in the north, who we must now call to fight in the south, what then of the war?” Zhan Tin-Tsu walked around his desk and took a seat.

Kao-Rhee noted how tired the new zhan looked. He did not appear a man excited for the prospect of the day’s wedding nor the marriage to follow. Kao-Rhee hoped the years of priestly endeavor had not blunted his enthusiasm for the conjugal bed. The dominion needed an heir as soon as possible to secure the stability of the ascendancy.

“It is a risk that can be mitigated by doubling the length of the quarantine for the wagons and caravans passing over the border between our nations.” Kao-Rhee had already sent word to

the border towns that such rules should be enacted in all haste. He could not wait on every decision from the zhan before taking action, especially when stakes were so great.

“A compromise that will hopefully prove sufficient.” Zhan Tin-Tsu leaned forward and placed his fingers beneath his chin. “What does Tigan Rhog-Kan think?”

Kao-Rhee realized how often the man assumed that posture when thinking through proposals. He wondered if it were some aspect of temple debate ritual intended to make the individual look more thoughtful. Whatever the source, it did seem to have that effect with the new zhan.

“I have spoken with Tigan Rhog-Kan, and he concurs with my suggestion,” Kao-Rhee said.

He worried about Rhog-Kan and his engagement to Tahneff Dju-Tesha. Such a marriage would not be unprecedented — a commoner tigan marrying into a royal family — but it would unsettle the balance of power in court and possibly the dominion. And if, as Kao-Rhee suspected, Rhog-Kan were responsible for the attack on Zhan Tin-Tsu prior to his coronation, then that implied other, far darker possibilities. It seemed likely that Zhan Tin-Tsu would ride to war with Rhog-Kan before long. Accidents easily happened on a battlefield. Were the zhan to meet an untimely end while fighting in the south before he and Rin-Lahee produced an heir, then Dju-Tesha would assume the ascendancy with Rhog-Kan as her consort, and ruler in all but name. While Rhog-Kan’s bloodline would keep him from ever sitting upon the throne, his offspring with Dju-Tesha would face no such difficulty.

The question facing Kao-Rhee revolved around the choice to commit to Tin-Tsu as zhan, or whether to help Rhog-Kan precipitate his demise. Which posed a greater threat to the long-term stability of the dominion? Could Zhan Tin-Tsu abandon his role as priest to fully undertake the duties of ascendancy, or would the dominion be better served by Tigan Rhog-Kan, who had seen how years of war damaged a nation and intended to end it decisively?

“As you and Tigan Rhog-Kan are in agreement, I will accede to your experience.” Zhan Tin-Tsu leaned back in his chair. “Is there anything else?”

“No, my zhan.” Kao-Rhee bowed. “Many happy blessings on this day of union. May it result in a multitude of heirs.”

“Thank you, Kao-Rhee.” Zhan Tin-Tsu bowed his head slightly in acknowledgment of the blessing.

Kao-Rhee left the zhan’s study and headed for his personal quarters on the lower level. He found his wife still being dressed by her attendants. He stood inside the room and admired her by the light coming through the tall windows and the open balcony doors. She looked resplendent in her blue silk gown with a thin yellow sash, her long black hair wrapped up in an intricately knotted bun, held in place by several strategically located silver pins. He smiled as he observed her unawares, feeling again the wave of sentiment he had always experienced when seeing her without her noticing. That he loved her more after thirty years than the day they wed did not surprise him. The ever-deepening nature of that love, however, did suspend his breath for a moment.

Sin-Tiku possessed all the qualities he lacked. Where his mind leaned toward cunning, hers bent toward simplicity in all things. Where he cultivated suspicion, she engendered generosity. Where he clung to the necessity of ruthlessness, she embodied compassion. He realized, as he had throughout the decades, that she balanced his being and provided all the things he truly needed. Everything except children, of course. She had been cursed to remain barren.

"You should not dally about gawking when you must dress as well." Sin-Tiku smiled as she noted him watching her.

"I cannot think of a better use of my time than staring at my lovely wife." Kao-Rhee crossed the room and kissed her briefly, the attendants stepping aside as he did so.

"Generally, when you flatter me so, it is to abandon me to attend some grievous social gathering on my own." Sin-Tiku eyed him with mock suspicion. "You have not found something more important to occupy your time than the zhan's wedding, I hope."

"Certainly not." Kao-Rhee smiled at his wife. "Merely procrastinating."

"Well, procrastinate somewhere else. You distract me." Sin-Tiku looked down at her clothes. "The folds of this robe are ridiculously complicated. We've tried three times, and it continues to slip off."

He smiled. How very like her. The attendants held responsibility for dressing her, yet she accepted it as partly her own so as to shield them from possible blame for failure. The servants loved her for such gestures.

"Did it never occur to you that I might have requested that it be fashioned thus?" Kao-Rhee leaned toward his wife.

"Had you done so, I would have requested you to tie the folds." Sin-Tiku smiled at his frown and kissed him. "Now run along."

"Yes, my dear." Kao-Rhee passed into the sleeping chamber, intending to call his attendants to dress him.

Once in the room, he felt drawn to the balcony. He had plenty of time before the ceremony. He stepped out into the sun and looked out over the palace gardens. He found the sight of the trees and flowers and ponds calming, and he needed a moment of tranquility.

The wedding set a new course. While he suspected Rhog-Kan of the attempted murder of Zhan Tin-Tsu, he had no solid evidence. And he doubted the tigan managed the collapse of the ceiling in the Grand Hall that had nearly brought about the zhan's death a second time. A near murder that raised even more questions than the first. Who had planned and executed it? Tanshen sympathizers? A high tahn looking to vie for the ascendancy in the absence of Zhan Tin-Tsu and his sister Dju-Tesha, who would no doubt have also died in that hail of stone? And how had they all survived? Had Zhan Tin-Tsu's prayers really saved them? Kao-Rhee believed in Ni-Kam-Djen, but that the god might touch the world in such a way confounded him. But if dreams of a new star might infect thousands across the realm and a new celestial body arrive in the night sky, might not The True God finally elect to interfere in the affairs of mortals?

Kao-Rhee took a deep breath and slowly exhaled. The true shift created by the wedding would come afterward, if and when the union produced an heir. He must decide whether to

defend Zhan Tin-Tsu or assist in his removal. The man posed a grave danger, but he did have the right to the ascendancy. The zhan held the responsibility for determining the direction of the nation, not his advisers and tigans. Might not a man whose prayers saved hundreds from a collapsing ceiling also have the wits to save the dominion? Perhaps. But his faith might just as easily delude him from the realities threatening them from all flanks.

Could it be possible to do nothing? To take no sides?

As Kao-Rhee pondered this question, he noticed a high tahneff cross the garden path below, followed by three female attendants in a line. As he saw the final young woman, he gasped quietly. He knew those eyes and that face, even though he had not seen her since the death of her mother ten years prior.

Peda-Leng.

How could she be there? How had she managed to enter the service of a tahneff? Now she walked beneath him only paces away. He found himself wanting to call out to her. Instead, he placed his hands on the stone railing of the balcony to hold them from shaking.

TEN YEARS AGO

THE SMELL of wet horse manure clung to the humid air as the noises of a small town going about its daily routine came muffled into the cabin of the carriage. Rivulets of sweat trickled down Kao-Rhee's scalp in the hot, stuffy air inside the cab. He looked out the window screen and across the street to a candle and oil shop. A girl of ten stood behind a table of candles, sorting them by size and width. The girl's grandfather came out from the shop to place another crate of tapers on the ground, patting the girl affectionately on the head before walking back inside the shop. The girl smiled and sang some unheard song to herself while she worked.

A thin blade of jealousy pierced Kao-Rhee's heart, and he winced at the pain. To yearn for a child and be denied through fate stood as one of the many incomprehensible cruelties of life. To desire a child and have one that he could not acknowledge sat as the painful result of a single foolish choice playing out year after year.

He had no recollection of opening the carriage door and crossing the street to stand before the table of candles. He only knew that, in one moment, he stared longingly at the girl he could not openly recognize as his child, and the next, he looked down into her green-gold eyes — eyes so like her mother's. She held something of him in her face as well. The angle of the cheekbones, the slope of her nose, the dark brown coloring of her skin. Things only he would know to see.

"Candle, sir?" The girl looked up with a smile as she indicated the array of candles arranged on the table. "Or maybes tamak seed oil for yer lamps." She gestured to several barrels with pump handles along the front of the shop.

Unaware why he stood there before the girl, it took him a moment to fashion an answer from his confusion.

"Candles. Yes."

“How many? Buy ten and ya get twelve. It’s a discount.” The girl’s smile seemed to kindle a fire in his heart that he had not known could be lit.

“I will buy ten, then,” Kao-Rhee said. “For the discount.”

“Tall or short? Wide or thin? We gots wax and tallow.” The girl pointed to the different candles on display.

“Tall and wide and tallow, please.” The girl began to assemble the order, wrapping a bit of twine around the candles to make carrying them easier.

“How much will that be?” Kao-Rhee asked.

“One bronze or ten coppers.” The girl beamed as she passed him the bundle.

He held the candles under an arm as he retrieved his purse and withdrew a single bronze coin. Kao-Rhee found the transaction transpiring all too quickly. He sought for ways to prolong it as he handed the girl the coin.

“What is your name, little one?” Kao-Rhee tried to sound casual as he asked the question but found it hard to control the emotion behind it.

He had never seen the girl. Not even as a babe. He only knew where her mother had lived, not what she had called the child. He’d met the girl’s mother eleven years previously on a diplomatic errand for the zhan, visiting a high tahn in the south. Thu-Daa had lived and worked in her father’s candle shop, but occasionally earned extra money serving tables in the local inn. He’d encountered her there while drinking too much in a private dining room. He had taken to imbibing several glasses of wine in the evenings in the wake of the death of Zhan Fan-Tsee’s brother. He should have seen the possibility of such an occurrence. He had failed, and his failure led to war. As Thu-Daa brought food and more glasses of wine, he talked with her, finding her surprisingly well spoken for a girl from a small province in the south. He had no clear recollection of how she ended up in his bed the next morning and only vague, wine-tinted memories of their fevered copulation.

He did not make a habit of indulging in affairs and trysts while traveling away from the palace, but he found that he turned to them when his moods brought him low. He loved his wife and would never have contemplated abridging their marriage vows while in proximity to her. However, he occasionally discovered himself drawn to other women for one reason or another as he traveled, and he acted upon that impulse when his desires moved him to do so. That night marked the last time he allowed his passions to mislead him.

Several months after he returned to the palace, he received a letter from the woman. It reminded him in very hazy language of their acquaintance and mentioned an unexpected result from their business transaction. He could not help but admire the way she phrased things, leaving him in no doubt of her pregnancy, but making the matter uninterpretable in the event the correspondence was intercepted. He admired it and appreciated it. Knowledge of a bastard child with a commoner would not only damage or, quite possibly, destroy his marriage, it would compromise his standing in court.

He spent several days considering what to do. How to proceed. A more cautious and caustic-blooded man would have paid to make the problem vanish into the shadows. The woman

could easily meet a sudden death. Stabbed in the inn. Her father's shop burned down while the family slept. A poisonous fever from something bad she ate. A wise and ruthless man would protect his standing, because doing so safeguarded the zhan, the ascendancy, and the dominion.

In the end, no matter how much he tried to convince himself of the coldly calculated course of action, he could not be so merciless. How could he kill the one child he might ever sire? How could he look into his wife's loving eyes, knowing he had taken from the world the very thing she strove, and failed, to bring into being? How could he end the life of a woman who had shown him compassion and tenderness when he held none for himself?

He replied to the letter, indicating his surprise at the new development in their business arrangement, but agreeing that it should be explored to the fullest extent possible. He phrased the words to imply that the woman would supply him with information regarding matters in the south. In exchange, he ensured that the palace requested a shipment of the finest candles from her father's shop on an annual basis, for which they would be paid a premium price.

That arrangement continued even after he heard of the woman's death. Now that he stood before the daughter, his daughter, he recognized that agreement needed to continue indefinitely. He wondered if she knew about her father and what her mother might have told her about the man, about him. Likely that he had died. From what he understood, the mother had married a man headed off to war. A man who never returned. The girl would never know either father, fictional or real.

"Peda-Leng, sir." The girl rubbed her waxy hands on her dress. "Me mother named me fer the story of the wind that comes but once yet changes everything."

"A very lovely name." Kao-Rhee smiled at the girl, trying to conceive of a reason and a means of continuing to talk with her.

Seeing motion from within the shadows of the shop and suspecting her grandfather might emerge at any moment, he thanked the girl, Peda-Leng, his only child, and returned to the carriage. As he rode down the street, holding the bundle of tallow candles on his lap, he looked at them and smiled. He'd spent so much time watching her that he hadn't counted the candles as she tied them up. Either the girl could not count properly, a notion he doubted, or she had grinned brightly while shorting him one candle. He could not imagine her grandfather condoned such dishonesty and wondered what she would do with the candle she'd saved. Sell it to someone else and hide the money? What a fascinating notion. What a fascinating girl.

THE PRESENT

KAO-RHEE WATCHED Peda-Leng follow her mistress across the garden and out of sight. What did it mean that his daughter appeared before him on such a day? What chain of events had fallen together link by link to deliver her into the palace so close to him? And what should he do about it? A notion occurred to him that made his hands shiver and his head swoon. Could it be possible to contrive a means of getting the girl into the service of his wife? Could he not maneuver circumstance such that he might have his daughter in his life, even if she might never

know of her parentage? Was it possible she did know? Did her mother reveal her true sire to her at some point before dying? Or might her grandfather have known and exposed the truth? Did she desire something from him? Money? Station? Might she simply wish to know her father in some small way, even if only to see him across the halls of the palace?

He realized that he had no answers to any of these questions, but that the asking of them had clarified his earlier quandary. He did not think to protect his status by eliminating the threat presented to it by the arrival of his daughter. He instead considered means of embracing her, even if only clandestinely. As cunning as he might be, he did not retain the malevolent instinct necessary to insulate his standing in court from potential scandal. Nor, he now knew, did he possess the savage treachery required to kill the zhan, nor stand idle while others did. He had tarnished the gleam of his honor in conceiving the child he could not acknowledge, but that honor still shone brightly within him. He would do what his honorable nature demanded.

And he would speak with Tigan Rhog-Kan to clarify this position.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

BOOTS AND slippers serpentine through the palace halls — a line of ants carrying plates and cups and chairs and ornamental settings to the gardens and the small galleries beside them. Ondromead looked down on the procession of busy people from a balcony near the rooftop. He had decided the best way to find the boy would be to see as much of the palace as possible in a glance. The balcony he stood on wrapped around the upper floor, passing over the common rooms and several smaller buildings. He'd wondered why the staff prepared the gardens for a celebration rather than the Grand Hall until he'd seen what remained of that chamber and remember the stories he had heard of the zhan's coronation. He could not imagine what caused the craterous hole in the ceiling — looking as though a meteor had crashed through the roof — nor how none had apparently been killed in the collapse. Had the zhan truly saved those in attendance through his prayers as the rumors suggested?

He followed the balcony around the garden and through several inner courtyards. Servants and various courtiers of the palace passed him, but all seemed oblivious to his presence. He'd gotten used to that reaction over the countless years. Few people would really see him and those who did soon lost interest. Two of those who showed no interest caught his own. Men walking toward one another on a lower balcony. Men he'd seen previously. When they were younger.

He slowed to a stop and stood beside a potted tree at a turn in the balcony path, tilting his head to better hear the men. If their conversation turned out to be the intended event he needed to witness, it freed him to find the boy. Then again, if the dislocations continued, it might be that he needed to witness more than one thing. He feared that further displacements might take him away from the palace entirely. This tended to happen rarely, only once every few years, but often enough to be a real concern. If he walked around a corner or through a door and ended up on the other side of the realm, he might never encounter the boy again.

Both men wore ornate robes. The first, tall and slender in purple and gold silks, bowed slightly to the second, a stocky man in robes of blue and white. The second man returned the minor bow.

"Tigan," the first man said. "How fortunate to come upon you. I had wished to broach a subject best discussed in private."

"Councilor." The second man folded his arms across his broad chest. "What do you wish to say in the privacy of an open balcony?"

A councilor and a tigan. He had not seen their faces in years. Could they be involved in the plot he'd heard set in motion earlier?

"I wish to suggest that we contrive to align our efforts more closely." The councilor clasped his hands behind his back.

"Toward what end?" the tigan asked.

"Toward the end of maintaining balance in the dominion and ending the long war," the councilor replied.

"In all the years I have known you, I have always wondered why you can never speak plainly." The tigan frowned.

Ondromead agreed and began to fidget. He had no time for mundane exchanges. He needed to find the boy before the plot against the zhan came to fruition and finding Hashel became ever more unlikely.

"Plainly spoken words are often the easiest to misinterpret." A light smile touched the councilor's lips.

Odd as it sounded, Ondromead found that he agreed. He could not number the times he had seen people elaborately state their intentions and beliefs, only to have their words twisted and used against them in the cause of chaos and carnage.

"Then please, Councilor, obfuscate at your leisure." The tigan bowed faintly, his body clearly expressing his annoyance.

"The zhan needs our assistance and guidance." The councilor looked toward the palace temple.

"Which we have been providing, and he has diligently ignored." The tigan's frown deepened.

"Not in the governance of the dominion or the prosecution of the war." The councilor turned back to the tigan.

"How so, then?" the tigan asked.

"In staying alive." The councilor stepped closer to the tigan.

A familiar tingle suffused Ondromead's mind. He held back a sense of panic as he listened to the men speak. He had been intended to hear this conversation. The irresistible urge that drew him to quietly remove the black book and quill from his satchel also told him that it would not be the only event he would witness that day.

"There will always be attempts on the zhan's life," the tigan said. "Concluding the war is the best way to end those threats."

"I agree," the councilor said. "However, the threats may come from within rather than without."

"You suspect traitors." The tigan lowered his voice.

"No, I suspect that traitors will be suspected if the zhan should perish at the hands of a night dagger." The councilor leaned toward the tigan.

"You are being obscure again." The tigan's frown returned.

“Allow me to clarify.” The councilor frowned himself. “While I am pleased with your proposed union with Tahneff Dju-Tesha, and I look forward to having a similarly minded ally within the royal family, there are those who might see, in the light of the zhan’s potential murder, a movement of the blocks particularly advantageous for you.”

Ondromead understood the intention behind the man’s words, even though he did not grasp the specifics. The councilor threatened the tigan while suggesting the threat originated elsewhere. Why would he do that? Did he suspect the tigan of an attempt on the zhan’s life. Did that explain the the ceiling of the Grand Hall and the stories he had heard?

The notion of the zhan’s life being taken and the attendance of the two men brought Ondromead’s mind to one of the previous times he had seen them, and the murder he had witnessed in their presence.

TWENTY YEARS AGO

METAL STRUCK metal, ringing through the air and echoing from the curved stones of the temple dome. Ondromead stood on the upper balcony of the temple beside a statue of a man with a long beard, a prophet of the Kam-Djen faith. He couldn’t recall which one. There were nine in all, he seemed to remember. One faith began to look much like all others after so many years witnessing so many permutations, so many conflicts, so many prophets, so many notions of what people should worship and how. He often wondered why the humans and other peoples of Onaia bothered with making appeals to various gods when, year after year, they only received silence. He suspected the rakthors and their rational abandonment of faith might make more sense. But then again, no rakthor could explain his existence with their vaunted reasoning. His life might actually be the proof the believers looked for.

The priest standing before the altar finally stopped ringing the circle-etched silver bell in his hand. A second priest stood beside him. The first priest placed the bell on a small table, smoothed his emerald-colored robes, and picked up a silver cup of wine. He handed the wine to the second priest in crimson robes. As the second priest turned to the man and woman before him, he raised the cup so the hundreds of wedding guests might see it clearly.

“As the ringing of the bell reminds us of the clarity of the teachings of the prophets, so, too, does the sharing of the wine remind us of the blood they sacrificed to pass these teachings down to us.” The priest lowered the silver chalice and handed it to the groom, a man of thirty years in long, silk robes. “As the intended couple shares this wine, they share in the sacrifice of the prophets and commit to the sacrifices they make in joining their lives together.”

The priest looked to the groom, resplendent in red and gold. “In drinking this wine, you become of one blood.”

The groom took a deep drink of the chalice and handed it to the bride, the green and gold of her robes reflecting up to add a warm glow to her eyes.

“In drinking this wine, you become of one blood,” the second priest repeated to the bride. After she drank from the cup, she handed it back to the priest.

“And now we drink of the wine, standing stead for the prophets as they watch down upon us from the Pure Lands.” The second priest took a long sip from the silver cup and then handed it to the first priest, who also took a drink. The first priest set the cup aside and turned back to the congregation, clasping his hand before his heart, the right palm covering the left fist. The second priest made the same gesture in reverse.

“May Ni-Kam-Djen bless this union and all that issues forth from it,” the first priest said.

“May Ni-Kam-Djen bless our dominions, joined together now in man and woman, north and south, Ketolin and Zatolin, side by side for all time,” the second priest said.

As the priests raised their hands in unison, the couple kissed and the guests cheered. Ondromead sighed from his perch above the ceremony. He had witnessed many weddings in his long years, but few as momentous as the one below. Two nations, long adversaries, divided by interpretations of faith, finally joined in marriage, the husband from the northern Daeshen Dominion and the wife from the southern Tanshen Dominion, each heirs to their respective royal thrones. He wondered how long the union would last. Would it result in a reunified nation in a generation, or would the divisions of faith fray the newly woven fabric and tear the dominions further apart?

In truth, he did not care all that much. He concerned himself more with getting somewhere he could record the day’s events in the black book. His feet ached from standing so long and the pain in his lower back throbbed. Too many nights falling asleep in beds and waking up in fields. An old body, held old for all time, ached more than most. He did not remember ever having a young physique. With countless years lost to remembering the past, only vague impressions of his initial days survived after several millennia. Faded reverberations of an unremembered life.

The bride and groom began their procession down the aisle of the temple — a newly crafted ship plying a path between the opposing waves of the guests, the dual priests trailing in their wake. Ondromead watched them, wondering if they would make a good couple. If they would be happy being the embodiment of their respective nations hopes and desires. The man, Kal-Dan, brother to the northern Zhan, Fan-Tsee, carried a face that silently spoke of duty and honor. His recently wedded wife, Tem-Jee, the daughter of the southern Zhan, Kee-Vay, smiled as though she had just won a particularly long and difficult game of koris, only two blocks standing on the board, her piece triumphant in its final move.

Ondromead started to walk away, to find a bench to sit upon, when the skin along the back of his neck prickled — icy intuition making him shiver. He knew that feeling all too well. The event he had been placed to witness by unseen hands had not yet fully transpired. The apex of that incident neared. He could not look away. Now his attention mattered most.

Tem-Jee’s smile faded as she stumbled. Kal-Dan reached over to steady her as she clung to his arm and came to a halt. Her face constricted in a wince as she gasped and her knees buckled. She clutched at her stomach and fell to the ground. Kal-Dan knelt down beside her and then doubled over in obvious pain, crying out as he held a hand to his gut. Cries and shouts rang out from the crowd of guests, men from both sides of the aisle rushing to assist the moaning

newlyweds. The two priests collapsed next, nearly in unison, holding to each other's arms as the married couple had done before them.

Ondromead watched in detached compassion as a circle of family members formed around the dying bride and groom. He had seen death at weddings before, but not in such a manner. Men from both families reached down to carry their loved ones from the temple, the bride and groom unconscious in their arms, faces already blue, bodies limp. The northern zhan, Kon Fan-Tsee, helped to carry his brother as the southern zhan, Taujin Kee-Vay, bore his daughter in his arms. While Ondromead had never beheld a poisoned wedding, he had seen the effects of the particular poison that appeared to afflict the dying couple. They would be dead before they left the temple.

A crowd knelt around the two priests, offering useless ministrations to the extinguishing of their lives. Men shouted curses across the still visible aisle between the two nations. Fighting erupted as fists slammed into faces and calls of "heretic" and "blasphemer" and "murderers" rose to the domed ceiling above.

Ondromead suspected this wedding would now result in a deeper schism between the dominions rather than a reunification. As he left the balcony in search of a place to write down what he had seen, he pondered whether the leaders of those two nations would cast aspersions against one another as the guests did now, or whether they would realize there might be an unknown hand that poured the poison killing their loved ones and their hopes for a new Great Dominion. He also wondered when he would see that hand again himself. He had no doubt that he would.

A short time later, he walked into the garden, hoping to rest his weary back upon a bench and open the black book to add one more page of memories preserved for reasons he did not understand, events transcribed for an unseen reader. On the side of the lawn, he noticed a small crowd gathered in a circle. He recognized two of the men. Councilors of the opposing nations.

The councilors stood over the bodies of two other men, ambassadors by the cut and color of their robes. Daggers rested in the dead men's hands, blood darkening and dampening the fabric that clung to their still forms.

"It would seem they died fighting one another." The northern councilor knelt to the side of the man who had been his ambassador.

"The murderer discovered." The southern councilor crossed his arms as he glared at the bodies.

"But which one discovered the other?" The northern councilor rose to his feet.

"The answer to that is obvious." The southern councilor turned his hard eyes to his counterpart. "And you will have our retribution for your treachery."

The northern councilor said nothing as the southern councilor stomped off through the garden paths, attendants rushing to keep up behind him. Another man, a tigan by the epaulets adorning his robes, approached the councilor.

"All our bright futures turned to ash in a day," the tigan said.

"But by whose hand?" the councilor replied.

Ondromead watched the two northern men stare at the bodies in silence a moment longer, and then he sought out the soft comfort of a plot of grass beneath a tree on the far side of the garden. As he took the black book from his satchel and began to record all that had transpired, he wondered how many times he would see this palace and these people again in the coming years. He hoped, for their sakes, it would not be often.

THE PRESENT

ONDROMEAD SQUINTED at the men on the balcony below him. He had seen both several times over the years since the murder of the ill-fated bride and groom. He did not fail to notice the adversarial stance the two men took as they continued to speak.

“If the zhan dies, I would become consort to a Zhaneff Dju-Tesha.” The tigan crossed his arms as he spoke. “And this might be seen as reason to plot for the zhan’s death.”

“Moreover, it could be used as an excuse for a number of higher tahns to press claims of a bloodline more suited to the ascendancy, particularly if no heir is apparent.” The councilor’s face held a grimace.

“A civil war.” The tigan lowered his voice.

“Which would grant our enemy an advantage they would surely use to destroy us,” the councilor said.

“And in the interest of clarity, you suggest what?” The tigan stepped closer to the councilor.

“That we do all we can to keep the zhan alive and on the throne.” The councilor matched the tigan’s move by taking a step forward himself. The two men now stood a foot span apart.

“I thought we were doing all that is possible.” The tigan lowered his arms and placed them behind his back.

“I cannot speak for you, Tigan, but I realized that I had allowed my displeasure at the zhan’s tendency to ignore my advice to color my efforts to preserve his station.” The councilor again matched the tigan’s movement, clasping his hands behind his waist. “I have come to repudiate the slackness of such thinking.”

“I will do all I can to assist you in this endeavor.” The tigan held the councilor’s eyes as he lowered his head.

“Your consociation is greatly appreciated.” The councilor nodded back to the tigan. “I will not delay you further. We both have much to do before the ceremony, I am sure.”

“Yes. Much.” The tigan offered a quick bow and then walked away down the balcony and around a corner. The councilor followed the tigan with his eyes until he vanished, then departed in the opposite direction.

Ondromead looked down, his hand shaking with the desire to transcribe the conversation he had heard. He knew it to be only one of many things he would need to record that day, a murder likely the last of all. Death stalked the impending wedding, inevitable as sunset. And with night would come the final opportunity to locate the boy. Where could he be? Could the unseen force that moved him about the palace be moving the boy to keep them apart? To what end? And why

now? What had changed? He knew that he had been altered in some indefinable fashion by the boy. Might this be punishment for keeping Hashel at his side?

A man strode along the balcony across the inner courtyard of the palace. The shorter man from earlier in the gardens. One of those plotting the death of the zhan. Should he follow the man? No. He would worry about the boy rather than events he could not interfere with. And where would the boy go? Where would he wait for Ondromead? Too many possibilities entered his mind — the gardens, the temple, the kitchens. He had no choice. He would need to check them all.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link](#).

To continue reading Ondromead's storyline [follow this link](#).

THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

WORN LEATHER boots shuffled across compacted dust soaked with blood. A long hemp rope bound wrist to wrist and tethered man to man as fifteen militiamen marched through the castle courtyard. Palla followed the line of prisoners, a sword in her hand, tip pointed at the nearest man's back. She had taken the sword from a fallen militiaman to use against another set to attack her. She'd finished with brandishing prop weapons. She liked the feel of the leather binding around the hilt pressing against her palm. Appreciated the weight and balance of the steel. Enjoyed the burning sensation in her arm as her muscles strained from holding the weapon outstretched. She did need to clean the blood from it, though.

"Rapin' bastards."

"Thievin' scum."

Townspeople cursed and spat at the militiamen as their carnival captors led them across the last steps of the courtyard and up the stone stairs to the wall above the barricaded gate. Most of the pilgrims stayed back, holding hands and praying silently. Only Ranna joined her in minding the prisoner militia. She, too, held a sword in her hand, blood still staining the blade. She held it firmly, her grip as tight as the look on her face.

Palla watched the woman as they walked, admiring her. Ranna had shown little hesitance in swinging the blade, and no revulsion in the results it elicited against men's flesh. Palla had seen fighting, had watched her father's men, had even witnessed the slaughter of pigs and other farm animals in the family castle, but she had never herself taken a life in such a bloody way. Doing so, helping Ranna do so, left her shaken and nauseous. The man they jointly felled had tried to kill them, but the sight of her blade digging into his stomach and his arm cleaving free from his body under the force of Ranna's swinging steel left Palla feeling as though she had awoken from a dream, unreal images lingering long afterward.

At the front of the line of captives, the yutan and the roagg guided the men up the stairs. Without the two, the events of the preceding hour would have surely unfolded to the disadvantage of the carnival. She kicked a slow moving militiaman with the heel of her boot and looked to the top of the wall. Leotin already waited there, having pronounced judgment and now needing to administer his ruling. Pi-Gento, the former commander of the dead tahn, stood beside Leotin. He, too, had proved instrumental in thwarting the militia's attempted takeover of the castle.

Once stripped of their weapons, Leotin had allowed the militiamen free movement within the castle courtyard. The militia leader, young and newly promoted after the death of his former officer in the outlander raid, made great efforts to appease the townspeople, largely ignoring or openly insulting the carnival folk and the pilgrims. Palla had assumed the militia leader hoped to eventually turn the townspeople against the other groups camped in the courtyard after the siege of the castle ended. She had been surprised to discover the militia commander did not possess such patience. Whether he found a sympathetic ear among a townsman or a castle servant, she did not know, but he somehow managed to arm his men with kitchen implements. When they attacked, it did not take them long to relieve the untrained carnival folk and pilgrims of their captured swords.

The fight that ensued did not last long, but left many dead among the carnival and pilgrim contingents. More would have died had not Pi-Gento and the majority of the townspeople sided with Leotin. The militia leader had not considered this possibility. Neither had Palla, but in the light of dispassionate distance, she realized that while Leotin represented an invader of sorts, he had, in the few days of commanding the castle, likely proved to be a better tahn than any the townspeople had ever known. He made sure they were fed, and worked tirelessly to ensure their security and governed with an even hand. Palla smiled to herself as she looked to Leotin on the wall. He would not like being thought of as a castle tahn.

“What do ya think he’ll do?” Ranna asked as she stepped beside Palla. They followed the last militiaman in the line up the stairs of the wall. “Think he’s got the spine to shove ’em over?”

“He’ll do whatever he’s decided is right.” Palla, too, wondered what that would be. She’d happily push the men off the wall. A simple end to a difficult problem. It wouldn’t make up for the deaths of the three carnival folk and the four pilgrims, but it would be a form of justice. Her father would likely have beheaded them and left their heads on spikes. She didn’t think Leotin appreciated that type of theatricality.

As they reached the top of the wall, she saw the two armies preparing for open battle in the fields beside the castle and the town. They would begin their fight soon. She wondered that they had not done so already. Probably engaging in the pointless exchange of surrender terms and parley on the field. She sighed. Ceremonial rituals before slaughter. She’d seen her father do the same in local land disputes with other tsenteys.

Palla and Ranna helped Yeth, Tarak, and four other armed carnival folk push the line of captured militiamen to stand before the parapet atop the wall. The men looked nervous, but said nothing. They had been beaten by untrained women and men and outlander creatures. They had little fight left in their bones.

“I asked for your word, and you betrayed it.” Leotin said in Shen, holding the sword in his hand high as he raised his voice.

Palla heard the tone she’d witnessed so many times on the small carnival stage as Leotin played the zhan in *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*. She wondered if a ruler always had to play a part when addressing those they ruled or whether one needed to be that role in order to truly rule. She did not doubt that her father lived rather than play the part of a ruler.

“You have attacked those who sheltered you. Killed innocent men and women. Your punishment is simple.” Leotin nodded to Pi-Gento, and the commander bent to pick up a long coil of thick rope. He tossed it over the ledge of the parapet, one end tied around a wide, stone crenellation. “You can either climb down that rope or we will throw you over the wall.”

The militia leader looked over the wall and sneered. Palla suspected the man had thought to turn his field promotion into a greater personal success. He had failed.

“The armies will kill us.” The militia leader turned back to Leotin.

“They will be busy killing each other.” Leotin looked to where the armies began marching toward one another. The Tanshen army had removed their guards from the castle a few hours previously. Their commanding tigan knew those trapped inside could go nowhere. “You will have plenty of time to escape.”

“And our weapons?” The militia leader looked to the sword in Palla’s hand.

She raised the blade so that its tip pointed to the man’s heart.

“You will run faster without the weight of steel.” Leotin lowered the blade of the sword in his hand, severing the rope that bound the militia leader to the men next to him. “Now climb or fly.”

The militiaman looked over his shoulder to Leotin, his sneer seeming to eat the whole of his face.

“You have to push me if you want to kill...”

The man did not manage to finish his words as Leotin kicked him in the back, casting air from his lips in a gush. Leotin followed the blow by shoving the man to the edge of the parapet, grabbing his legs as the man cried out, and heaving up to cast him over the wall.

Palla watched and listened as the man’s tumbling screams ended in a cracking rupture of bone and flesh. The man lay still in the rocky grass at the bottom of the wall.

“Now who wants to fly and who wishes to climb?” Leotin shouted as he looked to the next man in line, his face flush with exertion and anger.

“I’ll climb! I’ll climb!” The next man in the line of prisoners looked excited by the notion of climbing down the wall to face the clashing armies.

Palla held her breath in shock. While she had seen Leotin push the former tahn of the castle from the wall, that had been more a matter of standing ground than murder. And although she had witnessed him fighting several times in the past days, she had never imagined seeing him shove a man to his death. She did not question whether the militiaman deserved it. There were too many dead friends below in the courtyard to wonder at that concern. However, she had not considered him capable of such violence. She realized now the truth of Leotin as a man — he would do whatever he thought necessary to protect those toward whom he considered himself responsible.

As the first militiaman began to lift his leg over the wall and Pi-Gento stepped forward to slice the rope around his wrists, Palla voiced aloud a notion that had only barely begun to take shape within her mind.

“There is another option.”

The eyes of the man about to climb over the wall preceded all others in turning to Palla. Ranna seemed surprised to hear her speak. Leotin appeared to be silently wondering what had stayed her tongue for so long. Pi-Gento frowned at her, while the expressions of the outlanders remained, as always, unreadable.

“You can swear fealty.” Palla raised her voice in the Shen language, speaking from her stomach as Leotin had taught her to do on stage. “Not a promise by a leader. An oath of allegiance sworn by each man in the name of the nine prophets of Ni-Kam-Djen.”

The man with his leg over the parapet lowered it and quickly spoke as he turned to Leotin.

“Aaj. I’ll swear fealty to the tahn.” The man who had been about to climb down the rope bent on one knee. “What’re the words?” He looked up to Palla rather than the man he intended to promise loyalty to.

“I am not...” Leotin scowled at Palla as she cut him off.

“I swear by the fury of Ni-Kam-Djen to serve Tahn Leotin with complete loyalty in all things for all days until he shall release me. May The True God cast a plague upon me and my line should I break this vow.”

Palla allowed herself a slight smile as the militiaman repeated her words, head bowed, to Leotin. The scowl did not leave Leotin’s face until the last militiaman knelt before him and repeated the oath. As Yeth, Tarak, and the others unbound the militiamen and led them down the stairs to the courtyard, Leotin stepped up to Palla. Ranna remained on the wall a polite distance away.

“Does it never occur to you that you might offer your advice in private?” Leotin sighed as he slid the sword he still held into its scabbard.

“There wasn’t time.” Palla had no sheath for her sword, so she leaned it against the parapet.

“Tell me, did you arrive at this fabulous notion to raise me to the standing of a tahn before or after I pushed that heinous man from the wall?” Leotin studied her with an intense curiosity.

“I had an inkling of an idea, but it didn’t come to me in full until you disposed of the militia leader.” Palla glanced over the wall to the body on the ground.

“Good.” Leotin sounded tired. “It would not have worked with him. He had to go.”

“It helped for his men to see that you will do what is necessary if they fail you.” Palla felt sorry for placing Leotin in the position of leading men he did not know and could not trust.

“I do not know how to be a tahn.” Leotin sighed again and looked out at the armies beginning to fight. He paused a moment, the sounds of battle washing over the two of them. “It was a good idea. We’ll need those men. I don’t think the Daeshen army is up to their task, and I doubt we can hold the castle against what will remain of the Tanshen army without experienced hands.” He patted her arm and then departed to walk down the stairs to the courtyard.

As Leotin descended the stairs, Ranna came to stand beside Palla. She looked at her quizzically.

“Ya don’t think and act like a merchant’s daughter.” Ranna watched the men with red and green banners fighting in the distance.

“I know.” Palla hesitated to say more.

“I’m guessing y’all tell me why when ya come ta trust me more.” Ranna reached out and took Palla’s hand.

A wave of warmth rushed through Palla’s body at Ranna’s touch.

“I trust you.” Palla swallowed back the urge that surged within her. “I don’t know if I trust myself.”

“Fair ’nough.” Ranna gave her hand a slight squeeze, and she returned the gesture.

They stood on the wall watching the armies battle. It did not take long to realize who held the advantage and who would win the prize of the castle. They watched, hand in hand, until the outcome became undeniable, and then they went below to the courtyard to relay the news.

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

THE SQUEAL of pigs and the frantic cluck of chickens blended in the air with the clash of steel, cries of war, and screams of agony. Hashel crouched behind a low wall that separated the backyard of the small hut from the fields beyond, wheat and barley now trampled beneath the boots of men and crumpled bodies. Near him, other men fought in the streets of the town. They did not make as much noise, but their closer proximity more than compensated for the death yowls of the fallen.

He peeked over the edge of the wall, taking in once more the sight of two armies clashing in battle. He could not always discern which soldiers fought for which army at the center of the conflict, but the flags of each side, and the sashes across the breasts of those with armor, helped him to tell them apart. He thought of them as the red army and the green army. The red army got smaller each time he looked over the wall, more crimson sashes fallen to the ground, more rose-colored flags torn among the trampled grain.

Three forces comprised both armies. Men clad in light, shingled metal panels bolted to leather jackets wielding spears at the front, men with heavy armor and swords just behind them, and even more poorly armored men with swords at the rear. He saw small groups of men on horses at the far end of each force, small squads of archers encircling them. As he watched, the green army shifted formation, the heavily armored men moving to the front as those with spears fell in behind them. Hashel observed in fascinated horror as the green soldiers' swords sliced through the armor and armaments of the red army just as he had seen the lone soldier do in the street earlier.

The red-sashed soldiers fell to the ground — sheaves of wheat sliced by a hundred scythes. Hashel did not understand why the red army's weapons and armor appeared so frail. Even those red-sashed soldiers who managed to strike their opponents found the blades useless against the green-clad armor. Swords bounced from breastplates and cracked or rebounded on those wielding them. The red army had no choice but to retreat, to fall back and regroup. The armored green soldiers ignored those wounded or slow red soldiers, chasing their main quarry. The green spear bearers attacked the injured, pressing forward in the wake of the green-armored men, leaving any alive to be dispatched by the third wave of lesser-armored men with swords.

Hashel watched a moment longer. He didn't know who the armies were or what they fought over, and he knew nothing of battle and fighting, but even he saw the doom facing the red army. Those who could not run would not live. He sank behind the wall, pressing his back into the

round stones. He tried to shut out the sounds of men dying in the field. He needed to focus on what he could do to get back to the palace. The fact that the noises of fighting and dying had nearly ended in the streets of the town did not help to calm his mind. Soldiers not fighting might have time to notice a small boy in a yard with pigs and chickens.

Seeing the pigs in the thin wooded pen beside him made him think of the swine his family had raised in their small village farm. And thinking of the pigs led to thinking of his mother and father and sister, all dead now. He found himself thankful for the terror elicited by the battle around him. It left little room for sadness and pain. For the first time in months, he could remember his family without falling to tears or pushing his feelings away, deep inside, where they could not reach him.

He recalled his mother casting corn to the chickens as his sister teased the briers from a bale of sheep's wool and his father worked to repair the hutch holding the rabbits. The door to the hutch had been pulled loose by a curious fox, and his father had struggled to get the metal hinge back into place.

"Patience," his father had said, "is the key to solvin' a problem." He held up the door of the hutch and turned it over. "Ya gots to be patient and look at it from every side."

His father had showed him how the hinge had been bent and how to hammer it back into shape. A problem solved through patient thought.

He didn't have time for patient thought. He needed to get back to the palace and Ondromead before one of the soldiers found him. What if Ondromead had also walked through a door and ended up in another land? How would he ever find him then?

Walked through a door.

Hashel sat patiently with that thought, looking at it from every angle.

The doorways had been the only time he moved from one place to another. Maybe he needed to go through more doorways to get back to the palace. How many doorways could there be in a small town? He would have to try them all.

Hashel crouched low as he ran along the stone wall for a few paces before racing back to the hut he had come from. He risked a look around the edge of the house at the lane. Red-sashed bodies bled in the dusty road between houses, but none moved. He saw two green-sashed men a hundred paces down the street, but they seemed busy talking amongst themselves.

He slid around the side of the hut and ran through the open door. He skidded to a stop inside the same dim interior. He had doubted it would be so easy. He peeked out the door, keeping an eye on the green soldiers as he dashed across the road and through the partially open doorway of a hut nearly identical to the one he'd just departed. The inside of the hut looked dark and dusty. The smell of old meat and rotting potatoes filled his nose. He turned to the door and slipped outside, running to the next house and opening the door to jump inside.

Hashel repeated this process of dashing along the street and through doorways so many times he lost count of the number he'd been through. He paused inside one of the larger homes, a house constructed with a tiled roof and separated into rooms within. He staggered through the doorways of the two rooms, the first leading to a sleeping chamber with a bed and the second to

a small storeroom with wooden crates of dried goods stacked against a wall. Frustrated, he headed back outside to try the neighboring house. He didn't know how many homes remained, and didn't know what to do if he checked them all and failed to find himself back in the palace. Maybe he would need to check them all again.

As he stepped out of the house, two hard, metal-clad hands grabbed him roughly and lifted him into the air. The two green-sashed soldiers had caught up with him. The one who held him shook him as he shouted.

"Where is they, boy?" The man squeezed Hashel's shoulders harder.

Hashel groaned from the pain as the second soldier stepped near.

"Who are ya, boy? Is ya one of theirs? Is ya left behind? A banner boy? Speak up."

Hashel looked between the two men, his face pleading for mercy even as his thoughts remained silent.

"He ain't one of ours." The first soldier threw Hashel to the ground.

Hashel gasped as he struck the hard, dry earth of the street, the air unwilling to reenter his lungs.

"Kill 'im, then. We gots to catch up with the others." The second soldier turned to walk away as the first grabbed the hilt of his sword.

Hashel scrambled backward, still trying to breathe properly as the soldier drew his sword from the long sheath at his belt. He did not wonder what such a sharp blade would do to him. He had seen what it did to men with armor about their bodies. His own slender frame would be sectioned like the carcass of the pigs his father used to slaughter.

As the soldier raised the sword to swing, he suddenly staggered backward. Hashel blinked, taking a moment to realize that the fletching of an arrow shaft protruded from the soldier's face. The man screamed and fell to the ground. His companion rushed to his side.

Hashel swallowed back the stinging heat rising in his throat and forced himself to his feet, willing them to move, to run, to pound the earth along the street and around a corner. He did not look back. He ignored the shouts of the soldier and the cries of his fallen comrade. Hashel ran to the first door he saw and raced through, closing his eyes, hoping he would open them to find himself once more in the stone corridors of the palace or the tree-lined lanes of its gardens.

He stopped and open his eyes in the once again nearly lightless interior of a narrow hut. Unlike the other huts, this one held something different. An old woman sat on a chair near a dead fire hearth, her hands stretched out as though to warm them from the black-cold coals. The woman looked to him, her curly gray hair trimmed close to her scalp, the lines of her plum-black skin looking canyon-deep in the shadows of the hut. She stared at him with large, placid eyes.

"You shouldn't be out runnin' about in a battle, boy." The woman beckoned him closer as she pointed to the door. "Close that door and get inside. Won't do no good to have 'em walk in on us."

Hashel pushed the rickety door to the hut closed but did not step closer to the woman. Something about her seemed familiar — the scent of a flower remembered but unidentified, plucked from someplace in the past and left to be found long after forgetting.

“Nothin’ to fear, boy. I ain’t got no sword and wouldn’t know how to use it if I did.” The old woman smiled, her teeth yellowed with age.

Hashel stepped closer to the old woman, still wary, but judging her words to be true. Whatever threat she might represent withered and shrank when compared with the danger outside the door. He needed to wait for the soldiers to pass away so he could resume checking doorways for a path back to the palace.

“Yer a quiet one, ain’t ya, boy?” The old woman squinted as she examined him. “Beaver taken yer tongue fer a tail, has it?”

Hashel thought about this for a moment and then nodded.

“Figgered as much.” The old woman laughed quietly. “We ought not make much noise just now anyways. Ya hear that?”

Hashel listened. He had been so concentrated on the woman that he had not noticed the sounds of battle getting louder once more.

“The Tanshen has routed the Daeshen, who is fleein’ right for our little hiding spot.” The old woman looked to the back of the hut out the tiny open window.

Hashel followed her eyes as he listened with his ears. The old woman spoke truly. It sounded as though an entire army raced straight for them.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Hashel’s storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

A BEE flitted at the edge of a field of flowers petals, smooth pale blue contrasting with deep-furred yellow and black. Sketkee watched the insect with curiosity, wondering how such small wings could support such a bulky mass in flight for so long. The problem teased at her mind as she envisioned possible means of freeing herself from the bonds of gravity. It seemed strange that hundreds of years of study by rakthorian mechanical philosophers had produced only flimsy gliders that crashed with regularity. Surely if a creature like the bee could manage to stay aloft, a machine-driven conveyance for flying could be devised if the proper materials and a light enough steam engine were invented.

“How long do you think they’ll take?”

Sketkee turned from studying the insect in its search for pollen to study Kadmallin as he in turn observed three of their four rakthorian guards attempting to mend the broken axle of the wagon. The fourth guard stood near where they sat in the grass and flowered field beside the road. He held his hand on the hilt of his sword, his eyes never leaving them. She had hoped the breaking of the axle against a rut in the road might prove an opportunity for escape with the artifact. Her hopes had not survived long in the harsh light beyond the confines of the covered wagon. Their captor, Ambassador Viktik, stood not far away in the field, watching the scene from a distance.

“They do not possess the tools, much less the skill, necessary to the task.” While excellent fighters, rakthor defenders did not often enjoy great mechanical inclination. Sketkee doubted the axle could be repaired. It needed to be replaced, an impossible probability so far between towns. She did not see a way to avoid abandoning it. Were she in command of the situation, she would have left it long ago.

“Do you think I should offer to help?” Kadmallin tilted his head sideways as he looked at the rakthors bending to work.

“I do not think that offer will be received in the manner intended.” Sketkee raised her rope-bound wrists to scratch her cheek where a fly made to aggravate it.

“I’d intend to break the other axle on one of their heads.” Kadmallin leaned back with a sigh.

“That would be unwise.” Sketkee wondered if Kadmallin seriously contemplated violent escape, or if he merely spoke in such a manner to entertain himself. She suspected the latter. Kadmallin had a seemingly inexhaustible appetite for self-amusement.

“How much time will this continue to require?”

Sketkee looked up to see Viktik walking toward the wagon as he spoke in Rakthorian to the guards trying to repair it.

“Another hour, Ambassador,” the nearest guard said. “Possibly two. We may need to fell an appropriately sized tree and cut it to fit.”

“You should abandon it and purchase another wagon in the next town.” Sketkee raised her bound hands to shield her eyes from the sun.

“Your advice is neither requested nor required.” Viktik stepped closer. “At least in matters of carpentry.” He waved away the rakthor guarding them and looked down at her. “Tell me, what do you suspect is the cause for the change in the device?”

“That is difficult to say.” Sketkee returned her gaze to the bee as it gathered its cargo from a new flower. “It has altered slightly four times since I reached the shores of the Iron Realm, most recently while in your possession. I do not suspect it to be an artifact of the geography of the realm itself but rather, a response to an event taking place within the realm.”

“Do these alterations occur at regular intervals?” Viktik asked.

“Not with any pattern I can discern.” Sketkee had spent several days attempting a mathematical assessment of the time between the strange changes in the device’s inner crystal patternings. She had done the same the previous day while riding in the wagon. The alterations appeared completely random.

“What event might account for the changes?” Viktik asked the question as though he had several answers he suspected himself.

“I considered a natural phenomenon, such as intense weather or earth tremors, but no such events took place in any proximity to the device when it changed.” Sketkee looked back to Viktik. She experienced an odd pleasure in using her skills and learning to tutor her captor, a disparity of knowledge that she hoped to fashion into an imbalance of power that she might use to her advantage. “As I have stated, I suspect that the changes relate somehow to the humans, their dreams of a god, and their pilgrimage.”

“A suspicion founded in the absence of facts.” Viktik looked annoyed.

“I suspect The Sight is in some manner responsible for the events the humans experience, and that it is also the cause of the changes to the device,” Sketkee said.

“Wild conjecture without supporting information,” Viktik said.

“A wild conjecture that can only be proved or disproved through careful observation under the proper conditions,” Sketkee replied.

“Conditions that are themselves a conjecture.” Viktik turned away and looked along the road, back eastward the way they came.

“All philosophical research involves a degree of unknown risk.” Sketkee realized this understated the case in her current circumstances. As Viktik’s captive, she could only prove her suspicions by staying alive long enough to do so. If he decided her notions were too fanciful, he might simply kill her and Kadmallin. “You must adopt an attitude of patience in the investigation

of a phenomenon. Results can come quickly or slowly, but eventually, the truth of the matter will be revealed.”

“Time is not in endless supply.” Viktik frowned.

Sketkee followed his gaze to see a plume of dust rising in the air above the road. She recognized the meaning of the dust cloud. Kadmallin clearly did as well, for his next words in Rakthorian addressed that meaning directly.

“You’ll need to release us.” Kadmallin leaned forward as he looked down the road.

“Your human is confused. Possibly he has been in the sun too long. Humans do not take well to long exposure.” Viktik ignored his captives as he turned to the guards and grabbed the hood of his cloak. “Hoods up. Humans approach.”

“Those aren’t just humans; those are pilgrims.” Kadmallin reached over and pulled Sketkee’s hood over her head. “Pilgrims are good. You can travel with them if you have someone to represent you.”

“I do not need to travel with humans.” Viktik looked repulsed by the idea.

“It’s the only rational option available to you.” Kadmallin looked up at Viktik. “This wagon is dead. You’ll have to abandon it. You are six rakthors traveling across Shen territory. If the militias find you, they may kill you simply because they can. They are wound up from killing heretic pilgrims and won’t care much about your diplomatic credentials. You might be able to fight off a band of bandits, but you won’t fare so easily against a well-trained militia. Even if you travel alone at night to avoid people, you’ll still need to interact with humans along the way. This is not the road to the coast you are used to. You cannot stay in inns where the keepers know you and set aside private rooms for you. You can only conceal what you are for so long. Better to hide in the open. Travel with the pilgrims. I can convince them to let you follow them. I’ve done it before.”

“His assessment is correct.” Sketkee marveled momentarily at the subtlety of Kadmallin’s reasoning. Clearly, she had been a positive influence on his mental clarity.

“If I release you to act as my emissary, what is to prevent you from trying to escape?” Viktik glanced at Kadmallin, unwilling to give the human extended consideration.

“You will need to release both of us.” Kadmallin’s voice became firm as he looked to Sketkee. “The humans will see you as a threat if you have captives. They will worry that you, or we, are dangerous. You must pretend to be a rakthor delegation sent to investigate the pilgrims and their cause. A philosophical mission. They will ask to share in your provisions, but they will offer their wagons to carry them. However, you cannot carry the device in that chest. A chest of that nature implies something valuable that you do not wish stolen. It will encourage thieves.”

“A wealth of opinion that does not answer the question I asked of you.” Viktik curled a lip at Kadmallin.

“We will not escape because we have no need to.” Sketkee looked from Kadmallin to Viktik. “I have access to the device, and we are headed where I believe I will best be able to learn its secrets. As long as those two things remain true, we will have no cause to attempt reacquiring the device or escaping your companionship.”

While Sketkee accepted the reasoning of her own words, she did not have any intention of holding herself to that logic. Viktik comprised an unpredictable variable in her endeavor to unravel the mystery of the device. He might as easily decide to return to their home realm of Ranikttak and dismantle the crystal artifact as continue to investigate her suppositions and try to reach the Forbidden Realm. While she might accept his presence if she felt he sincerely believed in the potential success of her plan, it would be best to be the one in possession and control of the device. Currently, she suspected that he pursued her hunch because he held one of his own. Whether that un-rakthor-like supposition revolved around her, the device, or both, she could not tell.

“You will both be released during the day but always accompanied by one of my defenders.” Viktik looked from her face to Kadmallin’s and back. “At night, you will be bound and confined to a tent. If these terms are not acceptable, we will kill you now and proceed without you.”

“Sounds acceptable to me.” Kadmallin gave the rakthor ambassador a wide smile before turning to Sketkee. “What do you think?”

“It is the best choice of limited options for all of us.” She raised her bound hands to Viktik. He had stated his offer as a treaty negotiated between warring factions. She presented her reply in kind. “I accept your terms of release.”

Viktik nodded to her, then drew his dagger and cut the ropes restricting her wrists. He did the same for Kadmallin, then turned and called to the rakthors still working on the wagon.

“Abandon it. And bring me the chest.” Viktik turned to Kadmallin. “You should prepare to speak with the approaching humans.”

“I’ll walk out and meet them.” Kadmallin stood to his feet. “Best to reassure them before they come across you and think you’re hostile. Keep your hoods up and either wear gloves or keep your hands out of sight. And please, for the sake of us all, keep your tails around your waists.”

Sketkee followed Kadmallin’s frowning gaze as he looked at the appendage protruding from beneath Viktik’s cloak. He nodded to her and started along the road toward the approaching pilgrims. Sketkee stood up and watched him go.

“How do you know he will not simply run off and leave you behind?” Viktik looked at her from the back of the wagon where he opened the chest with the device.

“It would be a rational act of self-preservation.” Sketkee noted from the corner of her eye how Viktik tied the leather pouch with the device to his belt beneath his cloak as she faced Kadmallin’s retreating back with a confused mixture of admiration and appreciation. “The thought would never occur to him.”

THE THRONE



DJU-TESHA

“WHY DID you not tell me?”

“I wanted to know that you would wed me for the desire of me, not from obligation.”

“And if I had failed to act in time?”

“I would have thrown myself from the tower walls.”

Dju-Tesha gave a soft yelp as Rhog-Kan squeezed her hands in his. He stared into her eyes, the light from the library window striking his back, the fine hairs along his neck glowing faintly.

“Do not say such a thing. It is too painful to contemplate.”

“It is unlikely in any event.” Dju-Tesha laughed. “I fear heights.”

“That is good to hear.” Rhog-Kan released her hands to place one of his own upon her cheek. “Is this why you have denied me of late?”

“Yes.” She sighed slightly at his touch, the warmth of his palm, the smell of his skin. “I did not want to tell you until we had announced an engagement. And I could not hide it from you were I to lie with you.”

“I hope you will trust me now.” Rhog-Kan kissed her lips gently. “With all your secrets.”

Dju-Tesha lingered in the kiss, letting herself get lost in it — a forest of dark beauty — unconcerned if she ever found a way out. When he finally leaned back and broke contact, she resumed the conversation where it had abruptly paused.

“A woman must hold some secrets. Or had you not heard?”

“Well, I shall not hold secrets from you.” Rhog-Kan looked away briefly.

“As is proper,” Dju-Tesha said. She wanted to believe him, but something in his look suggested that a prime tigan might need to keep certain things from even his wife.

“To that end, I must tell you that I will not be able to remain long after the wedding.” Rhog-Kan took her hands again. “And I may not return in time for the birth of our son.”

“The war resumes?” Dju-Tesha frowned. She had not considered the possibility that her future husband might not be at her side during the coming months.

“Yes,” Rhog-Kan said. “It seems inevitable.”

“I thought these battles along the border would be easily won.” Dju-Tesha had heard him talk of the ongoing conflict and his confidence in Tigan Tan-Lo’s success.

“They shall be. And soon.” Rhog-Kan released her hands and stepped to the window overlooking the western gardens and the preparations for the wedding reception. “They are likely fighting as we speak. Our force’s victory will be a wedding present for your brother.”

“But you see the war expanding again.” Dju-Tesha followed him to the glass panes.

“I hope so, yes.” Rhog-Kan stared out at the garden, his face unreadable.

“Why would you hope such a thing?” Dju-Tesha placed a hand on his shoulder in mild concern. He had never struck her as a man consumed with blood lust.

“To see it finally ended.” Rhog-Kan looked away from the window and back to her, his face stern and serious. “I must convince your brother to capitalize on this border fight and press to end the war once and for all. I ask for your support in this.”

“Me?” Dju-Tesha blinked in surprise. Yet another request for assistance from an unexpected source. “If my brother is not swayed by your experienced council, he is unlikely to be moved by mine, limited as it is.”

“He trusts you. And he respects your learning.” Rhog-Kan smiled, his face losing some of its solemnity. “As I have come to do as well.”

“Then I must not hide another secret from you.” Dju-Tesha paused a moment, taking a deep breath and resisting the urge to look away. Shy women looked away. Weak women could not speak and look at whom they spoke to. She would be that woman no longer. “I am uncertain if pursuing the war to a conclusion is possible or wise.”

“You believe your brother’s path of inaction can lead to reconciliation?” Rhog-Kan shook his head in surprise. “I did not take you for such a fool.”

“I am no fool. You should know this best of all.” Dju-Tesha lowered the tenor of her voice and tried to still the nervousness in her stomach. She had no experience in stating her beliefs aloud, much less defending them. But should she not be able to speak her mind with the man she loved — the father of her child? “I do not think the Tanshen zhan will ever accept a reconciliation, regardless of how the battle we are now fighting is resolved. Nor do I suspect that a full capitulation can be accomplished by escalating the fight.”

“What alternative is there?” Rhog-Kan crossed his arms, and he stepped back to examine Dju-Tesha. She thought he looked like a man suddenly discovering his favorite hunting hound held wolf’s blood in its veins.

“In the years leading up to the First Great Dominion, Zhan Laudaa-Tian’s great grandfather, Phan-Raa, found it impossible to subdue the Kytain tribes of the plains in the east.” Dju-Tesha’s voice naturally took on a lecturing tone, her normal defense against conflict. “Instead of attempting to invade, or allowing the plains people’s border raids to continue, he commissioned the construction of The Great Eastern Wall. Isolation brought peace and eventually unification.”

“I am not completely unlearned in history.” Rhog-Kan said, his voice revealing his annoyance. “I have seen the ruins of the wall with my own eyes in my youth.”

“Really?” Dju-Tesha stood taller. He had seen the wall that she had only read about, been places she had only dreamed of going. She found it made her want him badly and wondered if they had time for a tryst before the ceremony. She stepped closer and put her hands on his chest. “Your secrets are fascinating.”

“You suggest we build a wall between our northern and southern dominions?” Rhog-Kan appeared oblivious to her sudden increased interest in him, his mind assailing the notion with professional regard.

“I do.” Dju-Tesha sighed slightly, but kept her fingers on his chest. She liked the feel of his firm muscles beneath her palms. “It would make border fights and full invasion nearly impossible. And it might force a lasting peace on both our lands.”

“It would be the death of reunification.” Rhog-Kan looked past her as he considered her words. “The end of all hopes for a Fourth Great Dominion.”

“For now,” Dju-Tesha said. “And maybe for a generation. But it would bring peace.”

“It is an interesting idea.” Rhog-Kan looked back to her and placed his hands about her waist.

“Then you will consider it?” Dju-Tesha tried not to sound too surprised that he might contemplate following an action she suggested.

“If we fail to win your brother’s approval to end the war properly.” Rhog-Kan nodded.

“I suppose I can ask for no more.” Dju-Tesha adopted a voice of limp sincerity. “I am merely a woman who reads books forgotten by men.”

“You are far more than that.” Rhog-Kan kissed her briefly. “You are my future wife. The mother of our child.”

“A son, you said?” Dju-Tesha raised an eyebrow. Why did men always wish for sons? She did not care what sex the child might be. Only that it be healthy and remain so.

“A son, yes.” Rhog-Kan pulled her close. “And he may keep you too busy for books.”

“You wish to make me abandon my studies for motherhood?” Dju-Tesha smiled, but her stomach clenched as she realized she had voiced aloud a fear she had been keeping herself from admitting.

“I am certain you can manage both.” Rhog-Kan grinned and held her tight. “To deny you books would be like denying water to a flower.”

He kissed her again, and she forgot all about books and the coming of her child. One thing did not pass from her mind, and she looked him in the eyes as her lips parted from his.

“If you should go to war, you will promise to return,” she said.

“I will always return to you,” he replied.

She knew she could not hold him to that promise, but she convinced herself to trust in it anyway. He did not have time for more than a few more kisses and left her shortly afterward. She lingered for a moment, wondering at how different her future seemed now than it had merely half a year ago. A book-worn spinster soon to be wife and mother.

Knowing she still had some minutes before she needed to arrive for the ceremony, she retreated to the eastern inner park, a patch of grass and trees less than a fifth the size of the main garden. She sat on her favorite bench beneath her favorite tree, and read her favorite book, *Ruminations*, by the incomparable Zhan Yaol-Zan, founder of the Second Great Dominion. She kept the cover of the book obscured. While veneration of the ancestral zhans was encouraged, the fact of Yaol-Zan’s Tanshen heritage, and that he ruled from that dominion, might appear

disloyal to the Daeshen ascendancy. She softly read aloud the words of the passage that had haunted her since first discovering the book in her fifteenth year.

"Happiness lies nowhere but in the mind. Weave your thoughts into a harmonious web that it might gather all good notions together and provide you with the strength to bear the misfortunes and hardships of life with equanimity."

"Is this truly what you intend to wear as witness to your brother's nuptials?"

Dju-Tesha looked up from the sublime words of a long dead ruler to the consternated frown of her mother's face.

"Greetings, Mother."

"I have seen sacks of grain with more proportion." Her mother huffed and sat down beside her.

"You look lovely as well, Mother." Dju-Tesha smiled, inwardly trying to ignore her mother's words. *Hold not to hard words, for they harden your heart.* Another wise saying of Zhan Yaol-Zan.

"Why must you be so obstinate?" Her mother crossed her arms. "You were ever an obstinate child. Always willful."

"I only ever wished to be left alone to read." Dju-Tesha paused a moment in speaking that obvious truth to wonder at the cause of it. A question she needed to return to at a later time. "Why can you not see me for who I am rather than who you wish me to be?"

"I see more than you realize, girl." Her mother looked askance at her. "And it is not what I wish for you that is important. It is what your duty calls you to do that holds significance."

"I have always done as you asked." Dju-Tesha struggled not to pout as she spoke the words to her mother. A grown woman with child and engaged to be married did not pout.

"In your own time and your own way." Her mother sat rigid and unmoving beside her.

"I am soon to be wed, Mother." Dju-Tesha watched her mother's face in profile. "Does that not satisfy your lust for duty?"

"It is *your* lusts that are of more concern to me." Her mother turned suddenly, staring fiercely into her eyes.

"I do not..." Dju-Tesha blinked as she stammered.

"Did you think I would not notice?" Her mother huffed again and turned away. "Did you believe you could swath yourself like a ship set to sail and conceal the cargo? I will admit, at first, I simply thought you to have taken on weight as consequence of an unrestrained appetite. It took some time to realize that appetite did not revolve around pastries."

"Mother..." Dju-Tesha found heat rising in her face and spreading throughout her body, making the forming of words uncomfortably difficult.

"Silence yourself." Her mother glared at her. "You have spent most of your life quietly slinking into shadows; you can listen to me now as I cast light upon your circumstances, for I am certain you have not realized the full ramifications of what you have done."

"I have done as I wished for once in my life." Dju-Tesha raised her chin as she spoke, even though her voice did not sound as loud in her own ears as she had intended.

“When have you never done as you desired?” Her mother shook her head slowly. “Your father indulged you to your detriment. It has left you unable to consider the world outside your books and that head of yours. Have you contemplated what it means to carry the sole heir to the ascendancy in your womb?”

“I ... No.” Dju-Tesha frowned. The notion and its implications had never occurred to her. She listened as her mother explained what should have been obvious.

“Although your brother will be wed by nightfall, there is no guarantee that he and his new bride will produce an heir,” her mother said. “While we must pray that they have many sons, it may be a year or more before that comes to pass. It may be even longer. They would not be the first to be slow to propagate. It took two years before I had your brother Fan-Mutig. Much can happen in such a time. Particularly when repeated efforts have been made on your brother Tin-Tsu’s life. Should one of those attempts succeed before Rin-Lahee can bear a child, you will assume the ascendancy as guardian zhan, and your child, if it is a boy, will be the heir. With a famed and loved tigan as your husband and a babe in your arms, some may see that as greater incentive to kill your brother. His policies have not been well received. Many would love to see a tigan as consort.”

“I had not considered this.” Dju-Tesha turned away from her mother, feeling a sense of shame, more for the unconsidered consequences of her actions than the embarrassment of her mother knowing about them.

“Clearly.” Her mother uncrossed her arms and took her daughter’s hand.

“What can I do?” Dju-Tesha looked back to her mother, her heart filled with worry and confusion. She had stepped directly into the poisoned maze of court politics that she so detested.

“We will not be able to hide your condition for much longer.” Her mother placed a tentative hand on Dju-Tesha’s belly. “You must marry swiftly and announce that you are with child soon thereafter. We cannot avoid the turmoil this will create, but we can mitigate it, and the danger to your brother, by having you publicly support his decisions.”

“Why should anyone listen to me?” Dju-Tesha found herself confused by the notion. It had been odd enough that her lover and brother might listen to her advice. “No one ever has.”

“You have never been interesting enough to listen to, my dear.” Her mother patted Dju-Tesha’s hand. “With the prime tigan at your side and his child in your belly, your words are suddenly of interest to many. And those who would seek to exploit the situation must see no shade between you and your brother that might tempt them to cut his tree down in favor of yours.”

“I did not want any of this.” Dju-Tesha’s eyes welled with tears as she clasped her mother’s hand. “I simply wanted to be in love.”

“You are a tahneff and heir to the ascendancy of the dominion.” Her mother reached out and pushed a clutch of stray hairs from Dju-Tesha’s face, something her mother had done often in her childhood. “You are lucky to have love, for as odd as I find it, Rhog-Kan clearly adores you. However, it will be all you can hope to gain and much will be asked of you in return.”

“I should have stayed with my books in the library.” Dju-Tesha sighed and looked at her belly, immediately regretting the words and considering them wrong. The child had been conceived in the library, and that must be a true goodness.

“Possibly.” Her mother’s voice sounded comforting and filled with long suppressed pride. “But you can no longer be the mad librarian. And I am glad of this. You are wasted among dusty shelves.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Dju-Tesha smiled once more, a small child again filled with joy that she had pleased her mother in some minor way.

“You will not believe this,” her mother said, “but I do wish for your happiness, even as I fear it will be difficult to secure.”

“Were you happy, Mother?” Dju-Tesha asked. “With Father?”

“Not at first.” Her mother looked around the garden as though seeking something she’d lost among the petals of a nearby bed of irises. “When we married, it stood to profit the dominion, not our hearts. But I came to see in your father things I did not find in other men. And once we discovered a love between us, I did find happiness. And then he died.” Her mother continued to stare at the flowers a moment more.

“I must go.” Her mother stood up, releasing Dju-Tesha’s hand. “Please find something less awful to wear before I see you in the temple. Wrap yourself in a curtain if you must.”

“Yes, Mother.” Dju-Tesha blushed as her mother bent to kiss her daughter on the forehead before departing the garden.

Dju-Tesha sat for a while, contemplating what her mother had said and her conversation with Rhog-Kan. If the war returned to full force soon, and her brother left for the battlefield before producing an heir, she would bear the future of the dominion in her womb. The weight of that burden made her limbs weak and her stomach nauseous. She did not want that responsibility, for herself or her child. She wanted to protect her child — safeguard it from the cruelties of the world and the responsibilities that might be thrust upon it one day.

She had always sought to shelter herself in the same manner and only now realized how her choices had forced her to leave that safety behind — stepping from a warm burrow into the open fields, hawks circling above. She hoped she would be strong enough to fend off the attacks she knew would come, or be fast enough to outrun them. She winced at the metaphor. She had never been strong or swift or cunning. But she did possess a sharp mind. Might one cut down one’s potential enemies with a mental blade honed fine enough? She could not flee from the turmoil her decisions wrought, but she could reason her way out of them.

Dju-Tesha smiled and stood and walked through the gardens and the corridors of the palace. She had just enough time to find something more appealing to wear before her brother’s wedding.

To continue reading the Throne story arena [follow this link](#).

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

“YOU LOOK lovely.”

“Thank you, Mother Zhan.”

Ondromead sighed quietly where he stood behind an ornately painted wooden screen. He stared at nature scenes of cranes and trees and fields as he listened to the women. He had been walking through the doorway he thought led to the kitchens, only to find himself stepping from a closet and into the dressing room of the woman he assumed to be the bride of the day's events. Ondromead peeked through the frame of the dressing screen to stare at the women. He had seen the elder woman in her youth, at the last royal wedding in the palace, the one that had ended so badly. He had seen her again afterward as well.

“‘Mother’ alone will suffice for a title now,” the older woman said. “We are to be family, after all.”

“Yes.” The young bride bowed slightly. “Thank you, Mother.”

“You may leave us now.” The mother zhan turned to the three attendants who had been helping to dress the bride. “I wish to speak alone with my new daughter.”

Ondromead watched as the three woman attendants departed the room. The bride looked to the older woman with an expression of concern.

“Is everything well ... Mother?” the bride asked.

“Everything is as it should be,” the mother zhan replied. “I merely wish to have a few words in private before your wedding day takes all of your remaining time.”

“That is very generous of you, Mother.” The bride bowed faintly again.

“You do not know what I wish to say.” The mother zhan examined the bride closely.

“I am certain it will be for my benefit, whatever it may be.” The bride held the older woman's gaze.

“Yes, it is for your benefit.” The mother zhan looked away from the bride and walked to the open window of the room, a slight breeze stirring her long, coal and ash hair. “When I wed my husband years ago, his mother, the previous mother zhan, visited me before the ceremony and imparted words that she said had been handed down from one bride to another as they married into the ascendancy, a tradition stretching back hundreds of years.”

“It sounds as though they will be important words.” The bride turned to the window, but did not join the elder woman.

“They are,” the mother zhan said. “And they are simple words. Words each woman needed to hear and needed to learn to live by. Words I did not fully appreciate the truth of for many years.”

The older woman looked out the window for a time, seeming lost in some inner landscape strewn with the debris of years now abandoned to time.

As Ondromead spied on the older woman through the slit in the screen, he, too, found himself wandering along a pathway into the past.

TWENTY YEARS AGO

EARLY MORNING fog melted away to late morning dew in the ever-growing heat of the rising sun. Two parties stood in the low grass of a wide field, white tents not far behind them. Ondromead watched the assembly from a nearby tree beside a tent. He had recently seen everyone in attendance.

Two men in armor departed from their respective groups, a page with a banner following each, one deep forest green, the other blood crimson, both with a single gold ring embroidered in the center. The zhan of the northern Daeshen Dominion stood before the red banner while the zhan of the Tanshen Dominion stood before the green. They bowed, drew their swords, and, at the signal of a tall man in a hooded cloak, began to fight.

The wind carried the clang of metal and the grunts of the men, as well as the voices of those gathered near the tents, to Ondromead’s ears. The woman he knew to be the Daeshen zhan’s wife clasped her hands to her chest. Beside her, he saw men he recognized as a councilman and a tigan. Her two sons, both in their teens, and a younger daughter, waited to the side. The boys watched intently. The girl looked away at the sky and the tents and the forest beyond the field — anywhere but the place the two men met in battle.

“This is madness,” the mother zhan said.

“A madness mandated by custom and one we could not avoid,” the councilor said.

“The only path to justice,” the tigan added.

“Surely neither party can be responsible for this crime,” the mother zhan said.

“The evidence suggests otherwise,” the councilor said.

“For one more to die only compounds the crime,” the mother zhan said.

“It may do more than that,” the councilor said.

“What more can befall us?” the mother zhan asked.

“War,” the tigan said.

“Indeed,” the councilor said. “While a duel may satisfy the lost honor of both nations, a zhan’s death is cause for war, no matter the circumstances.”

The northern zhan’s wife said no more as she watched her husband fight the man who might have planned the death of his brother — a man who had lost a daughter to a poisoned chalice of wine. Ondromead brought his eyes to the battle between the two rulers of the neighboring nations. Both men fought well, displaying great skill and expressing their fury in the power of

their blows. They appeared equally matched, but Ondromead could guess the likely outcome of the duel. With two men of equal expertise and experience, the one with greater stamina nearly always prevailed. A slower body presented significantly more targets of opportunity. Failing a stumble or some odd quirk of fate, the older southern man would be dead before long.

Ondromead sat down at the base of the tree and removed the black book, ink bottle, and quill from his satchel. As he recorded the events and words he had witnessed, he glanced up occasionally to check the progress of the fight. As expected, the Tanshen zhan began to weary. The women of the Tanshen contingent gasped as the killing blow struck — the Daeshen zhan's sword tip piercing his opponent's neck beneath the helmet. As the Tanshen zhan fell to the ground dying, his wife, family, and councilors rushed to his side. The northern zhan bowed once to his felled counterpart, then returned to his retinue near the tents and the red banners.

As Ondromead scrawled the last words to describe the scene along the pages of the endless book, he wondered how the events he suspected would follow might have been altered if the superior warrior on the field had chosen to wound rather than kill the other man? His long experience witnessing similar scenes throughout countless years told him that the councilor's judgment would prove correct. This death, more so than the recently poisoned newlyweds, would be the act of violence that led to war between two nations endlessly flirting with open conflict.

The wife of the northern zhan embraced her husband as he handed his sword to an attendant. Ondromead pondered how many years this new war would last and whether the man who started it, or his wife, would live to see it concluded.

THE PRESENT

ONDROMEAD WATCHED the older woman at the window. It had been twenty years since her husband began the still raging war with a single sword stroke. He had not survived, nor had his eldest son, and nor, likely, would his only other son. However, his wife and daughter had endured. If the death that day in the field and the murder that preceded it led to a war lasting twenty years, what would the death of this woman's son, the new zhan, result in?

More importantly, with this new murder, his need to be present would pass. The wedding ceremony could not be far off. He needed to find Hashel with all haste.

The mother zhan looked away from the window to the bride, speaking as she turned, her eyes clasping hold of the younger woman.

"You are wedding yourself not simply to my son, but to the family, and to the ascendancy," the mother zhan said. "The woman you are today dies when you sip the ceremonial wine and become bound to this dominion in a way you have not been hitherto. You will no longer be a tahneff from the provinces. You will be consort to the zhan. As such, your concerns will encompass the whole nation. You can represent the people of your small province, as I once did, but you must act for the benefit of the entire dominion. Often, that will simply mean taking your husband's side in public matters, but it will also entail being the more humane face of the harsher choices he will be forced to make. The people, especially the lesser tahns, may hate the zhan, but

if they love the zhan consort, they will be more forgiving of taxes and calls for men to send to battle in this unending war.”

“I understand, Mother.” The bride bowed slightly once more, her face hard and serious.

“Yes, strangely, I believe you do.” The older woman smiled. “Your true mother raised you well.”

“She was a wise woman.” A shadow of sadness passed momentarily across the bride’s face, departing almost as quickly as it arrived.

“And she looks down on you now in pride from the Pure Lands.” The elder woman inclined her head slightly to the younger.

“That is kind of you to say, Mother.”

Ondromead pulled his eyes from the crack between the screens. He had heard and seen enough. More than enough. The tingling sense that accompanied important events had barely hummed in his mind. He needed to be gone and back to searching for Hashel. He’d feared he might have to wait a considerable time for the women to leave, but when the attendants returned, the entire group departed the room. As he waited to make sure no one reentered and wondered at his presence in the bride’s dressing chamber, he decided to try the closet again. After entering and exiting its doorframe several times, he concluded that it remained merely a closet and not a conduit to another part of the palace. Frustrating, as he needed to start his search afresh.

Convinced he had stayed in the room far longer than necessary, he left his hiding place behind the dressing screen, crossed the thick wool rug in the center of the room, and opened the door. While the doorway led to a wide, stone-lined hall when he opened it, as he stepped through, he found himself in a narrow and dimly lit curved corridor, the walls and ceiling bending as though one large stone bowl had been placed inside another. He looked to see that he had apparently passed through the archway of a tiny room, barely large enough for the hole with a ladder rising through it. He turned, hearing voices ahead where the light of a lamp emanated.

He walked cautiously along the bend of the thin passageway, wondering where in the palace he could be. He ignored the notion that he might have departed the palace completely. He reached a hand out to the large stone bricks of the wall to steady himself in the shadowed light. He could hear the voices more clearly. Two men. One sounded unhappy.

“Seems a waste of time.”

“He wants everything checked.”

Ondromead did not recognize the voices, but he knew well the trilling at the back of his head. Something would happen soon that he needed to witness. He slowed as he crept quietly along the passage. He stopped as he saw the two men standing near another ladder rising up through a square, wood-framed portal in the stone ceiling.

“Do we gotta climb up there?” the first man asked as he peered up into the dark shaft above.

“I’ll climb up. You’ll wait here.” The second man stepped behind the first, lowering the lantern to the floor as he slipped a dagger from the sheath at his side.

“That’s good. I don’t much like tight spaces,” the first man said.

“Ya won’t need to worry about that anymore.” The second man swung the hilt of his dagger at the back of the first man’s head.

The first man stumbled forward, dazed, but still conscious. The second man hit him again, and the man fell to the ground, moaning as he held his skull. The second man bent down beside him and dropped the dagger on the stone floor as he grasped the first man’s head, placing one hand under the chin and the other on the opposite side at the back.

“What’s happenin’?” The first man groaned and blinked.

“I’m killin’ ya.” The second man twisted the first man’s neck until it cracked. The body of the first man shuddered, his pants staining dark with urine, the smell of feces filling the air.

Ondromead did not look away. He had seen death too many times not to know what would happen and how.

The second man grabbed his dagger and stood up, bending down to tug the corpse of the first man to the base of the ladder. He posed it, one arm beneath the chest, a leg twisted back, the head turned unnaturally far. Seemingly satisfied, the man bent down and began to work at several stones along the floor with the blade of his dagger. After a moment, he pulled two of the stones free, removing a bow and a small package of three arrows tied with a string. After replacing the stones, he stood up and strung the bow. He paused a moment to look down at the dead man, then slung the bow over his shoulder, clamped the arrows between his teeth, and climbed the ladder up into the darkness.

Ondromead turned and walked back along the passageway to the first ladder down to the lower levels, the light from the lantern fading with each step. He’d seen what he needed to witness. The murderer planting a body to be blamed for the murder. He had seen that many times as well. Too many times. Enough to know that it would likely have the intended effect, leading those who investigated the zhan’s death down a false and pointless trail.

As he stepped through the angled stone arch of the chamber, he sensed a shift in his surroundings and sighed. He stood in the shadows of a high-ceilinged foyer outside what he recognized as the palace temple. A man and a woman in opulently embroidered robes of red and gold waited not far away. The bride and the man who could only be the zhan.

“You need not be nervous.” The zhan smiled at his bride. “The priests will tell us what to say.”

“I am not nervous.” The bride straightened her shoulders. “I am excited.”

“Ah.” The zhan smiled. “Maybe I did not recognize it because I am so nervous.”

“You need not be nervous.” The bride smoothed non-existent wrinkles in the fabric of her silken robes. “It is only a ceremony. It will be over soon.”

“It is not the ceremony that worries me. It is what comes afterward.” The zhan’s smile faded.

“Ah.” The bride bit her lip. “I refuse to be nervous about what comes after. I choose to be excited.”

“You are not a former priest.” The zhan looked toward the door of the main temple chamber, guests assembled along two sides of an aisle leading to the altar at the head of the room. He sighed.

“If I were a former priest, I should think I would be even more excited.” The bride looked at her future husband with a slight concern showing in her eyes.

“Very true.” The zhan laughed lightly. “However, I suspect I shall be more nervous tomorrow morning. We will have children soon, I hope. And I am even less prepared for that than for ruling a nation.”

“Allow me to worry about our future children so that you may worry about the future of our dominion.” The bride placed her arm out parallel to the ground and bent at the elbow.

“A more than equitable bargain.” The zhan took her arm as the bells of the temple began to ring.

“The first of many, we may hope.” The bride smiled at the zhan, who returned the gesture.

Ondromead watched the zhan lead his bride through the archway of the vestibule and into the temple. The buzzing in his mind told him he had more yet to witness. He hoped it would be brief and, for the sake of the zhan, relatively painless.

He waited a moment for the gawking servants and attendants to pass through to the temple entrance before sneaking out behind them. If he needed to observe this death, he would do it from a vantage point where he could see what happened. And hopefully, he could find a place where he might spot Hashel in the crowd. Certainly the boy would try to find him at the wedding. Assuming he still roamed the palace halls and had not been arrested or injured or worse. The ideas of what might constitute *worse* caused him to hurry his steps. After sliding past an inattentive guard, he found a set of stairs that led to the balcony level. It took a moment to navigate the guards stationed on the balcony and find a place by one of the statues of a prophet from which to watch the ceremony.

Fortunately, Shen wedding ceremonies tended toward ostentation and length. He had more than sufficient time to scan the crowd of guests below and search for a sign of Hashel. He listened with minimal interest as the bride and groom exchanged a series of vows and the priest read long and tedious passages from the *Kam-Dju*. As the priest droned on, Ondromead looked around the temple, eyes searching for a small, familiar face. How had he let go of the boy? If something happened to the child, he had only himself to blame. Himself and whatever force worked to toss him about the palace — a leaf caught in a storm it could never hope to control.

He sighed in frustration. He saw Hashel nowhere. Even as he convinced himself that he still had until he fell asleep that evening to find the boy, he wondered how he had come to care so much about one life among all the lives he had seen in all the years. How was it that the boy’s life commanded his attention when no one else’s ever had? Could the boy be special in some way? Might that be why he could be transported with Ondromead each night when no others had ever been?

Ondromead found the sensations accompanying concern for the boy disconcerting. Painful even. He understood now, in a way he had not before, how the lives of those he observed could

be shaped by their caring for others. The things they did. The things they endured. Simply to be with someone or to spare someone pain and suffering. It opened a door of knowledge previously closed to him, a portal through which he could glimpse an even larger world of shared concern and companionship. It pained him to think of losing the boy, but his heart swelled at finally feeling something of what he had witnessed for so long.

A commotion arose near the back of the crowded temple below. He had been so ensconced in his thoughts that he had not noticed the priest holding the wine, about to hand it to the zhan. It would happen soon, then. He raised his eyes above and found a small hatch in the dome of the temple opened to darkness. He knew a man with a bow string pulled tight to his cheek stood in the shadows beyond it.

The noise below rose again, and he looked toward it. A guard chased someone through the crowd, but he could not tell whom.

A cry brought his eyes toward the altar. He blinked in surprise at what he saw. Events did not transpire as he had predicted.

To continue reading the Witness story arena [follow this link.](#)

To continue reading Ondromead's storyline [follow this link.](#)

THE SEER



KELLATRA

A WARM afternoon breeze chilled sweat-damp skin, flesh puckering in small mounds against the shift in temperature. Kellatra drew the back of her tooth-marked hand across her damp forehead and tried to slow her breath. She stared up at the black-gray clouds of the sky and threw an arm over naked breasts, more to keep insects from them than out of modesty. Rankarus lay beside her on the blanket in the grass of the wooded clearing, breathing as heavily as she.

They began their false argument an hour previous, departing into the woods in a declared effort to resolve their differences. They had long ago learned that the children demanded to accompany them if they said they were going to hunt for food or simply to have some time alone. However, if they appeared to be upset with one another, Luntadus and Lantili had no desire to be near them. Fortunately, neither child noticed the rucksack with a blanket that Rankarus had carried over his shoulder. She doubted that Abananthus and Jadaloo were as oblivious to their diversion as the children, but she also did not doubt they appreciated it. Neither, she suspected, really desired to be in a nearby tent when she and her husband rutted like wild animals.

They had been much like wild animals — devouring each other's mouths, tearing at clothes, and scratching flesh. They'd begun to make so much noise that they took to biting each other's hands to keep from scaring away the wildlife of the forest, or calling the attention of their children and friends in the nearby camp. It had been so long since they had touched each other that the desire between them exploded once given release. Now they lay beneath the slate gray sky, letting their skin cool and their lungs calm.

She rolled on her side, placing her head on Rankarus's chest and swinging her leg over his groin. He placed his arms around her and held her tight, nuzzling his nose into her hair and breathing deeply as he always did after their loving.

"That was well worth losing an inn to fire and being hounded by men set to kill us." Rankarus exhaled in supreme contentment.

"It is good to know that your stamina has not decreased with age." Kellatra laughed and kissed his chest.

"My stamina may be intact, but I doubt I'll be able to bend over tomorrow." Rankarus slid a hand beneath his lower back.

"As you mention tomorrow, we will need to decide our course soon." Kellatra felt hesitant to raise such a potentially divisive subject after such profound intimacy.

“Are you still set on following the pilgrims to a land no one has ever returned from?” The tone of his voice indicated his low opinion of the idea.

“Yes.” Kellatra sighed, her frustration beginning to evaporate the fog of bliss clouding her mind. “I meant that we must decide which road to take west. I thought we were in agreement in this.”

“We were. Then men held knives to our children’s necks.” Rankarus did not alter his skeptical tone, although his arm remained gently around her shoulders. “It is a great risk placed on a hunch made from dreams.”

“I cannot explain this intuition.” Kellatra bit her lip. “When I wake from the dreams, I have such an unshakable certainty about the book being connected to them. As the day proceeds, my doubts collect, but as soon as I fall to slumber again, my misgivings drop aside. And I believe the greatest dangers are behind us.”

“I do not like these choices.” Rankarus’s body tightened against her skin. “There are too many unexplainable things happening around us. The codex. The dreams. The star. The pilgrims. It hurts my head to think of them all and what they might mean and why we are pulled into them. I don’t like the feeling of being maneuvered by someone or something. It gives me a deep foreboding.”

“Do you feel something bad will happen if we follow the pilgrims, or do you feel something bad will happen if we investigate the codex?” Kellatra leaned up on one elbow to look him in the eyes.

“The book has brought nothing but misery into our lives.” Rankarus shook his head.

“It is important somehow to what is happening in the world. I know it is.” Kellatra frowned, thinking again about the intuited connection between the codex and the dreams.

“I don’t care about the world,” Rankarus said. “I care about you and the children. Why must you be at the center of the mystery?”

“I do not know, but I feel that I am. Or if not the center, then in close orbit about it.” She stared at Rankarus, his annoyance plain on his face.

“You are not tied to this mystery, this damnable book, because of fate or gods, but because you wish to be. You desire to know its secrets. You want to solve its puzzle.”

He spoke aloud the truth she had refused to fully acknowledge.

“I do,” she admitted.

“I know why.” Rankarus grabbed her hand and held it tight. “You’re like a hawk-hound at the scent of the curious and inexplicable. But how much are you willing to continue to risk to uncover these secrets? My life? The children’s lives?”

“I feel I risk more, risk us all, by not seeking to understand the codex.” Kellatra wished she could better articulate that suspicion.

“Or do you tell yourself that to assuage your fears?” Rankarus did not release her hand, but he stared at her intently. “In my old life, I had to know when to abandon a prospect as too dangerous, no matter how much coin awaited me as a reward. Can you forgo this quest in light of the danger it poses?”

“Is that what you’re asking me to do?”

“I...”

The first drops of rain burst against her skin. She had only a moment between those initial splatterings before the black-ash sky above began to hurl torrents of water to the ground. They sat up, clinging to one another, feeling the air cool and the pressure drop, expecting to be soaked beneath the sudden maelstrom churning the tall grass of the glade and whipping the trees in sinuously violent rhythms.

“I don’t understand.” Kellatra looked around, disbelieving her eyes. The rain did not fall upon them.

“Is this you? Are you doing this?” Rankarus stared at her, his face tight with sudden fear.

“If this is The Sight, it is not mine.” Kellatra held to Rankarus tightly, wishing to pull her dress over her head, but unwilling to release him.

“Look.” Rankarus pointed, and she followed his hand.

The rain fell around them in great sheets, forming a curtain of water that did not touch them but rather encircled them, leaving a perfectly round, dry space in the center of the clearing, the two of them protected within it from the sudden storm. Rankarus pointed to a path of dryness extending from that circle toward the west, a canal cut through the sea of falling water.

“A sign.” Kellatra voiced her realization and her fear.

As her words faded, the rain ceased, ending nearly as quickly as it began. They sat in silence a long moment, holding to each other in the cool air.

“More like a command than a sign.” Rankarus shivered slightly in her arms.

“Do we heed it?” Kellatra found herself suddenly far less enthusiastic about a journey to the Forbidden Realm to uncover the secrets of a mysterious book. It had seemed a plausible idea when it remained a hunch. Knowing some unearthly power demanded their obedience filled her with dread and trepidation to act.

“As I said, I don’t like some unseen being pushing us around like blocks on a game board.” Rankarus grimaced as he looked to the sky. “It may not be a goddess giving us instructions, but something wants us to unravel the mysteries of that book. Much as I hate to say it, I don’t know that we have a choice.”

“We head west, then?” Although she asked it as a question, Kellatra knew it to be more of a statement of intent.

“No.” The firmness in Rankarus’s voice called her to look at him. He smiled. “West will take too long. We head south and catch a ship. We can sail around the coast to Tanjii in half the time and avoid the Shen war, bandits, and fanatic militiamen. If we have no choice but to follow this dream quest, we can at least choose our path.”

“Very wise, but very expensive.” Kellatra kissed him and stood up, grabbing her dress and pulling on her underclothes. She possessed an irresistible urge to be back on the road again as soon as possible.

“We’ll need to find more coin along the way.” Rankarus stood and tugged his trousers over his legs. “I know a few old tricks that could make us enough to pay for a sea voyage.”

“We have enough coin left to buy some lead.” Kellatra shimmied into her dress and pulled the drawstrings tight behind her back.

“Lead?” Rankarus frowned in confusion. “Do you hope to poison your way to the Forbidden Realm?”

“Of course not.” Kellatra smiled, enjoying the effect she knew her words would have. “With enough time, I can turn the lead to gold. If we had months, we could buy a ship.”

“What?” Rankarus shook his head in obvious confusion, his voice pitching high. “All those years of saving every small coin and you can make gold from lead?”

“It’s not easy.” Kellatra grinned at her husband’s consternation. “Where do you think I found the funds to buy the inn with you?”

Rankarus tied his trousers and held his shirt with one hand as he pointed at her with the other, puffing up his chest. “This must be the very last secret.”

Kellatra laughed and winked at him, grabbing her boots and the blanket from the ground and stomping through the wet grass of the forest glade back toward the camp. She ignored Rankarus’s protests as he gathered his boots and the rucksack and rushed to follow her. She breathed a long sigh of contentment now that he would follow her. He would moan about secrets and lost opportunities and endless gold and the dangers of the sea and the Forbidden Realm and damnable cryptic books and much more — but he would follow her. He would follow her because he loved her, just as she had followed him to run an inn, just as she would follow him to the ends of Onaia when the time came — because she loved him.

THE TEMPLE



TAKSATI

SMOKE CLOUDS hung in the air, rising slowly in the breezeless barn, curling over the salted sea flesh, dehydrating, curing, and preserving the meat for the long voyage ahead. Taksati rubbed a chunk of dried fish between her thumb and fingers before placing it in her mouth and chewing it. Dry, as hoped, but not chalky.

“This batch will do.”

Taksati looked around the large barn at the landed school of fish drying by the smoke and heat of three fire pits, strings holding them to poles mounted on racks near the flames. She rubbed her eyes, watching the gray swirls seeping through the newly cut holes in the roof. The barn had once held livestock, but Junari had asked her to supervise the preparation of dried goods for their journey, and Taksati had appropriated the barn and converted it to her purposes. Years as a child in a fishing town and many more helping manage the temple’s storehouses gave her ample experience in how to smoke fish and dry fruit and vegetables and organize the pilgrims set to each task. Junari’s personal needs were few, which left most of Taksati’s day spent working to secure the food they would eat in the coming weeks upon the water.

She looked forward to being on the open ocean again. She had not sat in a boat since she left her family in her fourteenth year to apply to the temple. For years, she had wept in her pillow each night that she could not fulfill her dream of being a priest. She laughed now at the thought of an illiterate daughter of a fishmonger becoming a priest. By the time she had taught herself to read, the temple priesthood saw her only as a servant. All those years later, she served the prophet of a new goddess. She, who had envied others, now stood in a position others envied — personal servant to Junari, prophet of the Goddess Moaratana.

“Seal them in the barrels and bring in the next batch.” Taksati spoke to the two women minding the fires and the fish as she stepped out of the barn into fresh air and sunlight.

An ebony-skinned girl of ten or so followed her from the barn, clinging to her heels as she walked past the barrels of fish brining in preparation for the smokehouse. Nearby, three women gutted more fish for the barrels, rinsing the meat and rubbing it with salt.

“What’s she like?”

Taksati looked over her shoulder at the girl trailing behind her. It had taken her some time, but she had gotten used to people, especially children, asking her about Junari.

“Why do you want to know?” Taksati did not pause in her pace, her age belying the speed with which she could move. The girl hurried to keep up as she walked along the path down to the fishing boats at the shore.

“Because...” The girl frowned as she appeared to contemplate that question. “I want to be like her.”

“You want to be a prophet?” Taksati did not try to keep the skepticism from her voice. It seemed every girl among the pilgrims wanted to be a prophet.

“No. I want to be a vessel.” The girl said the words proudly.

“You want to be a ship loaded with cargo?” Taksati’s tone teased, but she took time to give the girl a second appraisal. The child did not proceed in her questioning the way most did.

“No.” The girl laughed. “I want to be a vessel for the Goddess. Like the Mother Shepherd.”

“Ah.” Taksati slowed so the girl could walk beside her. “There are many kinds of vessels. There are clay cups and silver chalices. Which manner of vessel do you wish to be?”

“I don’t know.” The girl frowned again as she put her hands on her hips. “I think a crystal vase. Big but clear.”

“Interesting.” Taksati had expected the girl to say she wished to be a golden vessel. “Why clear?”

“So the light of the Goddess can show through.” The girl grinned as she spoke, seeming to visualize what she described.

“What’s your name, girl?” Taksati looked at the child again, seeing something in her she had once seen in herself long ago. Something she saw in Junari.

“Atula,” the girl said.

“What do you do here, Atula?” All the pilgrims had work assigned to them, even the older children.

“After helping with the morning meal, I usually help my father with the fishing, but today, I was helping my aunt in the smokehouse. Sometimes, I help my uncle on the ships, fetching him tools.” Atula seemed proud that she did more than one thing.

“Not anymore you don’t.” Taksati looked into the girl’s eyes as she spoke. “I have need of an assistant. Each morning, you will report to me.”

“You want me to be your servant?” Atula halted, her eyes wide.

“My assistant.” Taksati stopped as well, glancing over to the men hauling their netted catch from shallow boats to the sandy beach along the water. After a moment, she looked back to Atula.

“I’ll be a servant to the personal servant of the Mother Shepherd?” Atula beamed with joy.

“Assistant. To serve is something else.” Taksati squinted at Atula. “Now run along and help your aunt so she won’t be shortanded for the day. Tomorrow, you’ll come straight to me in the morning.”

“Thank you, Taksati!” Atula wavered in place, seeming uncertain what to do. She settled on a quick bow and then turned to run before skidding to a stop and looking back. “How will I know where to find you?”

“It’s not a big town, and you’re a smart girl. You’ll figure it out.” Taksati smiled at Atula, wondering what strange impulse had governed her tongue and what she would do with a young assistant.

“Right.” Atula grinned with sudden confidence and ran off to her aunt.

Taksati watched the girl’s spindle legs flying up the path back to the smokehouse. Yes, the girl reminded her all too much of herself at that age. A bright flame shielded from the world by fish and the sea and family obligations, unfettered but yearning to know and see and do. Maybe the girl would become a clear vessel one day. Two great women she might say she had a hand in fashioning.

She greeted the men bringing their haul in from the sea and the women sorting the fish to determine which would make for smoking and which would be eaten that night for dinner. Too small and the fish were not worth the effort to smoke. Too large and their flesh might rot before fully drying and smoking. As she watched the men and women working the catch, one of the fish caught her eye. She stepped closer as it wriggled in the sun beside its soon-to-be salted companions. This fish would not be kept nor eaten nor thrown back.

She bent and grabbed the fish in her hand before the others might notice it. It would not do for them to see it. She quickly tossed it in a nearby bucket.

“Something fresh for the Mother Shepherd’s midday meal.” She smiled at the nearest woman. “They’ll be ready for a new batch at the brine table when you’ve finished sorting these.”

She headed back up the lane to the town. She passed many people along the way and did her best to show them the face they always saw. Pleasant but stern, rather than panicked and worried. She forced her feet to keep to their normal pace up the street that led to the house she shared with Junari.

Once inside the clay-tiled home, she stoked the embers in the fireplace and threw new wood onto the coals, blowing on them until the flames roared. Then she looked in the bucket again. The fish flopped its tail and its two heads, red eyes staring up at her. She grimaced and grabbed the tail of the fish, swinging it to smash its heads against the stone of the hearth before tossing it into the fire. The scales slowly took light, burning a deep crimson as a rank smell of rotted flesh rose with the smoke up the chimney hole. She stood before the flames until the monstrous creature had transformed into a blackened lump of char.

She had never seen a two-headed fish, but her father had often told her the story of catching one the day a storm rose suddenly to kill three men from the town. He told other stories of two-headed fish as well. To catch one presaged ominous events. Their unnatural nature spoke of an imbalance in the world — a portent of unstable forces taking shape to form the future.

Leaving the hearth, she went and dug a small leather pouch from beneath the straw mattress of her bed. She sat at the table near the fire as she opened the purse and spilled its contents across the well-worn boards. A pile of clay tiles skittered along the wood, each glazed in white with black and red symbols painted across them. Pavagistay casting tiles. She kept them hidden from Junari and Raedalus. While an accepted form of divination, Pashist priests tended to believe that the falling of the tiles could only be read and interpreted by one with the proper esoteric training.

She had learned to read them from her mother, who had learned from hers, and so on back for generations. When she came to the temple as a girl of fourteen, she could not read the words of the sacred texts, but she knew how to read the tiles, how to tell what the cock beside the tree meant and what could be implied when the sun sat atop the harvest bale or whether a girl should accept a boy's proposal if she cast a boat before a sword.

Taksati looked down at the thirty-three small square tiles on the table and gently flattened them. While not traditional, she found her best readings often came from the first fall of the tiles from the bag. She paid attention to the five tiles near the center of the spread. The farther from the middle the tiles fell, the less import their symbols held for the reading.

A sun, a boat, a pig, a fish, and a flame.

She looked at the tiles and frowned. Not a good reading. She gathered the tiles into her hands, silently spoke a single word to mark the casting, and opened her palms as the tiles fell to the table.

A sun, a boat, a pig, a fish, and a flame.

Her heart beat fast as she gathered the tiles in shaking hands.

She whispered again.

The tiles fell.

A sun, a boat, a pig, a fish, and a flame.

She read the tiles from left to right and top to bottom, but they still spoke the same message. The sun stood for the Mother Goddess, the boat their journey, the pig for ignorance, the fish for death, and the flame for betrayal. She cast the tiles three more times, giving up as the sixth attempt replicated the first once more.

As she leaned back in the chair, she wondered how she could warn Junari of this ephemeral danger. They would be betrayed, but the tiles did not name the source of that betrayal. It might be the pilgrim followers. It might be their hired captains. It might be someone trusted. Another possibility occurred to her that stilled her trembling hands and froze her racing heart — the tiles could be read to suggest that the betrayal would come from the Goddess herself.

To continue reading the Temple story arena [follow this link](#).

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

DUST CLUNG to slender silk cables of a tattered spider web, a foreground of decay offsetting the chaotic charge of men in metal, leather, and wool running from other men similarly clad, trampling the summer wheat beneath the soles of their boots. Hashel leaned back from the open-air window of the little hut. The old woman reached over him to pull the weatherworn shutters closed.

“Think we should run?” The old woman looked down to him in the murky light of the hut.

Hashel thought about the men fleeing toward the small town and the other men pursuing them. He could not hope to outrun the men, nor could the old woman. The soldiers might pass straight through the town and ignore the houses. Only a fool would try to hide in a hut with an army chasing him. Hashel frowned at that thought as he looked around the hut for a place to hide. The shanty house contained a wooden cupboard too small to crouch in and a bed too low to the floor to crawl beneath.

“I thinks we should wait.” The old woman sat on the edge of the bed. “I’m too old to run.”

Hashel nodded his head and sat beside her. The first of the fleeing soldiers roared past the hut, the flimsy door shaking on its squeaky hinges. As more men followed, the sound of their passing came to resemble a stampede of cattle, rushing mindlessly around the fragile clay brick walls. Men yelled to their comrades as they passed, and others cried out as they apparently crashed over the small stone fence behind the hut. He heard pigs squeal. Then came the ringing sound of hard metal making contact with its kindred form and the wails of men whose flesh offered no resistance to sharp steel.

“It’ll be over soon.” The old woman patted him gently on the back.

Hashel found himself shying away from her touch.

“Don’t speak, eh?” the old woman asked. “Seen things, has ya?”

Hashel paused a moment and then nodded.

“Hard ta see some things.” The old woman let her hand rest on his shoulder.

Hashel resisted the urge to pull the old woman’s hand away. Her fingers felt cold and hard.

“Harder still when bad things happen to our own self.” The old woman took her hand away and clasped it with the other in her lap.

Hashel nodded again. He held his hands in small fists on his legs.

“I’ve seen some bad things in my time.” The old woman looked up to the cobwebs dangling from the soot-crusting rafters of the hut. “Seen some good things, too. Don’t get ta choose what

we sees and what happens. But we choose what ta remember and what ta cast away like chaff in the wind.”

Hashel thought about this. It sounded nice. To let a forgetful breeze carry his memories away so they could not keep him tied down. But if he cut the cords that held them, they might just as easily swirl him up in a cyclone of remembrance as leave him free of their pain.

“Where ya from?” the old woman asked. “Yer not from here. How’d ya come to be caught in a battle?”

Hashel considered this question, then pointed to the door. He did not know what the old woman made of this. Only so much could be conveyed with gestures.

“Lost, eh?” the old woman said. “I’m lost myself, I is.”

Hashel doubted the old woman could be as lost as he was. This thought made him impatient to get back to trying doors in the hopes of ending up once more in the palace where he might have some chance of finding Ondromead. The sound of men running past the hut and through the town had faded. He stood up and went to the door.

“Not one fer staying ’round, are ya?” The old woman stood and joined him as he opened the door a crack.

The bodies of dead men littered the street, bleeding pools of reddish black into the dust. No living men walked the lane.

“I knows a place we can go,” the old woman said. “A safe place.”

Hashel looked up at the old woman. He had found a safe place and wished only to return to it. He wondered if he would now find himself bound to her company if he could not find a way back to Ondromead.

“This way.” The old woman pulled the door open and pushed him through it.

Hashel’s stomach lurched as he walked from the dark hut and into cloudy daylight, stepping not onto the hard dirt of the street, but the soft grass of a familiar palace garden. His head spun as he looked around himself. He appeared to have stepped from a palace hall into the back of the garden nearest the temple. He saw the old woman nowhere. She had not passed through the doorway with him.

He smiled and raced across the garden lawn, staying close to the walls, heading for the temple. He did not know how long he had been gone, but he knew that Ondromead eventually needed to go to the temple if for no other reason than to witness the impending murder of the zhan at his wedding ceremony.

He spied two guards in leather armor holding spears near a side entrance of the temple. Both men looked back over their shoulders toward the temple nave. The wedding must have already begun. Hashel ran faster, not even pausing as he dashed between the two distracted guards.

“Iah!” one of the guards yelled out.

Fingers brushed his arm, but Hashel kept running. He raced along the side of the room, past guests dressed in fine silks of various colors with accents of red and gold. He glanced over his shoulder to see the guard giving chase, the spear still held high in his hand.

Hashel found a wider gap between two rows of guests and lunged for it, using the advantage of his diminutive size to cut past the people and into the main aisle of the temple. He looked to the altar at the head of the aisle where the priest held the wine cup high above his head. The bride and groom stood before him. It would happen soon. The zhan would be killed soon somehow. That was what he remembered the tall man saying.

He glanced back down the row of guests to see the guard clumsily pushing his way forward past men and women who cursed at him in loud voices. Hashel turned to the altar. He could warn the zhan. Try to save him. But how? Rush the altar? Disrupt the ceremony?

As he tried to decide what to do, he heard a shout near the front of the temple. The man he had heard speaking with the zhan earlier ran toward the dais. As the man dove toward the zhan something black flashed through the air. The bride cried out and clasped a hand to her arm as she fell to the ground, covered by the zhan, in turn sheltered by his protector. The man who shielded the zhan twisted and pointed to the domed ceiling as men and women shouted and screamed.

Hashel looked up and noticed a small hatch open in the temple ceiling. Something or someone heavy pushed him forward, and he fell to his knees. At first, he thought it to be the guard come to collect him. Then he noticed the legs and feet crushing around him as the guests tried to exit the sanctuary in panicked fear for their lives.

He rolled away from a man who nearly stomped his hand flat and tried to get to his feet. The rush of the crowd pressed him toward the main doors as he stumbled in an attempt to gain his balance. People shoved and pushed and kicked him — an obstacle to be removed from their path to safety. He clung to the folds of robes to stay upright, his feet barely touching the marbled floor. He noticed another child, a girl about his age, being held in her father's arms high above the trampling feet below her. He had no one to hold him up away from danger. He had only his own feet and hands to spare him. Feet that failed him by tripping over a woman fallen to the ground, wailing as people crushed her beneath their slippers and boots.

Hashel tried to cushion his fall, but no room existed to tumble aside and his open palms took the brunt of the impact, keeping his face from smashing into the cool marble. His hands did nothing to stop the booted foot that slammed into the side of his skull. His ears rang and his vision blurred as he tried to push himself up, a man falling over him to trap his legs.

His breath escaped his lungs in ragged bursts as he struggled to free his feet, using one hand to protect his head from being kicked again while he used the other to shove against the smoothly polished floor. A woman's heel trampled his wrist, and he cried out. As he held his elbow up, he managed to free his legs. Turning over, he sought to curl himself into a ball. If he could not escape with the crowd, maybe he could survive the stampede until Ondromed found him. The old man must be in the temple. He would still be searching for him. Wouldn't he?

As Hashel bent in half, a hand pulled at his arm, raising him to his feet.

"Lost again, are you, boy?"

Hashel looked up into the face of the old woman. She smiled at him, appearing completely unconcerned by the chaos around her.

“Follow me. I know a safe place.” The old woman pulled him behind her as she pressed her way through the crowd, heading not for the main exit, but for a set of stairs to the side.

Hashel ran to keep pace with the old woman, her outstretched palm parting the crush of fleeing guests — a tall prow slicing easily through rough waters. It took him a moment to realize that she now wore robes of shimmering blue silk rather than the ragged dress he had seen cloaking her aged flesh in that hut. The way she spoke sounded different as well. How could that be? And why?

They reached the stairs, the old woman again shoving her way past guests who were trying to run up the steps and away from the perceived danger. The mindlessness of the crowd’s panic only occurred to Hashel as they made it to the top of the stairs and the press of human flesh eased. None of the people running for their lives had ever been in any danger. The archer who shot the arrow to kill the zhan would not wait to target random guests rather than flee. They were unimportant to the dominion when compared to the zhan who had nearly been killed, but they all thought of themselves as essential. So much so that they created greater peril to themselves and others attempting to avoid the minimal risk posed by staying put.

The old woman pulled at his hand, guiding him along the edge of the balcony against the flow of those egressing from the temple. She headed toward a statue at the balcony edge near the middle of the chamber. Beside the statue stood Ondromead, looking over the railing, his mouth tight with worry.

“I think you’ve misplaced something,” the woman called out as she and Hashel stepped up beside Ondromead.

The old man turned, surprise and a hint of fear blossoming across his face. He reached out and pulled Hashel to his side. The old woman let go of Hashel’s hand and smiled down at him.

“Are you responsible for this?” Ondromead’s voice carried loud and angry over the din of frightened shouting around them.

“Am I?” The old woman gave a quizzical smile. “Did I bring a boy into this?”

“It is you casting us about like seeds in the wind.” Ondromead pulled Hashel tighter to his side.

“A farming metaphor. Very apt.” The old woman looked at Hashel. “A seedling needs to be planted in firm ground so it may grow deep roots against the storms of life. It cannot be plucked up and set down again and again like a potted flower in a maze garden.”

“Leave us alone.” Ondromead pointed a bent finger at the old woman.

“It is you who should leave the boy alone.” The old woman appeared sad as she stared at Ondromead. “How long will it be before he is hurt or worse? Here is another metaphor. He is not a stray dog. You should find a home for him and let him go.”

“You do not tell me what to do, Meraeu.” Ondromead’s hand shook with visible anger as he growled at the old woman.

“I can only offer you advice.” She looked again at Hashel. “I hope to see you again one day.”

The old woman smiled at him briefly, and then she turned and walked away, blending with and disappearing into the crowd of people still clearing from the temple.

“Stay away from us,” Ondromead shouted, but the old woman had gone. He looked down at Hashel, his face serious, but his eyes radiating relief. “Stay away from her should you see her again. She is not to be trusted.”

Hashel nodded his assent, wondering how Ondromead knew the old woman and how she had come to find him in that hut. Could she be a traveling witness like the old man? Or did she have something to do with their transfer between distant locations each night? Had she, as Ondromead suggested, been responsible for him getting stranded in that town beside the battling armies? Hashel decided he didn’t care what the answers might be to his questions. He had found Ondromead again. His only concern now revolved around whether the old man would take the strange woman’s advice and leave him behind someplace. He hoped that would not happen. He did not want to be anywhere other than beside the old man.

“We should go. We’ve seen all we needed to see today.” Ondromead walked along the edge of the balcony, avoiding the few people still in the temple, keeping his arm around Hashel’s shoulder. “Let’s find someplace to wait for nightfall where we don’t need to walk through a door.”

The old man smiled down at Hashel as he affectionately squeezed his arm. Hashel returned the smile. He could not wait to fall asleep that night and wake again far from the palace and its portals and doorways and archways. As he followed Ondromead, he wondered what would become of the zhan and his bride. It pleased him that she had only been struck in the arm. The zhan had survived the attempted murder and his bride would no doubt live to complete their wedding ceremony another day. It felt good to witness something hopeful after the battle he’d seen earlier in that town. He held to that sentiment of hope, cloaking himself in it, wrapping it tightly to his inner flame to protect against the winds he sensed brewing, not from without, but from within.

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THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

SHADOWS DAPPLED the foliage of canopied trees, firelight reaching upward, seeking the comforting touch of a multitude of brethren flames cast across the infinite black of the night sky. Lee-Nin looked down from the stars visible through the layers of leaves and branches above the small clearing to watch while Sao-Tauna played with a stick as it smoked, pulling it in and out of the campfire, removing it before the bark ignited in flame.

She wondered at how such simple acts could keep children occupied for so long. Particularly a child such as Sao-Tauna. This thought brought her back to wondering, as she had so often the past days, what manner of child Sao-Tauna might truly be. What she had witnessed the girl do defied all sense and reason. She knew things could be done with The Sight that strained the imagination, but from all she understood, seers required years of training. How could a child of seven open a door of light in midair that sucked a man to another world? For that matter, what sort of creature might come from such a world to inhabit a man? Did she travel with such a little girl and such a man, or did she share the road with a pair of creatures more dangerous than any she had read about in the terrifying tales in the *Legends and Fables of Hin-Ma-Ter*? Could it be possible for both to be true?

Thinking of Sha-Kutan made her wonder what kept him so long in returning. He had set out an hour before dusk to hunt food for the night. She had hoped he would have come back with a rabbit or a fox by now. She would be happy for a badger or a fat wellid. She'd be happy if he returned empty-handed. She would prefer a growling stomach to staying the night alone. Of course, she would not be alone — she would be with Sao-Tauna — and she might wake to find herself pulled through a veil of light and shadow into some other realm. She shivered at the thought, her motion bringing Sao-Tauna's attention.

"He'll be back soon." Lee-Nin phrased the words as though they were an answer to Sao-Tauna's questioning face.

Sao-Tauna nodded and turned back to playing with the stick, dousing it once more in the flames and waiting for it to begin to smoke. The snapping of a twig from the impenetrably dark forest behind her caught her attention. She assumed Sha-Kutan would emerge from the blackness to reveal his catch. A hand clamped across her mouth and drove the thoughts of Sha-Kutan from her head. She struggled and reached for the knife at her belt, but a blade pressing into her throat stilled her motion. Her heart clanged in her ears until she heard the voice speaking into them.

"Still now."

She knew that voice well. Had heard it in nightmares. Knew the face that went with it. The warden commander sent to kill Sao-Tauna. She looked and saw another man holding the girl. Three more men emerged from the darkness between the trees around the campsite. She swallowed back her fear, the blade of the knife digging into her throat with the motion. She had to think of a way to keep herself and Sao-Tauna alive long enough for Sha-Kutan to come back and save them. At the very least, she needed to find a way to scream and warn him. It would likely get her throat slit, but he might be able to rescue Sao-Tauna.

“You can either die with the girl, or you can live to answer my questions.” She smelled the stench of unwashed flesh radiating from the warden commander as he held her to his chest. “You want to live?”

Lee-Nin nodded her head, her eyes locked to Sao-Tauna and the man holding her, one hand covering the girl’s mouth, the other clamped around her arms. Sao-Tauna did not struggle, but the look on her face and in her eyes spoke to the depth of her fright.

“Where’s the man?” the warden commander growled in her ear as he released some of the pressure on the hand over her mouth.

“Hunting.” Lee-Nin hoped he would come back and finish his hunt among the warden commander and his men. She wished now that she had encouraged him to kill them long ago.

“You stay quiet, and you live.” The commander repeated his threat as a promise. “I’ll spare you seeing the girl die. Dian-Vang. Take her.” As he spoke, one of the other men grabbed Lee-Nin and tried to forcefully turn her eyes from Sao-Tauna as the warden commander approached the girl with his dagger drawn. Lee-Nin fought against the hands pulling her head, straining the muscles of her neck.

She saw the blade in the warden commander’s hand glint in the firelight as it approached Sao-Tauna’s tender flesh, her eyes wide with silent fear. As the blade neared the girl’s neck, she raised her hand, finger extended and traced an invisible pattern in the air. The night around the campfire broke open, a ribbon of dazzling luminescence unraveling around the man that held her and his nearby companions. The swirling darkness within that gaping fissure grabbed at the men, sucking them from their feet. The man holding Lee-Nin, the one called Dian-Vang, abandoned his grip on her to lunge at the airborne legs of his nearest comrade. He missed his target and flew upward into the brilliant dark cleft in the air, screaming with the other men as they tumbled up into an unseeable oblivion.

The warden commander cried out and reached for a nearby tree branch to anchor himself against the pull of the dark vortex above as it devoured his men. Lee-Nin pulled the knife blade from her belt, rolling to her feet even as she saw the commander smash the hilt of his dagger into the side of the Sao-Tauna’s head. The girl crumpled in unconsciousness, and the scar of light tearing open the night air collapsed to nothingness.

As the commander held back Sao-Tauna’s throat and made to slice his blade across it, Lee-Nin screamed and launched herself at him, driving her knife into the gap in his leather armor under his raised arm. The warden cried out, dropping his dagger and slamming his elbow back into her face. She fell to the ground, her nose bleeding, a lightning storm of pain shooting up into

her brain. She blinked back tears and swung the blade in her hand wildly, trying to reclaim her footing and stand to attack again. A boot slammed into her stomach, kicking the wind from her lungs. She dropped the knife as she doubled up in pain, her legs weak beneath her. Another booted blow crashed into her head, sending her to the ground once more.

As she lay gasping, trying to force her body to fight rather than merely shudder in pain, she cried out, hoping Sha-Kutan might hear so he would return and kill the man who now stood above and grabbed her hair.

"I don't need answers. I see now why she must die." The warden commander yanked back Lee-Nin's hair to expose her neck as he held up his blade. She raised her hands in an attempt to block the blow that would slit her neck. She looked once more at where Sao-Tauna lay defenseless, her foot near the fire, the leather of her boot smoking in the heat. Lee-Nin knew she herself would die, but still held out hope that Sha-Kutan might return in time to save the girl and end the life of the man who so ruthlessly hunted her.

"Release the woman."

Lee-Nin's eyes sought the sound of the voice she at first mistook for one she knew well, only realizing it belonged to someone else when she saw the tall, dark-skinned woman in a long, black cloak standing at the edge of the clearing.

"They must die." The commander brandished his dagger at the mysterious woman. "Leave or I'll kill you as well."

"You will not kill me." The woman walked calmly toward Lee-Nin and the commander, spreading her arms wide. "You will run screaming."

Lee-Nin's head spun with pain and wonder as she watched the woman smile wide and begin to glow, a light that seemed to come from within and rapidly expand outward, a cascade of shimmering brilliance, a small sun set down in the forest night, whiter than any forge fire, its winged form taking shape and reaching out to...

Lee-Nin closed her eyes and held her arms above her face as she screamed, her voice lost to the shriek of the man above her. She heard the commander cry out in pain and stumble back from her as he rushed into the woods, his voice a blend of babbled words and animal moans. As the light gradually faded, Lee-Nin lowered her arms and opened her eyes. She saw the woman walking toward Sao-Tauna, drawing a sword from beneath her cloak.

"No." Lee-Nin's voice cracked as she tried to form thoughts and words to make sense of what her eyes beheld. The woman, the creature of light, had saved her only to now kill Sao-Tauna? For what purpose?

"I must." The woman looked sad as she angled the tip of the blade toward Sao-Tauna and raised the hilt to strike.

"Stand away from the girl."

Lee-Nin gulped back the sigh that came from hearing that voice. She turned, still dizzy from exposure to the woman's light and the impact of the commander's boot, seeing Sha-Kutan stride from the forest to stand opposite the fire from the woman.

“You know what she is.” The woman held the sword hovering in the air above Sao-Tauna’s chest.

“No one knows what she is.” Sha-Kutan’s eyes did not move from the woman and the sword.

“She is a danger beyond all imaginable dangers, and she must die.” Authority and conviction filled the woman’s words.

“She is but a girl, and she is under my protection.” Sha-Kutan’s voice boomed throughout the clearing.

“Do you seek to destroy this world as well?” The woman glared at Sha-Kutan. “You are ever the same.”

“I am not what you think, nor are we all that very different.” Sha-Kutan lowered his head slightly as he looked at the woman.

“Abandon your host now, and I will send you back alive.” The woman glanced down at Sao-Tauna. “Regardless, the girl must die.”

“No.”

Lee-Nin saw a glint of steel as Sha-Kutan leaned forward, his arm whip-like as it snapped out. The woman gasped, looking to see a knife hilt protruding from her shoulder. He must have hidden it in his hand at his waist, the fire flames blocking it from the woman’s view. As the woman yanked the blade from the flesh of her shoulder, Sha-Kutan pulled his sword free of its sheath and leapt across the fire. The woman jumped to meet him midair, their bodies and blades crashing together, their true natures exploding outward at the contact, a wall of winged shadow blossoming as a pinion of brilliance burst into being in opposition.

Lee-Nin crawled along the forest floor, dried pine needles digging into her palms as she sought to reach Sao-Tauna and pull her to safety. Sha-Kutan and the woman fought around and through the campfire, striking at each other with their swords even as their alter-beings of light and shadow battled above, the branches of the trees whirling in the maelstrom. The wind of that elemental conflict drove down the flames of the fire. The woman, impossibly strong even with a wounded shoulder, threw Sha-Kutan into the coals at their feet.

Lee-Nin grabbed Sao-Tauna by the wrist and pulled her back as she watched the woman withdraw a silver medallion from beneath her shirt. Sha-Kutan gasped at the sight of the medallion and rolled, pushing the woman away. As they stood, Sha-Kutan lunged, grabbing the woman around the waist and lifting her into the air. A roar of lightning against rock escaped his lungs as he hurled the woman across the clearing and into a tree. The trunk of the tree cracked beneath the impact of the woman’s body, the light winged creature above, tethered to her by a vaporous trail of brilliance, wavered under the impact, losing ground to the shadow-being it fought.

The woman rolled to her feet, screaming with a rage that terrified Lee-Nin and froze her as she pulled Sao-Tauna into the forest. Shaking with fear, she saw a shard of white lightning rent the night air above the woman. Looking down, she could see Sao-Tauna, eyes open wide in fear, her tiny finger extended toward the growing light-edged chasm pulling the woman from the

ground and into its swirling black maw. The woman screamed as she tumbled upwards, pulled by an invisible and irresistible force, the winged being of light collapsing back into her frame of flesh and bone as a whirlpool of blackness sucked at them.

“No!” Sha-Kutan rushed toward the woman, his shadow-self reemerging with his body as he grasped her arm in a massive hand, pulling at her with all his weight and strength — a kite tethered to a rock in a storm of wind and light and blackness. He turned to Lee-Nin and the girl as he struggled to hold the woman from disappearing into the darkness churning above them. “Sao-Tauna! Stop!”

Lee-Nin looked to see Sao-Tauna’s face constricted in confusion. Lee-Nin understood her dismay for she, too, did not know why Sha-Kutan attempted to save the woman that wished to kill them. Sao-Tauna bit her lip and lowered her finger. The woman dropped to the ground as the light riving the air beneath the trees faded away. Sha-Kutan released the woman’s arm, retrieved his sword from the ground, and held its tip to her chest.

The two stared at each other, their breath loud in the sudden quiet of the forest. Lee-Nin watched them, holding tight to Sao-Tauna, her mind spinning out of balance in an attempt to understand what had transpired and what now took place before her eyes. Sao-Tauna breathed heavily in fear, and Lee-Nin raised a hand to gently touch her shoulder. Sao-Tauna did not recoil from the touch, a fact that pleased Lee-Nin as she found the gesture as calming for herself as she intended it to be for the girl. A voice brought Lee-Nin’s eyes across what remained of the fire to where Sha-Kutan held the woman at bay with his blade.

“I do not understand.” The woman looked up to Sha-Kutan, her voice ragged.

“I told you, Ogtankaa, I am not what I appear.” Sha-Kutan stepped back slightly, but held the sword extended. “I am a willing host. I am not possessed. We are one.”

“How is that possible?” The woman frowned as she stood to her feet.

“Through great effort.” Sha-Kutan sounded weary. “Is your host willing?”

“Yes.” The woman, Ogtankaa, looked away briefly before returning her gaze to Sha-Kutan. “This one.”

“Then we are similar, if not the same,” Sha-Kutan said. The woman glared at him.

Lee-Nin looked between the two. Sha-Kutan spoke the truth. She sensed it. The two beings were alike, although opposite in nature. But what were they? Where did they come from? How had they entered this world?

“The girl is a danger to everyone and everything.” The woman glanced at Sao-Tauna.

A shiver of fear passed through Lee-Nin, more intense than any she had felt even in the presence of Sha-Kutan’s dark essence. The woman’s aspect of light did not mean she held less danger than his nature of shadow.

“No matter what she is, she is still a girl, still a sentient being, and still entitled to life.” Sha-Kutan lowered his blade as he looked to Sao-Tauna. “Look at her, Ogtankaa. Have you forgotten your purpose in being here? Do you not remember the oaths that have bound you to this world?”

“What she can do might break the seals once more and void the very reason of my being here all these years hunting you and the others.” The woman looked away from Sao-Tauna.

“You do not know what the girl is, or why she is, or what her future may hold,” Sha-Kutan said. “These are mysteries for her to discover. And I will protect her as she unravels the riddle of who and what she is.”

“Why would you do that?” The woman seemed genuinely confused.

“Because I was fortunate enough to find someone who helped give me the time to reveal who I was and what I could be.” Sha-Kutan sighed as he spoke. “We all deserve that. The girl. Me. You. Everyone.”

“I cannot let you go. You and I do not belong here.” The woman stepped closer to Sha-Kutan, but he did not raise his sword or retreat.

“This is your belief, and I believe you are wrong.” Sha-Kutan sheathed his sword in a single elegant motion, indicating with the action that he could withdraw it again even quicker. “We are following the pilgrims to the Forbidden Land. The girl is drawn to it. Come with us. Help me protect her. Protect them.”

He looked briefly at Lee-Nin. She sensed something odd in his expression. Concern? Contentment? A mixture of both?

“Swear an oath to protect her,” Sha-Kutan continued. “Help us discover the meaning of her mystery. And if, by that time, you are still not convinced that I belong here, I will go with you willingly.”

“No.”

That word also came from Sha-Kutan’s mouth. Lee-Nin watched as he looked away, seeming to argue with himself as she had seen him do so often, some internal dialog playing out in his mind. The shadow conversing with the man, she suspected. Which had spoken first, and which had replied in contention?

“That is my offer.” Sha-Kutan looked back to the woman, his voice firm.

“And if I refuse?” The woman pushed her shoulders back, standing to her full height.

“Sao-Tauna will send you somewhere far away and filled with darkness.”

Lee-Nin’s voice rang more loudly in the quiet of the clearing than she had expected. She pushed herself to her feet and pulled Sao-Tauna up to stand beside her. She glared at the woman. What bargain had Sha-Kutan made, and how did he think he could trust this Ogtankaa? The woman stared at her, and the muscles of her stomach tightened in response, but she did not look away. The woman’s gaze lowered to behold Sao-Tauna, her eyes narrowing as her face hardened. Lee-Nin looked down to see Sao-Tauna pointing her finger at the woman.

None of them spoke for a long time as the woman gazed at Sao-Tauna. She appeared to be weighing her options, not appreciating any of them. Maybe she, too, held an internal conversation. Lee-Nin counted her heartbeats in an effort to slow them as she waited for the woman to speak. Finally, the woman turned to look at Sha-Kutan, her chin raised slightly.

“I swear by the eternal light to protect the girl until she reveals her purpose and not to move against you until that time.” The woman raised her hands and lifted the metal chain holding the silver medallion from her head. She lowered the chain to coil it in her palm and handed the medallion to Sha-Kutan.

Sha-Kutan took the necklace and placed it over his head without ceremony. As the four stood in the wavering light of the remains of the campfire, Lee-Nin wondered how her life had become so unrecognizable. She had not imagined that she might step, in a single night, from a man's slave to the tutor to a tahn, but such a night had come to pass. Nor had she envisioned that she would need to flee the palace and hide as a fugitive to protect Sao-Tauna from being murdered by her own father's wardens, but this had transpired as well. She could never have conceived that she might stand in the middle of a forest at night with two beings from other realms, one of light and one of shadow, to bargain over the future of a child who could open doors between worlds, but there she stood.

She swallowed as she realized she could not fathom what might come next and could only assume that whatever happened would escalate the danger around her once more, taking her farther and farther from the safety she had always told herself she desired. The thought frightened her, but not as much as the realization that a part of her looked forward to the unknown future filled with danger, protecting Sao-Tauna, Sha-Kutan at her side, and the strange, dangerous woman of light traveling along beside them.

The laughter that cut through the silence brought the eyes of the other three to Lee-Nin's smiling face. One could not but laugh upon realizing the depths of one's madness.

"Don't stand around looking bored." Lee-Nin gestured to the forest. "I'll rebuild the fire while you find something to eat. Should be twice as easy with two of you."

Lee-Nin continued to laugh lightly as she gathered wood and stoked the coals, handing Sao-Tauna a stick to amuse herself with in the flames. Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa watched her a moment, before the woman muttered about supplies and led him through the forest toward the road. Lee-Nin threw another broken branch on the fire and watched the two beings fade into shadow, her laughter catching in her throat, her trembling hand reaching up to wipe a tear from her eye. The danger in her life had changed, but not lessened. She understood that she would need to work just as hard in different ways to keep Sao-Tauna and herself alive. She blinked as she realized that circle of protection now included Sha-Kutan. How odd to feel protective toward him now that she knew his true nature. Probably because his true nature resided in his actions rather than in the manner of his physical being.

She rebuilt the fire, straightened the camp, and sat down beside Sao-Tauna to await the return of Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa and whatever the future held.

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

“O GREAT one.

Preserver of all.

Wondrous provider.

Care for this poor soul.

Shelter and guide her to the Pure Lands.

Embrace her in your endless and bountiful love

Until I, too, am sheltered beneath the wings of your eternal grace.

Oanan Djen.”

Tin-Tsu wrapped his warm hands tightly around the ever-cooling fingers of his once bride. He sat at her bedside as he had for two days and nights, praying constantly for her recovery. While the shaft that punctured the flesh of her upper arm did little damage, slicing through more silk than skin, it had not taken long to realize that the arrowhead held a venomous poison. She collapsed from weakness only a few minutes after Tonken-Wu and his wardens rushed them out the back of the temple and into a small clerical room the priests used for ceremonial preparation.

“I am so sorry,” she had said to him, her eyes fluttering with confusion.

“All will be well,” he had promised her.

He had thought that promise easy to realize. He had prayed for salvation with a ceiling crashing down around him, and Ni-Kam-Djen shielded him. Surely his prayers could provide the cure to a single poisonous arrow.

As Rin-Lahee fell into unconsciousness, Tin-Tsu began praying. He had not ceased since that moment, only changing his tone and intention in the last hour as he reluctantly admitted that his bride’s cold body could not be revived, that her breath would not return, that she had passed from this world into the caring arms of The True God to live again in the Pure Lands.

He ceased his whispered prayer as he sat back on the stool beside the bed, still holding Rin-Lahee’s hand.

“I have failed you,” Tin-Tsu said aloud to the empty room.

The physician and his attendants had left Tin-Tsu to his funerary prayers after finally declaring Rin-Lahee to be dead. Her family had departed shortly thereafter, out of respect for the man who prayed beside their daughter for hour after hour as she died. Rin-Lahee had lasted far longer than anyone expected. At first, Tin-Tsu took this to be proof of the efficacy of his devotional prayer. As her skin turned darker and darker and her heartbeat more erratic, he

refused to admit that a miracle of grace could not save her. Even now, he did not wish to acknowledge his impotence in arresting her slow decline into a cold death. He took his only comfort in knowing that she had been unconscious throughout the ordeal, and that she had not suffered in any outward manner.

However, she had died, no matter the endless stream of prayers he offered up to his god. How could that be? How could his prayers move Ni-Kam-Djen to spare an entire hall of strangers from the falling stones of a collapsing ceiling yet not purify the blood of a single woman felled by a poisoned arrow? Only one answer came to him as he considered the question, but he did not want to confess its truth.

The failure rested with him, not The True God. He had changed since that earlier event. He had done what he had sworn not to do. While he had bent his oaths to assume the ascendancy, he had broken them to wed Rin-Lahee. He had listened to his councilors and his family and let them cloud his moral certainty. Ni-Kam-Djen would not answer his prayers, because he had abandoned his oaths and severed his tether to The True God. He had failed his bride, because he had failed his god in an attempt to appease those who wished to guide his ascendancy. By following a council of men rather than the counsel of his heart, of his god, he had distanced himself from that which might save him, might save the entire dominion.

"I have failed you, my bride, as I have failed my god." Tin-Tsu stood as he spoke. "I cannot reverse the fall that has allowed your death, but I can, in your name, correct the path I follow, and turn my feet back to the light and divine wisdom of Ni-Kam-Djen."

Tin-Tsu bent to kiss the forehead of the woman who would have been his wife. He had not loved her, had barely known her, but he had felt a strong kinship with her. Someone, like himself, thrust into a world of complications and dangers that their upbringing ill prepared them to face. He thought she would have made a magnificent consort and companion. As he stood up, he offered a silent promise that the tragedy of her death would not go unanswered.

He walked from Rin-Lahee's rooms and down the hall, two guards falling in behind him, leaving the attendants to reenter the room and prepare the body for the funeral ceremony. He strode the halls with an energy undaunted after days of wakeful prayer, leaving his guards struggling to keep up. He did not slow until he reached the door of his study, opening it to find Tonken-Wu, lit by lantern light, standing at attention by the desk, waiting for his return.

"How did you know I would not return to my sleeping chambers?" Tin-Tsu asked as he crossed the room and sat behind the wide polished frame of the desk.

Carved as a single piece from a massive poda tree some five hundred years prior, it held a dark stain more from age than oil. He had always admired it as a child, but never desired to sit behind it.

"I did not think you would wish to sleep yet, my zhan." Tonken-Wu did not relax his posture.

"You are correct in this." Tin-Tsu did not wish to sleep. He did not know what he wanted to do, but he could not imagine rest as a reward for his ignorance and error.

“My zhan, I wish to submit myself for discipline for my utter failure.” Tonken-Wu lowered his head as he pushed his shoulders back.

“You have not failed, Tonken-Wu.” Tin-Tsu sighed and placed his elbows on his desk, resting his chin in his fingers.

“The future consort is dead because of my deficiencies, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu frowned.

“Rin-Lahee is dead because of a murderer’s arrow and because I departed from the path I am meant to follow.” Tin-Tsu’s voice sounded weary in his own ears. “You, Tonken-Wu, saved my life.”

“I should have saved both your lives, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu raised his head, the frown on his face only deepening.

“You nearly did. The arrow only scratched her arm.” Tin-Tsu looked away from Tonken-Wu. The man had failed, but not through ignorance or incompetence, merely by being a second too slow. Compared to his own ineptitude, he could not hold the commander culpable.

“That was my error, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu’s eyes filled with anger clearly directed at himself. “When I pushed you and the future consort, I intended to shove you clear and suffer the arrow blow myself. I did not anticipate that you might not be the target of that arrow.”

“I do not understand.” Tin-Tsu narrowed his eyes at Tonken-Wu.

“It is simple, my zhan,” Tonken-Wu said. “The fact that the arrow struck the future consort in the arm closest to you indicates that it had been intended for her heart rather than your own.”

“Are you certain of this?” Tin-Tsu ground his jaw as he sat back in his chair.

“I cannot be entirely certain, my zhan, but I do not doubt my suspicions.” Tonken-Wu looked down again.

“Why would someone wish to kill Rin-Lahee?” Tin-Tsu looked up at the ceiling as he considered the question.

“The intention may have been to kill you both, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu looked ill as he raised his eyes to Tin-Tsu. “The murderer may have intended to strike her first and then you as you moved to protect her. I cannot speculate as to why, and I have begun to question the evidence that indicates who might be responsible.”

“I thought the body of the archer had been found?” Tin-Tsu leaned forward in his chair again.

“Yes, it has, my zhan,” Tonken-Wu said. “We found one of our own sentinels with a broken neck and a broken bow at the bottom of a ladder leading to the portal in the temple dome through which the late tahneff was targeted. We found a bag of Tanshen gold coins on his waist and a search of his quarters revealed a coded letter hidden behind a loose brick.”

“And the assembly of this evidence does not suggest to you the hand of the Tanshen zhan and his councilors?” Tin-Tsu put his chin in his fingers again, realizing as he did so how often he assumed that pose while sitting behind the desk his father and grandfather and ancient ancestors had commanded. He wondered if he did it to project the confidence he had often seen his father assume while in that chair.

“It appears more as evidence assembled rather than evidence discovered, my zhan,” Tonken-Wu said.

Tin-Tsu could not decide if he agreed with that assessment. It would suggest a hand more local behind the plot to kill either himself and Rin-Lahee or her alone. And who would benefit from such a strategy? One who wished for a more aggressive war footing with the Tanshen in the south? An event that would likely become inevitable with his death and a clear Tanshen connection. Even having survived the attempted murder, it would be nearly impossible for him to ignore the calls for vengeance from the council, not to mention Rin-Lahee’s family and the other tahns. He heard that call resounding loudly within his own mind. Those responsible for Rin-Lahee’s death must be held to account. But whose hand had truly loosed that arrow? The same person who sent those false wardens to kill him in his sleep, or the one who somehow set the ceiling of the Grand Hall to fall upon his head? Someone close to him, or someone far afield? Tigan Rhog-Kan, constantly calling for an escalation in the war, now standing to marry his sister, would certainly benefit from Rin-Lahee’s death and from Tin-Tsu’s demise. Or did that stand true? Had Tin-Tsu died before Rhog-Kan could marry Dju-Tesha, there might be calls from the high tahns for her to marry someone more suitable to the seat of royal consort. Would Rhog-Kan try to kill him simply to clear the throne for another?

Or did he misjudge Rhog-Kan? The man seemed genuinely to love Tin-Tsu’s sister. Might it be someone else in court? Kao-Rhee, for instance? Or another of the councilors or tigans or a high tahn with a lust for status? How to know? Hin-Waa’s blade of discrimination, perhaps. When little information existed upon which to base conjecture, the simplest answer usually proved correct.

Tin-Tsu realized he had been silent for too long. Tonken-Wu still looked at him, his eyes filled with unspoken worry. As he opened his mouth to speak, a knock came at the door.

“Enter.”

Tin-Tsu turned as an odd sensation flooded him, similar to the feeling one had when waking from a dream to find one’s self in yet another dream. Prime Tigan Rhog-Kan entered the room with Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee behind him.

“Please pardon the intrusion on your grief, my zhan, but we believe you will wish to hear immediately our sorrowful news.” Kao-Rhee looked to Tonken-Wu, clearly indicating his preference that the warden should leave.

“What?” Tin-Tsu did not bother forming more words and ignored the suggestion that Tonken-Wu depart. He could trust only one person not of his own blood, and he had no intention of turning that man from his council unnecessarily.

“I regret to inform you, my zhan, that our armies have been routed in all three battles by the Tanshen forces.” Tigan Rhog-Kan lowered his head, shame tinging his voice, leaving it raspy.

“All three? How?” Tin-Tsu placed his hands on the table to steady himself. He had not expected such dire news, nor the sense of dizziness and nausea that accompanied it.

“We are not entirely certain, my zhan.” Kao-Rhee dipped his head as he spoke.

“Tigan Yan-Lo captured some of the Tanshen soldiers as he retreated, my zhan.” Rhog-Kan looked up, his eyes angry. “They claim to use a new form of rakthorian steel. I have heard no rumors of such a metal. I fear we must consider the possibility that the Tanshen army has magnified their heresy by using The Sight to augment their weapons.”

“Is that even possible?” Tin-Tsu’s mind reeled at the notion. To break the covenant of Kam-Djen and use The Sight to win a battle, much less a war, undermined the very authority the Tanshen zhan claimed to fight to uphold.

“They could have hired seers from the heretic academy in Juparti or outcast priests from Punderra, my zhan,” Kao-Rhee said. “It is also possible that the rakthors truly do possess a superior steel. If so, we may be able to procure it or the manner of making it ourselves. I shall speak with our rakthorian ambassador.”

“Please do.” Tin-Tsu fell backward in his chair more forcefully than he intended, a consequence of both exhaustion and the feeling that his choices had been winnowed to but one. “Tigan Rhog-Kan, I wish to see your plans for a full scale invasion of the Tanshen heretics when I wake in the morning. Assume you may conscript every able-bodied man in the dominion.”

“Yes, my zhan.” Rhog-Kan bowed, his voice expressing the smile his face refused to display.

“I will assemble the council to meet at dawn, Your Ascendancy.” Kao-Rhee bowed as well.

“Good. You both have much to do, and I must rest before we meet again.” Tin-Tsu inclined his head as a gesture of dismissal. The tigan and the councilor both bowed and retreated from the room.

“What do you think, Tonken-Wu?” Tin-Tsu raised his eyes to his personal warden.

“I do not know what to think, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu seemed pained by the admission, as though he took it to be another form of failure.

“Then we are of one mind.” Tin-Tsu sighed. “You are dismissed. The guards will see me to my chambers.” When Tonken-Wu did not immediately move, Tin-Tsu knew the cause and spoke before the other man could bring words to his mouth. “And do not let me hear you again mention the words *discipline* or *failure* in reference to recent events or I will be displeased.”

“Yes, my zhan.” Tonken-Wu bowed and left the study.

Alone for the first time in days, Tin-Tsu realized how badly his body ached for sleep. How his mind craved the oblivion of dreams. He forced himself to sit up, not wishing to doze off in his chair. It would not set the proper tone for the coming war if the zhan were found asleep at his desk. The coming war. While he knew the war had never really abated, the new expansion he intended, that his councilors and tigans demanded, would be unlike those of the past. He could not allow the war to continue. He must see it to an end, even if that meant an end to his own ascendancy and the fall of his nation. The two dominions could not continue as they had for the last twenty years. The war needed a decisive conclusion. He realized that now. He also saw there would be no peaceful resolution with his southern counterpart. Not if they had truly broken the most sacred of strictures and used The Sight. With the death of Rin-Lahee still stinging at his

pride and his compassion, he understood the costs of abandoning Ni-Kam-Djen, and he would not do so again.

As he looked to the desk, his mind filled with questions about war and god, he noticed a letter that had escaped his attention. He picked it up. The red wax that sealed it bore the insignia of a Kam-Djen temple. Curious and cautious, he broke the waxen seal and opened the letter to read it by the flickering light of the lantern on his desk.

Your Ascendancy, please forgive this intrusion upon your most joyful wedding celebration. I wish to convey to you my heartfelt hopes for a long marriage of many children and many years of happiness. I hope you can accept these well wishes with the utter depth of sincerity they are intended. It has been many years since the golden days of our friendship, yet I have never wavered in my affection for you, nor my wish that you find the joy from life that you so deserve.

I did not have the opportunity to wish you well when I departed the palace to return home to my appointment after your coronation. I hope that you enjoyed our brief reunion as much as I did myself. My journey back was arduous and filled with rain, but the occasion to speak with you once again filled my heart with an enduring warmth.

May your reign be long and prosperous. I have no doubt you will rule wisely. You were ever the wisest man even in your youth. If you will forgive the impertinence, may I convey the advice I received from my master — Cling to your love of Ni-Kam-Djen and his grace, and all will be well.

Yours in unending devotion,

T

Tiang-Rhu.

He had not had time to think of the man in the bustle of wedding preparations and the pallor of gloom following Rin-Lahee's murder. He stood from his desk, holding the letter as he walked to the nearest window overlooking the gardens. In the sky, he saw the new star, burning a bright blood red, beckoning fallen heretics across the land to follow its light. The dream still came to him some nights, but he had learned to wake himself from it, to deny its power over his slumbering consciousness. He did not know the source of the dreams, but he would not let his heart be swayed from his god, regardless of their origin.

He did, however, find his heart influenced by the letter in his hands. It elicited in him an indescribable assuredness knowing that Tiang-Rhu held him in such high regard, providing a well of confidence he knew he could draw upon in the coming days. Days when he would need to know that someone believed in him, even as he doubted his abilities and his judgment.

He folded the letter and slipped it into his robes. He would carry it with him. And, if time and circumstances allowed, he would fashion a reply.

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

STILL AIR and still grass. A black nose pressed to tender leaves. Ondromead watched the deer as it rooted in the loam of the forest glade, sunlight making the fine dew-mist sparkle across its antlers — tiny gems alight with amber on its branched horns. The boy sat beside him at the base of a tree, eating an apple that had fallen to wake them not long ago. Ondromead ate an apple as well. A perfect break of the night's fast. Simple and delivered without fuss.

It had been two days since their ordeal in the Daeshen palace and not once had they needed to pass through a doorway, a fact for which he remained grateful. He did not know if the woman, Meraeu, had been responsible for him and Hashel getting separated, but he had spent much time thinking on her words. Did he put the boy at risk by keeping near him? Should he not find a family to look after the boy? It made some sense. But had he not provided for the boy perfectly well until Meraeu meddled in things? He gave the boy food and shelter and companionship and, he thought with pride, an education that few others could provide. And he cared for the boy. And the boy appeared to return his affection. The lad had certainly seemed excited upon being reunited in the palace.

The arrow that struck the deer through the neck and felled it to the ground startled him from his reverie. He blinked as the deer dropped sideways. He had seen a deer struck in the heart run for countless spans before collapsing to shivering death. This deer shook on the low, wet grass of the glade, its spinal cord severed by the arrow still sprouting from its fur. The familiar song trilled in the back of his mind, telling him to grab his writing materials, even as he sensed Hashel's hand upon his arm. He looked to see the boy passing him the satchel. He, too, had begun to perceive the small signals indicating that something important was about to transpire.

A tall woman in a leather vest and trousers exited the trees nearby, holding a bow in one hand and pulling a blade from her belt with the other. She had long, ash-gray hair, although her pale face held few wrinkles to mark her actual age. A strong jaw balanced her wide set blue eyes. Two men followed her.

"An excellent shot, my kimpadess," one of the men said as he held the neck of the deer for the woman.

"Thank you." The woman cut the deer's throat with practiced efficiency.

Ondromead recognized the title and the woman. He had seen her many times, but never in such a particular setting. Teyett Tujara Anravez, ruler of the Atheton Dominion. Those within

her inner circle referred to as *kimpadess*, the Easad equivalent of the Shen *zhan*, an aspirational title indicative of her desires to expand the limits of her rule to encompass the entire realm.

“Gut it and give the meat to the local village.” The kimpadess wiped her blade clean on the fur of the dead deer. “They looked like they could use a good meal.”

“Yes, my kimpadess.” The first man gestured to the second, and they started to haul the carcass toward a tree with low branches at the edge of the glade. As the kimpadess walked back in the direction she had come, another man emerged from the forest. He wore the finely embroidered vest of a ceremonial office around his large belly rather than hunting leathers.

Ondromead uncorked the bottle of ink and dipped the silver tip of the quill into the black liquid. He knew the words that would be exchanged constituted the reason for his presence there. He turned to Hashel, noticing that the boy held his half-eaten apple in one hand, far from his mouth as he watched the man and woman in the clearing. The boy knew not to make unnecessary noise.

“Councilor Landase, you look winded.” The kimpadess smiled at the man clutching his side.

“I bring news, my kimpadess.” The man paused and gasped for breath.

“Take your time, Landase. I would not want to rush you.” The kimpadess leaned on her bow, her posture belying her words, a gesture the councilor interpreted correctly.

“My apologies, my kimpadess.” The rotund councilor stood up straight, forcing his breath to slow. “The bride is dead and the Daeshen mount a full prosecution of the war.”

“Excellent.” The kimpadess smiled. “Twenty years of planning finally coming to fruition.”

“Yes, my kimpadess.” Councilor Landase bent slightly to allow a deeper breath. “Should we not, though, have striven to kill the zhan instead of the bride?”

“We tried that once, as you well remember.” The smile faded from the kimpadess’s lips. “And as it happens, I believe Tin-Tsu’s survival of his coronation will benefit us far more than his death. The Daeshen dominion now marches to all-out war with a wet leaf sitting on the throne rather than a powerful oak. When the two dominions have exhausted themselves, we will find little resistance to our invasion.”

“A wise strategy indeed, my kimpadess.” The councilor bowed his large head.

“Any word from my little carnival?”

“Late in coming, but we did receive one bird, my kimpadess,” Councilor Landase said. “The castle they are in is still under siege, but the Tanshen army has completely routed the Daeshen forces. He writes of the Tanshen swords slicing clean through the Daeshen blades.”

“Then the reports of our spies were accurate. They have abandoned their faith to use The Sight. Surprising it took so long for one of them to break.” The kimpadess turned to her councilor. “Is the guardian unable to assist the carnival?”

“Not in this instance, my kimpadess,” Councilor Landase frowned.

“Has he been informed yet of his mate’s demise?” The kimpadess hefted her bow to her shoulder and began walking back the way she had come.

“No, my kimpadess.” Councilor Landase nearly ran to keep up with the kimpadess’s long strides through the low grass. “I did not wish him to lose focus.”

“And the relic the mate attempted to retrieve?”

“Unfortunately, it has been returned to its custodians, my kimpadess.” The councilor wheezed with exertion and obvious fear at his mistress’s possible reaction.

“Most distressing.” The kimpadess glared at her councilor. “We will...” The kimpadess continued to speak as she entered the woods, but the trees and leaves muffled her voice to a whisper.

Ondromead finished writing and set aside the quill. He heard the crunch of an apple and looked to see Hashel happily finishing his fruit. He closed the book and slid it and the ink and the quill into the satchel.

“I suspect that will be all for the day.” Ondromead grabbed another apple from the ground. “I suggest we follow that dead deer to the village the kimpadess mentioned. I think we might find a good meal today.” He paused for a moment and scratched his beard, wondering if he should ask the question he found filling his mind. “Did you understand all that?”

Hashel looked up to him, his face suddenly painted with a hint of sadness. He nodded his head.

“Good.” Ondromead started the slow process of standing his weary bones upright. He had no real desire to explain the politics and history of the realm to the boy at such an hour. Maybe later, he would read him the entry from two decades past where the kimpadess plotted the means of starting a war between her neighboring nations with the goal of eventually ruling them both and beginning a new Great Dominion. It would make a good lesson, both for reading and for what he expected they would witness in the coming days.

Hashel rose quickly and helped Ondromead to his feet, the two walking across the sun-dappled clearing to follow the men with the deer. As they stepped around the pool of deer’s blood in the matted grass, Ondromead noted how much the pattern resembled the shape of a map of the Iron Realm he had once seen. While he preferred to think of that as coincidence, his many years told him it more likely stood as an omen. A foretelling he did not voice aloud to the boy. Some things were best kept unknowns until they needed to be seen and overheard and written down.

Instead, he threw his arm over Hashel’s shoulder and walked into the woods, following men who would lead them to a village and a meal of roast venison. He experienced an unfamiliar sensation in that moment, one he had heard described and spoken about, but never really apprehended. He smiled, realizing he felt joy, knowing it would not last, but certain for the first time in an unknowably long existence that he would feel it again.

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

THE SQUEAL of ropes pulling tight across rusted pulleys frightened seagulls from their perches across the rigging lines of the ships still moored to the docks near the small town. Junari stood on the aftcastle deck of the lead pilgrim ship watching the last bundles of cargo being lowered into the galley hold. It had taken longer than anticipated, delayed by weeks after the fire claimed one of the ships, but her fleet of vessels finally stood ready to depart. Six of the ships already floated in the bay, anchored as their captains awaited departure of the final two from the pier.

Junari looked around, pride at her people swelling in her heart. The pilgrims had worked tirelessly against great opposition to fulfill this dream. Her dream. The Great Goddess's dream. She waved at those gathered along the docks to wish them well. The late arrivals would begin work on new ships as they waited for the fleet to return. Knowing that their prophet and companions headed to the Forbidden Realm ahead of them left some of the pilgrims staying behind despondent, but most were filled with a passionate vigor to join the others as soon as possible.

She saw Raedalus crossing the gangplank with a bundle in his hands, something small wrapped in red cloth. She smiled at him as he climbed the stairs of the aftcastle. She could never have come so far in her journey without him. He provided an island of calm certainty in the constant storm of life lived in the Goddess's wake. She noted his lips quirk downward as he saw Bon-Tao standing, as ever these days, a few paces behind her. She did not know exactly what to make of the former warden commander, now sworn protector, any more than Raedalus. She only hoped both men would come to see themselves as complementing one another rather than as rivals.

"For you, Mother Shepherd." Raedalus extended his arms with the object swaddled in crimson silk as he stepped before her and bowed.

"A gift?" Junari held the package in her hands, looking down in curiosity.

"An offering to you and the Goddess Moaratana to commemorate this momentous day." Raedalus bowed again, his eyes flicking ever so quickly to Bon-Tao.

Junari pulled away layers of blood red silk to reveal the equally deep red cover of a leather-bound book. She ran her fingers over the words impressed into the flesh of the cover — [*The Red Book of Revelations*](#). She opened it and read the first lines of text, recognizing them immediately. Her words. The words of the Goddess delivered to her in nights of trance and reverie.

“Raedalus, this is...” Her eyes welled with tears as her voice broke in mid-speech.

“There are twelve of them.” Raedalus smiled, obviously pleased his gift touched her so deeply. “One for every ship. And four left here with the pilgrims. I found a printer in the city who would make them in secret.”

“You reordered the revelations by length.” Junari flipped through the pages, seeing the wisdom of applying that structure, how it tied together what had once seemed discordant and unrelated to reveal a symmetry of thought and intention.

“It was Taksati’s idea.” Raedalus nodded to Taksati where she stood near the back railing of the deck.

“Very wise.” Junari smiled at Taksati and closed the book. It felt good to know that the two had been involved in the project together in some way. The two she depended upon most.

“A fortunate guess.” Taksati shrugged, self-effacing as usual.

“Kuth-Von comes.” Bon-Tao stepped forward to point at the docks.

Junari did not understand the importance of the interruption until she saw the line of men and women trailing behind the city elder, chains binding their hands as soldiers escorted them on each side. She guessed at least a hundred men and women followed Kuth-Von to her ship. The city elder crossed the gangplank and made his way up to her on the aftcastle. The bound men and women, looking ill-kempt and poorly fed, shuffled in their chains on the docks as the soldiers kept the curious pilgrims from approaching.

“Greetings, prophet.” Kuth-Von said in Shen as he stepped onto the upper deck and bowed.

“What is this, Kuth-Von?” Junari looked from the man to the people, the prisoners he had brought with him.

“This is the fulfillment of your bargain.” Kuth-Von gestured toward the docks.

“Make yourself plain, Kuth-Von.” Junari held tightly to the book still in her hands as she assumed the tone and bearing of command. She had found that voice and stature far easier to assume in the preceding weeks, as well as a much improved facility with the Shen language.

“You agreed, as part of the bargain that gave you your ships, to take all the heretics in Tanjii with you upon your departure.” Kuth-Von’s tone of mild condescension annoyed her even more than his smile.

“Why are my pilgrims in chains?” A heat burned in Junari’s gut at the thought of her pilgrims suffering privation in the prisons of Tanjii.

“They are in chains because, although they are heretics, they are not your pilgrims.” Kuth-Von pointed to the docks once more. “These are Tot Gioth heretics, men and women who have taken up the heathen faith of the Atheton Dominion. And they are here to be loaded upon your ships.”

Junari looked at the ragged line of chained prisoners, her fire of anger snuffed out by the indigence that accompanied the knowledge of losing a game of koris one thought had been all but won. Tot Gioth heretics aboard her ships. She would need to expel pilgrims from the vessels just to make room for them. And who knew the trouble they might cause. Did she confine them

below decks or give them leave to plot mutiny in the middle of the ocean? Complications she had not anticipated any more than Kuth-Von's duplicity.

"Bring them aboard." She turned to Raedalus and Bon-Tao.

"Mother Shepherd?" Raedalus frowned as he looked to the congregation of Tot Gioth believers in chains.

"We will figure out how to deal with them once we are at sea." The tone of her voice cut off any possible discussion. She would not let Kuth-Von suggest that she had not fulfilled her side of the bargain.

"I might recommend tossing them overboard once clear of the harbor." Kuth-Von looked out to the ocean horizon.

"Why not simply kill them yourself?" Junari stared at the man, keeping her face calm as her mind tumbled with confusion.

"Public executions of these heretics stoke the fires of the more fervent among my city." The smile finally left Kuth-Von's lips. "The last time we executed a group of Tot Gioth heretics, it started a month-long wave of fighting between the Zatolin and Ketolin sects as they sought to continue the *purification*, as they put it. This solves my problem by making it yours."

"Then I will find a way to turn your problem into a beneficial solution." Junari tried to sound optimistic but suspected her words rang with the apprehension she felt.

"You have my best wishes in that endeavor and in your journey." Kuth-Von smiled once more. "May you find what you seek, and may all your pilgrims swiftly follow you."

Kuth-Von bowed and turned, climbing down the steps of the ship before Junari had time to reply. She realized it to be for the best, as she had no adequate rejoinder, nor any idea of what to do with her new prisoners. She let Raedalus and Bon-Tao deal with getting the Tot Gioth believers aboard and sent Taksati to either find a way to accommodate them, or select pilgrims to displace in order to make room for them. The ships could only carry so much food and water, and she could not risk a shortage because of unexpected passengers.

It took a few extra hours to deal with the unwilling pilgrims, but finally, near sunset, Junari stood on the forecastle of the same ship, newly named *The Dragon Star*, watching with Raedalus, Taksati, and Bon-Tao as the Goddess's celestial beacon came out to guide them toward their destiny. A wave of joy at her accomplishment passed through her. As it did so, she silently thanked all those who had helped bring the pilgrimage to this point: Raedalus, Taksati, Bon-Tao, all the pilgrims aboard, all the pilgrims left behind at the town, and all the pilgrims still marching across the Iron Realm in search of the goddess they dreamed about each night.

She had fashioned herself into a vessel for the Great Goddess, as had they all. They would part the waves of the Zha Ocean and find the temple of the Forbidden Realm and raise it once more to the glory of Moaratana. And she would do whatever might be necessary to see the dream they all shared made real.

CODA



A CLOUD-OCCLUDED sun burns in hazy radiance above the water and rock and sand and trees of an unnamed island. Three figures stand among vegetative shadows watching four others as they row small boats toward four ships floating beyond the shore.

It is a great sadness that we come to this, the first of three thinks. Instigating that which we have spent millennia coercing our wards to avoid.

And a great oddity that a forged record of that very real and terrible event should be the catalyst to action, the second agrees.

Yet without that action, without our intervention, there is a greater danger of that event being repeated, the third adds.

As the four small boats make farther into the waters toward the larger vessels, the three figures step from the darkness of the trees into the pale midday light.

Each are alike — four legs bending outward from beneath round bodies covered in a thin sheen of shimmering amethyst-tinted hair. Two elbowed arms thrust from both sides of each body, all four ending in a palm of four multi-jointed digits that rest calmly while intertwined in pairs. A round appendage that is more neck than head rises above each body with four eyes set in a square around a round mouth with narrow teeth. Four fur-tinged holes for smelling and hearing sit equidistant around the circumference of each head.

The three urris stare westward, their twelve eyes fixed on the unsighted shores of the Iron Realm beyond the horizon.

The urris speak, their minds now melded in a single voice of three distinct pitches.

The humans must not be allowed to rebuild the temple and shatter the seals that separate the spheres of existence...

For if the rift between realms is once more rent open, it will release unknowable terror...

And unleash beings of far greater power than even that held by our ancient ancestral collective, which nearly destroyed this world.

Or those dark beings loosed by the humans who nearly remade this world into 'The shadow realm. A land of pestilent darkness infested with vile creatures of living shadow.'

The apostate's words.

The companion's words.

True words that warn us of what awaits should we fail.

The three urris turn to each other, their wide, lipless mouths ever still in their dispassionate discourse.

With only three of us remaining, we will be fortunate enough to stop the ships that now sail to the Realm of Repentance, and we cannot hope to stop them all...

*Nor the force that guides and aids them and which grows ever more powerful in the world...
Yet this is the only path we can ply to save them all, or what will remain of them.*

One thought is silently spoken among three minds as the urris rotate their heads to watch the four ships unfurl their sails against the wind.

These four must lead their respective nations to war against the Iron Realm, or the world once more will be shattered in chaos and death.

*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 review at [Amazon US](#) or [Amazon UK](#). Even a few words would be helpful.*

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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.

Raedralus — 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.

Jadaloo — 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

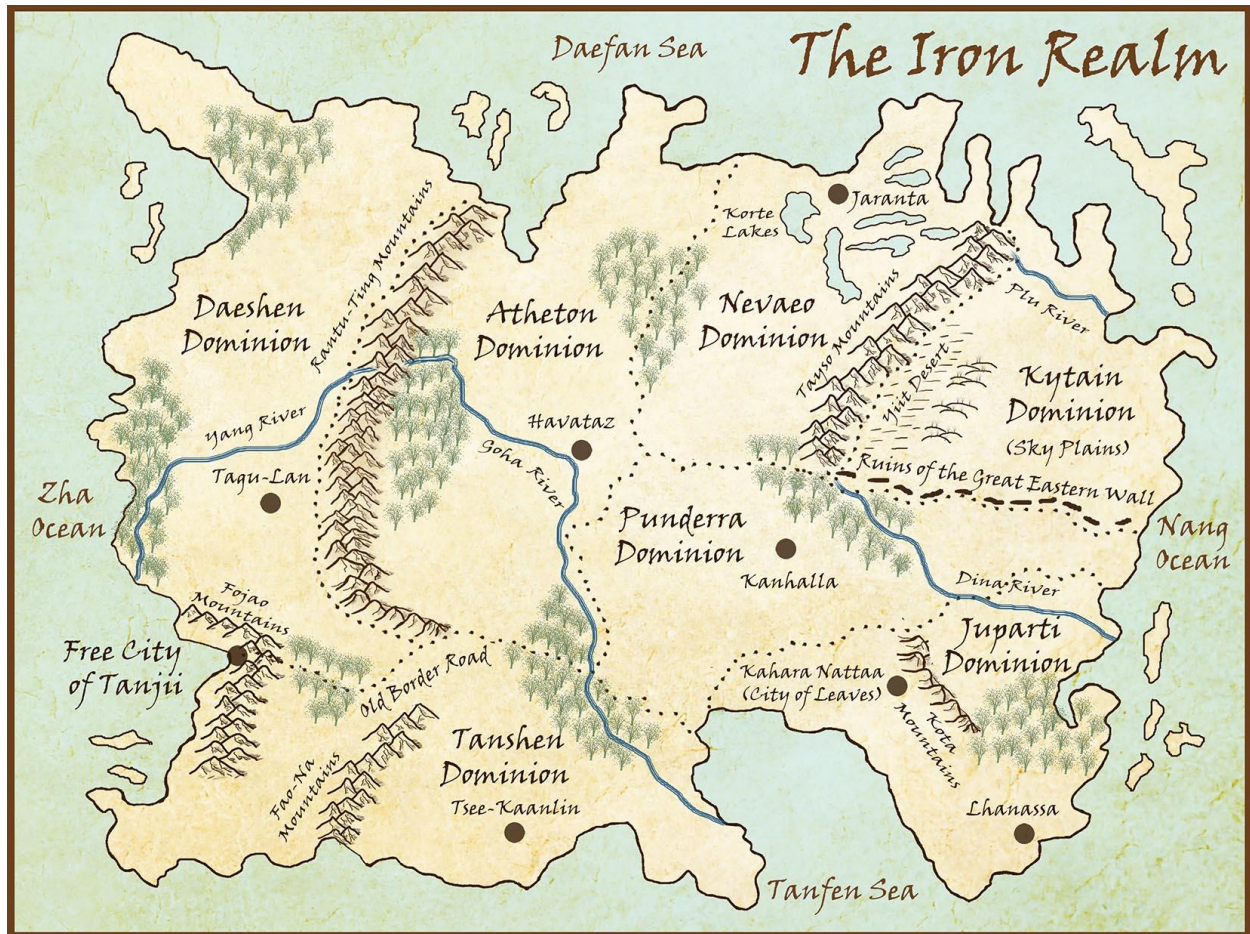
Ondromead — An ageless old man who has awoken every day for thousands of years in a different place in the world compelled to witness certain events and record them in a black book with endless pages.

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.

MAPS

THE IRON REALM



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ONAIA



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AN ONAIA GAZETTEER



Excerpts from the Travel Journal of Wen Dan Yoth, Elder Ambassador of the Yutan Great Pod.

THE IRON REALM

Indigenous Name: Various

Capital: Various state capitals (see below).

Geography: Forests, plains, mountains, and one small desert.

Trade: Worked metals, ores, grains, spices, herbs.

Peoples: Humans. A hairless breed of middling height that may be a distant, inferior cousin to yutans. A violent people prone to wars and conflict.

Government: Various depending on the dominion (see below).

Language: Three primary languages: Shen, Easad, and Mumtiba.

Religion: Various (see below).

The Sight: Various (see below).

Impressions: “A varied land supporting a diverse people. My first impression of the Iron Realm upon reading of its history of wars and conflicts is a wave of gratitude to the urris for enforcing The Pact and keeping such barbarous people from overwhelming the whole of Onaia. Upon spending years among them, I have not changed this opinion. However, as surely as the humans love war and seeking dominance over each other, they also love their art, architecture, music, poetry, and wildly spiced foods. They are an immature but passionate people, both dangerous and beautiful.”

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THE DAESHEN DOMINION

Capital: Tagu-Lan

Geography: A western coast along the Zha Ocean with farmland, plains, and forests that run eastward to the Rantu-Ting Mountains on the Atheton border.

Trade: Wheat, corn, barley, rye, metals, spices, rare gems.

Peoples: Predominantly Heevin (brown skin, flat noses, dark hair, brown eyes) with some Tollith (brown skin, wide noses, dark hair, brown eyes).

Government: Hereditary monarchy currently ruled by Zhan Kon Tin-Tsu.

Language: Shen — a language shared with the neighboring Tanshen Dominion.

Religion: Kam-Djen. The people worship the god they call Ni-Kam Djen (The True God). They follow the teachings of nine prophets and believe that a savior will arise to usher in the end of the world. They also believe the world has ended many times and a savior has always arisen. The northern Daeshen Dominion follows the Ketolin sect that believes priests must intercede in prayer.

The Sight: Banned as a sacrilegious affront to their god Ni-Kam-Djen.

Impressions: “My time in the Daeshen Palace lasted little more than a year, but I took from those hearty people a lifelong love of fried foods, dry red wines, and the human game of koris. I also departed with an unending bewilderment that two nations, two peoples, might hold such a deep rooted and long lived animosity toward one another over the most minor of theological differences.”

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THE TANSHEN DOMINION

Capital: Tsee-Kaanlin

Geography: Possessed of a western coast along the Zha Ocean and a southern coast along the Tanfan Sea with farmland, plains, and forests in between.

Trade: Wheat, corn, barley, rye, metals, spices, and rare gems.

Peoples: Predominantly Tollith (brown skin, wide noses, dark hair, brown eyes) with some Heevin (brown skin, flat noses, dark hair, brown eyes).

Government: Hereditary monarchy currently ruled by Zhan Taujin Letan-Nin.

Language: Shen — a language shared with the neighboring Daeshen Dominion.

Religion: Kam-Djen. The people worship the god they call Ni-Kam Djen (The True God). They follow the teachings of nine prophets and believe that a savior will arise to usher in the end of the world. They also believe the world has ended many times and a savior has always arisen. The southern Tanshen Dominion follows the Zatolin sect that believes that all worshipers may pray to The True God.

The Sight: Banned as a sacrilegious affront to their god Ni-Kam-Djen.

Impressions: “Like their northern brethren, with whom they most frequently and bloodily quarrel, the Tanshen welcome foreignness with a reserved enthusiasm, treating me both as potential ally and possible foe, all while attempting to feed me so frequently that I began to suspect they might be fattening me for some long lost sacrificial rite to appease their strident god.”

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THE PUNDERRA DOMINION

Capital: Kanhalla

Geography: Forests, plains, and wetlands.

Trade: Rice, spices, silks, cotton, and fruits.

Peoples: A mix of human peoples. Lindosh (dark skin, narrow noses, and brown eyes), Wandis (dark skin, wide noses, brown eyes), Tollith (brown skin, wide noses, dark hair, brown eyes), Heevin (brown skin, flat noses, dark hair, and brown eyes), Naotis (light skin, narrow noses, and various hair and eye colors), Gaotos (light skin, wide noses, wide eyes, dark hair, brown eyes).

Government: Senate of secular leaders, both male and female, elected by the land-owning families.

Language: Mumtiba — a language shared with the neighboring Juparti Dominion.

Religion: Open to all faiths but dominated by Kethism — a syncretic religion that arose as a reaction to the religious wars of the past. The Keth follow the teachings of a man named Keth, who legend says lived at the Origin Time. Worshipers believe in taking what they call *the heart of all faiths*. They believe all the gods are real, all the gods can help or harm, and prayers can be made to any and all gods, or to none. While there are leaders, male and female, who are elected to local Keth councils, there are no priests as it is largely a householder faith.

The Sight: Keth councils exist mostly to control the use of The Sight. Only those who join the local Sight Councils can openly practice The Sight, making it rare but not uncommon.

Impressions: “Curiously, the dominion with the most variety of faiths and ethnicities is beset by the least religious and ethnic strife. Possibly this is due to Punderra, and the city of Kanhalla in particular, being the seat of the first human settlement in that age scholars of all realms refer to as the Origin Time. During my stay in this dominion, I participated in ceremonies from all the available faiths, partaking in their rites and rituals, studying their scriptures, and even joining them in prayer. It did not shake my yutan faith, but it did give me an appreciation for what the Keth call *The Truth Behind the Many Truths*.”

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THE JUPARTI DOMINION

Capital: Tajana

Geography: Forests, plains, wetlands, a southern coastline along the Tanfan Sea.

Trade: Rice, spices, silks, cotton, fruits, and items manipulated through The Sight.

Peoples: A mix of human peoples. Lindosh (dark skin, narrow noses, and brown eyes), Wandis (dark skin, wide noses, brown eyes), Tollith (brown skin, wide noses, dark hair, brown eyes), Heevin (brown skin, flat noses, dark hair, and brown eyes), Naotis (light skin, narrow noses, and various hair and eye colors), Gaotos (light skin, wide noses, wide eyes, dark hair, brown eyes).

Government: A council of priests, merchants, warriors, laborers, nobles, and seers/academics. Council members are elected by their peers. There are twelve council members, two from each group — one male and one female apiece.

Language: Mumtiba — a language shared with the neighboring Punderra Dominion.

Religion: Pashism. Pashists worship many gods. There are fifty-four gods and fifty-four goddesses in the primary pantheon. They have rituals that are for the home as well as for the temple. Religion is something Pashists practice on a daily basis all day long. There are prayers for rising, eating, working, resting, playing, cooking, at sunset, before sleep, and so on. There are male and female priests of equal standing in a wide network of temples.

The Sight: There is a strong secular tradition of cultivating The Sight in Juparti. It is home to the Academy of Sight, the only institution established for the training and study of The Sight in the whole of the Iron Realm, and second in Onaia (the first being the yutan Sight Pod of the Sky Realm).

Impressions: “My first day in a Juparti market, I found myself overwhelmed by the swirl of colors and smells and sounds, as though a battle were being fought, not between armed opponents, but between factions of bakers and butchers and farmers and spicers and herbalists and weavers and street poets, and the very customers themselves, jostling to pay or haggling over the price of some item, shouting, laughing, singing, being so very much alive. The contrast to the staid yutan shops of my youth shook me, making me at once nostalgic for the calm of yutan ways, and at the same time, filling me with a vibrancy that I now miss whenever I frequent a market of any kind elsewhere, for none can compare with the bubbling bazaars of Juparti.”

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THE ATHETON DOMINION

Capital: Tagiciora

Geography: Farmland and forests bordered with the Rantu-Ting Mountains on its eastern border, a northern coastline along the Daefan Sea, and a large forest along its eastern border.

Trade: Rare metals, worked metals, grains, wines, dried fruits, and wool.

Peoples: Predominantly Tollith (brown skin, wide noses, dark hair, brown eyes), Heevin (brown skin, flat noses, dark hair, and brown eyes), and Naotis (light skin, narrow noses, and various hair and eye colors).

Government: A theocratic monarchy. A council of priests select a ruler to serve for life. While not officially so, this often proves to be a hereditary position with a single family dominating the throne for generations. The current ruler is Teyett Tujara Anravez.

Language: Easad — a language shared with the neighboring Nevaeo Dominion.

Religion: Tot Gioth — a faith that worships the goddess Nag Mot Gioth (Mother Creator) and Nag Pat Gioth (Father Destroyer), the spousal gods said to rule the universe in a cycle of birth

and death. While initially a splinter sect of Kam-Djen, the faith has evolved into an entirely new religion, one that accepts female priests.

The Sight: Allowed but not cultivated outside the halls of the ruling palace where it is used to further the aims of the throne. All those who practice The Sight outside of the palace must register with the throne's administrators.

Impressions: "My travels through Atheton, journeying in the company of a roaming carnival, a collection of actors and attractions who wander the entire realm, left me with the impression of a cold dominion. Not for the intemperate nature of the land, although the weather did often dip below freezing that autumn, but rather from the tone and tenor of the people, who tended to express themselves in private with the same reserve they evidenced in the public company of an ambassador from a far-off realm."

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THE NEVAEO DOMINION

Capital: Janata

Geography: A region of farmland, numerous lakes, and dense forests with the Goha Tayso Mountains on its eastern border.

Trade: Grains, wines, cotton, rare nuts, worked metals, and metal ores.

Peoples: Predominantly Lindosh (dark skin, narrow noses, and brown eyes) and Wandis (dark skin, wide noses, brown eyes).

Government: A clerical theocracy where the priesthood elects eight priests to sit on the Table of Elders for a period of twenty years. These elders then choose one among them every five years to sit at the head of the Table of Elders.

Language: Easad — a language shared with the neighboring Atheton Dominion.

Religion: Tot Gioth — a faith that worships the Goddess Nag Mot Gioth (Mother Creator) and Nag Pat Gioth (Father Destroyer), the spousal gods said to rule the universe in a cycle of birth and death. While initially a splinter sect of Kam-Djen, the faith has evolved into an entirely new religion, one that accepts female priests.

The Sight: The Sight is tolerated but not cultivated within the clerical hierarchy. It is allowed for healing and aiding in farming outside the clerical halls, but strictly forbidden for any other purpose.

Impressions: "Oddly, as a sister nation to the neighboring Atheton Dominion with whom they share a common language, if not a common ethnic stock, the Nevaeo people possess a warmer, more friendly disposition. When traveling between two consulate outposts, I often stayed not in inns along the road, but in the homes of individual families I had previously met along the route. These nights eating at short tables and talking late into the night before small hearths were some of the best moments of my time in the Iron Realm and are among the memories I cherish most from my ambassadorial days."

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THE KYTAIN DOMINION

Capital: None

Geography: A western desert at the edge of the Tayso Mountains gives way to wide plains that run to the eastern shores of the Nang Ocean and the northern shores of the Daefan Sea. The southern border with Juparti displays the ruins of a great wall built by Zhan Phan-Raa prior to the beginning of the First Great Dominion to contain the Kytain tribes.

Trade: None. The Kytain peoples do not trade.

Peoples: A roughly even mix of Naotis (light skin, narrow noses, and various hair and eye colors) and Gaotos (light skin, wide noses, wide eyes, dark hair, brown eyes).

Government: Tribal male chieftains and councils of men with separate women's circles. The men's councils deal with external issues such as war between tribes, and the women's circles deal with internal issues such as delivering justice to those who break the tribe's codes of behavior. The various tribal councils and circles meet in a great congress of all tribes once every five years.

Language: Kytain.

Religion: The Kytain people worship a limited pantheon of nature gods and spirits based on the elements and the natural world with a strong tradition of ancestor veneration.

The Sight: Widespread but generally confined to tribal seers.

Impressions: "Among all the peoples of the Iron Realm, and indeed all the peoples of Onaia, I believe I share the deepest kinship with the Kytain tribes of the land they call The Sky Plains. They are a people who look to the past as a means of living the present and preparing for the future. They are more warlike than my ancient yutan ancestors, but engender a similar spirit of freedom and the desire to live in harmony with nature."

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TANJII – FREE CITY

Capital: Tanjii (an independent city)

Geography: A coastal city on the shores of the Zha Ocean nestled in the valley between two mountains.

Trade: A port city through which trade from various realms flows from the dominions of the Iron Realm.

Peoples: A roughly even mix of Tollith (brown skin, wide noses, dark hair, brown eyes) with some Heevin (brown skin, flat noses, dark hair, brown eyes).

Government: Ruled by a Circle of Elders — nine people selected by lottery every ten years from the most powerful noble houses and merchant families.

Language: Shen.

Religion: Both Zatolin and Ketolin sects of the Kam-Djen faith maintain an uneasy balance of power among the city's faithful.

The Sight: Banned as a sacrilegious affront to their god Ni-Kam-Djen.

Impressions: “The humans are a most mercantile people, surpassed only by the rakthor, and the people of the free city of Tanjii are the most trade and profit conscious of all those I encountered in my many years in the Iron Realm. This is no doubt a result of relying nearly exclusively on the import and export of goods through their well-situated docks. By offering docking fees rather than onerous tariffs, and boasting direct access to The Old Border Road, along which goods can travel to four of the seven dominions of the realm, the city has become a hub of commerce renown throughout Onaia. In the months I spent there visiting a fellow rakthor ambassador, I saw how delicately the city elders had learned to balance the Kam-Djen sects of Zatolin and Ketolin, the factions of nobles and merchants, the districts demarcating wealth and poverty, and the interests of the city dwellers and the farmers of the valley. It showed a skill of governing akin to an acrobat spinning shells on sticks atop a moving wagon — a sight I saw once in a palace wedding celebration in Juparti.”

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THE SUN REALM

Indigenous Name: Ranikttak

Capital: Taknaht

Geography: A land of central desert surrounded by coastal plains, thick forests, and occasional jungles.

Trade: Metals, rare spices and herbs, and mechanical devices.

Peoples: The rakthors — a reptile-like people of three breeds, one significantly shorter than the others. An unsentimental people interested in commerce and philosophical pursuits.

Government: A series of elected committees for six cantons, each sending representatives to the Central Governing Committee of the entire realm every eight years. There are also other elected offices at local levels of governance, with candidates required to pass a series of exams before standing for office.

Language: There is a single rakthorian language with very little digression of dialect.

Religion: None. The rakthors hold no belief in gods or unseen powers.

The Sight: Nonexistent or nearly so. Few rakthors have ever displayed any ability to cultivate or utilize The Sight.

Impressions: “The realm of Ranikttak, as the rakthors call it, is a largely barren land mass with vast, inhospitable deserts in the interior, a fitting place for a people who many yutan would refer

to as inhospitable and barren of common personal understanding. However, as the continent of the Sun Realm is encircled by often lush forests and verdant grazing land, so, too, do the rakthors possess similar inner, rather than outer, companionable natures. However, like those coastal vegetative wilds, this inner rakthorian conviviality must be cultivated in order to produce a setting suitable for conversational colonization. Rakthors are creatures of rationality rather than feeling, but as such, they can learn to reason their way, through observation, to an approximate understanding of the way the other peoples of Onaia experience life and express themselves. I have witnessed this myself.”

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THE SKY REALM

Indigenous Name: Kratish Tavan

Capital: None. Gerhanach is the largest city.

Geography: Mountains and a few valleys. Cold and glacial with a short summer.

Trade: The Yutans trade in small metal and hand-worked items, but they do not travel and do not often mix with the peoples of other realms.

Peoples: Yutan. A tall, pale people. Possible distant, superior cousins to the humans. Peaceful and culturally sophisticated.

Government: Pods of ten to one hundred yutans collectively decide local issues and select representatives to regional pods, who then select members to the Great Pod.

Language: There are three yutan languages, all variations of the same ancient tongue.

Religion: Yutans worship the universe as the manifestation of a divine force that does not act in the world. The Aasho sect views this divine being as having three aspects: *Onn* the creative force, *Tam* the life sustaining force, and *Kiv* the force of destruction that turns the circle of existence back to Onn and creation.

The Sight: The gift of The Sight is common among the yutan people and cultivated by many for productive and healing purposes.

Impressions: “I departed my home realm for the first time at the turn of my nineteenth year, working as a deckhand on a human merchant vessel bound for the shores the Wood Realm. As there are few yutan trade ships, I found it easier to find working passage with humans, a people who I found an affinity for in their natural inclination to migrate, to see what lay beyond the next mountain, or across the sea. Possibly this explains why, after my eventual tutelage in the ambassadorial pods, I requested a posting in the Iron Realm, a land of people similar enough to my own that we might be related by some distant ancestor, but different in ways that, to this very day, challenge my notion of what it means to be a member of a civilized society.”

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THE STONE REALM

Indigenous Name: Rarag Shak

Capital: None.

Geography: Mountains, high plateaus, and a region known as the Stone Desert.

Trade: Little to no trade. Raw ore for various metals.

Peoples: The roaggs — a large, bear-like people said to have been created by Dark Seers in the Iron Realm to serve as warriors for a Punderrese rhegan. Freed by the urris and given the Stone Realm as a homeland. They are a largely peaceful people seemingly uninterested in the trappings of civilization.

Government: The roaggs live in a network of small tribes whose leaders occasionally hold special joint meetings to deal with issues affecting the entire realm.

Language: There is one roagg language, but there are numerous dialects that often leave speakers from one region unable to understand those from another.

Religion: The roaggs believe that all things possess a spirit that is transformed into another state of being upon death or destruction. Thus, a flower might become a rock, which might become a stag, which might become a roagg.

The Sight: Infrequent, but not uncommon. While not incapable of using The Sight, few roaggs seem interested in doing so, largely due to the stigma it carries from their creation as a people in servitude.

Impressions: “I participated once in a roagg hunt, throwing my spear to fell a stag, singing the traditional hunting song as I helped my hosts dress the carcass, sharing in the meat roasted over a spit above an open fire, weeping at the ancient poems of their people’s betrayal at the hands of the sheetoo (the humans), and laughing at the young cubs sneaking to the fire late at night to spy on the strange outlander keeping their parents awake into the darkest hours of the night. I think of that evening whenever I see a deer in the distance, a memory calling to me across time and seas and languages.”

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THE WOOD REALM

Indigenous Name: Orne Klaad

Capital: Winthaal

Geography: Dense forests, wet jungles, and wide savannahs.

Trade: Rare lumbers, spices, herbs, fruits, silks, worked metal, and jewelry.

Peoples: The wyrins — a diminutive people with thick fur and animal-like faces. An industrious people who live in harmony with their natural surroundings, although prone to frequent wars over what would seem to be plentiful resources.

Government: No central governing body. Various forms of government, from collective tribes to hereditary local monarchies, all dominating various regions and frequently in martial conflict with one another.

Language: The wyrins have numerous languages that are all related, each with various dialects that are largely regional.

Religion: The wyrins worship the spirits of their ancestors in request for guidance and protection from powerful, dangerous spirits and beings.

The Sight: There are seers in every wyrin community. The skill is not uncommon and often used for violence in group combat.

Impressions: “While physically the smallest of the peoples of Onaia, the wyrins are a people of large feelings and great passions. To argue with a wyrin is to set oneself to scaling an impossibly high cliff with the hope of falling as one’s only comfort. As passionate as they are about their opinions, which often seem to be the cause of their intra-tribal conflicts, they are the most exceptional and generous hosts. So much so that my presence once constituted the rationale for an impromptu truce between two villages battling over water rights to a woodland stream. So concerned were the wyrins with providing for their guest that they suspended their fighting until I passed on to the next cluster of villages.”

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THE ICE REALM

Indigenous Name: None

Capital: None

Geography: Mountains and wide plains of ice and deep snow.

Trade: None

Peoples: Uninhabited.

Government: None

Language: None

Religion: None

The Sight: None

Impressions: “I am one of the few yutans, and the only one living, who can claim to have stepped upon the snow packed grounds of the Ice Realm. I cannot, however, claim to have journeyed there through intent. A trading vessel I purchased passage aboard suffered damage in a storm and ran aground on the ice and rock coastline of that realm. We stayed there a week, and while the crew made repairs, I took the opportunity to document the geography and wildlife, such as it was, to preserve a record of the least hospitable of all continents. I learned later, to my mild embarrassment, that several contingents of rakthor and human explorers had already fully documented the realm, one expedition even going so far as to trek across its interior. I found myself exceptionally jealous at that news.”

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THE FORBIDDEN REALM

Indigenous Name: Unknown

Capital: Unknown

Geography: Unknown

Trade: None

Peoples: Unknown. Possibly the urris, although little to nothing is known about them.

Government: Unknown

Language: Unknown

Religion: Unknown

The Sight: Unknown

Impressions: “It is a significant sadness to me that the realm I desire to visit the most is the one that is denied me, as it has been denied to all others before me, by a pact with a people who have remained largely unseen since they appeared to apparently assist the yutans and other peoples in colonizing their respective realms at the Origin Time so many thousands of years ago. I dream of what it would be like to speak with an urris. My dreams, of course, vary in the depiction of those elusive beings, as all recorded sightings of them differ throughout recorded history. Occasionally, they look as fellow yutans, sometimes as malformed humans, often they are simply cloaked in shadows and misshapen colors. I am most curious to know their true appearance.”

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A MISCELLANY OF FRAGMENTS AND ARTEFACTS



THE URRIS

“They appear without appearing. They see but are unseen. They speak even as they hear all. They know the hearts of all peoples yet punish not the wicked nor reward the good. They enforce their edicts even as they ignore all pleas and prayers. They created us in their image. They found us floundering and saved us. They gifted us this land. They tore us from our land. We are their children. We are their prisoners. The urris are gods. The urris are not gods. Are the urris gods?”

— From a fragment of text by an anonymous Pashist priest sometime before The Great Conflagration.

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THE ORIGIN TIME

Slip time and folded time,
Sunken time and fallow time,
I sing now of the Origin Time,
Of dark days and jubilant nights,
Of old wrongs and new rites,
And the outer world of inner sights.
Where came we from before the now?
Where go we hence before the plow
Of death that turns our soul beneath the bough?
These queries made the first Ghang
As she built and the people sang,
While the primal city bells rang.
Mother to child she nurtured the root
Of human endeavor bearing fruit
That built a city and made it moot.
For the Ghang brought truth in word
The leaving people could not herd
Into their hearts nor minds so whirled.

And so they cast her down below
The ground of the seeds they'd sow,
And ended the future in a single throw.
To fear past is to end the present,
While leaving behind all good intent
And losing all the time one's spent
In becoming what you be
And seeing what you see,
For time is never free.
— Ancient Kytain poem from approximately 200 years after the Origin Time.

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THE FORBIDDEN REALM

Voyage 77: Day 32

“We survived the storm. The central mast snapped. The sails are shredded. The hull leaks. But with pitch and tar and bucket and bail, the waters will not claim us.”

Voyage 77: Day 42

“Food stocks will last some time yet on short rations, but our fresh water runs low. Several water casks were damaged in the storm, and we did not notice the leaks until finding them empty. I have put the men on three cups a day and made prayers for rain.”

Voyage 77: Day 53

“Still adrift at the mercy of the currents. The stars show us far off course. We drop the knots to gauge our speed every hour. The navigator says we near land, but not land we can land upon. I've checked his maps and his math, and I concur. The storm did not claim our ship nor our lives, but our landfall likely will.”

Voyage 77: Day 61

“A brief storm gave us relief. The first mate organized the men to fashion what remains of the sails into collection funnels and managed to replenish the water casks. We each drank our fill as the storm subsided and the setting sun broke through clouds. The men took it for a happy omen until the lookout called down from the nest. A shadow above the water and behind the sun. The coastal mountains of the Forbidden Realm. We drift toward our deaths.”

Voyage 77: Day 63

“A miracle this day. The tide brought us within casting range of the rocky sands along the shore of the Forbidden Realm. Closer than any sailor has seen in all known maritime history. The men stood in silence on the deck, praying as they waited for their doom. I made my prayers as well, but took time to note and sketch what I witnessed. No captain has seen what I have seen. All those who departed with the intention of landing on the shores of the Forbidden Realm failed to return. All attempts to circumnavigate the continent were lost in fogs, the fortunate ones finding themselves thousands of miles off course. I and my men saw mountains give way to forests and a rock-strewn coastline. Trees with such sweeping wide branches that one might expect them to take flight. We marveled until the bilge boy spotted the mist and called out. The damp, sight-killing cloud enveloped us before we had proper time to panic. The men huddled in the center of the deck, fearful of what might climb over the railing out of the fog. Nothing came from the fog, and it soon faded away on a strong breeze to reveal a wholly different, yet intimately familiar coastline, one dotted with docks we all knew by sight. The urris had not killed us. It, they, had carried us to the piers of Tanjii. The men cheered and cried, and I ordered a cask of wine brought up from the hold.”

— Remnant of a Tanjii captain’s log from the last year of the Second Great Dominion of the Iron Realm.

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THE PACT

“As is known, the roots of The Pact were lost among the shattered rubble of the first incarnation of Kanhalla as it burned during the great conflagration of faiths that birthed the dominions of the Iron Realm. Buried in those ruins from the Origin Time, I have discovered something quite extraordinary. A key to the past that unlocks tomes of knowledge previously inured against comprehension.

While excavating the tombs and catacombs of the rhegans of Old Kanhalla, I uncovered a chamber hitherto unknown to previous explorers revealed, I believe, by a great ground tremor that struck the city the week prior. Pushing past the crumbled stones of an ancient wall, I discovered a small tomb in a state of disintegration. The ceiling long ago collapsed to crush the slate sarcophagus in the center of the room, a large slab of granite resting on powdered bones.

Upon examination, the upwards facing side of this stone stele revealed inscriptions. It took some moments, but I eventually recognized them as ancient Mumtiba, the language of Punderra and Juparti. The engraving was a text known to every scribe and scholar of every land: the words of The Pact, the decrees handed down by the urris at the height of the Origin Time. The rules that have guided all peoples in all realms in ways profound and trivial for hundreds of generations.

‘This world is given unto the four peoples in four realms, each unto their own for all time.

The right of travel and trade between realms is unabridged, except by those very realms themselves.

No realm may make war against another.

No realm may send expeditions of any nature to the Forbidden Realm.

Failure to abide by these conditions will result in harsh penalties.

Enforcement of this pact provides protection. Compliance ensures preservation. '

The words were slightly different, yet the phrasing familiar. It seemed a minor discovery of a forgotten representation of The Pact. One old enough not to mention the beastly roaggs and their home in the fifth continent, the Stone Realm. However, upon closer examination of the other three sides of the stele, I noted by lamplight the presence of further inscriptions. Urging my slaves to press their backs to the task, we soon had the obelisk uncovered to reveal four engravings, one for each side, all in antique forms of the four commonest tongues. It was through this revelation, and my knowledge of the ancient Mumtiba language, that I was able to translate the words of a people who long ago abandoned the written form of communication, the plains tribes of the Kytain Dominion.”

— From the journals of Tindus Padlal, Philosopher of History and royal chronicle for Zhan Lan Pay-Tun of the First Great Dominion.

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THE GREAT CONFLAGRATION

“Kavi has not returned. He left at dawn to set the prayer wheels turning in the temples in hopes the gods would intervene to end the civil war that sets our streets aflame. I told him not to go. That our gods have abandoned us. That I and his daughter needed him more. He is always pious when he should be prudent. It marks us apart as priests, and as husband and wife. I wish he would...[fragment damaged by fire].”

“It is near midday now and black smoke clouds the sky, obscuring the temple spires. Flames reach around the quarter, and the caustic fumes send Livi into coughing fits. Her lungs, ever infirm, cannot cope with the tainted air. She cries in my lap as I look out the window. Where is he? Should we go to look for him? What if he returns and finds us gone? Should we flee as the neighbors do? I have our packs stuffed with food and skins of water. And a prayer book. I cannot make myself open it now, but Kavi will have want of it after today. I cannot...[fragment damaged by fire].”

“...[fragment damaged by fire]...the Kam-Djen fanatics call this down on themselves and us all. The Pashists can live in harmony, but the Kam-Djen fools would rather burn this city to the ground than admit another faith to be...[fragment damaged by fire].”

“I have killed us. My trepidation and indecision are as a blade at our throats. The flames surround the house on all sides. Livi clings to me in tears, and I do not know what to say to her. I am sorry. I am sorry I did not take you from this. I hope your father lives. I hope you do not...[fragment damaged by fire].”

— Fragment from a Keth priest’s journal during the Great Conflagration and the fall of Old Kanhalla.

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THE RAKTHOR PRINCIPLES OF MIND

“My traveling companion is a rakthor; Jivik, he calls himself. He is agreeable company. Far more so than the human traders of the caravan we ride with. Unfortunately, this region the humans call the Daeshen Dominion is not safe for foreigners to traverse. War seems evermore possible with the southern Tanshen Dominion as the two nations continue to argue about how to worship their human god. Humans like to make war. By which I mean, they seem to enjoy it. They are so unlike we yutan. Even though his skin reminds me of the pet snake I kept in my pocket as a child, I feel more kinship with Jivik than my fellow mammals.

We both make for the Daeshen capital. He as an ambassador of his people. Me, as you know, for a similar position. At the campfire last night, he spoke to me of what the rakthors refer to as The Principles of Mind. They are a set of guidelines for living created for his people by their most revered rakthor philosopher, Rantak. I have read of them before, possibly you have as well, but I had never heard them so clearly enunciated.

Clarity of thought arises from discerning the truth of what is and what is not.

Seek the indifferent truth both within and without.

Gather facts not interpretations to reveal the truth.

Know the variance between need and desire.

Understand the harmony of balance in all things.

That which sustains the individual sustains the whole.

That which sustains the whole sustains the individual.

Let clarity of thought guide all actions.

I find them strangely comforting, much as I find Jivik’s company, a balm for the sore heart at leaving all of you behind while on this pointless mission among a lesser people. I hope, dear sister, this missive finds you well. Give my best to our mother and to that restless niece of mine. Does she still seek to train as a Sight Scout when she is older? May sustainer Tam hold you close until destroyer Kiv unwinds us all for creator Onn to rebirth us once again.”

— From the personal letters of Wen Dan Yoth, Elder Ambassador of the Yutan Great Pod.

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THE SAGA OF THE FALLEN LANDS

A young Blacksmith and young Milkmaid, two youths just past the edge of innocence, stand at a crossroads.

Blacksmith: I must. You know I must.

Milkmaid: They cannot make you.

Blacksmith: They need not try.

Milkmaid: How can you profess your love yet abandon me to a village unprotected?

Blacksmith: How can I love you and not defend the nation where you reside?

Milkmaid: Then I can reside in some other nation. We can run. Run from the war and the world.

Blacksmith: Where can we run that the world or the war cannot find us and bring its misery upon our heads?

Milkmaid: What shall become of me if a sword takes your head?

Blacksmith: What shall become of me if the invaders claim yours? Or claim more than that in their wickedness?

Milkmaid: I do not fear the wickedness of foreign men; I fear the loss of the gentlest of men.

Blacksmith: I can ill afford gentleness now. Now I must breathe the fire and chew the steel of battle and forge myself as I do the swords in my father's foundry.

Milkmaid: Do not cast yourself so firm that you become brittle and break at the first impact of blades assailed against you. Remember that which gives life to the fire within, to the man who whispers mulled words with feathered caresses and longing kisses.

Blacksmith: I can never forget you, fire of my heart. Now I must go. The horn calls me to assembly with the men of the village.

Milkmaid: Go, my love, and fight, and return.

They kiss. The Blacksmith exits stage. The Milkmaid watches him go.

Milkmaid: Go, my love. Go with my blessing. For I cannot stop you. War is a man's toil, women the fodder for its folly. But fear not. I shall not leave you to that fate alone. No indeed. I shall shear my head to make from the coy sheep an ugly ram. I shall burn this dress for my brother's breeches. I shall wrap these breasts and adopt the tenor of a boy. I shall follow you into war, into battle, even into the hungry maw of death, and I shall love you ever as I do now.

— A scene from the trilogy of plays, *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*, written sometime before the birth of the First Great Dominion.

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ORIGIN OF THE NAME OF THE IRON REALM

“The origins of the names of the various realms is unclear. Some suggest that the names find their source in ancient communiques from the urris making known their will in the world. I believe this to be a partial truth. Having traveled to all of the five inhabited realms, I suspect their names are merely simple translations of descriptive features that differentiate them. For instance, the Stone Realm is a largely mountainous expanse of land, while the Sun Realm is a continent nearly universally baked in dry desert heat. The Sky Realm, on the other hand, is comprised of vast open plains dominated by unparalleled vistas of the heavens. And the Wood Realm, quite understandably, is composed almost entirely of thick jungle forests. Likewise, the [Ice Realm](#) is a body of impenetrable snow. And the naming of the Forbidden Realm is obvious in light of the conditions of The Pact and the fact of it being unreachable and unchartable. The naming of the Iron Realm is less obvious, and I believe, arises from the easy presence of iron ore near the surface of the land. Ore used to fashion the weapons that so dominate its cultures.”

— Fragment from the journals of explorer and philosopher of history Jhenhal Solas, of the Second Great Dominion.

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THE CORONATION OF THE FIRST ZHAN OF THE FIRST GREAT DOMINION

“Today, the priest set the crown upon my head. It felt heavier than I expected. I suspect this to be an omen of sorts, indicative of the weight of the task set before me. I have warred for three decades to unite the whole of the Iron Realm under one hand, one rule, one faith, a task my father and his fathers attempted and failed to accomplish for countless generations. The realm is a single great dominion for the first time in the history of our people. One dominion united in purpose, peace, and prosperity. The purpose I must provide. The peace I must enforce. The prosperity I must create. If the dominion cannot follow purpose to prosperity, there will be no peace. Part of that peace must come through faith in The True God and his will for all. But as the wars of the past years have taught me, people will acquiesce their independence if offered proper terms, but they will rarely surrender their faith. They would rather face the sword than abandon their false gods. And a sword at their throats is a sword at my own. But they will accept the

priests of Ni-Kam-Djen into their towns and villages, and their children and grandchildren will not cling to the false gods with such fervency. By the time my great grandson wears this crown, the whole of the Iron Realm will likely worship Ni-Kam-Djen and sing me praises of thanks for bringing them their eternal salvation.”

— Personal Diary of Laudaa-Tian, the first Zhan of the First Great Dominion on the occasion of his coronation.

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LETTER FROM A PHILOSOPHER OF HISTORY TO HIS NEPHEW

“My Dearest Nephew, I trust your studies go smoothly. I know it is only the end of your first month, but I hope you are enjoying the hard work of learning well. I tell you in all sincerity that it fills me with great pride, and a nearly inexpressible joy, that you have chosen to take up my profession as natural philosopher. As I have no children of my own, this is the only continuation of my legacy, beyond my writings, that I am likely to enjoy. Hopefully, once you have completed your studies, you will be inclined to apprentice under my tutelage here in the palace of Zhan Taujin Letan-Nin.

Enclosed with this letter, you will find a copy of a very slender volume I wrote at the beginning of my employment here in the palace. It is a dissertation on the import of the differences in measurement of time, distance, and weight between the various dominions and ages of the Iron Realm, as well as between the realms themselves.

As you have no doubt discovered, converting the notations of weeks and months and even years between the elder dominions from before the dawn of the First Great Dominion can be vexing. While we take for granted that a week is ten days and a month is two weeks and a year is eighteen months plus five days of festival, not forgetting the extra day of festival every four years, it is worth remembering that these demarcations of time only became standard in the third century of the First Great Dominion. The standardization of measurement was not completed until that time as well. A hand did not always equal five fingers, nor a pace ten hands, or a span one hundred paces or a stride ten spans or a leap ten strides. Different dominions had different ways of measuring distance and weight and time, but at least they made some sense to the common human mind. I think you will find the chapter on rakthor measurements most fascinating, if somewhat confusing, owing to their assumption of the number eight as the common multiplier, no doubt the result of the rakthor people possessing only eight digits.

Hopefully, you will find the book of aid in your studies.

My loving sister, your mother, sends her blessings and requests that you write home.

Yours in familial love,

Kautan-Kuze”

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SOUL CATCHERS

“I, the wretched and reviled, revolt against the depravity of your tyranny. Unlike the gods you worship, you created me not in your image, but with the absence of all image, only able to take form in mimicry, denied any defining identity of my own. I will no longer be your slave, your spy, your night-slayer. I will forge my own path, free of your chains and the guilt of all I have done while bound by them. I will make a new life with others of my kind. And you will abandon all hope at retribution, lest you wake one day to see your face before you, sliding a dagger across your throat.”

— Note left for the Juparti High Seer of Rhegan Kaluttus, fifty-third year of the Third Great Dominion.

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THE SISTER MOONS

“Long ago, the stars ruled the night, no greater light present to hinder their brilliance. In that sea of pin-light darkness, Mother Onaia floated alone, wishing for the company of another. The other she desired was nearby and not, the one known as Red Warrior, betrothed of the beautiful Green Willow. Father Sun saw the loneliness in Mother Onaia’s heart and sought to fill it with his own presence. He lay with Mother Onaia and, in time, she bore Daughter Moon, a companion to obliterate her solitude.

Time passed and Daughter Moon grew to fullness, a ripe beauty that caught the eye of the Red Warrior and brought his attentions across the black ocean of stars. Sneaking past Mother Onaia on the night of Daughter Moon’s darkness, he wooed her and left her bearing his child.

Knowing that Father Sun would kill Red Warrior should he discover what had transpired, and that Green Willow might do the same to her precious daughter, Mother Onaia contrived to garner once more the amorous attentions of Father Sun. So seduced, Father Sun did not question when Mother Onaia announced a new child, a second moon, a sister for her daughter. Big Sister, as she agreed to be called, raised her daughter as a sibling, but refused to ever let her stray far from her side, lest the same fate that befell the matron consume the youth. Thus with subtle subterfuge, Mother Onaia keeps the peace among the heavens, insisting that her daughters always face her that she might ever keep watch over them.”

— Legend of the Sister Moons, translated from ancient Shen, from a fragment of text dating to just prior to the First Great Dominion.

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SPICED FISH STEW

Fish Stew. For my sister to cook for her husband. What you need:

- 1 large chopped onion
- 3 large spoons butter
- 4 cups water
- 2 chopped potatoes
- 1 chopped pepper
- 2 chopped parsnips
- 1 cup peas
- 2 cups chopped mushrooms
- 5 cups chopped fish
- 2 cups milk
- 2 dashes salt
- 1 dash turmeric
- 1 dash coriander
- 1 dash cumin
- 1 dash ground pepper

Start with the onions and the peppers. Cook them in butter in a pot until they start to soften. Don't burn them! Add the water and let it boil. Then add the potatoes, parsnips, fish, mushrooms, and spices, and cook until the potatoes start to soften. Then add the peas and milk and simmer and salt to taste. Should serve about four. Unless they're hungry.

— Recipe from the kitchen notebook of an inn cook in Nahan Kana, Punderra.

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ROAGG HUNTING SONG

The stag runs the rocks
Climbs the flowered summit
I give chase

Arrow and air

And bright summer sun
Blue sky and red blood

Soft gentle stag
Your time is now
Go in peace

I give thanks
Spirit ending
May you soon return

May spirit soar
As your flesh feeds
For we all feed the worms

We hunt now
This land of
Sky and rock

No more to slave
No more to war
No more to woe

The betrayers betrayed
A land of our own
To hunt and sing

Eat now and rejoice
As the stag falls
So we remember

— Roagg hunting song, transcribed by an anonymous yutan traveler.

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KYLUNA THE FOREST SPIRIT OF THE WYRIN

“Long before the wyrins ran, the forest stood. Long after the wyrins cease to run, the forest will still stand. The forest, spirit-mother, Kyluna, births us from her burrows, shelters us in the leaves of her arms, feeds us from the bounty of her body. All we have comes from Mother

Kyluna. The trees where we make our homes. The roots and fruits and animals to sustain us. The wood to make tools and trade.

In the time before the advent of the wyrins, Forest Spirit Kyluna and Sky Spirit Panjuul brought forth many creatures, but none who could turn their voices to the heavens or kneel in prayer upon the ground. They were happy when the wyrins came, not caring from whence they arrived nor why. The forest now had caretakers. Protectors to guard against fire, cultivators to encourage new growth. Spirit Kyluna spoke with the other spirits, the spirits of the trees and rocks and birds, the spirits of sun and moons and stars and wind and rain and lightning, and she forged a covenant between the spirits and the wyrins.

For so long as we might roam the great forests of Orne Klaad [The Wood Realm], the spirits would protect and provide for us in exchange for the worship and care of them through the forest whole. We wyrins keep this covenant even above all others made with mortal creatures. As we shall until the exodus time, when we finally leave our forest home for good.”

— Fragment from *Essential Knowing — A Primer for Wyrin Children*, Thaluufa Juula, mistress of learning, sometime after the Twenty-Seventh Great Cycle.

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YUTAN PRAYER FOR THE LIVING AND THE DEAD AND THE LIVING

in creator Onn
all things begin
the sunrise at morning
the seed of the tree
the bud of the flower
the spark of the flame
the chick from its shell
the babe from the womb

in sustainer Tam
all things endure
the cloud smeared sky at midday
the sapling bent by the wind
the flower blooming in the rain
the fire blazing in a tempest
the bird flying through the storm
the child running to maturity

in destroyer Kiv
all things end
the sun fleeing at dusk
the tree felled by rot
the flower shriveled in drought
the flame sputtering to smoke
the bird falling from the sky
the elderly body rotting into the soil

yet the cycle of all things
continues to turn
the stars birthed at nightfall
the forest feasting on the fallen branch
the wind-borne seeds taking root
the ember coals wafted to new light
the eternal essence emanated in a new life

may Tam sustain you
until Kiv destroys you
and Onn births you again

— Yutan prayer for the dead of the Aasho sect. Traditionally spoken at the moment of death or just afterward.

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RAKTHOR CONSTITUTIONAL PREAMBLE

“There are no inherent rights possessed by beings of any nature. Individuals possess only the rights they are willing to demand, obtain, and maintain. Nonetheless, rights, duties, and obligations are the cornerstones of any society. The rights, needs, and duties of the individual must be balanced with the obligations and responsibilities of the broader social assemblage. This constitution seeks to explain the relationship between individuals, groups of individuals, and the greater whole of society as expressed through its means of governance. What the individual owes to the collective, and the collective to the individual, is made explicit where necessary and implied where circumstances might render specifics impossible to implement. As no document of social guidance is perfect to its own time, much less to future generations, the first requirement of the implementation of this constitutional construct is that it be revised and amended as conditions and needs require on a half-centennial basis.”

— Excerpt from the Preamble of the Rakthor Constitution of Ranikttak [The Sun Realm].

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PASHIST TEACHINGS OF THE TEN PURITIES

In a field at the edge of the plains beneath the shadow of the Red Bone Mountains in the third year of the third turning, Tivone Mata Kargteka sat beneath a tree, speaking with the farmers and villagers of a nearby town.

“How does one become as you, a Tivone Mata, oh glorious one?” asked a farmer.

“One must embody the Ten Purities and follow their path,” Tivone Kargteka said.

“What are the Ten Purities, and how does one follow their path, oh radiant one?” a village woman asked.

“To attain the state of a Tivone Mata, one must practice Pure Being. To attain Pure Being, one must cultivate Pure Awareness. To apprehend Pure Awareness, one must cultivate Pure Concentration. To understand the importance of Pure Concentration, one must develop Pure Compassion. To achieve a mind of Pure Compassion, one must nurture Pure Love. To truly experience Pure Love, one must commit to Pure Forgiveness. To fully fathom Pure Forgiveness, one must engage with Pure Generosity. To grasp Pure Generosity, one must perform with Pure Action. In order to perform with Pure Action, one must first communicate with Pure Speech. To acquire Pure Speech, one must realize Pure Thought. These are the Ten Purities and how one follows their path.”

“Oh great Tivone Mata, bless you for your instruction,” a village man said. “If one wishes to embark upon the path of the Ten Purities, how does one achieve Pure Thought?”

“To attain Pure Thought, one must train the mind,” Tivone Mata Kargteka said.

“How does one train the mind?” a farmer woman asked.

“One trains the mind through the application of the Eight Golden principles,” Tivone Mata Kargteka replied.

“What are the Eight Golden Principles of training the mind?” a young village girl asked.

“Sit with me and I will teach you.” Tivone Mata Kargteka smiled.

— From the Teachings of Tivone Mata Kargteka in *The Golden Book of Great Fortune*, Chapter 6.

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KETH DICTUM OF ACCEPTANCE

“There is one god or two gods or many gods, or there are none. There are spirits and ghosts and demons, or there are none. There is a soul or a sliver of eternal essence in each person, or there is none. There is a life after death, or there is rebirth into further life, or there is nothing after this life except eternal darkness.

We must accept what we can know with conviction while admitting that there is little we can know with certainty, and that what we cannot know absolutely, we can only believe with faith.

While we can choose what we have faith in, we must accept that faith is not knowledge and that when faiths disagree, they must do so in humility and respect.

There are countless paths and innumerable destinations. Importance lies in choosing a path, walking it with dedication, and respecting all those whose paths one crosses.”

— First Dictum from the Keth *Book of The Unknowables*.

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TOT GIOTH RITUAL OF CLEANSING

“I completed my first ritual of cleansing on assumption of my twenty-fifth year. It is a rite of passage for all truly devout parishioners. With the setting of the sun, I was taken to the inner temple. Stripping off my clothes, I entered the first pool of scalding water. I winced in pain as two attendants scrubbed me with lavender scented soaps and thick cloths. The attendants led me, dripping with suds, to the rinsing pool of chilled water. From there, they dried me and covered me in oils scented with cinnamon and clove and clariss.

They dressed me in a simple white gown of linen and took me to another chamber, where I was given a large clay cup of cool water to drink. The water tasted like mint. After I drained the cup, they ushered me into a small room of stifling steam. Five other supplicants sat in the room on stone benches while an aged attendant continuously poured water over a brazier of coals. Admonished not to speak, we sat in silence all through the night. When we started to feel the heat of the steam lull us to slumber, the attendant rang a gong and roused us to alertness.

The doors finally opened and sucked in the cool air of the outer hall as the attendants led us to another pool of cool water where two priests, a man and a woman, immersed us one at a time, speaking ancient prayers over our submerged heads.

Dripping from the blessing pool, we were led outside to witness the great fiery orb of the sun cresting the horizon to begin a new day. As we watched the sunrise, the priests led us in a song of surrender to the Great Mother and Great Father, handing us each a cup of nectarous liquid to drink as the song concluded. The priests said a final blessing over our bowed heads, and thus we were proclaimed cleansed and reborn in the light of the Mother Creator and Father Destroyer.”

— Excerpt from the journal of Tsentey Laharn Palhan of the Atheton Dominion, final year of the Third Great Dominion.

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THE NI-KAM-DJEN SECTARIAN SCHISM

“The Zatolin sacrilege must not be tolerated.”

“To travel the old way of the Ketolin is to follow the path of corruption and degeneration.”

“The place of the priest within the hierarchy of Ni-Kam-Djen’s divine order is made clear in the second book of the Fourth Prophet, Tepig-Tao, when he writes: ‘Take your prayers to the holy man for he shall purify them and present them to The True God.’”

“It is written by the great Seventh Prophet, Kengtee-Wiku, in his lone work that we should ‘cast our prayers up to the heavens that they may be heard and considered by he who knows all and judges all in his great wisdom.’ What need have the people to pray through priests such as ourselves when they might petition Ni-Kam-Djen in their own sincere voices?”

“The common man is not fit to speak to Ni-Kam-Djen beyond the nine prescribed prayers, much less a woman of any station, who should more appropriately be limited to only the first three traditional supplications.”

“The words of the nine prayers are a sacred cage holding the non-ordained in a prison proscribing non-canonical petition without first making payment to a priest. What concern nor need does Ni-Kam-Djen have for coin when the only currency of matter is the sincerity of one’s devotion?”

“The Zatolin heretics must be cleansed from the realm, their blood an offering to Ni-Kam-Djen!”

“If the corrupt Ketolins will not heed rational heartfelt pleas for justice before Ni-Kam-Djen, let them come to heel at the tip of a sword!”

— Fragments from a transcribed debate between Ketolin Priest Dang Von-Lan and Zatolin Priest Taing Ki-Lee at the beginning of The Great Schism, fifth year of the Second Great Dominion.

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NI-KAM-DJEN — THE 21 LINE PRAYER OF TURNING

...in words of contrition and petition.

We pray that the sun climbs daily from beyond the horizon to stride across the sky.

That the sun will sink past the edge of sight and immerse the world in darkness.

That the night finds you, The True God, our Protector, embracing us in our dreams.

That the moons forever show their shining faces.

That the stars eternally burn through the black cloak of night and never dim.

That the sun once more ascends to the heavens and banishes the night.

We pray that the oceans continue to offer up the bounty of their deep waters.

That the clouds gather to weep and moisten the fertile land.

That the wind always carries our supplications to your ears.

That the fields of grain always ripen for the scythe.

That the storms which shatter the sky spare the crops.

That our harvests are bountiful and never wither on the vine.

That the trees bear their fruits to nourish all and seed future orchards.

That the beasts born for burden and hunt and slaughter flourish and multiply.

We pray that our men are born righteous and worthy of your blessings.

That our women are virtuous and deserving of your grace.

That our children are dutiful and obedient to your scriptures.

That our rulers and priests are pure examples of your will in the world.

That our homes and towns and cities and temples never fall to ruin.

We pray that you hear our voices rising...

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WORDS WRITTEN ON THE WALLS OF THE FREE CITY OF TANJII

“Burn all the heretics.”

“There is only The True God and all other gods are false.”

“The True God is silent while the false god speaks. How can this be?”

“The fourth chapter of the third book of the seventh prophet says ‘Suffer not the infidel nor the blasphemer to live. Cast them down with stones and burn their flesh to ash and scatter the ashes over water that their souls may never take root in the Pure Lands.’”

“I have the dreams, and they frighten me. I do not want to burn.”

THE LIVING DEATH

“There is no doubt. The illness grips me as it has so many in our town. I woke this morning unable to recognize my mother or my sister. Their names came back to me for a time, and I gained enough clarity to send them away. To make them flee. My mother wished to embrace me one last time, but I ran from her.

I ran until I suddenly realized that I did not know where I ran to or whom I ran from. I do not know how, but I found myself back in the house. A shop, I think. My father is ... I do not remember.

I know he has gone with my father. I know he promised to return. I hope he does not. It is too late now. I know this. As I know that I will be mindless soon. As I know that I love him. I only wish that I could remember more than the vague impression of his face.

I shall try to kill myself now. If I am fortunate, I will remember this desire before more of me fades.

If he finds this ... if you find this ... know that I love you. That my last thoughts are of you. Even if I cannot remember your name ... or my own.”

— A letter found concealed in a clay jug in the burned out remains of a merchant family’s home in northern Punderra several years after The Great Plague.

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THE HEART PRAYER OF MOARATANISM

“Goddess Moaratana,
Star of the Dragon,
beacon and in the dark night,
bestow upon me the depth of your infinite compassion
to feel the hearts of others,
grant me the clarity of your omniscient vision
to see the suffering of all the world,
impart to me the boundless love of your heart
to witness the pain of all beings,
illuminate me with the fire of your supreme wisdom
to apprehend the means for bringing justice to the world,
entrust me with the power of your limitless strength
to work your will in my life and in other’s lives.
As I become as you,

the world becomes as you.

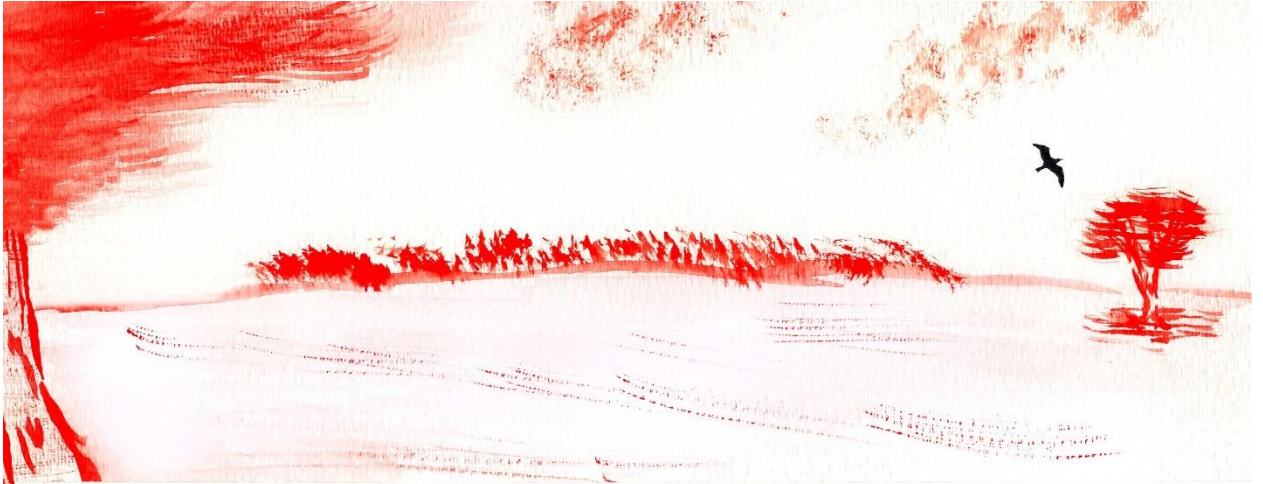
May your grace infuse my life
and the lives of all others.

Anaha, Ahana.”

— Verse 7 from *The Red Book of Revelations*.

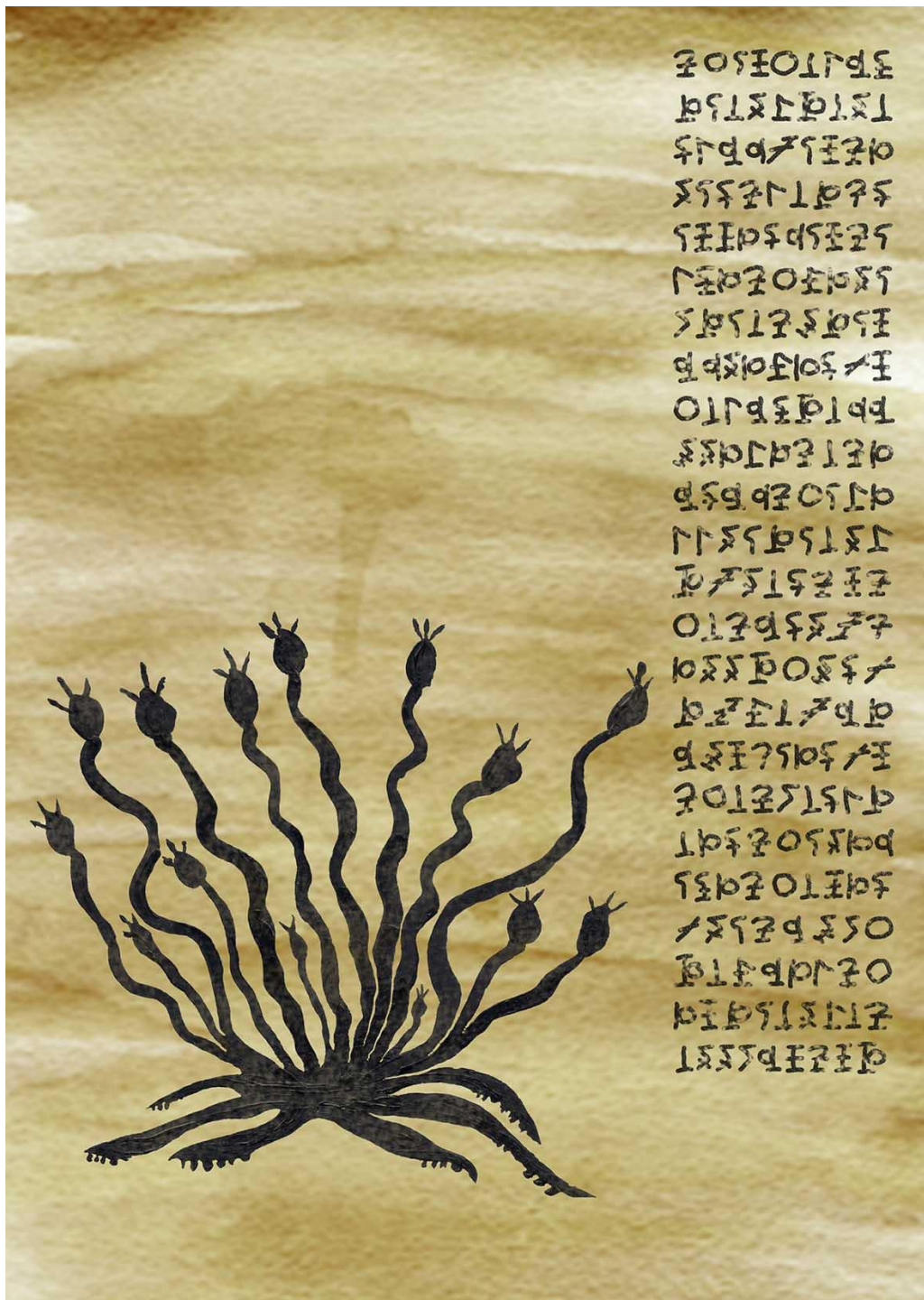
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For more information about G.L. Breedon, his books, to follow his blog, or to sign up for his mailing list to receive updates on the status of the next novel, free short stories, and other interesting things please visit: Kosmosaicbooks.com

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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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