

# THE SHATTERED REALMS

THE DRAGON STAR SAGA — BOOK TWO  
(EPISODES 4-7)

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# OVERTURE



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.*

Note: This novel can be read in the linear way it is presented, or it can be read, or reread, by following the individual story arenas via the hyperlinks provided at the end of most chapters. Additionally, a [Primary Cast List](#), a [Maps Page](#), and a [Miscellany of Fragments and Artefacts](#) can be found at the end of the book.

To continue reading the story arena 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 be 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 turn the page.

# 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 than 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.](#)



# 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](#).

# 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. Jupiterus 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!”

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## 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](#).

# 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 Jupterus’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.

Jupterus 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 Jupiterus 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. Jupiterus 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](#).

# 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](#).

# 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](#).

# 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 Mumtiba 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](#).

# 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](#).

# 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](#).



# THE TEMPLE



## RAEDALUS

“MOTHER SHEPHERD!”

Raedalus 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?” Raedalus’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?” Raedalus looked to the Mother Shepherd’s face.

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

Raedalus 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.

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

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

“Let me see.” Bon-Tao pushed Raedalus 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?” Raedalus 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, Jupiterus, 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 that 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.

Raedalus 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.

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

# 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 outlanders 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 Donjeo, 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](#).

# 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](#).

# 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 Jupiterus 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](#).

# 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](#).

## 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 saltwater 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 story arena 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. Although the siege pit around the castle had degraded over the years to little more than a gently sloped ditch, the walls were firm and the gate solid. 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 sheeto 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 turn the page.



# 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](#).



# 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 turn the page.

# 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.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena [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. Donjeo, 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.” Donjeo 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 tahneff 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 Donjeo 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 tsetet 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 militiaman 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](#).

# 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](#).

# 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-packed 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](#).

# 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 Mumtiba 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](#).



# 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 pada-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.

He 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](#).

# 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 turn the page.

# 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](#).

# 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 scabble 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 Abanathus 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](#).



# 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 raktors 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](#).

# 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](#).

## 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 story arena 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. Rakhthors did not dream. They might see arbitrary images while asleep, but not the way humans did. A rakhthor 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 rakhthors 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 rakhthor mental organ. While all the brains held two discrete halves, human, wyrin, roagg, and yutan brains appeared structured from three distinct areas, whereas the rakhthor 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 rakhthors 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 rakhthors 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 rakhthors 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, rakhthors followed a methodical approach to understanding the world. She believed rakhthors 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 rakhthors 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 rakhthors 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 rakhthors sat in the wagon as it passed under the trees and down the southern road. The presence of rakhthors 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 rakhthor who originally found the artifact before I stole it.”

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena turn the page.

# 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.](#)

## 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](#).



# 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. Rakhors 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 rakhors 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 raktbor 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 groomsmen 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](#).

# 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. Rakhthors did not eat a particularly varied diet, focusing mainly on meat. The disadvantage of rakhthor 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 rakhthor 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 rakhthorian 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 rakhthor Central Governing Committee, Viktik informed Sketkee of the various shifts in the political landscape after the recent elections. Kadmallin had always marveled at the rakhthor 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 rakhthor 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 rakhthor 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. Rakhthors 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](#).

## 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 Donjeo 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 Donjeo to look at the army once more.

“The militia didn’t have so many men.” Donjeo’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.” Donjeo 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?” Donjeo 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.” Donjeo’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 Donjeo’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 Donjeo. 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 Donjeo, but he would certainly sacrifice what might be necessary to do so.

“I forgot. Sorry.” Donjeo 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 Donjeo 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?” Donjeo 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. Rakhors 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 rakhor 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. Raktors 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 raktors.

"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](#).

# 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.”

Raedalus 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?" Raedalus 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."

Raedalus 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." Raedalus knelt to the floor and began picking up sheaves of parchment, reordering them by the length of the text.

"Thank you, Raedalus."

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.

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# 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.

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# 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?

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# 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 raktbor 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 raktbor 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 raktbor legal philosophy is slender.”

“So he might just kill me.” Kadmaller 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 Kadmaller at some point before reaching the Sun Realm, if they headed in that direction. She abandoned the effort after a moment, as much because Kadmaller 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.” Kadmaller 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 Kadmaller’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 raktbors didn’t believe in revenge,” Kadmaller 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.” Kadmaller’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 Kadmaller deliberately chose incongruous things to say in an attempt to vex her.

As she readied a more critical reply, the wagon shifted direction. Kadmaller 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, raktbors tended to be extremely patient.

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# 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](#).

## 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 rakhthor, 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 rakhthor 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 story arena 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 turn the page.

# 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 the crossover between the Witness and the Throne story arenas turn the page.

# 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.” Zahn 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.

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## THE WITNESS



## ONDROMEAD

BOOTS AND slippers serpented 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.

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# 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 Carnival story arena continues in *The Lost Temple* (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3).

# 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 the crossover between the Witness and the Throne story arenas [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 Philosopher story arena continues in *The Lost Temple* (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3).

# 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.

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To continue reading the crossover between the Witness and the Throne story arenas turn the page.

# 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 sting 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.

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## 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 Seer story arena continues in *The Lost Temple* (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3).

# 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 shorthanded 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. Pavigistay 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 flatted 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 think 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 Ondromead 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.

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

To continue reading the crossover between the Witness and the Throne story arenas [follow this link](#).

# THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

SHADOWS DAPPLED the foliage of canopied trees, firelight reaching upward, seeking the comforting touch of a multitude of brethren blazes 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 Fugitives story arena continues in *The Lost Temple* (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3).

# 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 pada 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 tahnaff 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 tahnns. 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 tahnns 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 Throne story arena continues in *The Lost Temple* (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3).

To continue reading the crossover between the Witness and the Throne story arenas turn the page.



## 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 Tijaro Havarez, 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 Witness story arena continues in *The Lost Temple (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3)*.

# 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 Zatozin 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 forecandle 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.*

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*The Dragon Star Saga* is a continuous novel spread over several books. The Temple story arena and the rest of *The Dragon Star Saga* continues in *The Lost Temple (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3)*. You can read the [first chapter here](#).

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# THE PRIMARY CAST



## THE FUGITIVES

Sao-Tauna — The seven-year-old daughter of Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi (brother to Zhan Taujin Letan-Nin of the Tanshen Dominion).

Lee-Nin — Sao-Tauna's former tutor and protector.

Ing-Ku — The warden commander who hunts Sao-Tauna with orders to kill her.

Sha-Kutan — A farmer with a dark past.

Ogtankaa — The huntress who pursues Sha-Kutan.

## THE THRONE

Tin-Tsu — A former priest and the newly raised zhan of the Daeshen Dominion.

Dju-Tesha — Tin-Tsu's sister.

Pai-Nakee — Tin-Tsu's mother.

Kao-Rhee — The prime councilor to the Daeshen ascendancy.

Rhog-Kan — The prime tigan (military commander) of the Daeshen Dominion.

Tonken-Wu — A sub-commander warden of the Daeshen palace.

Rin-Lahee — A tahneff engaged to marry Tin-Tsu.

Tiang-Rhu — A priest and childhood friend of Tin-Tsu.

## THE TEMPLE

Junari — A former Pashist priest called by the new goddess to lead a pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm.

Raedalus — A former Pashist priest who is Junari's closest friend and adviser.

Taksati — Junari's former Pashist temple servant who follows her on the pilgrimage.

Bon-Tao — A Tanjii soldier responsible for Junari's security while in that city.

Kuth-Von — A Tanjii Circle Elder.

## THE SEER

Kellatra — The owner of an inn in the largest town in the Punderra Dominion and a secret seer with a hidden past.

Rankarus — Kellatra's husband.

Luntadus — Kellatra and Rankarus's six-year-old son.

Lantili — Kellatra and Rankarus's nine-year-old daughter.

Abananthus — A merchant and family friend of Kellatra and Rankarus.

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 Palla'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.

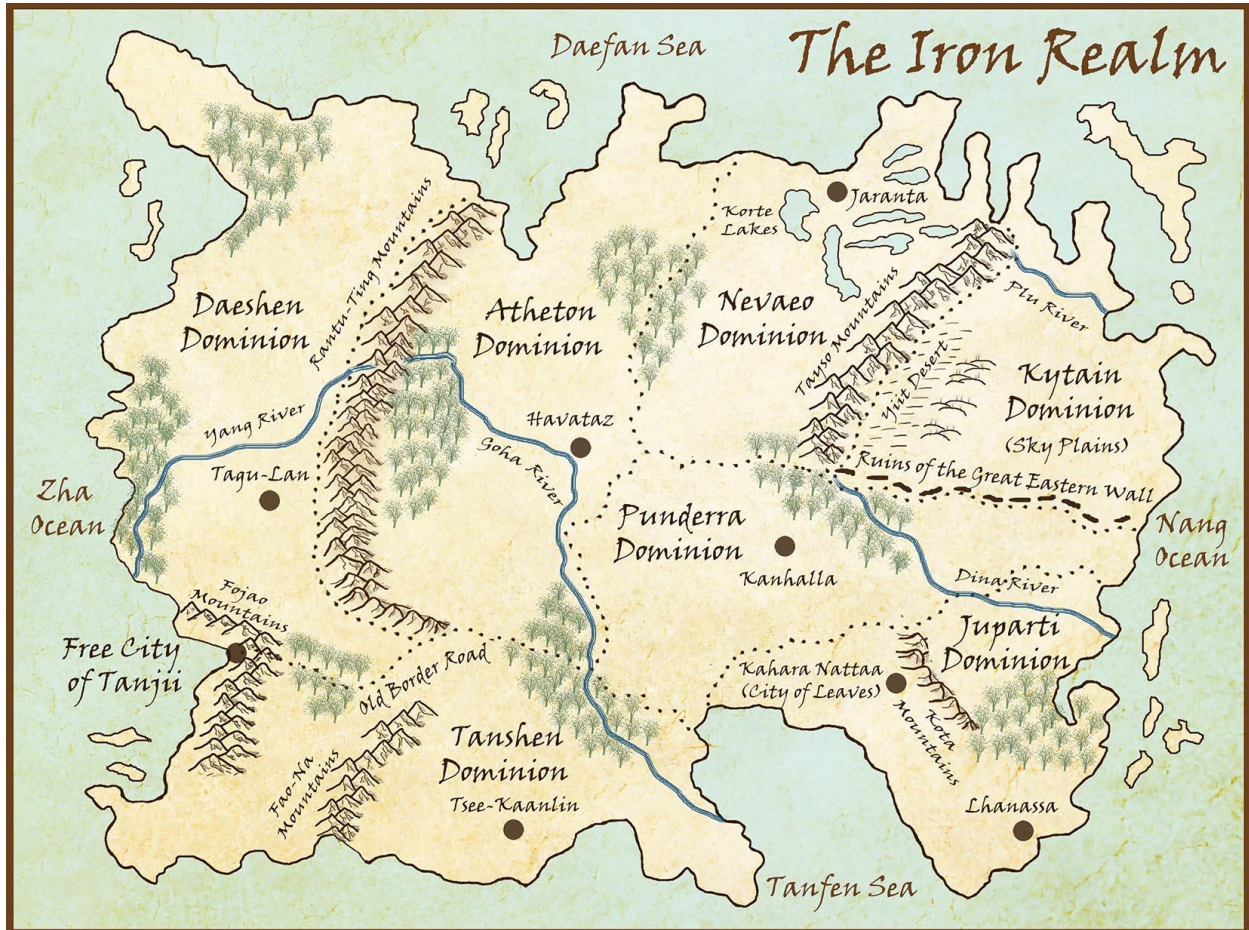
Meraeu — A mysterious old woman who occasionally appears to Ondromead.

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# MAPS



## THE IRON REALM



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# ONAlA



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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 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 rhexans 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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## 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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## 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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## 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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## 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.”

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## 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.

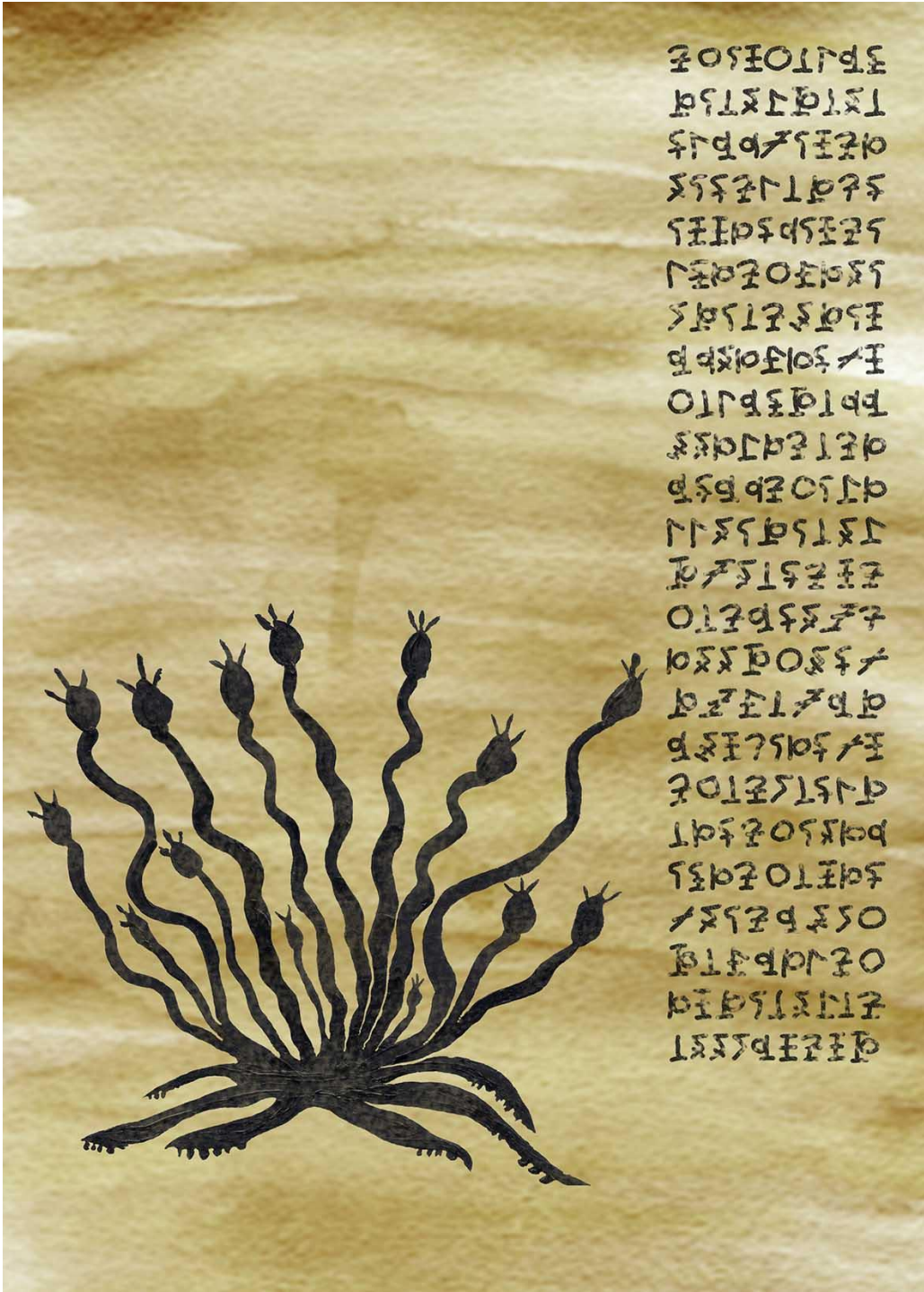
I know he has gone with my father. I know he promised to return. I hope he does not. It is too late now. I know this. As I know that I will be mindless soon. As I know that I love him. I only wish that I could remember more than the vague impression of his face.

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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# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

After a childhood spent whizzing through the galaxy in super sleek starships and defeating treacherously evil monsters in long forgotten kingdoms, G.L. Breedon grew up to write science fiction and fantasy novels. He is also an ordained interfaith minister. He lives with his wife in Brooklyn, NY.

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

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 LOST TEMPLE (THE DRAGON STAR SAGA – BOOK 3)

## THE TEMPLE



## TAKSATI

RECURRENT WAVES broke against the bow of the ship, sea-spray flying over the railings of the forecastle deck, salt mist caught in the wind, drifting back over the wide and well-worn boards. Taksati licked her lips, her tongue stinging at the sea-brine brume. It tasted of fish, seaweed, turbulent storms, and ivory-tipped waves. The taste of seawater had once reminded her of her childhood and days spent in a little fishing boat with her father and brothers, but so much had transpired in the preceding forty-four nights, she wondered if it would now only ever remind her of this one incredible and painful journey.

She stared across the low waves and held to the weathered wood of the portside railing as the wind-borne ship undulated through the water, the motion akin to the rhythm of breathing. She often found herself inhaling and exhaling in concert with the movement of the vessel, as though she had become a part of it — a fingertip gently pulsing in time with a beating heart.

Taksati stared at a foreign shore two strides away — the Forbidden Realm — a land of seemingly endless, dense forests of vibrant green, stunningly high gray cliffs, and surprisingly white-sanded beaches. They had sailed north along the coast of the undiscovered continent for three days, searching for a sign of the temple from the dreams that propelled them across the Iron Realm and over an ocean. She began to wonder whether the temple might have faded from existence with the dissipation of the dreams, or if it ever existed at all. The dreams now seemed like distant memories of a life never lived. She had become so accustomed to the nightly visitations of the Goddess's intentions that the absence of them left her feeling disoriented, even more so during the day than the night.

Some of the pilgrims counted the loss of the dreams as the greatest tragedy of their harrowing voyage. The destruction of half of the pilgrim fleet — four ships — weighed heavily on everyone, especially Junari. The forfeiture of the special guidance of the Goddess each heart had come to know in their slumber pained most as much as the deaths of their fellow congregants and believers. Junari said it felt as though the Goddess now resided behind a firmly closed door, faintly heard, but unseen and unable to enter their world. Knowing the cause of their goddess's absence from the world made the pain of the diminished presence easier to bear. Everyone understood that the urris somehow stood between them and their goddess — the same urris who assailed them at every stage of their ocean journey, taking from them their ships and friends and loved ones, and forcing

upon them decisions whose consequences stung like saltwater in open wounds.

Four ships and nearly three hundred pilgrims lost to the urris. Only the grace of the Goddess, and the iron-willed leadership of Junari, their true captain, allowed the faithful to succeed in reaching the long-denied shores of the continent now stretching out before them, a verdant ocean of green vegetation rolling away into the distant western horizon, the late-day sun giving it a mysterious and ethereal glow.

“Does it go on forever?”

Taksati looked down to find Atula standing at the rail. She reprimanded herself for allowing her thoughts to so consume her mind that she became unaware of her surroundings. How long had the child been there? She glanced around. Many of the pilgrims and crew stood on deck with their eyes cast toward the shoreline. Not as many as in the first day of arrival, when everyone aboard had crowded the portside, so many that the vessel began to list, and the captain declared a rotation to distribute the watchers and help balance the ship.

“Nothing goes on forever.” Taksati looked at the dense forest and the sun that gradually sank behind it, forcing herself to believe the truth of her statement in the face of an overwhelming sensation suggesting that she lied. “All oceans lead to land, and if you walk far enough, the land leads you back to water.”

“But we’ve been sailing along the coast for days.” Atula frowned as she stared across the water. She did not lean on the railing as so many would have done. The child seemed perfectly adapted to life at sea, swaying her body with the tilting and rocking of the ship. Only the most extreme weather caused her to grapple for balance among ropes and rails.

“If you sail a coastline long enough, you will eventually return to where you started.” This had been the first thing Taksati had thought as a child when she looked beneath her father’s arm while he appraised a map of the world a friend of his, a local cargo captain, displayed one night after a shared meal in their small home. She had traced the outline of all five continents with her finger while the men drank rice wine and laughed over stories of their youth together in the small fishing town.

“What about the night sky?” Atula raised her eyes to Taksati. “The stars look very far away and there are always stars behind the stars.”

“The Pashist priests who study the stars, the temple astrologers, write that the stars are unnumbered but not unknowable.” Taksati considered that the trees of the Forbidden Realm might fall into a similar category. “The priests say the only infinite thing is the love we may hold in our hearts. The Goddess would approve of that, I think.”

“Is that in a book you can read to me?” Atula looked intrigued by the notion.

“It is not in any of the books we possess here,” Taksati said. “But there are other things we can read about. And it is you who will be reading to me soon.” She spent many nights during their ocean journey sitting next to a noxious-smelling oil lamp burning the fat of some unfortunate sea whale and teaching the girl to read. The lessons served a multi-fold purpose — first, as she herself could no longer decipher letters at close distance without the aid of a reading glass, it might provide her aging eyes relief in the years to come. Additionally, a village merchant’s daughter, no matter

how bright and precocious, rarely had need of learning to write and read. Young Atula would grow to be a very different woman from the one she had been born to be if Taksati's plans held sway. Lastly, the nightly lessons helped to distract the girl from the loss of her father.

Atula had witnessed her father cast over the rails of the ship and swept out to sea by a massive wave that rose without warning in the first deadly storm thrown at them by the urris in their attempt to keep the Forbidden Realm proscribed. The girl had cried out and might have flung herself into the turbulent waters in an attempt to save her father had Taksati not held her firm and pulled her beneath decks. The girl wept for a whole day and night with the ache of the loss. She'd lost her mother to a militia attack on the road to Tanjii, and her father's passing struck her doubly hard. While Taksati could keep her busy enough during the days to drive the memories and pain of her father's passing from Atula's mind, at night, the girl sank into her cot and cried and moaned for hours until finally falling into sleep from exhaustion. The reading lessons gave her a small respite from the wailing wound of her heart each evening and further taxed her mind to the point that, after two weeks, she began to fall to sleep with only a few tears in her eyes.

"How many more days until we find the temple, do you think?" Atula looked northward toward where they sailed.

"Today." Taksati had cast the tiles every morning. The readings were usually unclear and inconclusive. This morning's casting, while vague, was highly suggestive. It reminded her, as it always did, of the casting she gave before their departure from Tashi-Gano, the pilgrim town up the coast from the city of Tanjii. A casting that spoke clearly and conclusively of betrayal. She hoped that the duplicity indicated in that ominous series of castings referred to the undisclosed inclusion of the Tot Gioth heretics into the bargain struck between Junari and the Tanjii elders. She feared, even after all they had suffered crossing the Zha Ocean, that it indicated something as yet unrevealed.

"How do you know?" Atula leaned forward and squinted her eyes as she looked over the waves toward the coast of the foreboding forest realm.

"I don't know for certain," Taksati said. "I speculate from what I've read."

"What did you read?" Atula turned to her again with a look that seemed to suggest she suspected Taksati of keeping special books from her.

"I read more than books." Taksati looked down at Atula and returned the girl's frown. Once again, she noted the similarities she held with the girl in appearance and temperament, as though the Goddess's pilgrimage had allowed her to stumble upon an unknown and impossible descendant.

"What more is there to read beyond books?" Atula asked.

"Many things," Taksati said, a smile crossing her lips. "You read the stores in the ship's hold with your numbers, for instance. What is your count today?" Taksati gave the girl regular errands to perform on the ship as her assistant, which included a daily count of the ship's food and water stocks. Unfortunately, the counting got easier for the girl as the days of the voyage passed.

Atula looked to the side and scrunched up her face in concentration. "Three bags of flour, two bags of beans, six barrels of dried fish, two sacks of walnuts, one sack of barber nuts, three crates



of potatoes, one half crate of turnips..."

Taksati listened thoughtfully as the girl recited from memory her inventory of the ship's hold. Not enough. Their supplies would easily last until they found the temple, whether that day or the next or the one after that. But it meant thin rations once they made landfall, especially if they could not find animals to hunt and wild fruits and vegetables to forage.

"And fifteen casks of water," Atula finished her recitation.

"And how many days of water will that allow us?" Taksati asked as she gazed down at the girl.

Atula bit her lip. "Four days on full rations and almost eight days on half rations." She looked over her shoulder at the pilgrims spread around the deck of the sailing vessel and then back to Taksati. "But it won't matter once we make landfall."

"Do you know how easy or difficult it is to find water in a foreign land?" Taksati frowned again at the girl. "Have you seen rivers and streams? Do you know how simple it will be to dig a well?"

"I saw one river," Atula said. She thought for a moment and then sighed. "Two days ago."

"The day I suggested to the captain that we should weigh anchor and refill our water casks while we could." Taksati's years of practice having her experience and advice ignored by Pashist temple priests kept the bitterness and annoyance from her voice. Junari had been persuaded by the captain's arguments that the temple could be no more than a day's journey up the coast.

"The Goddess will provide for us." Atula's tone did not sound as certain of this as her words implied.

"The Goddess may wish us to learn to provide for ourselves," Taksati said. "To do things now so that we can do them better in the future." She considered this thought and hoped it would not prove entirely true.

"Like learning to read?" Atula asked.

"Exactly so," Taksati replied.

They stood in silence for a while, watching the waves and trees of the shore shifting in the evening wind as the golden dome of the sun receded behind the canopy of the forest.

"I reckoned for sure we'd find it today." Atula leaned her chin on the railing. She did not need to bend much at her height to accomplish the pose. "I had a dream where my father said we would."

"A dream with your father." Taksati placed a hand on the girl's shoulder. "That is a good omen indeed."

"I dream of him every night since we reached the Forbidden Realm. Each night I ask him when we will find the temple, and each night he says soon, and then last night he said today, so I thought..." Atula's voice trailed off into another sigh.

"Sometimes dreams show us the future, and sometimes they show us the future we wish to see." Taksati tried not to worry about how this statement reflected on the dreams of the Goddess that had once been her nightly comfort and were now painfully elusive.

"There! There!" a voice cried out above.

Taksati and Atula looked upward to the sound. One of the pilgrim crew hung in a cradle of

ropes near the top of the center mast. The crew took turns throughout the day as lookouts scanning the coastline ahead for any sign of the temple. The man stood in the knotted ropes like stirrups astride a horse, his right arm outstretched as his left clung to the rigging.

“There! I sees it! There!”

Taksati and Atula spun in unison, each peering in the fading light as they searched for signs of what had prompted the lookout’s alarm. There had been other declarations of sightings over the past few days, but each had resolved itself as being an outcropping of rock or an oddly formed cliff face. Natural features to a strange and beautiful land, but not the structures they had seen in their lost dreams.

The minutes passed and Taksati’s hope faded with the light as the darkness of sunset cloaked the world. Suddenly, Atula grabbed her hand and squeezed with all her might. Taksati nearly yelped, but she, too, saw the shadow-shrouded features revealed along the shoreline. There could be no confusing those massive curved lines of stone as anything natural, even covered as they were in vines and forest growth. Nor could one mistake the size and placement of the buildings. Far too many to be a mere temple. They could only represent the shadows of a city.

The ship tilted, and she heard the sails shift behind her as the crew called out the captain’s orders and they tacked closer to shore. Exclamations of joy rang out across the vessel. She looked back to see Junari standing atop the aftcastle deck with Raedalus, Bon-Tao, and the captain. She appeared both radiant and trepidatious.

“I knew we’d find it today.” Atula bounced on her toes. “I knew my father wouldn’t lie to me.” She smiled and wiped tears from her eyes with the knuckles of her thin, calloused hand.

“Your dream proved more prophecy than pining.” Taksati stared again into the darkness. They would need to anchor the ship for the night and wait until morning before they explored what they hoped to be their ultimate destination in this unknown land. In the meantime, it might prove useful to gain some knowledge of what they faced when they set foot ashore. She knew one way to attempt such an investigation from their current confines — the same method she had used every day since her childhood.

“Come. We can see no more in this light. We’ve work to do below decks.”

“Work?” For once, Atula sounded almost petulant. One of the girl’s most attractive qualities, in Taksati’s opinion, was her enthusiasm for labor, and for doing as much of it as possible in a day.

“Yes,” Taksati said, placing her hand again on Atula’s shoulder and pulling her away from the railing. “We don’t know what we’ll find when the sun rises on this strange land, but we can find hints of it if we look in the right places.”

“Hints?” Atula tilted curious eyes upward to Taksati.

“Hints and sometimes more than hints.” Taksati led the girl toward a hatch and the hold below. “I’ve something new to teach you to read tonight.”

*The Dragon Star Saga* is a continuous novel spread over several books. The Temple story arena and the rest of *The Dragon Star Saga* continues in *The Lost Temple (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3)*.

