

THE LOST TEMPLE

THE DRAGON STAR SAGA — BOOK THREE
(EPISODES 8-10)

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OVERTURE



OCEAN MIST and crisp parchment. The Yutan Ambassador stands on the deck of his realm's only warship, a hastily converted merchant vessel that once hauled spices and grains between the ports of the five inhabited realms. The hull still smells of canmurr, cumin, and cardamom. In the distance, the black walls of the human coastal city of Tanjii sit in the valley of a mountain range. A so-called free city denied unrestricted access to the waters by his ship and the two that accompany it — a long, slender wyrin vessel and a hulking iron rakthor warship. The roaggs fashioned few ships and could offer none to the Alliance blockade.

A breeze flutters the edges of the parchment in his hands and brings his attention back to its words. A missive just received via entwined clay boards and delivered by one of the ship's seers. A message from his mate, sight master and councilor in the Great Pod. A paltry number of words for news of such grave import. He reads them again.

“My love. It is worse than we feared. We may act too late. Reports of anomalies have reached me from across the realm. Disturbances in reality. I go now to investigate the most recent. May Tam sustain you. Sheema.”

He lowers the parchment.

What did she mean by anomalies? Are we too late? What does that mean for the world?

He raises his eyes to the walls of Tanjii across the waves. He wants to write back, but what can he say? Only one thought comes to mind.

If we are too late, may Tam sustain us all.

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 EIGHT



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."

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

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

STALE SWEAT and animal dung, dead fish and sour incense, hot meat pies and pungent wood oil. These and dozens of other smells jostled for dominance in the narrow streets beside the water. A faint breeze only helped to more thoroughly mingle the scents in the air along the docks of Tashi-Gano, the pilgrim town up the coast from the city of Tanjii. Five ships sat nearly ready at the piers, the last supplies carried by workers up slender gangplanks to the waiting vessels.

Sha-Kutan wrinkled his nose as he walked through the crowded wharf-side street. Sao-Tauna's legs clung to his shoulders, her hands gripping tight to his wide neck. The girl insisted on riding in this manner whenever they walked for long periods of time or when she wished to see over the heads of a crowd. Her high perch afford her the best view. Not that she commented on what she saw as most children would. Her only communication came at the times when she decided to get down, gently tapping the side of his head as though giving manual instruction to a simple beast of burden. Sha-Kutan took no offense from the gesture. Sao-Tauna meant no insult by anything she did.

He glanced over to where Lee-Nin walked beside him. She looked up, the expression on her face unreadable. He often did not know if she felt amused or annoyed or something in between when looking at him. At least she did not express fear. He usually relied on her scent to tell him her state of mind, but interference of the aromas near the docks rendered that impossible. His feelings in reaction to her regularly proved difficult to untangle. What were those feelings? Their unfamiliarity and their frequent intensity left him routinely disturbed by their source and nature.

We could mention it to Ogtankaa.

We could mention it to Lee-Nin

Yes, both...

Bad ideas.

Ogtankaa walked behind them. A part of them, yet apart from them. He did not need to see or smell her to know where she was or the mood of her minds. At this distance, he sensed her feelings as easily as he felt his own skin, and she the same for him.

"What do you think he wants?" Lee-Nin did not look back up to Sha-Kutan. She often complained of the need to crane her neck when speaking to him because of his height. Too often. Instead, she stared ahead to the back of the teenage boy who led them through the streets.

"I am sure he will tell us." Sha-Kutan did not understand why the captain of one of the five pilgrim vessels preparing for departure wanted to see them. He wondered at the mystery himself. How had the man even known they were in the town? They'd arrived only three mornings prior.

"You could speculate." Lee-Nin looked askance at him, long enough to make it evident that her mood tended toward annoyance rather than amusement.

"I will allow you to speculate." Sha-Kutan turned sideways to dodge an overly large woman

with a basket of bright-orange squashes balanced upon her head. He turned back to find Lee-Lin glaring at him briefly before she, too, sidestepped a pedestrian encumbered with produce.

“There is no need to speculate.” Ogtankaa stepped close to their heels to avoid the need to shout in the crowded street. “He wants something.”

“How can you know?” Lee-Nin looked back to Ogtankaa.

“Unfamiliar men never ask for mysterious meetings unless they want something.” Ogtankaa sounded certain of herself.

Lee-Nin seemed to consider this a moment and then nodded silently in agreement. Sha-Kutan could not find fault with this thinking based on his experience. However, what the captain wanted was not as important a question as whether they would wish to provide it. This issue raised notions of how the coming meeting might play out, and Sha-Kutan adjusted the strap of the sack over his left shoulder and across his back. The sack held their limited possessions, but most importantly, it contained his sword. A large sword drew too many worried looks and gathered too much unwanted attention, so he kept it in the sack and kept the sack on his shoulder. Ogtankaa did not hide her sword. The blade at her waist, her own surprising height for a woman, the long coat flaring out below her knees, and the stern features of her face left most passersby feeling imposed upon regardless of their sex or their size. Were it not for the little girl roosting upon Sha-Kutan’s shoulders, they would have appeared to be two formidable guards for the small woman they accompanied. He ruminated briefly on the knowledge that Sao-Tauna presented far more danger to anyone they encountered than he and Ogtankaa, either alone or together.

It is a shame the man who hunts us knows to fear the girl.

It is a shame we do not have time to hunt him.

“This way.” The boy they followed turned onto one of the newly rebuilt piers and headed toward the largest of the five pilgrim ships.

Sha-Kutan stared up at the three tall masts and the sails bound around their crossbeams. He remembered the names of those parts of the ship — the yards, foremast, mainmast, and mizzenmast. Oddly, he could not quite discern which of the minds within his mind originally knew those words and why. Regardless, the ship gave the impression of swiftness and power and even a hint of grace. He wondered what it would be like to sail across the open waters upon such a vessel.

They trailed behind the boy as he led them up and across a gangplank crowded with sailors and pilgrims hauling crates, caskets, sacks, and baskets of supplies aboard the ship. He led them in a weaving pattern between the people hustling around the main deck, to the rear of the ship, and up a short ladder to a raised second deck with a tall rudder wheel.

The aftcastle.

At the stern.

Our minds are truly...

Beginning to merge.

Near the wheel rudder of the ship, leaning against a tall wooden railing, stood a man with a short-cropped beard and rich, dark skin. Not a small man, he nonetheless looked surprised by the

size of Sha-Kutan when he climbed up the steep stairs. Two other men, crew members by the look of their clothes and bare feet, cleaned the deck with mops.

Swab. Swab the decks.

What a strange word.

Through silent agreement, borne as much of natural inclinations as previous experience, Lee-Nin spoke for their small group.

“You asked to see us?” Lee-Nin stepped before Sha-Kutan as Ogtankaa joined him at his side.

“To see if you are real,” the man said in Pundareese-tinted Shen. He walked forward and offered his hand to Lee-Nin. “I am Captain Faragg.”

“What do you want?” Lee-Nin clasped the captain’s hand only briefly. Sha-Kutan noted that she did not offer her name.

“As I said, to see if you are real.” The captain looked toward Sao-Tauna atop Sha-Kutan’s shoulders with a smile. “And to see if she is real.”

The man’s mention of Sao-Tauna unsettled Sha-Kutan and visibly disturbed Lee-Nin and Ogtankaa. Lee-Nin stepped back, reaching up to take Sao-Tauna down from his shoulders as Ogtankaa brushed aside the long flap of her coat and placed her hand upon her waist near the hilt of her sword. Sha-Kutan made no motion for the sword in the sack on his back. No need to forewarn potential enemies of one’s armament. The two crew members stopped cleaning as they noticed the tension and motion of the strangers on deck. They stood holding their mops in one hand while gripping the work knives at their belts with the other.

“All is well.” Captain Faragg raised his hands in a supplicating fashion as he looked to his crewmen. “Leave us.” The captain gestured to the men and waited until they climbed down the stairs to the main deck before turning back to his guests. “My apologies if I upset you. I mean no harm. I saw you in the streets of the town this morning, but I have been dreaming of you for some time.”

“Dreaming?” Lee-Nin still looked wary of the captain and held Sao-Tauna at her side. The girl seemed unfazed by the captain or any of the events transpiring around her.

“Not recently, not since the Goddess’s dreams ended for everyone, but before that, yes.” Captain Faragg looked from Lee-Nin to Sao-Tauna. “For weeks, I dreamed of you all. Seeing you walking with pilgrims on the old road or alone through fields. Sometimes it seemed you were being chased. But the dreams always centered on her, on the girl. I think the Goddess sent me these dreams for a reason.”

“Why would you dream of us?” Lee-Nin sounded skeptical.

“I believe the Goddess wants me to take you to the Forbidden Realm.” Captain Faragg stared at Sao-Tauna. “To take her.”

“You are offering us passage?” Lee-Nin glanced to Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa, her face confused.

Sha-Kutan understood her confusion. They had been discussing the problem of how to get to the Forbidden Realm since arriving in the pilgrim town and discovering that places on the five ships slated to depart were already claimed. They had assumed they would need to wait for weeks

or months to gain passage to their destination. Time where they were easy targets for the man still hunting Sao-Tauna.

“What do you want in return?” Sha-Kutan asked this question.

“Nothing.” The captain shook his head, looking offended at the idea. “I am giving you passage on my ship to serve the Goddess. She gave me those dreams because you are important. Because the girl is important. I don’t even know your names.”

By his tone and his scent, Sha-Kutan judged the man to be honest. It seemed passage to the Forbidden Realm came more easily than expected.

“I am Lee-Nin. This massive lump of flesh is Sha-Kutan. The stern-looking one is Ogtankaa. And this is Sao-Tauna.” Lee-Nin eased her hold on the girl.

Sao-Tauna said nothing, as usual, merely raising her small free hand in silent greeting. The captain mimicked the gesture in reply.

“You are all welcome to my ship.” Captain Faragg looked up from Sao-Tauna. “I will have my first mate find you good accommodations. Do you have any things you need to fetch?”

“We carry what we have.” Sha-Kutan shrugged his shoulder to indicate his bag.

“What about the blockade?” Ogtankaa looked out toward the bay beyond the town’s docks. Upon their arrival in the pilgrim town, everyone they met told them about the blockade and speculated what it would mean and how the Goddess would break it.

Sha-Kutan did not entirely understand why the peoples of the other realms, acting as what they called The Alliance, enforced a blockade on ships departing the city, especially pilgrim ships. They claimed that an ambassadorial vessel carrying representatives of all four realms sank after an attack by a pilgrim ship. This seemed implausible to Sha-Kutan, and to everyone they spoke to in the town. But it did not matter. The blockade of ships from the other realms worked in concert to prevent any vessels leaving the bay without being boarded and checked for pilgrims. He doubted the Tanjii elders would stand for such an imposition for long. He also doubted it would take much time before pilgrims began to depart from other ports around the realm.

“We’ll stick close to the coast and sail at night with no lights.” The captain stared out to the open water. “We should be able to get past their ships, and even if we encounter them, they can’t stop all of us. This ship...”

A man’s voice, shouting from a distance, turned Sha-Kutan’s attention from the captain’s speech and toward the docks of the small town. He spotted the yelling man easily enough. The man pointed to the roof of a nearby building. Although he could not make out what the man said, a sense of danger pervaded the man’s tone. Sha-Kutan extended his preternatural senses as he turned away, sighting a second man standing atop the roof of a two-story building holding an empty bow in one hand, his other hand still held at his cheek. He recognized the man instantly — the soldier who hunted them.

Sha-Kutan shoved Lee-Nin, knocking her into Sao-Tauna. He saw no flying arrow but hoped to push the woman and girl out of the projectile’s path. Sao-Tauna’s cry of shock and pain told him of his failure even before he saw the wooden shaft sticking from her tiny breast. She collapsed to the deck, her eyes blinking in surprise and pain. Sha-Kutan knelt beside her, checking the entry

of the arrow and examining the wound.

“Sao-Tauna!” Lee-Nin crouched at the girl’s side, holding her frail, trembling face.

“What is happening?” Captain Faragg looked around and then bent beside Sha-Kutan and Lee-Nin.

“It will be okay.” Lee-Nin stroked Sao-Tauna’s head as the girl panted and moaned. The arrow pierced her right lung, making it difficult for her to breathe. Judging from where the shaft lodged, the intended target had been her heart.

“Find him.” Sha-Kutan spoke to Ogtankaa, still standing above them. Her gaze followed the man on the roof as he ran away. He did not need to tell her to kill the man. She understood the anger in his voice.

We should have killed him...

Killing is never the right choice, even when it is the only choice.

Ogtankaa looked to Sha-Kutan and nodded in reply before leaping down the stairs to the main deck. She would find the man. And she would end the threat he posed. How had the soldier managed to get so close to both him and Ogtankaa without being noticed? Had he learned to mask his presence somehow? Other questions demanded his attention more urgently.

“Can you save her?” Lee-Nin stared into Sha-Kutan’s eyes, her own brimming with tears.

“The arrow passed clean through.” Sha-Kutan examined where the arrow shaft exited Sao-Tauna’s slender back. “We can cut the arrow and pull the shaft out, but her lungs will fill with blood. I do not know what to do to stop that.” Sha-Kutan had seen such wounds. They never ended with survival of the wounded. Already Sao-Tauna’s breath came in wheezes accompanied by an unsettling gurgling sound.

“We need a healer.” Captain Faragg stood. “I know a man on one of the other ships.” He ran to the railing and shouted to one of his crewmen on the main deck.

Sao-Tauna coughed between small cries of pain, blood spewing from her delicate mouth to cover her dress.

For a moment, Sha-Kutan found himself incapable of moving, unable to think properly. She could not die. He looked from Sao-Tauna to Lee-Nin and back again, his heart burning with anger and anguish and recriminations. He had vowed to protect the girl and failed.

She cannot die.

We must save her.

As she has saved us.

TWENTY-FOUR DAYS AGO

WOOD SMOKE drifted in the evening air, the acrid smell clashing with the scent of roasting rabbit flesh and the earthy aroma of grass and shrubs in the forest glade. The fire cast a flickering light across the grass, shadows dancing through the nearby trees, the illumination welcome, unlike the heat it added to the warm summer night.

Sha-Kutan rotated the rabbit on a spit above the fire. Sao-Tauna stared, her mouth open,

licking her lips in anticipation.

“Soon?” Sao-Tauna asked. Only great hunger or great curiosity coaxed the reticent girl to speak.

“Yes. Soon.” Sha-Kutan knew better than to suggest that she help Lee-Nin unpack a set of a small bowls for the meal. The girl had a singular focus, which he admired. He watched as Lee-Nin filled the bowls with rice from a pot. She had told him the rice would cook before the rabbit, but he had ignored her, as he did not see how it mattered. Ogtankaa sat nearby, sharpening the blade of the knife she’d used to skin the animal.

“Should we try again?” Lee-Nin sat the four bowls of rice on a blanket next to the fire. Beside her lay a crossbow and a small quiver, salvaged from an attack by soldiers two weeks prior. Lee-Nin’s interest in the weapon unfortunately exceeded his or Ogtankaa’s knowledge of it, but she practiced every evening.

Sao-Tauna gazed at the rice for a moment, seeming to consider whether to eat it, but turned her hungry gaze back to the roasting rabbit.

“Try again to join a pilgrim band?” Ogtankaa re-sheathed her knife.

“Yes,” Lee-Nin said. “It’s safer in the larger groups. We stand out too much alone.”

“We stand out everywhere.” Ogtankaa sat down on the blanket beside Lee-Nin.

“We can travel at night. Alone.” Sha-Kutan pulled the rabbit from the spit and brought it to the others. He ripped the legs free of the roasted carcass and placed one in each bowl before slicing away chunks of lean flesh with his knife. Sao-Tauna followed him and grabbed the rabbit leg from her bowl as she sat on the blanket.

They hid in the woods that night because earlier in the day the man who hunted them found the pilgrim band they had traveled with for more than two weeks. The soldier who wished Sao-Tauna dead managed to enlist the help of a Daeshen militia hunting heretics. Sha-Kutan, and Sao-Tauna’s fellow protectors, ran before being sighted, but he had no doubt that many of the pilgrims died at the hands of the militia. He frowned at that thought, wishing he could have stayed and fought, but the numbers looked too great and the risk to Sao-Tauna even greater.

“We make it a danger for the pilgrims when we are found.” Sha-Kutan sat on the blanket but did not touch his food.

“I’ve been thinking of a way to hide in the pilgrim bands.” Lee-Nin chewed a small bite of rabbit before she continued. “He is looking for four of us now. That’s what they ask when someone sneaks into a pilgrim camp to question the pilgrims. But what if we were in the same pilgrim group, but not together. Sao-Tauna and I could show up in the morning and the two of you would follow close and join the group at night. This way, we’d be together, but not seem to be together. It might throw him off for a time.”

“We should have lain in wait and killed him before he gained a militia to help him.” Ogtankaa used her fingers to scoop rice into her mouth.

“Lee-Nin’s plan makes sense. We should try it. If it does not work, we can travel by night.” Sha-Kutan turned to Lee-Nin and Ogtankaa, who both nodded, their mouths full.

He looked at his food and raised his palms to his chest in prayer. The others found it strange,

but he gained great comfort in his old habits.

*“Prayer will not change your food or the world...
but it will transform your mind.”*

Jandu Laanta’s words in his...

Book of Inner Transformations

As Sha-Kutan lowered his head and closed his eyes, something pricked at his mind. He opened his eyes and looked around the glade. Ogtankaa clutched the hilt of her knife. She sensed it, too.

“What is it?” Lee-Nin whispered and pulled Sao-Tauna to her side. The girl noted the anxiety of the adults but continued to gnaw at her rabbit leg.

“Something is close.” Sha-Kutan rose to his feet, grabbing his sword from where it lay near the blanket, unsheathing it silently.

“Something dangerous.” Ogtankaa stood and bared her sword as well.

Lee-Nin climbed to her feet and clutched at Sao-Tauna, placing herself and the child between Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa. A rustling in the trees at the edge of the clearing called their eyes in unison to a man walking from the shadows into the firelight.

“The danger stands beside you in that man.” The stranger spoke as he stared at Sha-Kutan. He stood over average height for a man, his skin pale, his eyes bright blue. He carried no weapons and seemed unconcerned with those displayed before him.

Sha-Kutan did not recognize the man, but he knew the manner of being that inhabited him. Taksa Kranee. The same as the one co-mingled in the body called Ogtankaa.

“You need not be here.” Ogtankaa stepped forward as she spoke to the man approaching the fire.

“It should not be here.” The man continued to stare at Sha-Kutan as he stopped a few paces away. He stood far enough to still be seen easily in the firelight, but not so close as to be within the range of a sword blade.

“An arrangement has been made.” Ogtankaa sounded both defensive and concerned.

Sha-Kutan wondered at Ogtankaa’s thoughts and her possible actions. Would she honor her oath, or would she betray him?

“There is no arrangement.” The man scowled at Ogtankaa. “You have abandoned your duty.”

“How did you find us?” Ogtankaa asked. “I sought this one for many years before finding him.”

“I did not find him. I found you.” The man shook his head in sadness. “Have you been here so long among these simple beings that you have forgotten our abilities as well as our ways?”

“The medallion.” Ogtankaa spoke the words as though realizing something obvious yet easily forgotten.

“Yes. The medallion.” The man pulled an ornate metal medallion from beneath his shirt.

Sha-Kutan tightened his grip upon the hilt of the sword. Now that the man had removed the medallion, he could sense the nearly imperceptible connection between it and the one he wore around his own neck — a faint trilling that vibrated beyond sound or sight at the very edge of thought. He felt stupid for holding the medallion as a threat to Ogtankaa, as it now posed a danger

to them all — Sao-Tauna in particular if the Taksa Kranee standing before them learned of her special nature.

“This one must be returned to its proper place, and you must return with me.” The man came a half pace closer.

“I thought this as well at first,” Ogtankaa advanced toward the man, her hand still on her sword, the tip now pointed to the ground. “It is not unwelcomed in its host. It is a mutual joining. Like ours.” She gestured to her chest. “Like yours must be.”

“Even if such a thing were possible, it is unnatural and cannot be allowed.” The man shook his head again. “You know this.”

“There is more here...” Ogtankaa’s voice faded as she spoke.

Sha-Kutan guessed that she started to mention Sao-Tauna and then reconsidered. He hoped she would not remark on the girl. It would put her in great peril.

“I am uninterested in your justifications.” The man held the medallion out and before him, a faint tendril of light wafting forth from his chest to touch the metal surface.

Sha-Kutan’s head buzzed as the nature of reality before him shifted, a fissure of arcing light opening above his head.

“Wait!” Lee-Nin shouted.

“You do not understand.” Ogtankaa walked toward the man, her sword raised. The man stretched his hand toward her, a blast of living light emanating from his open palm to engulf and restrain her.

Sha-Kutan looked up to the glowing rend breaking the air above him and stared into another world, a place of dark shadows and twisted forms.

I cannot go back. Not now. Not after all I have become...

We can run...

Yes, we can...

Sha-Kutan felt himself begin to separate, the immaterial part of his being, the shadow nature, drawn inextricably upward and into the gaping maw of phosphorescence-ringed darkness. The filament of energy and essence connected to his human half began to dissipate. The shadow aspect looked with disembodied eyes to see the human side of himself staring upward at it in horror. Beside him, Ogtankaa struggled against a writhing chain of light that held her tight. Lee-Nin stood clutching Sao-Tauna. He wanted to cry out to the girl for help but did not know how she could, ashamed that he needed her protection when he’d failed in his vow to guard her.

Sao-Tauna frowned and dropped the rabbit leg, now a well-chewed bone, as she raised her finger to the air. Sha-Kutan watched as the rift of energy consuming him began to transform, the light blazing at the edges of the unnatural portal shifting from blueish-white to a pulsing amber. His perception altered instantly as his shadow nature snapped back into the body of the man called Sha-Kutan.

I did not know...

She could do such a thing...

“What is this?” The Taksa Kranee dropped the medallion, letting it fall against his chest as he

raised his other hand toward Sao-Tauna. “What are you?”

Sha-Kutan moved to stand before Sao-Tauna, placing himself between the Taksa Kranee and the girl. But the Taksa Kranee did not attack. Instead, he looked up, his eyes filled with surprise. Above them, the rent in the air no longer revealed a passage to a realm of shadow, but rather one of brilliant, cascading light with towering trees that glowed from an inner illumination.

The man cried out as a blazing, winged being ascended from his chest, pulled toward the shining cleavage in the air. Ogtankaa slumped as the brilliant chain of energy restraining her vanished. Sha-Kutan watched the vaporous string of radiance connecting the human man to the luminescent being faded, the opening to the other realm pulling it through to the other side. When the resplendent wings passed beyond the edge of the portal to the incandescent realm, Sao-Tauna dropped her hand, the blazing portal blinking out of existence. The man, the former host of the Taksa Kranee, fainted and fell to the ground.

Silence filled the wooded glade, the crackling of the fire the only sound heard between the trees. Sha-Kutan stilled his breath and knelt beside Sao-Tauna. He took her small hand between both of his massive palms.

“Thank you.” Sha-Kutan did not try to express his feelings with more words. None were needed with the girl.

“I won’t let them take you away.” Sao-Tauna smiled at him and placed her other hand atop both of his.

“Have you seen that realm before?” A worrisome thought crept into Sha-Kutan’s mind.

Sao-Tauna nodded.

“Have you seen of more beyond those two?” Sha-Kutan’s throat tightened with the question. He had only ever known three realms to exist — his own dark world, the realm the Taksa-Kranee came from, and the one they stood in presently.

“Yes.” Sao-Tauna frowned and looked away. “Some are easy to get to. But some are hard to get to.”

“Do not try to reach them on your own.” Sha-Kutan did not wish to think of the girl pulled into a foreign realm by herself.

Sao-Tauna nodded her head in serious agreement.

“What do we do with him?” Lee-Nin pointed to the collapsed man in the tall grass, her hand shaking as much as her voice.

“Let him sleep.” Ogtankaa did not take her widened eyes from Sao-Tauna. “We can leave him food, but we should flee soon.”

“Yes.” Sha-Kutan released Sao-Tauna’s hands. “We should not be here when he wakes.” He took the medallion from beneath his shirt and pulled the lanyard over his head. He grasped the disk between the fingers of his hands and twisted it. The brittle metal snapped. He glanced at Ogtankaa, who nodded, before tossing the two halves of the medallion into the fire. Lee-Nin watched him closely.

“Are there more things like you hunting us?” Lee-Nin glared accusingly at Ogtankaa.

“There probably were not, but there likely will be now.” Ogtankaa stared into the fire. “It will

be more difficult for them now with the medallion destroyed.”

“And what will they do to her if they find us?” Lee-Nin stepped closer to the other woman.

“The same as I would have done when we first met.” Ogtankaa turned away.

“Then we will need to make certain they never find us again.” Lee-Nin directed this statement to Sha-Kutan.

“We will keep her safe.” Sha-Kutan turned to Sao-Tauna and repeated his pledge. “I will keep you safe.”

THE PRESENT

BLOOD SOAKED through wool and stained skin, dripping down to pool on weathered wood. Sao-Tauna’s eyes fluttered as she cried and stared at Lee-Nin and Sha-Kutan.

“We must do something.” Lee-Nin held Sao-Tauna’s head as she looked into Sha-Kutan’s eyes.

Uncertainty gripped Sha-Kutan’s mind. He did not know enough about dressing such an injury. He remembered seeing a man wounded in such a manner once, long ago. He also remembered what happened to the man.

“I will do what I can.” Sha-Kutan pulled his knife from the sheath at his belt and sawed through the end of the arrow sticking from the girl’s chest. He rubbed his fingers around the cut end of the arrow shaft to make sure it had not splintered.

“A lamp.” Sha-Kutan looked to the captain. “I need a lamp. A lit lamp.” The captain stared at him without comprehension. “For the flame. To cauterize the wounds and stop the blood.”

The captain nodded and ran to the edge of the aftcastle deck, calling out to the crew below for a lantern.

Sha-Kutan tore the fabric of Sao-Tauna’s dress free from the punctures in the front and back.

“You have done this before?” Lee-Nin held Sao-Tauna on her side as he inspected the exit point of the arrow.

“I have seen it done.” Sha-Kutan did not mention the full extent of what he remembered from that day long ago.

The captain ran to their side with a lantern burning bright. Sha-Kutan sat the lantern down, opened the hinged glass door, and thrust the tip of his knife blade into the flame.

“Hold this in the fire.” He gestured for the captain to grasp the hilt of the knife and returned his attention to Sao-Tauna. She looked at him with pleading eyes.

“Make it stop.” Sao-Tauna coughed up a handful of blood as she spoke. Lee-Nin wiped it away with the edge of her dress sleeve.

“I will try.” Sha-Kutan gently held Sao-Tauna’s small body as he pulled the arrow straight through and out the back.

Sao-Tauna screamed in pain as the wooden shaft came free. Blood gushed from the holes in her chest and back. Sha-Kutan shook his head. He did not remember this happening to the man long ago. Had he been wrong? Should he have waited for the healer?

“She’s bleeding to death.” Lee-Nin tried to staunch the flow of blood with her hands.

“Hold her still.” Sha-Kutan said to Lee-Nin. He then looked into Sao-Tauna’s eyes. “This will hurt greatly.”

The girl only nodded. Sha-Kutan took the handle of the knife from the captain and pulled it from the flame of the lantern. He pushed Lee-Nin’s hands from the girl’s chest and pressed the glowing tip of the blade to the open gash of flesh. A hiss of searing skin and vaporizing blood surrounded the wound as Sao-Tauna screamed and thrashed. He pushed the blade into the flame until it glowed again and repeated the procedure on the laceration in Sao-Tauna’s back.

“Will it work?” Lee-Nin stroked Sao-Tauna’s hair as the girl’s eyes rolled into her head and her moans of pain ceased.

“I do not...” Sha-Kutan could not finish the thought. Sao-Tauna’s eyes opened wide as she began a coughing fit, blood spewing over her face and dress.

“Her lungs are filling.” Lee-Nin wiped Sao-Tauna’s face as the girl coughed up more and more blood. “What can we do?”

“I do not know.” Sha-Kutan slumped beside Sao-Tauna, once more taking her small hand in his own.

Our haste and carelessness...

have killed her.

All we can do...

is pray.

Sha-Kutan stared at Sao-Tauna as she coughed again. Soon she would pass out from blood loss and then she would drown in that same blood as it filled her tiny lungs. Only the swift arrival of a very skilled healer might save the girl now.

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

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

VERDANT VINES with wide leaves and thick stems enveloped ancient stones worn down by countless years of wind, rain, and ocean spray. Raedalus cast his eyes around the ruins of the ancient, alien city and the broad, curving avenue before him. He stood with the others of the exploring party that included Junari, Bon-Tao, Kantula, Jupiterus, the captains of the four surviving ships, several strong pilgrims armed with hatches for cutting vegetation, and an older man named Tanagaal — a seer from Juparti. Three seers had accompanied them across the Zha Ocean. Tanagaal, the most experienced of the three, had been the most useful. In part, because he was the only one to survive.

Three of the pilgrim men held long ropes coiled and slung over their shoulders, while the captains each held unlit oil lamps in their hands. Taksati and her helper, Atula, handed out water skins to each person. Two of the pilgrim men carried dried fish and stale dinbao in bags over their shoulders. The old woman had pointed out that they had no idea how quickly they would find the temple, and that they should be provisioned for a long day. When Junari requested her to accompany them, Taksati had demurred, insisting that someone needed to remain and organize the pilgrims for what came next. Raedalus wondered what would follow their arrival. Finding the temple? Rebuilding it from ruins? With the absence of the Goddess's guiding dreams, he no longer knew what the future held.

He looked back at the ships moored along the crumbling stone piers of the dead city's port. While it appeared as though the harbor once held berths for over a hundred ships, they had been lucky to find four not completely crumbled into the rough waves of the ocean. The several hundred pilgrims who had survived the long voyage helped to unload the ships of the remaining food supplies and construction equipment. Barrels of dried fish lined the broken stones along one side of the docks while crates of rope, hammers, and chisels filled the other.

"I think we are ready."

Raedalus turned back to the sound of Junari's voice. She looked around at the party of men and women. She appeared apprehensive. At least to him. Probably no one else noticed. Bon-Tao possibly, but not the others. The man had spent a great deal of time in Junari's company during their journey to the Forbidden Realm. Enough to stoke a sharp jealousy in Raedalus's breast, but not so much that he suspected them of consummating their clandestine courtship. To the rest of the party, Junari presumably looked excited. He knew her too well not to recognize the trepidation in her eyes.

"We have paid a painful price to stand here in this mysterious city." Junari looked past the people nearest her toward the crowd of pilgrims along the docks. She paused a moment, a flicker of sadness crossing her face. Then she turned back to the city proper. "Let us move with caution. These ruins are older than anything I have heard of in any realm, human or otherwise. It looks as

though the jungle vines are all that hold the walls of these ancient edifices together. Touch nothing that looks unstable. And stay close together. We do not know what manner of wild beast may make its home in these long-abandoned structures. May the Goddess bless us and guide us to her temple.”

Junari nodded to Bon-Tao and the two of them walked side by side into the city. Raedalus walked behind her with the seer, Tanagaal. Jupiterus and Kantula followed, and the rest of the party fell into line after them. As they passed from the docks, two massive stone structures loomed between the buildings, marking the entrance to the main avenue. Raedalus thought of them as sculptures, though they looked like no statue he had ever seen. The stone appeared melted and warped, the intended shape left indiscernible, more so due to erosion over time. He could not tell if the statues were of animals, only that they stood on four limbs and possessed rounded bodies and a large head. He looked away from them, an unsettling sense of foreboding filling his gut.

They walked in silence along the spacious, curved avenue, the eyes of each party member scanning their surroundings. From the reports of the sailors who had climbed the central masts of the ships in the harbor, the boulevard they walked along from the docks comprised one of three such thoroughfares, each turning in a rightward spiral toward a wide plaza in the center of the city, where a three-storied domed structure sat. They hoped this building proved to be the temple from their dreams. Side streets cut from the main avenues, allowing quicker progress toward the city center, but most appeared overgrown with dense vegetation.

Raedalus glanced down at his feet as he followed behind Junari and Bon-Tao. While the wide paving stones of the streets were largely intact, the passage of time left many of them sunk into the ground at odd angles, making progress slow. He had tripped once already that morning at the docks. The avenue featured several trees grown up from overturned paving stones, but it remained mostly free of vegetation in the center. As they walked, bird calls filled the air, their songs as foreign as the colorings of their wings. He spied a large brown creature with a wide tail darting behind the vine-encrusted wall of a crumbling building up ahead. The Forbidden Realm seemed to hold only the unfamiliar, from the wildly over-sized leaves of the vines and trees colonizing the long dead city, to the garish, bright flowers shooting up between weeds in the cracks of the paving stones, to the strange beasts that lurked in its ruins, to the husk of the city itself, formed of an architecture that had once likely been imposing and elegant, but which now, in its decay, gave the impression of a great beast left to rot in its demise until only a flora-enveloped skeleton remained.

All the structures of the city possessed two obvious qualities — they were far larger than expected, and they beheld no straight lines. The walls of all the buildings, whether close set or far apart, curved to create convex structures with domed roofs. Often several curved buildings combined to form a single, sprawling complex. What Raedalus assumed to be windows were circular as well, although devoid of anything that might have been glass. The doorways of the buildings were all high and rounded, implying that the city’s absent inhabitants had stood quite tall. While the wooden doors had long ago rotted away, what could be glimpsed of the darkened interiors gave little indication as to their original purpose. They took the time to examine a few buildings but found them mostly empty — expansive round chambers bereft of much beyond tall stone tables in the middle of the rooms.

Raedalus could not discern which structures might have been shops or homes or served some civic function. Even the taller buildings, which never rose above three stories, displayed no obvious utility. Evidently painted in various bright colors long ago, the harsh sun of unnumbered years faded the pigment until only the vaguest impression of color remained upon the gray-black granite and basalt stones that interlocked in a mortar-less fashion to construct the city's dwellings.

They passed through a small plaza as the avenue widened. He noted two more statue-like structures, their features as uninterpretable as those near the docks, although they stood only to the height of a single building. A side street ran to the right beside one of the statues. Overgrown with vegetation, its narrow, curved walls lay darkened in shadow even under the bright sun of mid-morning.

"What do you think?" Junari asked as she paused to peer down the side street. "Shall we try to cut our way through or follow the main path?"

Raedalus did not bother voicing a reply, as he knew the question had been posed for one man alone.

"Chopping vines takes time," Bon-Tao said in stilted Mumtiba. "Best follow big road. Find better path later."

"I could try to push them away with The Sight," Tanagaal offered as he squinted into the impassable street.

"No," Junari said as she began walking again. "There may be need of your skills later. As we have learned, it is unwise to exhaust your mind unnecessarily."

"True." Tanagaal looked away and said nothing more. The lesson Junari referred to had been painful for everyone, most especially, Tanagaal himself.

They walked on for a time before crossing a similar small plaza with another plant-obstructed side street and a set of misshapen statues.

"I think they have been vandalized."

Raedalus followed the outstretched arm of Tanagaal toward one of the sculptures. Like the others, the stone of its features sat twisted in disconcerting lines that obscured its intended image. The party came to a halt as Junari stopped and looked from Tanagaal to the statue.

"I've seen that done to a statue before." Tanagaal wiped the sweat from the dark-brown skin of his balding head. "Stone can only be contorted like that with The Sight, and it takes a powerful seer to accomplish it."

Raedalus watched Junari as she shifted her gaze between the distorted effigies and then back to the rounded buildings lining the avenue.

"If one possessed The Sight with such skill, why not simply destroy them?" Junari rubbed her chin. "And who would do such a thing?"

"Who or what?" One of the captains, Tunadar, shielded his eyes against the sun as he examined the mangled features of the closest statue. He'd been the leader of their small fleet and the captain of the vessel Raedalus and Junari traveled aboard. A good man to have close when things went wrong.

"And how long ago?" Tanagaal added. "Where did these people all go?"

“There are too many questions in this city.” Junari sighed and looked away from the others.

“Possibly the temple will provide some answers when we find it.” Raedalus stared down the spiraling avenue, wondering how long it might take to reach the temple that had once called to them in their dreams each night. Dreams that since the beginning of their sea voyage had been bereft of the Goddess’s imprint.

“Yes.” Junari nodded with a small smile at Raedalus, and he responded in kind. “Let us proceed.”

They continued along the main avenue, following the curve of the spiral through the decayed remnants of a long dead civilization unknown in all the realms. As they walked, Raedalus listened to the strange calls of mysterious birds and the sound of the breeze whistling around broken walls and rustling the leaves that grew over them. He thought of the questions posed by the city and those presented by the temple they sought. What manner of beings had once walked this avenue? Why had they left? Had they died out? Had they moved to another location somewhere else along the expansive coast or deeper into the vast interior of the Forbidden Realm? And why had the urris banned this realm? Were they responsible for the disappearance of these people? Or had the urris been the inhabitants of the city in an age long before the Origin Time?

Junari spoke truly — this city posed too many questions.

Raedalus nearly thudded into Bon-Tao’s back as Junari and the man came to a halt. She pointed to a side street that appeared somewhat less engulfed with greenery than those they previously encountered.

“What do you think?” Junari walked closer to the street. “Is the vegetation thin enough to make passage possible? It may cut an hour or two from the day. I would prefer to return to the ships to sleep tonight rather than need to make camp in these strange streets after sunset.”

“Not so many vines.” Bon-Tao pulled his sword from the scabbard at his side and swung it at a swath of emerald and yolk-colored vines. The blade swept through the plants with ease, opening the entrance to the side street enough for a man to pass through.

“Yes.” Bon-Tao nodded to Junari and then turned to Kantula, Jupiterus, and the pilgrims with hatchets at their belts. “More hands.”

“Allow us, Mother Shepherd.” Kantula placed herself between the side street and Junari.

“Our ocean voyage has not left me an invalid,” Junari said as the others cleared the street. “I can help. Give me a blade.”

“It may not be safe.” Jupiterus frowned at the wall of foliage before them. “Maybe the next street we clear.”

Jupiterus and Kantula stayed close to Junari, slicing through what remained of the vines as they brought up the rear of the group just behind the three captains, each with a green-stained sword in his hand.

“Sometimes, I forget that I am not really responsible for this endeavor of ours.” Junari looked to Raedalus at her side.

“We are all responsible for different things.” Raedalus pushed the slender branch of a small tree out of her way. “You were responsible for leading us here, and they are responsible for keeping

you safe, so you can lead us to where we go next.”

“And you would not prefer to make yourself useful in our current efforts?” Junari’s voice held a teasing tone.

“I believe we are all aware that I am more likely to be a danger than a service to our party if I swing a blade.” Raedalus heard a soft snort of assent from Bon-Tao at the head of the group but ignored it. He stepped over a thick root crawling along the paving stones and reached out a hand to help Junari. She accepted his assistance as she raised the hem of her dress and stepped over the obstruction.

“I should have worn something more practical.” Junari continued to hold her dress high. Raedalus made a concerted effort to avoid looking at the well-muscled flesh of her calves. He did not need such distracting thoughts clouding his mind.

“I’m certain Taksati can fashion you...”

A guttural cry of panic rang out among the leaves and stones. One of the pilgrims struggled with vines wrapped around his torso and limbs.

“Get it off!” the man yelled.

Raedalus twitched at the man’s frenzy but froze as his own fear filled him from the bottom of his stomach. The vines around the pilgrim were not moving in response to the man’s motion — they bound him of their own volition, pulling him away from the center of the narrow street. The man yanked at the vines, but they wrapped around his neck and head, long thorns drawing blood as he called for help. Bon-Tao, Captain Tunadar, and the others rushed to assist him. Raedalus saw that the living vines emanated from a leathery green-grayish lump the size of a large dog. It looked like a massive turnip that somehow attached itself to the stone wall and whose roots now yanked the hapless pilgrim toward it.

Bon-Tao hacked at the vines, cautious to avoid striking the man entangled in them. As the man’s leg touched the root-rump of the plant, all of its creepers burst into a bright white flame of extraordinary intensity.

Raedalus raised his hand to shield his face even as he placed himself before Junari. Bon-Tao leapt back from the flames that enshrouded the poor pilgrim trapped by the incendiary plant. Kantula and Jupiterus pulled Junari away, back down the street toward the main avenue as she struggled and shouted out to the wailing pilgrim caught in the blaze, calling out a prayer of protection to the Goddess Moaratana. Raedalus expected the prayer would have as little impact as all those spoken for the pilgrims who died on the long passage to the Forbidden Realm. Their goddess, once active in the world, their lives, and their dreams, had been silent for many weeks.

Beside him, Tanagaal dropped the sword in his hand and raised both palms to the inferno of plant vines burning around the screaming pilgrim. Bon-Tao, the four captains, and the other pilgrims stepped back, the blaze too hot to risk greater proximity. Raedalus watched Tanagaal as the man focused on the fire. He knew what the seer attempted to accomplish — extinguishing the conflagration — but whatever manifestation of The Sight he sought to render remained impossible to produce.

“It resists The Sight.” Tanagaal stepped closer, his jaw clenched tight.

The pilgrim trapped by the burning bramble ceased to struggle, his moans becoming quieter until they faded to silence. Tanagaal lowered his arms, his shoulders slumped in defeat. They watched until the fire-plant exhausted its fibrous fuel and became little more than a smoking mass of charred flesh and vines. As they walked back toward the exit of the side street, Raedalus noted that none of the other vegetation near the fire-plant did more than smoke. The nearby plants appeared immune to the flames. What manner of land did they walk in, and why had their goddess brought them to such a dangerous place?

In the main street, Junari stood beside Kantula and Jupiterus, tears in her eyes.

“Nothing could be done.” Bon-Tao reached for her hand but stopped before touching her fingers.

“We could have stayed on the main path, as you suggested.” Bitter self-recrimination filled Junari’s voice.

“You could not have known this would happen,” Raedalus offered. “None of us suspected these plants to be so dangerous.”

“And we have paid for our incautiousness, my recklessness, with yet another innocent life.” Junari sounded on the verge of shouting her words. He understood her pain. She blamed herself for every failing of the pilgrimage, every death, and never gave herself credit for any of their successes, extending that glory to the Goddess instead. He had told her repeatedly that no one could maintain such a disposition indefinitely, even one as strong of mind and heart as herself.

“They are not plants.” Tanagaal spoke loudly enough that everyone turned to look at him. “At least, not in the usual sense. They were created with The Sight. That is why I could not extinguish the flames of those vines.”

“You mean someone used The Sight to fashion plants that can trap their prey and burn them alive?” Junari blinked in obvious frustration. “Whatever for?”

“I cannot say.” Tanagaal shrugged. “Maybe they were not intended to be left in the streets.”

“And how long have they been in the streets?” Raedalus looked around at the layer of vibrant vines cloaking the city, a chill spreading outward from his stomach. “If there were enough of them, and they were here since the city fell to ruin, they might encompass nearly all the green we see around us.”

They stood in silence for a long moment as that thought disquieted them each in their own way.

“A trap.” Captain Tunadar looked around as he stroked his long, red beard. “A trap grown to the size of a city.”

“We stay on the main path.” Junari raised her voice as she started walking again. “And we avoid any plants with vines. We will return for the body and offer Joraus a proper burial for his family and friends.”

“We should go back now, Mother Shepherd,” Jupiterus said. Junari glared at her guard as a response. He took her meaning after a moment and looked away to scan the nooks and shadows of the avenue for potential threats.

They kept their eyes in motion, looking around for any possible danger, conversation reserved

for moments that brought into question their safety — an unexplained movement in a rubbled building, a plant swaying a little too much in the breeze, a stretch of vines reaching into the path, a bird calling from somewhere unseen. Anything that threatened them, which they now realized could be everything. They adopted a different formation, with Bon-Tao in the lead, the captains and pilgrims in a tight circle around Junari, and Kantula and Jupiterus at her side. Raedalus and Tanagaal walked behind Junari in the middle of the men.

Their slow pace gave Raedalus what he considered an unnecessary amount of time to ruminate on his place in the group and his usefulness. He had worried throughout their dangerous voyage at his ability to contribute to the success of the pilgrimage and what came once they were in the Forbidden Realm. His primary role had always been as a trusted adviser to the Mother Shepherd. Though he had done his best to provide thoughtful counsel while aboard the ship, what advice of any use could he offer in their current circumstances? His knowledge and expertise were useless in the middle of a city overrun by deadly flammable plants. He had only held a sword once, and it did not suit him. He did not like the feel of it in his hands, nor the ease with which it allowed him to take a life. He knew part of his worry found its root in his reaction to the man at the front of the expedition party — a man who wielded a sword as an extension of his very being. A man of action rather than contemplation. How could the Mother Shepherd, Junari, not find such a man attractive? He noticed the way she looked at Bon-Tao even now, her gaze lingering on the back of his tanned neck and broad shoulders. Who would not prefer to possess a polished sword instead of a box of books when exploring an ancient city fallen to ruins and filled with unknown dangers?

He mentally reprimanded himself for his distracting bout of self-pity. He would help the Mother Shepherd realize this phase of the Goddess's great plan, even if he needed to learn new skills and master new knowledge to do so. As he looked up, his mind and face filled with a new determination, the party followed the curve of the avenue into an expansive plaza five spans in width. While weeds struck up between the cracks of the wide paving stones, little vegetation encroached on the plaza, making the bulky structure in the center look even larger.

The temple of the ancient city, so similar in features to the ruins that until recently had inhabited their dreams for so many months, stretched nearly two hundred paces across, its three squat, rounded levels, each narrower than the last, stacked up at least thirty paces into the sky. The final level ended in a spacious, curved dome with a great, jagged fissure marring its appearance.

The party came to a halt in unison at the edge of the plaza, each silently gaping at the sight before them. The walls of the temple gave way in many places, especially around the rounded entryways and the circular windows. The structure looked like a more colossal version of every building they had passed along the spiral avenue to reach it — an alien construction with its sensuous lines of composition crumbling in certain spots and preserved in all their elegance in others.

“At least there are no vines upon it.” Tanagaal walked to the forefront of the group. “And it appears relatively intact.”

“Yes, it does.” Junari stepped forward as well, Kantula and Jupiterus close beside her.

“It is beautiful.” An undefined emotion overwhelmed Raedalus for a moment, and he blinked

his eyes in the glare of the bright sun. It suddenly felt as though he had stood in front of this magnificent temple before, in a long-forgotten age, and now stepped toward it once more, all clear memories of it erased by eons of passing time and only vague impressions of its glory leaving imprints upon his heart.

What did this feeling mean? Did his mind trick him due to the emotion of finally seeing the object of so many months of struggle and sacrifice born from now absent dreams? And why had the Goddess brought them here? Why this temple? Who were the people who built it and where had they gone? And why had they abandoned it?

A better question came to the fore of his mind among the multitude that churned there — why did the Goddess want them to rebuild these ancient ruins, and what would happen when they did?

“Let us see what is inside.” Junari strode past Bon-Tao toward the temple, her voice strong and her strides long. “So that we may discover the work that lies ahead of us to realize the Goddess’s desires.”

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

BIRD CALLS and the endless rhythmic crash of ocean surf against rocks filled the air along the desolate stretch of coast at the south side of the small pilgrim town. Kadmallin stood watching the waves, gnawing on a piece of dried fish. While not the best-tasting meal, it filled his stomach. Beside him, Sketkee sat writing notes in a leather-bound journal, frequently dipping her quill into a bottle of ink balanced on a nearby rock. Behind them lay their tent, far enough from the water to keep it dry, and farther still from the edge of the pilgrim town to keep them safe. While the pilgrims had offered them space in an overcrowded barn, only recently patched to habitability, as usual, they preferred to keep a distance from the humans. Close enough to seem part of the town's congregation, but far enough to ease curiosity and concern over Sketkee's rakhthor nature.

"I am going to head over to the docks." Kadmallin had spent the better part of each day since their arrival, a week ago, working at the docks to help prepare the ships for their voyage. All the pilgrims contributed some manner of labor to the effort of reaching the Forbidden Realm. Even Sketkee helped in her own way. Unable to walk freely in the town without attracting unwanted attention, she volunteered to guard the edges of the pilgrim settlement each night. While nothing had occurred since they arrived, apparently, the local [Kam-Djen fanatics from Tanjii](#) had attacked the town on more than one occasion in the past.

"I will await your return." Sketkee continued scratching her marks in the journal. "Tomorrow, you should remain here to guard the tent. It will have been three days since I examined the artifact, and I wish to note any changes."

"The ships plan to sail tomorrow, so that will be fine." Kadmallin watched her writing and envied her ability to wait patiently. He hated guarding the tent and their possessions while she took a day to journey into the city of Tanjii. He had no notes to keep him occupied, and he remembered the words of the one book he possessed by heart. It left his mind with too many hours to consider their situation.

They had convinced Viktik that it benefitted them for Kadmallin and Sketkee to live near the pilgrim town and become part of the community there. They needed to be seen as true pilgrims to have any hope of being assigned a place on one of the ships. Sketkee assured Viktik she would not flee, as he retained control of the artifact in the rakhthorian ambassadorial house at the center of Tanjii. The trip to the city from the pilgrim town took less than an hour by boat down the coast or two hours by foot along an old, rocky road. Sketkee tried to make the journey every few days to examine the device and ensure that Viktik did not change his mind about accompanying them to the Forbidden Realm.

Kadmallin, at first, hoped to bribe one of the five captains of the ships to give them a berth, but this proved impossible. The vessels held no spare space, and the captains found their faith in their goddess more rewarding than coin. Had they arrived a month earlier, there might have been

a chance, but too many pilgrims now crowded the once abandoned houses, barns, huts, and even old sheds of the town.

“Do you wish me to bring anything back with me when I return?” Kadmallin chewed the last of the dried fish and reached inside the tent for the water skin to wash it down.

Sketkee looked up from her writing. She blinked at the brightness of the sun.

“No.”

“Any new thoughts?” Kadmallin pointed to the journal in her hands.

“None.” Sketkee turned back to her task, applying the inked iron quill to paper. “Merely cataloging what we know by areas of interest rather than chronological order of discovery in hopes it will lead to a new understanding of the device’s nature and purpose.”

“Well, good luck with it,” Kadmallin said.

“It is a matter of categorization, not chance.” Sketkee continued to write.

Kadmallin smiled. He knew better than to press further with such a conversation.

“I’ll be back before sundown,” he said as he walked away. Sketkee said nothing, and he expected no reply.

He climbed up a small, wooded embankment to the coastal road into town. While not dense, the woods shielded their campsite from the lane and curious eyes. As he walked along the hundred paces to the edge of the town, he thought about the journey ahead of them. Convincing Viktik to pursue the mystery of the ancient device to the Forbidden Realm counted as an accomplishment, even if Sketkee did not control the device directly. They still hoped for some opportunity to regain possession of the artifact from Viktik, but no circumstance with any likelihood of success presented itself. They talked each night about possible plans to steal the artifact, but without passage on a pilgrim ship, even a successful theft left them with little gained. Viktik would simply track them to recover the device once more. And getting aboard a pilgrim ship seemed likely to take months. While five ships prepared to sail the next day, hoping to slip past the blockade of allied realms around the harbor, no more vessels stood ready to follow them. The only hope lay in waiting for ships to return from the Forbidden Realm. He did not look forward to that wait. Sketkee’s restless mind, even more so than his own, eventually needed something active to focus on.

Possibly, they could use a rakthor embassy ship to get past the blockade. He made a note to mention the notion to Sketkee that evening. He did not fully understand the rationale for a military cordon. It seemed an act more likely to provoke a war than to receive retribution for a claimed grievance. He gave no credence to the explanation than a pilgrim ship attacked and sank a vessel carrying high-ranking representatives of all four foreign realms. Firstly, why would rakthor, wyrin, yutan, and roagg ambassadors be on the same ship? And how might an unarmed pilgrim vessel sink it? The whole tale sounded concocted as a ruse to stop the pilgrims from leaving the Iron Realm, but for what reason, he could not fathom. What did it matter to the peoples of the other realms if a few thousand humans tried to sail to the Forbidden Realm? Their success posed no threat, and failure only highlighted the sanctity of The Pact — the ancient urris edict that forbade war between the realms and especially proscribed travel to the Forbidden Realm.

Kadmallin nodded hello to a family of pilgrims leaving their small, allotted home as he reached the edge of the town. He marveled at the level of organization of the settlement. A great deal of thought and planning went into the structure of the small society by the ocean. People were assigned to various roles, from baking bread to harvesting vegetables from nearby garden plots, to restoring buildings for habitation or repairing and stocking the ships at the newly reconstructed docks. And all of it accomplished without the exchange of currency. With nearly every need provided by their fellow pilgrims in return for their own participation, each person had few desires not met by the labor of the town. It worked as a system for a small town of people all dedicated to the same common goal, a goal held close in sight, but he wondered if such an arrangement could ever work elsewhere. Possibly in the rakthor realm, but his experience of human nature and its history led him to believe it would be difficult to achieve anywhere else in the Iron Realm.

As he came to the docks and neared the ship he'd been helping to ready for its voyage the last two weeks, something caught his eye, something that did not belong in the pilgrim town. A man stood atop the roof of a building across from the shipyard, a bow held in his hands, an arrow pulled tight to his cheek. At first, Kadmallin thought the man must be aiming at a bird near the ships, intending to down a fowl for dinner. But as he traced the line of sight from the man's arrow tip, he saw several people standing on the aftcastle of the ship. He recognized one of them as Captain Faragg, the ship's captain that he had tried unsuccessfully to bribe. Before the captain stood two women, one short and a taller one armed with a sword. A small girl, and one of the largest men he had ever seen stood there as well. As meaning burst upon his mind, he called out.

"Look out!" Kadmallin shouted at the people on the high deck of the ship, pointing with one arm toward the man with the bow on the nearby rooftop. As he turned to the man with the bow, he saw that it no longer held an arrow. He snapped his head back just in time to see the little girl fall, a wooden shaft embedded in her chest.

He had assumed the man with the arrow aimed for the captain or one of the adults. Who would shoot a child and for what reason? Maybe the shot flew astray. As he looked back to the rooftop, the man with the bow glanced at him and then ran, leaping down to a lower roof and then jumping to the ground.

Kadmallin did not hesitate, ignoring concerns and questions about who would want to kill a little girl. His boots hammered against the old boards along the docks as he raced to follow the man from the rooftop. He lost sight of the man behind a building, but soon stood where the archer had jumped down to the lower roof. Where did he run? Back into the heart of town to blend in with the thin crowds? The town did not hold enough people to hide effectively. The hills, then. Kadmallin gripped the hilt of the dagger at his belt and ran along the alley where the man had fled. He wished he had his sword with him, but carrying weapons in the pilgrim town only made people nervous. He pulled the dagger out as he ran, not knowing when he might catch the man, but certain he would need the blade handy when he did.

He ran from the cramped alley and into a narrow street. Looking both ways, he saw the back of the man's brown shirt slide behind the corner of a decrepit house. Kadmallin dashed after him, skidding as he came around the corner of the building, a whistling sound filling his ears as wind

brushed his face and a sharp pain stabbed at his chest. He looked down, his shirt sliced in a line, blood welling from the thin cut along his chest muscles. He looked up. The man he chased glared at him, the empty bow held high. Had Kadmallin not turned his body as he rounded the corner, the arrow would have gone clean through his heart. No doubt remained. The man's archery could not be questioned. His first arrow had meant to kill the girl. Kadmallin wondered briefly if the girl would die and why. Vowing to find the answer to the second question, he launched himself down the street at the man.

His quarry ran behind another house and Kadmallin chased him, rounding the corner of the building more cautiously this time. He did not spot the man, but he noted a fence in a nearby yard bent where someone might have leapt over it. Trees of pine and spruce rose behind the boundary. He jumped over it and walked into the woods, moving as fast as he dared. His years of tracking wild game for dinner in his childhood in Punderra came back to him. He noted where the man went, branches bent, weeds crushed, stones overturned. The man moved fast and with little care for concealing his trail. Kadmallin ran through the trees, crouched low, as much to better his view of the trail as to make himself a smaller target should the man again choose to try and skewer him with an arrow.

He followed the traces of the man but found no sight of him. After a few minutes, the woods thinned. He glimpsed a rocky plateau through the needled branches of the trees. At the border of the woods, he finally spotted the man, standing at the edge of a cliff, open air behind him, the bow raised once more to his cheek. Kadmallin instinctively moved behind a tree but only realized the man did not aim at him until the arrow flew from the string. He turned and saw the taller woman with the sword from the ship as she dodged sideways to avoid the projectile. She stood straight again, sword raised, and ran for the man. The man threw the bow down, shrugged the quiver off his back, turned, and leapt into the air.

Kadmallin ran for the lip of the cliff, reaching it only moments after the tall woman in the long coat. He looked over the cliff edge, waves slamming into the rocks a hundred paces below. Water churned and foamed near the jagged stone outcroppings, but he saw no sign of the man.

He panted with the exhaustion of the chase as he turned to the woman. He noted that she held the sword with familiarity and ease. His own dagger blade felt small and pointless. He slipped it into the sheath at his belt as the woman turned and appraised him, lowering her sword blade to point at the ground. He found himself uneasy under her stare, his heart still beating strong, his breath quick. The woman did not look winded. Something in her stern, dark features and the intensity of her gaze spoke of a power not entirely evident in her tall frame. It made his stomach tighten to realize that he never wished to face the woman in combat.

"Why did you chase that man?" The woman swiftly re-sheathed her sword.

"He shot a girl with an arrow." Kadmallin didn't think more explanation necessary, largely because that comprised the extent of his motivation in running down the man.

The woman nodded at this.

"Is she alive?" Kadmallin could not help but ask.

"I do not know," the woman replied. "I go now to find out." Without another word, the woman

turned and ran back into the woods.

Kadmallin looked after her for a moment, then again over the edge of the cliff to the swirling waters below. He did not know what story he'd briefly crossed into but found himself glad to be walking away from it. His own story with Sketkee provided more than enough mystery and danger. He did not need to unnecessarily seek more of either. He wondered what Sketkee would make of the events when he told her of them that evening. He also wondered what her response would have been to seeing an unknown girl struck with an arrow. He knew that while her motivations might have been different, her actions would have been similar. He wondered as well if he would ever know what happened to the wounded girl.

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

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

DUST CLOUDS roiled in the strong breeze wafting through shadow-drenched corridors and shattered walls. Junari rubbed her nose with the back of her hand to stifle a sneeze. The movement of so many feet kicked up plumes of fine particles caked along the cracked and age-worn tiles of the floor.

She walked beside Bon-Tao at the head of the exploration party. Kantula and Jupiterus followed close behind, while Raedalus and Tanagaal brought up the rear. Junari had ordered the three captains and other pilgrims to remain at the entrance. She worried that too many people venturing into a potentially unstable building might cause it to collapse. She desperately desired to avoid any further deaths.

Bon-Tao held a lamp high, the tamak-seed oil burning a bright yellow-white and illuminating their progress through the lower level of the temple. They followed a wide corridor with curved walls and an arched ceiling. Like the streets of the city, the passages turned in a spiral from the outer entrances toward the center. There were sections where smaller rounded hallways branched off to connect the larger passageways, but they were infrequent and the first two they encountered proved impassable due to collapsed stonework.

Junari did not mind needing to follow the main corridor. The side passage only reminded her of Joraus, the man who had lost his life following her whim to cut through a side street on their way to the temple. He was a man who she had only met that morning. Each of the captains had picked a pilgrim to accompany them on their exploration. No doubt Joraus had been filled with pride at being chosen to join the Mother Shepherd and her party to explore the ruins of the city and locate the temple that had called to him in his dreams for so many months. Until they set sail. Until the Goddess became silent. She wondered if the man had any family back at the ships and a new wave of sorrow and recrimination assaulted her. It seemed no matter what choices she made, people always died to achieve her goals — to realize the Goddess's desires.

“Look at these.” Bon-Tao swung his lamp to the side as the passageway crossed into a spacious chamber twenty paces wide. He walked to the curved wall of the room and held the lamp up to expose a mural painted across the smooth stone in thick sensuous lines and deep, time-worn, pigments. Hidden from the sun and the worst effects of the elements over countless years, the paint had not fully faded the way it had from the exterior of the buildings in the city. The scene depicted forests and animals and now familiar round dwellings in a pastoral landscape.

She placed her hand on his wrist, guiding the lamp to the side where something caught her eye along the wall. She could have asked him to move the lamplight where she desired, but her need just then extended beyond the necessity of mere illumination. After the death of Joraus, she had so wanted to hold Bon-Tao, to be held by him. To find comfort in his embrace. They had drawn close over the hard weeks at sea, and even though the confines of the ship and the nature

their status in the pilgrim community prohibited any outward show of their growing fondness, they did manage to find a few brief moments for kisses and passionate embraces in the shadows of the cargo hold or in the darkness behind the aftcastle on a moonless night. She wished now she might at least take his hand to give her fortitude. Instead, she released his wrist with a small smile. He offered her a slight curve of his lips and followed her eyes as she turned back to the wall of the chamber.

A section of the mural looked absent, as through scrubbed until it lost all visible form. She leaned in and peered at the faded paint on the stone. She could not make out what the images had been with any clarity, but their shape looked somewhat animal-like. From the scale of the surrounding buildings and trees depicted by the painting, the temple builders had been much larger than humans.

“There are more.” Bon-Tao guided his lamp along the wall to reveal places where erasures marred the mural.

“Someone has erased all the people.” Junari turned to take in the whole of the scene now lit by lamplight. The panorama showed a progression of events, each small section repeating the same scene from a later time, moving from a densely populated forest on the ocean to the arrival of domed buildings, to a collection of structures the size of a town, and eventually to what she took to be a representation of the city itself, the temple recognizable at its center. All depictions of people had been eliminated, leaving only faded, vague outlines among splotched and sanded stone.

“Who would take the time to vandalize an entire city and remove all record of its inhabitants?” Raedalus leaned close to the wall, squinting in the darkness, his finger tracing near invisible lines in an attempt to piece together the original image. “And why do such a thing?”

Junari wondered at Raedalus’s question. She had pondered similar issues ever since seeing the distorted statues near the docks. Why had the Goddess brought them to this city and this temple? Who were these vanished people? Had they been her worshipers? Where had they gone? Why had this temple been abandoned for so long? Why did it sit in the Forbidden Realm, and why had the ever-unseen urris worked so hard to keep her and the pilgrims from reaching it?

“There may be no answers.” Tanagaal spoke from the center of the room. “*Sometimes, history is lost to us and to imagine answers to our questions about it only carries us further from the truth.*” The older man sighed and shook his head. “One of my instructors at the Academy said that once. He was quoting someone far more eloquent, I’m sure, but he never mentioned who.”

“The sentiment is well taken,” Junari said to Tanagaal. The man had proved invaluable in many ways on their journey, the least of which, she realized now, being his ability with The Sight.

“We should go. The day makes short.” Bon-Tao gestured with his lamp to where the main passage continued to curve into shadows, intermittently illuminated by slender shafts of light streaming through broken walls and cracked ceilings.

Junari kept any hint of amusement from her face as she nodded her agreement and they proceeded along the curved corridor. With Mumtiba now the unofficial language of the pilgrims, in large part due to the fact that Raedalus had transcribed Junari’s trance-induced pronouncements of the Goddess Moaratana compromising *The Red Book of Revelations* in their shared native

tongue, Bon-Tao tried his best to speak it when in the company of others. She had noted, however, that the subtleties of the language escaped the man. She often found herself wanting to kiss him when he spoke Mumtiba simply to silence him. It always proved a much better use of those wide, full lips. They generally spoke Shen when alone, as it helped her slowly master the language.

“I do not like this place,” Bon-Tao whispered in Shen from her side. “It feels as though the eyes of the dead are upon me, judging me with each step for trespassing in their sacred halls. And what disturbs me more is that I cannot envision the faces that accompany those unseen eyes.”

Junari marveled, as she did often in speaking alone with Bon-Tao, that a soldier could be so eloquent. In his own language, at least.

“So much of this was not in the dreams.” A chill ran across Junari’s shoulder blades as she peered down the curving passage. Once again, she wanted to take the hand of the man beside her, the man who had come to mean so much to her in the months past. “It is not at all what I imagined it to be. I cannot understand why the Goddess wishes us to rebuild it. Why travel the ocean, why lose so many good people, to reconstruct these ruins? Why not simply build a new temple in the Iron Realm?”

“We cannot know the mind of the Goddess. We can only surrender to the majesty of her desires made known to us.” Bon-Tao grinned. “A very wise woman taught me these words.”

“Do not quote me to myself.” Junari frowned at him. “I sound like a forgotten prophet from a tattered, ancient scroll.”

“You will never be forgotten.” Bon-Tao held her eyes a moment. “Certainly not by me.”

“I am not important. I am but a vessel for the Goddess.” Junari spoke the words she had so often said, but knew they carried less truth each time she recited them.

Bon-Tao grunted but made no further reply. They walked in silence for a time, listening to the sounds of the temple walls. A curving side passage led them to another wide, spiraling corridor, which opened into a large central chamber in the lower level of the temple. Round, like all the other rooms, this one spanned twenty paces, its walls decorated by another mural depicting the turning of the seasons, again with any reference to the people who might have painted it removed and sanded away by a rough hand. In the center of the space, a spiral ramp of solid stone rose to the second level.

They looked around the chamber before cautiously climbing the stone ramp, pockmarked with deep divots and crumbled with time. They made slow progress, often needing to move to one side of the ramp before being able to clamber up to the next safe section. Halfway up, the degraded stonework proved so unstable that Bon-Tao took a rope from Jupiterus and climbed up ahead. With nothing to secure the rope, he used himself as an anchor to provide a handhold for those below to pull themselves to the top.

When she reached the head of the incline, Bon-Tao gave her his hand and pulled her up beside him, more as an excuse for the extended touch than the necessity of the act. She clasped the rope and added her weight behind Bon-Tao’s, standing close to his back, but not as close as she would have desired. Kantula and Jupiterus followed her up and joined her at the rope. Raedalus and Tanagaal were the last to make the ascent. As Bon-Tao coiled the rope, the party raised their

lanterns and assessed their new surroundings.

Junari noted first, before any other impressions, that the spiral ramp no longer extended all the way up to the third and final floor of the temple. Halfway to the upper floor, the carved stone gradient ceased in a jagged pile of stones. The ramp appeared destroyed more by intent than by the decaying passage of time.

“That’s no easy climb,” Bon-Tao said in Mumtiba as he stared upward.

“Look here.”

Junari turned to find Raedalus standing beside a circular stone edifice at one side of the chamber where they stood. The rounded room stretched twenty paces from wall-to-wall with three tall, arched entrances leading to curved halls that likely spiraled through the building. The sides of the space held another mural showing the sky and a series of constellations, one of which no longer existed, rubbed from the chipped lapis-colored paint to leave a whitish-gray swipe across the glittering yellow stars around it. She wondered if the paint contained gold for the stars to still reflect light so well after so much time.

As Junari walked around the back wall of the spiral stairs toward Raedalus, she saw that he stood next to one of three stone objects, each constructed from a seamless mass of granite the height of her chest. Hollow and three paces wide, stone lids tilted at an angle beside all three.

“Sarcophagi.” Raedalus leaned over the edge of a colossal coffin.

Junari looked inside the nearest sarcophagus to see a pile of pulverized bone fragments and the remnants of what might have been cloth. She saw something flicker in the lamplight at the bottom. It took her a moment to recognize it as a dust-caked gold ring the width of her thigh.

“They not only desecrated the temple, but the burial chamber as well.” Raedalus looked to Junari. “If the people who build this temple were once the Goddess’s followers, someone wanted them forgotten entirely.”

“It would seem so.” Junari examined the room and the placement of the sarcophagi. They sat equidistant from one another. It suggested three long-dead and unknown people of equal significance.

When Junari and Raedalus walked back around the rear of the ramp to rejoin the others, she paused, her breath arrested for a moment as she watched Bon-Tao float upward through the opening to the third level of the temple. Being from Juparti, she had seen people levitated via The Sight on several occasions, usually at carnivals or fairs, but she never imagined seeing the man she ... She what? Felt fondly for? Lusted for? Loved? She pushed the confusing question aside. However much Junari might desire such a union, the Mother Shepherd had no time for liaisons.

As Bon-Tao floated up to reach the lip of the upper opening, Junari noted the rope dangling down from his sword hand and coiled at Tanagaal’s feet. The seer stood with his arms outstretched, his face a tense mask of attentiveness. As Bon-Tao’s feet touched the edge of the floor above, Tanagaal lowered his arms and turned to her.

“I can raise everyone up, one at a time.” Tanagaal pointed to the rope. “Bon-Tao will hold the rope, tied to each person’s waist. Only a precaution in the event my concentration wavers.” His tone suggested he considered such an event unlikely.

“You’re certain you can raise all of us?” Junari tried to keep her skepticism muted. She had witnessed the seer accomplish amazing things with The Sight, but she had also seen him fail in attempts of what she considered simple endeavors. His success seemed proportional to the danger involved in the task — the more life threatening, the more likely to succeed.

“Maybe you should go first, just in case.” Tanagaal gave a weak smile.

“No worry,” Bon-Tao called from above her. “I have rope.”

The knowledge that Bon-Tao would haul her to safety if Tanagaal’s Sight-induced flight failed gave her greater comfort than she allowed herself to voice aloud.

“Let us proceed, then.” Junari grabbed the rope dangling nearby and wrapped it around her waist. Kantula came to her aid and helped her fashion a harness to sit in.

“It will be over quickly.” Raedalus gave her an encouraging nod. Among all those present, only he knew of her deep fear of heights and her recurrent dream of falling endlessly into a black pit.

She nodded back and then turned to Tanagaal. Before she could speak, her feet rose from the ground as the seer lifted his hands. She looked around as she floated upward — a leaf caught in a warm draft — rising farther into the temple and further into its mysteries. As she looked down from her harness of woven hemp fibers, she remembered a similar scene, seen from the opposite vantage.

THIRTY-FIVE DAYS AGO

SEABIRDS CRIED as they dove and swooped through the air beneath the cloudless sky. A man in a harness of ropes at the top of the mainmast called out. The man shouted down a simple report of his attempt to see anything in the clear, blue horizons circling the ship.

“No clouds.”

Junari looked from the heights of the mast and past the limp sails to the man who stood beside her. Tunadar, the captain of her vessel, shook his head.

“I have seen the wind cease for a day,” Captain Tunadar said with a grunt. “I have seen it blow one direction then another in the span of minutes. I have never heard of it stopping to a dead calm then gusting to a full gale, first from the east, then the west, and on around the compass.” He spit over the side of the rail. “Tussing urris.”

His last words, he nearly whispered, and Junari assumed only she heard them. It did not matter. The words expressed what everyone aboard felt in their hearts, even if they could not prove it with evidence in their minds — the urris worked against them to slow their progress toward the Forbidden Realm by causing the wind to rise and fall and change direction in such an erratic fashion that progress in their navigation proved nearly impossible. They had covered less than a third of the distance the captain estimated they should have in the last three days. At the rate of their present progress, they would run out of food and water well before they reached the halfway mark of their journey.

The pilgrims across all eight ships prayed with every spare moment to the Goddess Moaratana

for better winds. So far, she had not responded. Or, as Junari had come to suspect, the Goddess could not respond. She noted that, since their departure for their journey, her sense of the Goddess's presence, once a near constant soft hum in the back of her mind, felt distant and intermittently imperceptible. Just as the urris distorted the winds, they also seemed capable of thwarting the Goddess's access to the world. Even the dreams of the Goddess and the temple each night were shorter and less vivid.

Angry shouts drifted through the still air across the deck and brought her attention to the bow of the ship where two groups of people raised their arms in anger, yelling words she had heard many times since leaving the port of Tanjii.

“Heretics!”

“Fanatics!”

Junari ground her teeth in annoyance. The [Tot Gioth believers](#), who Kuth Von tricked her into carrying away from his city on her ships, did not make themselves welcome among the pilgrims. Their words and actions ranged from petulantly hostile to blatantly violent, with little variation. She saw Raedalus running to place himself between the two groups, his arms outstretched in either direction, hands raised in a gesture of calm. His words did not carry to her where she stood, but his admonitions to both parties pacified them, at least temporarily. After a few minutes, the two groups returned to their assigned labors; the Tot Gioth segregated to the rear of the ship to clean the decks.

As the Tot Gioth believers worked, they stared up at her with hateful glances. They believed the erratic winds to be the result of the Tot Gioth gods intervening to save them. Possibly, they grasped the truth of the situation. Maybe the Tot Gioth gods, Nag Mot Gioth, and Nag Pat Gioth worked the winds to stop the pilgrims' journey. Perhaps, they beheld not the effects of the mysterious and mythical urris enforcing the millennia-old Pact, but instead, a battle between gods played out on the ocean and centered on a small fleet of eight ships. In the end, it did not matter. Something sought to halt their progress to the Forbidden Realm, and she needed to find a way to resume it.

“Do you have any suggestions, Captain?” Junari turned back to Tunadar. “Is there anything we can do that we are not already attempting?”

“I can think of nothing, Mother Shepherd.” The older man tugged at his thick, reddish beard. While well-tanned by years in the sun, the man originally hailed from Atheton, his Naotis heritage evident in the rare color of his hair. Years of trade around the coast of the Iron Realm left him well-spoken in all of its languages, although his Mumtiba held a heavy accent. “More prayer?” He did not sound hopeful of its efficacy.

“Could we fashion oars from the timber supplies we have in the hold?” Junari saw the frown on the man's face and knew his answer before he spoke.

“Possibly.” Captain Tunadar rubbed his neck and looked out over the deck. “But even if we can make oars long and sturdy enough to pull against the water, we'd still need to do it for all the ships. And the decks are too high. We would have to cut holes in the hulls to get the oars close to the water. And then there is the matter of manning them. Rowing is hard labor and requires many

hands. Hands that get hungrier as they work. It's not a bad idea, Mother Shepherd, if we only needed to row for a week along the coast of a dominion or two. I've read of warships fashioned thus in ages past, but for an ocean voyage of weeks, with limited provisions, I fear it would harm us more than help us in reaching our destination."

Junari sighed.

"Prayer, then."

"Prayer," the captain echoed.

"The Goddess has always protected us when we could not protect ourselves. She will come to our aid. I am certain of it." Junari spoke the words as much to reassure herself as to bolster the confidence of the man responsible for leading their small fleet across the seemingly endless horizon of dark-blue water.

Even as she finished speaking, a breeze pressed against her cheek. The wind grew to a gust that filled the sails and pushed against her body, forcing her to grasp the railing for support. Captain Tunadar clasped the tiller wheel as the ship lurched into motion across the waves.

"The Goddess must have heard you." The captain grinned at her through his bushy beard. "We have a strong wind from the east at our backs for the first time in days."

As a cheer rose up from the pilgrims on the deck below, Junari lowered her head and traced a spiral, the sign of the Goddess, around her heart. Maybe the goddess had vanquished the urris or the Tot Gioth gods or whatever forces worked to prevent her pilgrims from fulfilling her bold project.

Junari turned into the wind, her hair blown back behind her. A smile tightened her lips. They would get to the Forbidden Realm. They would complete their journey.

Her smile faded as quickly as the gusting air, the sails sagging as the ship coasted to a standstill, the waves once again flattening to a calm ocean. The pilgrims on deck moaned aloud and the Tot Gioth believers cheered. Then a silence gripped the vessel.

"Look!" the man still in the harness at the top of the main mast called out.

Junari turned her eyes toward the man above before following his pointing arm back down to the water around the ship. A heavy mist rose rapidly from the ocean, thick vapor curling up into the air — a dense, impenetrable cloud manifesting from the ocean to engulf the vessel.

"Captain, what is happening?" Junari barely had time to speak her question, her voice breaking with panic, before the sudden fog enshrouded the ship, making it impossible to see for more than the length of an arm.

"I do not know, Mother Shepherd. I have never seen such fog appear so quickly." The obvious fear in the captain's voice made Junari glad she no longer discerned the features of his face.

Wails of terror sounded from crew and pilgrims and Tog Gioth believers alike.

"Quiet!" Junari leaned on the railing as she shouted to those on the main deck beneath her. "Stay calm. The Goddess will protect us."

As the frightened noises of the ship's passengers faded, Junari's stomach lurched and her head spun with dizziness. Her knees weak and nearly buckling, she gripped the railing of the upper deck more firmly. The sensation passed quickly, and the fog began to dissipate. A gentle wind caressed

her face. The Goddess would save them. She had been foolish to fear the unknown with the Goddess to protect them.

As the thick mist evaporated, it became clear that she had been wrong to rush to judgment and correct to fear the fog. When the last wisps of vapor sank into the gentle ocean waves, she saw that their ship sat alone. They had been carried away from the pilgrim fleet and cast into unknown waters. She did not know where their ship now rested in the world, or how far they might be from their companions in their sister vessels, but she knew from the thin strip of land along the eastern horizon that they were nowhere near the Forbidden Realm.

THE PRESENT

STALE DUST, dried mold, and the scent of weathered stone mingled in Junari's nose as her head crested the lip of the opening to the third and final level of the lost temple. Tanagaal lowered her with the power of The Sight until her feet touched the tiled floor. Bon-Tao helped her remove the rope harness, his hand lingering longer than needed at her waist.

"I will help the others." Bon-Tao threw the end of the rope down to the lower level.

Junari watched him a moment, studying the pull of the muscles along his neck as he steadied himself to brace against the impending weight the next person would place against the rope before being raised by Tanagaal with The Sight. She looked away, reminding herself that, sadly, there were more important things to study than the shape of Bon-Tao's neck.

The penultimate floor of the enigmatic temple encompassed far less space than the two levels below, having a diameter of only fifteen paces. As she examined her surroundings, it became evident that three distinct areas divided the chamber, all connected by a single mural wrapping around the walls and the high, domed ceiling. The painting, unlike those of the levels below, did not portray a pastoral scene or a representation of the city and temple, but instead displayed a series of gold-tinted symbols on a faded, red background, some aligned in rows, others in circles or spirals, and some in vastly more complicated, swirling, repetitious patterns for which she had no name. Were these symbols letters? Were these etchings in gold the writings of these dead people? Were they prayers and supplications to their god? Were they prayers to her goddess by a people now long dead?

The designs of the symbols changed with each separate section of the chamber, lit by the light of a large, round window. The first area of the room contained three stone basins each ten hands wide with three rows of narrow stone benches raised behind them. The arrangement reminded her of water offering bowls found in Juparti and [Keth temples](#). Had the perplexing builders of this temple also practiced rituals like those of her former faith?

The second part of the room held a large spherical stone two paces in diameter with a series of holes drilled through its mass at odd angles. More of the indecipherable symbols wrapped around the sphere, etched into the surface, some the width of a finger and others the size of a hand. She could not fathom the intended purpose of the granite orb, nor how it might relate to her Goddess or any god.

The last section of the chamber held her attention longer than the others, in part because it appeared familiar, and in that familiarity, also deeply foreign. A collection of statues, each the size of a grown man, filled the space, hard granite features contorted and distorted — wax figurines melted in the hot sun. Three of the nondescript figures appeared to bow or prostrate themselves on four stocky limbs around another, much larger figure rising above them in the center. That stone shape, standing to the height of two men, did not look at all like the others. It possessed six legs and many smaller limbs. It held no obvious head, but several lumpish masses grew out of its back.

Junari found herself unsettled by the tableau. Were these the mysterious temple builders worshiping their god? Did this mangled sculpture depict her own Goddess in some far forgotten time? Was that why the dreams had led them to this place? In the dreams, the Goddess spoke with the face of a beautiful woman. A woman of manifest compassion and radiant strength. She knew from her many years as a [Pashist priest](#), and her studies of other faiths around the world of Onaia, that people imagined their gods in the form most familiar to them — their own. Guided by dreams that now seemed dim in her memory for their absence, she had envisioned the Goddess Moaratana as a woman much like herself. Why had these long-vanished temple builders portrayed their god in a fashion so radically different from their own form?

These unanswerable questions fell to the side as one she knew she would have no choice but to answer arose in their place — how should she represent the Goddess when she persuaded her pilgrims to rebuild this temple as their shared dreams had urged them to do for so many months?

“Mother Shepherd?”

Junari blinked and turned to find Raedalus and the others standing beside her. They looked at her expectantly. How long had she been staring at the assembly of mangled stone figures in contemplative reverie? She took a deep breath and set her mind as she determined their collective course.

“Rest for a moment. Take note of all you see. We will head back soon and inform the others of what we have found. In the morning, we will lead the pilgrims here to begin rebuilding this temple and prepare a place for the Goddess when she finally and triumphantly enters the world.”

Junari smiled, exuding confidence in her voice and stature, but a seed of doubt sprang to life in her belly. Would the Goddess really come? And what would she look like when she did?

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

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

“I HAD a quiet conversation with our friend the captain.”

“You mean you had drinks in his cabin again last night.”

“The drinking came secondary to the conversation, I assure you.”

“I am assured, but unconvinced.”

“No. Really. I only had one cup of wine.”

“Because you drank all his wine on the voyage here.”

“Yes, well, he didn’t have much wine to begin with. And he likes to drink. And we need him as a friend.”

“We paid him handsomely. In gold.”

“The gold bought his services. The drinking gained his friendship.”

“Please simply tell us what your drinking friend the captain said.” Abananthus sighed as he interrupted Kellatra and Rankarus’s digressive conversation. To himself, he thought other words.

“Words can illuminate, and words can obfuscate, so choose your words with care.”

The three of them walked along the street near the docks of the small pilgrim town, each headed to their own assigned labor for the day. Their routine since their arrival six days prior held invariable. Jadaloo minded Lantili and Luntadus back in the newly constructed one-room cottage the pilgrim council assigned them to live in. Kellatra worked in the bakery. Rankarus assisted in the construction of new dwellings for the pilgrims arriving daily. And Abananthus helped manage the supplies being loaded on the ships. Each morning, as they walked to their designated labors, they discussed their future in an open manner not possible with the children around in the evenings.

“The captain let it be known, after keeping it secret to himself for weeks, that he has the dreams.” Rankarus looked to Kellatra, whose hand he held as they walked. “Or at least he had the dreams back when there were dreams to have.”

“So, the captain is a pilgrim?” Kellatra pursed her lips. “He never said anything about the dreams or the Goddess or the Forbidden Realm.”

“He’s not so much a pilgrim as a potential pilgrim.” Rankarus pressed a little closer to Kellatra to avoid a boy running through the street. “He’s more a man of business than a man of faith.”

“He has a great deal of faith in gold.” Abananthus snorted at the mention of the captain’s averseness. He still held an unsettling awe knowing that Kellatra managed to procure their passage by transforming small bars of lead into pure gold. Or as she pointed out, if not pure, close enough not to matter.

“Are you saying that Captain Tasmanat will take us to the Forbidden Realm because he’s a believer now?” Kellatra stared at Rankarus, her skepticism clear in her tone.

“I’m saying that as a man of faith and a man of business, Captain Tasmanat will take us to the Forbidden Realm for one hundred gold coins, or whatever the equivalent weight is.”

“A hundred?” Kellatra’s voice raised in pitch and volume. “We only paid ten to get to Tanjii.”

“Yes, but the distance, the return trip, the risk of the unknown, and all such blather.” Rankarus rolled his eyes. “He wanted two hundred, but I talked him down.”

“How soon does he want payment?” Abananthus wondered how quickly Kellatra could create more gold. They had a little left from her previous endeavors, and only a small amount of lead remained.

“It took a half week of solid work to transform the gold that got us here.” Kellatra looked skyward as though calculating something. “Maybe I could do it in a couple of months. Forty days. No less than that.”

“That’s plenty of time.” Rankarus smiled at his wife. “We have to wait for this ridiculous blockade to end, in any event.”

“Assuming it will.” Abananthus regretted his sour thought as soon as he voiced it. Sometimes, their journey, the one he’d joined without knowing the destination, curdled his mood a bit. The loud shout of a man nearby negated the need to amend his statement.

“Look out!”

The man of middle years, whose pale skin marked him as from Punderra or Atheton, stood only ten or so paces away, his arm raised to point toward a nearby rooftop. On the roof stood another man, releasing an arrow from a bow. A cry cut the air from one of the ships and Abananthus snapped his head around to see several people gathering close to a small girl with an arrow in her chest. He looked back to find the man with the bow gone from the rooftop. The man who had shouted now ran in the direction of the absent assailant.

“What is happening?” Abananthus looked back to find Kellatra running toward the ship with the wounded girl, still holding Rankarus’s hand as she pulled him along behind her.

Abananthus dashed to catch up with them, reaching the couple in time to hear the end of a quick exchange.

“You have to be careful.” Rankarus scanned the crowd in the street as he ran.

“I will be.” Kellatra stared straight ahead at the small girl and the adults on the high, rear deck of the ship.

“Tell them you are a healer.” Abananthus dodged a woman with a basket of bright-colored squash. There were too many people on the street. It was taking too long to reach the ship. How long could the girl survive?

“Yes.” Rankarus looked to Abananthus with a grateful face. “Tell them you are a healer. Abe and I will keep them far enough away, so they don’t know otherwise.” He took the leather satchel from around his shoulder and handed it to Kellatra. “Take this. It will look like a healer’s bag. Don’t let them see inside.”

“Thank you.” Kellatra clutched at the bag as she ran.

Abananthus knew the bag contained only a few wood-working tools and a small hammer. Not the implements of a healer. He wondered what events led to a small girl being felled by an arrow and the wisdom of inserting themselves into the middle of such unknown circumstances. He understood voicing any concern to be pointless. Kellatra could not ignore a child whose life she

might save any more than he himself could, if he possessed the skill. He spotted a tall woman in a long coat running down the gangplank of the ship as they approached it. She dashed past them, headed in the same direction as the man who'd shot the arrow and the second man who pursued him.

"Make way. Healer. Make way. Healer coming through." Rankarus raised his voice and pushed crewmen and others aside as he led Kellatra along the gangplank and across the deck. Everyone they passed stood staring up at the raised deck at the rear of the ship.

As Abananthus followed them through the maze of people arrayed on deck, he realized, yet again, how much he envied Rankarus's ability to take charge of a situation — to pretend to be whatever he needed to be no matter the circumstances at hand. Abananthus found, after many years of experience, that no matter the events of the moment, he remained invariably himself. He also found, after many more years, that he liked being himself.

"A man is always himself, even if he does not know precisely who that man is."

He would have preferred, however, to be a little smaller as he wedged his large feet into the thin steps of the stairs leading up to the rear deck. He held to the rails as he pulled himself up behind Kellatra and Rankarus. On the small deck, he found a man with even more bulk than his own squatting beside the small girl as she coughed up blood, and a young, slender woman holding the girl's head and trying to wipe her mouth clean with the sleeve of her dress. Beside them stood an older, dark-skinned man who Abananthus recognized as the captain of the ship. Near the girl, sat a lantern burning bright and a knife, the tip of its blade black with burned blood. Seeing the broken arrow beside the lantern and knife, he realized what methods had been attempted to save the girl's life.

"Make way. Healer here. Give her room." Rankarus spoke to the large man and the woman holding the girl, but neither responded nor even looked in his direction.

"You need to step back." Kellatra knelt beside the girl, who once more spit blood as she coughed. "I can save her."

"She's dying," the young woman said in heavily accented Mumtiba.

Kellatra gently pulled the weeping woman away from the girl. "These men can help me. But I need room." She looked to the large man who frowned but backed away.

"It will all be well," Abananthus said as he knelt beside Kellatra and the girl, placing himself where he could block the view of the large man. He noted Rankarus doing the same to shield the view of the girl from the young woman. Kellatra's own body blocked the sight line of the captain.

"Can you save her?" Rankarus whispered as he held the girl's head.

"I hope so." Kellatra reached for the leather satchel and opened it, sticking her hand inside and miming the action of removing something that she then placed against the wound on the girl's chest.

"What's that? What's she doing?" the young woman asked from behind them.

"She's doing her work," Abananthus said. "You need to give her time."

The woman fell silent and stared at Rankarus's back, trying to see around him. An inner heat arose upon Abananthus's neck where the large man stared at him. Something about the man felt

odd, even beyond his massive size and the look of his scarred face. Abananthus glanced back to see that the man appeared concerned, but far calmer than anyone else circled around them. He took no time to wonder at this and returned his attention to the dying girl.

He watched Kellatra, her eyes focused on the girl, her breath even and deep. He noticed a change in her countenance, a shift he suspected gave her insight into the nature of reality regarding the wounded girl's body. A chill broke out behind his shoulder blades. He always experienced an inexpressible anxiety when witnessing Kellatra use The Sight. Doing so in a town filled with strangers, even fellow pilgrims, did not lessen that apprehension. While some pilgrim groups might openly embrace a seer, too many people still clung to the old prejudices of their former faiths to make open practice of The Sight a wise endeavor.

Within moments, the girl ceased her coughing. She spit more blood from her mouth, and Rankarus wiped it away with his hand. The girl blinked and seemed to become more aware of her surroundings as well as the strangers around her. After another minute, Kellatra leaned back.

"You are well," Kellatra spoke softly, taking her hand from the girl's chest and wiping the blood away. She continued to wipe the blood, and Abananthus could see the blistering burn from where the hot knife blade had sealed the wound begin to soften and turn to normal flesh.

"Won't that be obvious?" Rankarus nudged Kellatra with his elbow as he whispered close to her.

Kellatra frowned at Rankarus and then smiled at the recovering girl.

"I don't care." Kellatra wiped the last of the blood away, the skin unblemished beneath her fingers. She applied the same ministrations to the wound on her back. After a moment, she pulled her hands away, the look of boundless calm and concentration leaving her face. She smiled at the girl. "You will be well now."

"I saw you." The girl reached out a small, blood-covered hand to touch Kellatra's fingers.

The girl started to say more, and Kellatra might have replied, but the young woman pushed Rankarus aside and pressed her hands forward to check the girl's wounds. Kellatra feigned putting something back in the leather satchel and pulled out an old work rag she used to wipe the blood from her hands.

"The wounds are gone." The young woman turned to Kellatra, her mouth hanging open in astonishment.

"A very strong poultice." Kellatra looked at the young woman, holding her eyes with her own. "A strong poultice. You understand?"

"We understand."

Abananthus heard a rumbling voice in his ear as a massive hand gently but firmly pressed him aside. He turned to see the large man kneeling beside him on one knee. The ease with which the man moved him out of the way gave Abananthus pause. He had grown accustomed to being the largest man in the room. It felt odd to suddenly know how smaller men must view his size. He found he did not enjoy the sense of powerlessness that accompanied that feeling.

"Thank you." The man reached out a giant hand to touch the girl's shoulder. "We will say nothing of this."

The young women nodded in affirmation.

“Who was that man?” Rankarus looked between the large man and young woman. “Who was he trying to hit?”

“A Kam-Djen fanatic trying to kill me, no doubt.” The captain of the vessel spoke up as he looked from Rankarus to Kellatra to Abananthus. “We are lucky the arrow only grazed the girl.”

“A very fortunate day for us all.” Abananthus stood, speaking to the captain while glancing at the man and woman. The archer had not planned to fell the captain, and Abananthus suspected the intended target lay on the deck, saved from death by Kellatra. She had her secrets, and the girl and her companions had their secrets, and Abananthus did not desire to hold any more secrets.

“A man can only hold so many secrets before he drops the one that shatters all the rest.”

He did not remember where that saying came from, but the truth of it nagged at him.

“She will need rest and plenty of water. And bone broth if you have it.” Kellatra stood to her feet. Rankarus joined her, grabbing the satchel and holding it in a blood-encrusted hand.

“Thank you,” the young woman said. “May the Goddess protect you.”

“May the Goddess protect us all.” Kellatra smiled again at the little girl. She appeared exhausted and too drained of blood to do more than raise her hand to wave.

They left quickly, before names or questions could be asked. Abananthus followed Kellatra and Rankarus from the ship and along the street back to their small home. They needed to change their bloodied clothes to avoid queries from their fellow pilgrims.

“They are not what they appear to be,” Rankarus said as they walked side-by-side, his fingers once more entwined with Kellatra’s.

“Neither are we,” Kellatra replied.

“It makes one wonder,” Abananthus said.

“Wonder what?” Rankarus asked.

“How many times we meet people who are not what they appear, caught up in something impossible to explain.” Abananthus wondered if the woman, the large man, and the little girl thought the same of him, Kellatra, and Rankarus.

“People are never merely what they seem to be, but they are always what they need to be for themselves.”

He did remember the source of that saying. No one famous, but someone dear to him. The wagon master of his first merchant caravan back in the days when he wore a sword and protected other people’s goods. Little had changed, for although he no longer carried a sword, he did protect people, though not their wares. Yes, he might not be all that he appeared from the outside, but he remained himself within himself. He wondered how many others they would encounter who needed a little protection for a time.

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

THE FUGITIVES



ING-KU

THICK CLOUDS, steel-gray and hanging low, let loose a continuous drizzle of fine drops, coating wood, stone, cloth, and flesh in constant dampness. Ing-Ku lay in the wet earth at the end of the woods beside the pilgrim town, his hands holding a near-glass to his eye as he watched the shipyard five spans away. From that distance, even with the magnification of the glass, the scene before his eye seemed small. It did not matter. He could still discern one person from another, especially when he recognized their forms so well. Hours passed while he observed the final preparations being made aboard the ship. During that time, the large man and the two women came in and out of a cabin beneath the raised deck at the front of the ship. He noted the smaller woman carrying a steaming bowl of something to the cabin once. They did not move the way one would if filled with sorrow. He did not glimpse the girl in the cabin as the door opened, but he knew she resided within it. Clearly, his arrow only wounded rather than killed her.

It took him two hours of strong swimming to reach a safe place along the shore after leaping from the cliff. He had known no other choice possible as the woman approached him. He could not fight such a being in combat.

Coward.

He wondered who the man that followed him through the town and tracked him into the woods might be. Did the three heretics and their small, deadly charge have a new ally? He did not see the man on the ship with them as it made ready for departure.

Who could he be? Would he appear again? Why did he help them?

Ing-Ku let the thought once more pass from his mind, knowing it would come back later.

It took several more hours to make his way up the coast and to his campsite in the woods, where he retrieved his sword, near-glass, and supplies. He regretted the loss of the bow, but mere wood and steel would not be enough.

Poison.

Yes. He needed to concoct a poison for the arrows, something to assure success should his aim once more miss its mark.

Poison the girl.

He considered getting closer for the strike, to make the task easier to complete. He had spent months tracking the heretics, enough time to know that the man and the tall woman somehow sensed him when he got too close. He had also learned that if he calmed his breath, stilled the beating of his heart, and focused his mind away from his quarry, he could gain a nearer proximity to them before being noticed. If he practiced, he might get within range for a knife blade tipped with poison.

Yes. A blade in her heart.

As he contemplated his possible means of killing the girl, he realized he also needed to quickly

assemble a plan to follow her. He watched the crew of the ship pull free the mooring ropes, using long poles to push the vessel back from the pier. They departed for the Forbidden Realm. He scanned the docks, seeing the other four ships making similar preparations.

He needed to find a way to track them. Even if it required pursuing the girl to the shores of the Forbidden Realm, he would eventually fulfill his duty and kill her.

Yes. Kill her and my duty is done. And then I can...

A large black beetle crawled through the damp loam of the forest near his arm, distracting his attention and dissolving his thoughts. Before it could move, he snatched the insect with his fingers and shoved it into his mouth, cracking down on the hard carapace, soft ichor oozing between his teeth. As he swallowed, he knew what he must do and that it needed to be accomplished with all haste.

He stood and gathered his things, a plan unfolding in his mind — a map of a future path through a foreign land. He looked to the ships in the dockyard.

I will find her. I will kill her. I will be free.

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

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

MIDNIGHT BLACK and sun-yellow stripes floated through the air, humming with languorous motion and an implication of danger. The bumblebee darted around a flower and then rose to assess the fruit hanging from the branches of the tree. Hashel watched the bee while trying not to watch the bee, hoping if he ignored it, that it would ignore him. He'd been stung by a bumblebee once, his hand swelling to twice its normal size, painful for days. His mother put a poultice of platan weed, lavender, peppermint, and garlic on the wound and kissed his head. He missed his mother. He doubted Ondromead knew how to make a poultice if the bee stung him. But Ondromead knew many other things.

Hashel and Ondromead sat under the low branches of a pear tree beside the road outside a small town in southern Atheton. They waited for the event Ondromead needed to witness. They had awakened in a barn near the town and wandered out to find something to eat from a street vendor selling meat pies. Then they had walked through the town as Ondromead waited for the feeling that told him where he needed to be. Hashel wondered what that feeling felt like. Ondromead said it was like a string vibrating as it tugged him one direction or another. They eventually ended up beneath the pear tree, sitting in the shade, hiding from the heat of the bright sun, and waiting for something to happen.

"I've been in this town twice before." Ondromead bit into a hard, pale-green pear. "The first time, it was larger than it is now, and the second time, it was smaller. Now it's larger again. I wonder why? Maybe a plague took too many people? Or a flood wiped out too many houses? It's hard to know why things change when so many years pass between arrivals."

Hashel looked to Ondromead, biting into his own pear. He wondered how long it had been since the old man visited the town. Ondromead saw his look and recognized its meaning. He often understood what Hashel wanted to say without needing to hear the words aloud.

"I think the first time I saw the town was two hundred years ago or so. And the second less than fifty years ago." Ondromead looked back down the road out of the town. Two wagons and several men on horses passed the last house with its small barn and vegetable patch. Ondromead scratched his head. "Hmmm. Seems this is part of what we need to see."

Hashel appreciated that Ondromead always included him when speaking of the need to witness something. It made him feel a part of Ondromead's journey.

"Merchants, you think?" Ondromead stared at the wagons and men as they approached.

Hashel nodded. The canvas-covered wagons looked like those used by traveling merchants to carry goods from one town to the next, selling or trading their wares. As the wagons passed, the eight men of the short caravan took notice of him briefly and he waved. The men looked away, failing to wave back or even to seem interested in him. This happened sometimes when near Ondromead. People didn't usually see the old man and forgot him after they had.

“Not very friendly for merchants.” Ondromead put the pear near his mouth but did not take a bite. “What do you think they were carrying in those wagons?”

Hashel shrugged. The wagons could have carried anything. He thought through the possibilities. Sacks of grain? Barrels of ale or oil? Bolts of cloth? Rugs, maybe? Maybe a combination of things. Hashel shrugged his shoulders again.

“Odd, don’t you think, that they weren’t in the town this morning, and yet passed through without stopping?” Ondromead finally took another that bite of pear.

Hashel rubbed his chin as he watched the merchant wagons roll out of sight around a bend in the road. What interested Ondromead in them so much? Was it merely a feeling of his? Was Hashel missing something he should be able to see?

“If I’m right, we’ll have a bit of time to wait.” Ondromead tossed the core of the pear into the grass. “I think I’ve seen this before but not for many years.”

Hashel could tell by the tone of Ondromead’s voice that the old man hoped he would be proved wrong. Whatever he saw in the past probably did not end well for someone. People undoubtedly ended up dead. Hashel still found this to be the hardest part of traveling with Ondromead. Too many awful things happened to people for no reason. Or they happened because of other people. That was harder to witness. People could be so terrible. And so wonderful. They had seen many terrible and wonderful things in the months since being separated at the Daeshen palace. Thankfully, they had not seen the old woman, Meraeu, again. Ondromead said he sometimes went decades without seeing her. Hashel pondered how long it would be before she returned again, or if she would. Would he be there when she did? How old would he be? This made him consider other thoughts he’d kept from his mind by intent. How long could he stay at Ondromead’s side? Would he still be the old man’s companion when he had grown to be a man himself? Would he end up an old man traveling beside Ondromead? How long might they stay together?

They sat in silence for a long time, each concerned with his own inner thoughts. They often sat without talking for hours. As Hashel did not speak, all conversation relied on Ondromead. Sometimes, the old man spoke at great length about the place they happened to be in and what he had seen there, the history of the people, and how what he’d witnessed in one age related to what he saw many years later. Today, they sat in quiet. They had a snack of corn dumplings they’d purchased earlier in the town. After a time, they saw a man riding fast on a horse, a trail of dust billowing out behind the animal’s hooves.

Ondromead sighed loudly, and Hashel turned to him.

“It is as I suspected,” Ondromead said. “We’ll have some more time to wait.”

Hashel watched the man on the speeding horse round the bend in the road. What connected the man and the merchants? Hashel considered the puzzle for a time and then resigned himself to having it solved when they eventually witnessed the thing Ondromead expected.

“Why don’t we read while we wait?” Ondromead pulled the mysterious black book from his leather satchel and opened it to a seemingly random page and started to read. He placed his finger beneath the words so that Hashel could follow along with him. “Year 3210. A beautiful sunset in the Tayso Mountains of Nevaeo. I walked with a boy of twenty and girl a little younger through

the mountain pass. They had just run away from their warring mountain families to marry and start a new life. By the look of the girl, she already carried a new life. They spoke..."

Hashel read the words to himself as Ondromead spoke them aloud. He had gotten very good at reading in the months since Ondromead began teaching him. He didn't really need the old man's help anymore, but he liked the ritual. It made him feel more a part of Ondromead's life and him more a part of Hashel's. They usually only read the pleasant stories of what Ondromead had seen. Sometimes, Ondromead read a series of entries, explaining how they connected and affected one another. At those times, it was impossible not to read a few sad stories. But Hashel did enjoy seeing how things that happened in one time and place affected the events of a distant land many years later.

After an hour or so, near sunset, Ondromead put the book away and looked back toward the town. A sound that began as an indistinct rumbling soon became the steady thunder of countless boots and horse hooves. A slight chill spread across Hashel's skin as he observed a line of soldiers five men wide marching from the town. Behind the men in armor, rode men in greater armor, followed by wagons stuffed with weapons and supplies and people without armor, men and women, walking or guiding cows and pigs or oxen. Hashel saw a large wagon near the rear of the caravan, surrounded by soldiers with long spears. On the wagon sat a massive cage of iron bars, and within the cage sat a creature Hashel had never seen.

"A bone-giant." Ondromead answered Hashel's unspoken question. "I have not seen one of them in many, many years."

The bone-giant squatted in the cage, looking as though he might break free at any moment. Man-like in shape, with plates of what appeared to be grayish bone covering its massive body, Hashel guessed it stood as tall as three men. A singular white horn erupted from the center of the creature's enormous, elongated head. A head that held large black eyes behind a long snout and a mouth filled with bright, sharp teeth. The chill returned to Hashel once more, making him shiver.

"In the time when the human seers made the roagg people to fight for them, they also made many other creatures for battle." Sadness reverberated in Ondromead's voice. "The bone-giants were not as intelligent as the roagg, but they were larger and far more violent. This made them harder to control. But they could kill many, many men on a battlefield. I thought they had all died off."

Hashel and Ondromead watched as the army finally passed entirely around the bend in the road. The procession took nearly two hours, and Hashel could not guess how many soldiers marched down the road. Thousands and thousands, he supposed.

"Do you see the connection with the merchants and the man on the horse and the army?" Ondromead wiped dust from his face with the edge of his sleeve.

Hashel thought about it and decided that he didn't see the connection between the three events. He shook his head.

"The merchants were not merchants," Ondromead said. "They are soldiers in disguise. They pass through towns ahead of the army and then wait. If someone rides from the town in haste to warn of the approaching army, the fake merchants stop them. If they are lucky and from the same

dominion, they might be allowed to live. If they are from the dominion being invaded, they'll be killed. In this way, the army has a greater chance of surprising their enemy, keeping word of their approach from spreading ahead of the troops. It's an old tactic I haven't seen in years and years. These are likely the same soldiers we saw training in the northern mountains of Atheton all those months ago. I'm sure you know what that means."

Hashel nodded. He did know what that meant. The Atheton Dominion went to war. He sighed. There would likely be very few pleasant events to witness in the coming months.

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THE TEMPLE



TAKSATI

WORN LEATHER slapped against ancient stone, footsteps echoing faintly along curved walls. The sun shone for a few brief moments before hiding once more behind a clouded sky. Taksati walked beside Junari down the wide, spiraling avenue leading to the temple. Atula followed just behind them, trailed closely by Kantula and Jupiterus. The journey to the temple from the ships took far less time than two days prior. Bon-Tao had led a team to clear the curving side streets of the vicious vines that had killed that poor pilgrim. The secret, from what Taksati gathered, seemed to be stabbing the bulbous root with a spear repeatedly to kill it. This rendered the vines combustible, allowing them to be hacked and burned.

“Captain Tunadar tells me the ships will be seaworthy and ready to sail in half a week.” Junari clasped her hands behind her back as she spoke.

“That may be, but we will need more than five days to stock their holds with supplies for the journey back.” Taksati wiped a thin sheen of sweat from her forehead. The early autumn sun in the Forbidden Realm baked the land a little more than back in Juparti. She missed her wide-brimmed, reed-woven hat from the Pashist temple. Maybe she could teach Atula to fashion one. Her own aged fingers no longer held the dexterity for such work. “While the two wells we found are sound, and the water safe, it will take us at least a full week if not more to gather enough provisions. We have two of the small boats working with nets to catch fish, and we’ve set to drying and smoking in a building near the docks, but the crews will need something to eat besides cured cod.”

“Any news from today’s hunting and foraging expeditions?” Junari looked to the west, past the edge of the last stone structure four strides away and into the forests and fields that bordered the ruined city.

“No word as yet, but I’d guess the reports will be similar to the last two days,” Taksati said. “There looks to be plenty of deer, rabbit, and fowl to hunt. Enough to tide us over until we can breed the pigs and chickens and cows we brought over on the ships. The foraging teams have found fruits and root vegetables in the forests, but not many. We have two families of farmers clearing land to plow and sow the grain that survived, but we won’t get anything from the ground before winter sets in. Spring will be better, when we can plant the vegetable seeds we brought, and the winter grain will grow. We should have fresh flour for bread again by summer.”

“You don’t think the ships will be stocked within a half week?” Junari turned to look at Taksati, her eyes curious.

“We have little left from our journey and we need to feed all the mouths here, as well as stockpile stores to fill the bellies of the sailors heading back.” Taksati frowned at the problem. They needed too much food and had too little at hand. They needed to accumulate a significant surplus to see them through the coming cold months when game became scarce and foraging

beneath the snow impossible. “Atula.”

Taksati looked back to the girl as she ran to catch up.

“Yes, Taksati.” Atula looked up with a smile on her face, clearly happy to be suddenly involved in a conversation between her mentor and the Mother Shepherd.

“How many casks of water do we need for the ships?” Taksati looked at the girl as they walked side-by-side.

“You said one hundred and ten for each ship, so...” Atula’s fingers twitched, but she did not glance at them. “Four hundred and forty.”

“And how many barrels of smoked fish and dried venison?” Taksati asked.

“Twenty-five for each ship, so that makes exactly one hundred.” Atula smiled, obviously enjoying the game of numbers. They played similar games with facts about the pilgrim colony every day.

“And how much hard bread do we have left from the voyage over the ocean?”

“Fifteen barrels of hard bread. Which is four barrels for three ships and three barrels for one of the ships.”

“How many sacks of flour remain?” Taksati wished they had brought more flour. Much of it had been lost on the ships that did not survive the voyage.

“Thirty-six and one half,” Atula replied. “But a tenth of that will be gone by the end of the week to make bread for meals.”

“And how many days do you think it will take to stock the ships for the journey back to the Iron Realm?”

“Hmm ... Maybe nine.” Atula furrowed her brow as she considered this number. “Eight if the smoking goes fast. But probably nine.”

“That is the assessment of our most enthusiastic storekeeper.” Taksati patted Atula on the head and the girl beamed with pride.

“You are lucky to find such an astute assistant, Taksati.” Junari smiled at Atula, who at first smiled back and then dipped her head in bashfulness.

“Indeed. Thank you, Atula.” Taksati nodded to the girl and she obediently slipped back behind them to walk beside Kantula and Jupiterus.

“So, the ships can depart in under a week.” Junari sighed and shook her head. “What about the accommodations? Are people settling well?”

“We’ve cleaned out two buildings near the docks for the sailors,” Taksati said. “And we are settling everyone else in buildings near the temple. It will take a few more days. Bon-Tao insists on checking every building for those noxious plants before pilgrims move in.” She looked at two such structures as they passed from the spiraling avenue into the plaza at the city center. The domed temple rose above them, its upper level momentarily hiding the sun and casting a welcomed shade. Women worked to clean the buildings of dust, cobwebs, bird nests, and desiccated vegetation blown through open doors over the centuries. “We should have everyone settled by sundown tomorrow.”

“You do realize I know that every time you say ‘we’ that you are the one responsible.” Junari

reached a hand and rested it on Taksati's arm. "You carry too much on your shoulders."

"Much less than the Mother Shepherd bears." Taksati held Junari's eyes long enough to let the younger woman know she accepted her concern and would ignore it as always. "How proceeds the work on the temple?"

She turned away from Junari and watched the men hauling wagons of timber and construction supplies toward the closest temple entrance. A crude scaffold of tree logs bound with rope climbed the side of the temple toward a large fissure in the stone structure. The sight made her think of a handful of ants attempting to reassemble the carcass of a dead animal.

"There are not enough hands to do the work." Junari raised her eyes to the window in the domed top level of the temple where two men worked to mortar small stones into the time-worn gaps of the frame. "The stone masons tell me that the upper chamber will require weeks, if not months, to restore, but that assessment does not include the rebuilding of the ramp to that level. The rest of the work will go slowly, as there is so much of it and so few of us. And as you pointed out, many of the pilgrims are required to work providing us food to eat and clearing space for those who are yet to come. If they come."

"They will come. The Goddess saw us here and she will guide the others to join us." Taksati tried to sound certain of her statement.

"Little more than half of those who began the journey survived." Junari walked through the enormous rounded entrance to the main hall of the temple. Taksati and the others followed. "It may be too great a price to pay for rebuilding a ruined temple."

"Perhaps, now we are here, the urris will leave us alone." Again, Taksati could not make her voice convey the proper optimism.

"Perhaps," Junari echoed. "Regardless, we do not know how harsh the winter will be. How much it will impede those pilgrims headed to us, or how it will affect the rebuilding. The masons think it will be spring before any real progress is made."

"Then it will be spring, or it will be summer, or next autumn." Taksati looked around the curved temple corridor, noting the countless cracks in the walls and the floor tiles. "The Goddess set us to a purpose, she did not set a time for us to accomplish our task."

"True." Junari nodded at Taksati's statement. "I had always assumed the Goddess to come to us when we finished the temple and so hoped to complete the work as soon as possible."

"The Goddess will come when she is ready." This sentiment did contain the conviction Taksati intended.

They walked in silence through the spiraling hall, Jupiterus holding an oil lantern high to light their path. Taksati had been so busy, she had not taken the time to see the inner chambers of the temple. She'd heard descriptions of it, but her schedule had not allowed her witness it in person. Now Junari insisted on showing it to her personally. She would have demurred to continue her work, but it afforded her an opportunity to spend time with Junari and inform her about the state of the pilgrim colony. They'd found few moments since landing to speak for more than minutes every night. Each had too many responsibilities, and neither possessed an inclination toward delegation.

Seeing the temple close at hand filled her with a palpable thrill — the long-dreamed visions of a never-seen shrine brought to reality before her eyes. However, the true enticement came in having unhurried minutes to spend with her mistress. The voyage had taken them past the known horizon of the world and pushed them further into the inner horizons of what they each assumed themselves capable of. They had done things miraculous and terrible to reach the forbidden shores of this realm, Junari more so than any pilgrim. The weight of such actions, such difficult but necessary decisions, could not be borne in silence. One needed to speak of the doubt they engendered.

While Taksati found time aboard the ship to listen to Junari's rarely voiced fears, often needing to coax her into admitting them, their arrival allowed little opportunity for such intimate communications. Not that their current walk offered any occasion, for delicate talk, accompanied as they were by Atula and Junari's ever-present guards. Still, it felt good to be near her without the great cares of their individual commitments pressing them apart.

"It is as beautiful as it is mysterious," Taksati said as they passed through a chamber with a pastoral mural covering its walls.

"Yes," Junari said. "Tanagaal says the temple was likely constructed nearly entirely with the use of The Sight. It is a shame we do not have more seers to assist him as he helps the masons."

"More will come," Taksati said as they stepped into the adjoining passageway. "Eventually..."

The sudden groaning of the temple walls overpowered her voice even as those same barriers began to tremble violently, cracks rupturing along the stones and between their seamless joints. Taksati turned to see the archway over the entrance to the passage crumble above Atula's head. Without thought, knowing with instinct that pulling the girl to her would take too long, she bent forward and shoved Atula into the arms of Kantula and Jupyterus. Junari grabbed Taksati's arm and tugged her away as the stones of the ceiling collapsed to the ground in a billowing haze of dust. They stumbled back, coughing and covering their faces with the necks of their dresses. They held to each other as the earth tremors faded.

"Are you hurt?" Taksati touched her hands along Junari's arms and head — a worried mother bear inspecting her cub for wounds.

"I am fine." Junari brushed Taksati's hands away and applied her own to the elder woman's face. "Your cheek is cut."

Taksati winced from where Junari touched her. She raised her own hand to her cheek and found blood on it when she brought her finger before her eyes.

"It's nothing," she said as she looked around the darkened corridor. The lamp Jupyterus had held lay on the ground, miraculously intact and still burning, its glass dimmed with dust, a crack in the side leaking oil. "They have found us again."

"The urris." Junari growled her words as she picked up the lantern and wiped the glass clean with the hem of her dress. "It is no coincidence that these walls have stood for thousands of years and only now begin to crumble from the tremors of the ground."

Junari held the lamp aloft. They stood among a maze of broken passages, falling ceilings, and

shattered walls, lost and separated from their companions. Much as they had been on the ship weeks ago.

THIRTY-FIVE DAYS AGO

MURMURED CHANTS floated through the salt-laden air, carried across bowed heads and misted planks before the wind swept them out over the waves and up into the clear sky. Taksati sat on the main deck of the lead pilgrim ship, the sun warming her back, curved from her many years bending to labors in a Pashist temple. She sighed as the breeze cooled her face. Her right hand held Atula's, and her left wrapped around the palm of a Juparti man named Tanagaal. She spoke the words of a prayer recited for the last hour by all the pilgrims aboard the vessel.

“Mother Moaratana, Great Goddess, protector of the innocent, defender of the defenseless, savior of the lost and forgotten, remember us now in our time of need and deliver us from those who oppress us. Return us to the arms of our brethren across the sea that we might complete your journey to the Forbidden Realm. Save us, Great Goddess.”

As she once more joined the voices repeating the prayer, Taksati opened her eyes, examining the vessel and their place on the water. With the ship's sails pulled in, and even Captain Tunadar bent in prayer near the rudder atop the aftcastle, the waves carried the vessel away from the coast of the foreign landmass visible over the portside rail. Some of the sailors said the rocky shoreline and pine forests reminded them of the northern coast of the Daeshen Dominion, but others suggested they might behold the western edge of the Stone Realm. No ships or ports had been spotted by the man hanging from the ropes of the mainmast in the three hours since their mysterious arrival. They did not know where they were or how far they might be from their sister vessels.

Taksati stifled an inner sigh as she continued reciting the words of the prayer. *“Self-pity never finished the chores,”* her mother told her once long ago. They could not fall to despair with so much left to accomplish. Unfortunately, they could achieve nothing until they either found a way back to their sister ships or figured out how to once more begin their journey to the Forbidden Realm.

She had not believed in the mythical urris, feeling them to be as immaterial as the gods of her original faith. One could believe in gods, but one could not expect that belief to result in any change in one's life. Not until the Goddess came to their dreams and touched the world in numerous miraculous ways. She should have expected that the urris might affect the world as well, particularly the lives of the pilgrims. However, as Junari said after the terrifying fog evaporated, their best hope lay in the Goddess altering reality once more to return them across the waves. They could only pray for assistance.

But would the Goddess help them? Could she even do so? And if she could transport their ship back to rejoin the others, why did she not carry them all over the ocean to the Forbidden Realm? Were there limits to her power or restrictions to how she chose to use it?

She felt a squeeze of her hand and looked down to see Atula staring back up to her, eyes still

wide with fear. The normally talkative girl spoke little since their arrival in these unknown waters. Ignoring the pain in her shoulders and the ache along the old bones of her spine, she bent to the side and kissed the girl on the forehead.

“All will be well,” Taksati whispered in Atula’s ear. The girl’s posture relaxed, and she offered a thin smile. Then she closed her eyes and spoke the prayer again, a little more loudly.

As Taksati shut her eyes to focus on her petition to the Goddess, a cry rose from the aft of the ship. She snapped her eyes open and looked around, blinking in surprise at what she saw. All the Tot Gioth believers stood at the rear of the ship armed with cooking blades and wooden clubs fashioned from crates. Nearly twenty in all, the first six of their number held pilgrims with knives to their necks.

“We’re seizing the ship!” one of the Tot Gioth men holding a woman as hostage yelled. “You take to the small boats or we’ll kill them.” The man dug the blade deeply enough into the woman’s neck that Taksati saw drops of blood from twenty paces away as the woman cried out.

As Atula helped Taksati to her feet, she noticed Bon-Tao, sword drawn, edging toward one side of the Tot Gioth mutineers. She watched Kantula and Jupiterus make for the other side of the people clumped together, opposite Bon-Tao.

“Stay close to me, child.” Taksati gripped Atula’s hand tighter. “This looks to be destined for a bloody end.”

“Stop this at once.” Junari’s voice rose above the din of ugly words shouted between the Tot Gioth believers and the pilgrims. The pilgrims fell silent at Junari’s words and made a space at the front where the groups faced off. A gap of several paces opened between the two sides.

“The Mother and Father have saved us from your wicked plans and delivered us to safe shores.” The man with the knife to the neck of the bleeding woman spoke again. “Now we will complete that deliverance. Your prayers have gone unanswered because your god is false while ours have been realized. Take your heretic lies aboard the small boats and we will let you live. Refuse and we will cast you all into the waves.”

Taksati pulled Atula behind her as she pushed her way toward the stairs of the forecastle deck. She stood too short to see well among so many people and the raised deck at the bow provided the safest vantage to view whatever happened next. While her heart and her duty told her she needed to stand beside Junari, she refused to allow any danger to befall Atula. As Taksati climbed to the top of the forecastle stairs, she heard Junari speak again, her voice filled with anger.

“The elders of your city sent you with us to avoid the need to kill you.” Junari stepped closer to the Tot Gioth leader. “I know you. You are Terrotell. We have spoken. You know I will not abandon my Goddess’s plans any more than I will abandon this ship. Blood does not need to be shed on this day.”

“But blood will flow if you do not make for the small boats and leave us the ship.” The man once more pressed his blade into the neck of the woman he held. She cried out, tears in her eyes.

A man, likely her husband, edged forward from the pilgrim crowd. Taksati looked between Bon-Tao, Kantula, and Jupiterus, seeing them moving in preparation to strike. She saw sailors and pilgrims arm themselves with whatever they could find at hand on the deck — wooden dowels,

pulley blocks or ropes, short lengths of chain, and even wooden buckets. Taksati glanced to Atula. The girl looked frightened, and she pulled her closer as a new voice arose in the confrontation on the deck below them.

“There is another way that does not require blood.”

Taksati watched a man push his way into the space between Junari and the leader of the Tot Gioth believers. It took her a moment to recognize him as the man whose hand she had held in prayer. Tanagaal. She wondered what he intended, thrusting himself into a confrontation of such potential violence. She had heard him say he worked for a Juparti Rhaga on the east as a tutor or adviser. Might he have experience in negotiations between warring parties? She hoped he did not turn the tense situation unnecessarily toward violence. She knew Junari hoped to avoid such an outcome.

“Stand back, man!” the leader of the Tot Gioths shouted toward Tanagaal. “No more talking. Take the boats or leap over the rails and swim, but you will get off this ship, or we will kill so many of you that you will not have enough hands left to sail it to that shore behind you.”

Tanagaal stopped and raised his hands.

“I offer you instead the chance to surrender.” Tanagaal raised one hand higher and the weapons in the grasp of the six Tot Gioth mutineers holding hostages soared into the air and over the side of the ship. The Tot Gioths stared in shock at their suddenly empty hands. Then Tanagaal thrust forth both palms and the six Tot Gioths flew backward through the air, crashing into their brethren, the whole group falling to their backs as an invisible force pushed them into a crowded mass along the wall of the aftcastle cabin.

Taksati squinted in the sun at the surprising display of The Sight. She had not suspected Tanagaal as a seer. It seemed he had grown so accustomed to hiding his nature while traveling through the Shen dominions, where it might mean death, that he continued to hide his powers even among those who would accept them. A part of her mind began listing all the ways a man with such skills might be helpful in maintaining the health and welfare of the pilgrim fleet. She set those thoughts aside as events unfolded below her.

Bon-Tao, Kantula, and Jupiterus did not hesitate in leaping forward to subdue the Tot Gioths, using their swords to knock away improvised weapons and forcing the mutineers to huddle together on the deck. The pilgrims nearby helped, pulling weapons from Tot Gioth hands and striking those who refused to surrender. Some of the pilgrims enjoyed their turn of fortune a little more than necessary, at least two of them viciously beating the Tot Gioth leader of the mutiny.

“Enough!” Junari pulled the men away from the dazed Tot Gioth mutineer. “I meant what I said about not shedding blood.”

The Tot Gioth leader looked to Junari from where he sprawled on the deck, nose bleeding and eyes already bruising.

“You should kill us, or one day, we will kill you.”

“I have another notion,” Junari shouted, turning to the Tot Gioth mutineers. “I will grant you your desire, but not as you wished it.” She looked to Bon-Tao and her faithful guards. “Launch a short boat and put them in it.”

“We don’t even know where we are,” the Tot Gioth leader protested.

“You will soon.” Junari turned away from the Tot Gioths and spoke to Tanagaal.

From where Taksati stood, she could not hear the conversation with the Juparti seer, but she knew Junari well enough to guess at its contents and the direction. There would be thanks, certainly, but like herself, Junari would already be thinking of ways the man might aid her in fulfilling the Goddess’s plans.

“I didn’t think magic was real.” Atula released Taksati’s hand and leaned on the railing of the forecastle deck. Taksati marveled at how quickly the child moved from fear to fascination.

“It is not magic,” Taksati said. “It is The Sight.”

“Is there a difference?” Atula cocked her head toward Taksati but did not take her eyes from the spectacle of six sailors lowering a small boat to the water.

“With magic, anything is possible.” Taksati watched as Bon-Tao forced the first of the Tot Gioths down a rope ladder to the small boat tilting with the waves. “There are limits to what The Sight may accomplish.”

“What about the fog that brought us here?” Atula asked as she moved to the side of the ship to better observe the unplanned departure of the Tot Gioths.

“It must have taken a great seer,” Taksati replied. “The old stories say the urris were the greatest of all seers.”

“So...” Atula’s voice pitched high as she thought out loud. “...the Goddess is a seer?”

“The Goddess is more than a mere seer.” Taksati scowled at the direction the girl’s questioning took. While the newness of the pilgrim faith protected it from notions labeled as heresy, her many years in a Pashist temple taught her to expect certain questions and declarations to eventually be considered unutterable. The nature of the Goddess’s power seemed just such a proposition to be queried with caution.

“I want to be a seer.” Atula straightened up and stood a little taller, balancing on her toes.

“You can be whatever you set your mind to.” Taksati ignored the pangs of anger and sadness that contradicted her words. She’d wanted to be a priest once and had set her mind to it, but she’d only ever been allowed to be a servant. Some of her long-held irritation dissolved as she reflected on how she now served the Mother Shepherd and the Goddess in a way the Pashist priests who rejected her never foresaw.

“I thought you wanted to be a vessel for the Goddess.” Taksati looked back to Atula, realizing that she did not need to long to be someone she’d wished to be in her youth. She could be who she desired to be now, in that moment. And she could not imagine wanting to be anything other than what she’d become.

“I can be more than one thing.” Atula sounded certain as she spoke the words, but then seemed to reconsider them. “Can’t I?”

“It depends on what those things are,” Taksati said. “Some things are incompatible in life and cannot be wed no matter how hard we try. But I see no reason why a seer can’t be a vessel for the Goddess. Look to Tanagaal as an example.”

The wails of the Tot Gioth believers in the boat below turned Taksati’s attention back to the

water. The ropes had been released. Two of the Tot Gioth men handled the oars, tugging hard to pull the overcrowded boat away from the larger pilgrim ship, in the direction of the unknown shore. The small boat, only a few paces wide and no more than six paces long, looked extremely unsteady with so many people crammed aboard. She wondered if they would make it to land without someone falling into the ocean. It presented an easy justice for rejecting Junari's hospitality. Many others would have taken the suggestion of the Tanjii city elder, Kuth Von, and tossed them overboard to drown.

Thinking of that day at the Tanjii port and the events just transpired reminded her again of the tile casting that foretold of betrayal. She had wondered if the tiles spoke of Kuth Von and his trickery at placing the Tot Gioths aboard the pilgrim ships, or if the tiles instead referred to the Tot Gioth themselves? Or did the tiles speak of a treachery yet to be uncovered?

Her thoughts on the matter dissolved as Atula grabbed her hand and shook it forcefully.

"There. Look."

Taksati followed the aim of Atula's other arm.

"Fog. More fog!" Atula moved closer to Taksati.

Taksati pulled the girl away from the outer rail to cling instead to the inner banister above the main deck. She didn't bother to offer words of reassurance, as they would contrast too greatly with the shouts and yells of panic from the pilgrims and the crew as they, too, watched the fog rise from the ocean once more. The Tot Gioth in their little boat disappeared from view behind a shroud of mist that swelled and blossomed and soon enveloped the entire vessel. She felt dizzy and nauseous for a moment, her spinning head reminding her of having drunk too many glasses of wine. The sensation faded with the dissipation of the fog to reveal that the ship sat a hundred paces from a vessel she recognized from having seen it close at hand for the last week.

A cheer rose from those aboard the ship.

"The Goddess be praised!"

"The Goddess has saved us!"

"Great Goddess Moaratana, thank you!"

Shouts bounced back and forth across the deck of the ship, and similar cries arose from the passengers of the other seven vessels nearby. Taksati ignored all of those sights and sounds to seek out a single face among the jubilant pilgrims, one racked with joy and tears. She guessed Junari wept in thanks for their deliverance by the Goddess's hands, but she also suspected the Mother Shepherd shed tears for those she had so recently cast off with no food or water or means of protection, nothing but their clothes, to face an unfamiliar shore and an unknown fate. Such were Junari's burdens. This among many acts spoke to why she loved Junari so greatly — she tried, in the face of all opposition, to embody the ideals expressed not only by the faith of her birth, but the faith she had herself birthed.

Taksati worried that Junari might not be strong enough to carry that burden and all the hard choices required in order for them to succeed on their journey to the Forbidden Realm and what awaited them there.

THE PRESENT

FALLEN SHARDS of stone littered the hallway, obstacles to easy passage in the dim and fading lantern light. Taksati squinted to assure her feet proper placement along the debris-strewn floor. They had been walking for several minutes, trying to find a side passage to lead them back to the main corridor and allow them to work their way out of the spiraled hallway rather than deeper into the temple. So far, the two halls they had crossed were as impassable as the collapsed entrance to the chamber behind them.

“We should turn back.” Taksati stopped, staring into the darkness ahead. “Kantula and Jupiterus will know where we are and come to find us.”

Junari sighed loudly and turned to guide them back the way they came.

“You know I dislike waiting for others to help me when I can help myself.” Junari kicked at a hand-sized bit of rubble, wincing as her booted toe made contact with the stone.

“Sometimes, we need to wait for others help. Sometimes, we need to wait for the Goddess’s help. Sometimes, we need to wait for a better idea.” Taksati looked at the lamp in Junari’s hand. “Besides, that lamp oil will run out soon, and it’d be better to be trapped in the dark where others can find us rather than wandering through this maze.”

“I know you are right. But I worry about the others. And I hate not knowing what has happened to them.” Junari’s lips curled with her expressed displeasure.

“Like Bon-Tao.” Taksati understood. Her own thoughts focused on young Atula and whether she stood safely outside the temple or had been wounded by the collapse of the ceiling.

“Yes. Like Bon-Tao.” Junari glanced at Taksati with a frown. “We are that obvious?”

“Not at all.” Taksati grinned. “There is at least one blind man and several children who are completely unaware of the glances and quiet conversations between you two.” Taksati had refrained from mentioning the noticeable growing connection between Junari and the former Tanjii city soldier, both to extend them some small privacy and because she feared doing so might discourage Junari from pursuing the union.

“I assume you approve, or you would have said something earlier.” Junari stared straight ahead, the lamplight painting her face with deep shadows, making her seem weary.

“He is a good man. And a good match.” Taksati placed her hand on Junari’s arm as they came to where the collapsed stone blocked the passage. “Even the Mother Shepherd needs the comfort of a strong embrace. Maybe more than all the rest of us.”

“But how can the Mother Shepherd and a soldier court one another in the middle of ... everything.” Junari lowered her head, her shoulders slumping.

“Do not worry about the opinion of the pilgrims.” Taksati tapped Junari’s chest with a bony finger. “Concern yourself with the judgment of your heart.”

Junari looked up, one eyebrow raised. “Bon-Tao said something similar.”

“Then he is wise as well as handsome.” Taksati held Junari’s gaze until they both laughed aloud.

“Mother Shepherd!”

Kantula's voice drew their eyes back to the pile of stones blocking the corridor.

"We are here!" Junari shouted. "We tried to find a way out, but the lantern was damaged and the oil is running out."

"Stand back," Kantula yelled from behind the crumbled stones.

Taksati and Junari stepped backward as the mound of rubble began to shake, the rumbling noise of stones grating against one another filling the air. A side of the debris pile nearest one wall shuddered more than the rest, the stones and chunks of masonry rolling backward of their own accord until light from several lanterns streamed through a growing opening and a pathway cleared for them.

Tanagaal stood in the lantern light, his arms stretched out before him, a toothy smile peeking out from behind his dusty beard.

"Is everyone safe?" Junari asked.

"So far as we know," Tanagaal replied.

"Taksati!"

Atula dashed past the Juparti seer, clambering over the remaining rubble, and ran to throw her arms around her mentor.

"Don't break my old bones." Taksati patted the girl's head as she clung tightly to her. Junari walked through the reopened side of the passage to join Tanagaal, Kantula, Jupiterus, and several others who had come to their aid.

"You pushed me away!" Atula looked up, her eyes filled with fiery accusation.

"I pushed you to safety," Taksati said.

"I'd rather be with you than be safe." Atula hugged her again briefly before breaking away.

Taksati wiped away the tears that arose in her eyes before the girl noticed.

"Come. Let's get outside and get you dusted off." Taksati put her arm around Atula as the two followed Junari and the rest of the party along the spiraled corridor and back out into the fresh air and bright sun. She shook the folds of her dress to free herself of the worst of the stone dust, watching as the others did the same.

"You are safe." Bon-Tao walked up to stand before Junari, his sword hand tightly clasping the hilt of his blade. Taksati admired the man's restraint as his face indicated a clear desire to do as Atula had done moments ago.

"As are you." Junari smiled at Bon-Tao. "Is everyone accounted for?"

"All but Raedalus and few of his assistants." Bon-Tao looked past Junari to the temple looming above them and spoke in Shen. "They were making maps of all the chambers and drawing the murals. They have not been seen, but they may have come out one of the other two entrances."

Taksati understood Shen well enough to follow Bon-Tao's words. She still possessed no deep fondness for Raedalus, but she understood his value to Junari and Goddess's plans. She hoped he stood safely outside in the sun on the other side of the temple.

"We should..."

Tremors shook the ground and threw Taksati from her feet to sprawl along the paving stones of the city's central plaza. Atula collapsed beside her, and she clutched the girl close. Junari clung

to Bon-Tao as she and the others also fell to the ground. The sound of cracking stone and groaning earth overwhelmed the shouts and screams of those near the quaking temple. A massive fissure opened beneath two pilgrims crouched on their knees across the square thirty paces away — a gaping jaw of jagged stone teeth sucking them down into darkness.

Taksati looked around, her chest clenched in fear. The ground tremors were far worse than the last time. She knew with certainty that the urris attacked them once more.

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

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

THICK GLASS and round metal frames. Viewing portals sunk through the walls of the bulkhead in the cabin beneath the forecastle deck glistened with ocean mist. The captain's personal quarters. Cramped and sparsely furnished. Lee-Nin stood at the glass portal looking out at rain-swept ocean waves falling to black shadow in the dimming light of dusk and darkening clouds. Beyond the waves, five spans away, still visible in the fading illumination, a strange ship sailed directly toward their own vessel. She saw no sails, but smoke billowed up from tall chimneys — a ship somehow aflame but in a manner that moved it swiftly through the water rather than sinking it to the depths. A second smaller but similar ship plowed the waters beside it.

At her side, Sao-Tauna lay in a narrow bed, wrapped in a woolen blanket against the chills that frequently shook her small frame. A lantern bolted to the wall beside the bed burned bright, illuminating the girl's sleeping form. She woke every few hours and Lee-Nin fed her broth and made her drink water before exhaustion pulled her tiny eyes closed once more. The girl needed rest, but she lived. Thanks to the help of a stranger. A woman who stepped into their lives for mere minutes, just enough to save a life, before disappearing as though never seen. A seer who appeared to possess as many secrets as Lee-Nin herself.

She pushed the thoughts of the woman and the two men from her mind. Other concerns needed her attention. The rakthor ships — iron hulled, smoke belching, mastless vessels — approached them with great speed. Sao-Tauna would only continue to live if they avoided being sunk by the ships of the Alliance blockade. They had sailed up the coast all day in hopes of slipping around the loose ring of ships cordoning off the harbor of Tanjii and the surrounding shores. It seemed for a time they might succeed, but no longer. What would the captain do now? Would they be turned back or worse? She looked to the sound of the cabin door opening. Sha-Kutan pressed his large bulk through the slender door frame, followed by Ogtankaa. The woman closed the door and they both stood near the bed, looking down at Sao-Tauna.

"The captain says the rakthor ships have signaled their intention to board all the pilgrim vessels." Ogtankaa walked over to stare out one of the small glass portals.

"Can we outrun them?" Lee-Nin noted the look of concern on Sha-Kutan's face as he gazed at Sao-Tauna. She had come to trust that wide, disfigured face, and even find it pleasant in indefinable ways. She wished she felt the same for Ogtankaa, whose hard, angular features only elicited a sense of unease. The woman gave an oath to see Sao-Tauna to the Forbidden Realm, but she did not truly trust her, nor the being within her. She appeared to work with them toward their goal, but for reasons she was unwilling, or unable, to clarify. Lee-Nin had tried many times to get the woman to speak aloud her reasons for agreeing to Sha-Kutan's bargain with no success.

"Captain Faragg says the rakthor ships are too fast." Sha-Kutan turned from Sao-Tauna and looked out the second window. "He thinks that a few of the pilgrim ships might be able to flee but

fears they will be sunk if they fail.”

“He says the rakthor’s have something called cannons.” Ogtankaa continued to stare out the portal. “They are like catapults that launch iron balls with great force.”

“Great enough to tear this ship in half,” Sha-Kutan added.

Lee-Nin noted the sadness in his voice. And more than that. Not fear, certainly not that, but a tone of regret and even shame. She realized that he blamed himself for Sao-Tauna once more being in danger.

“What can we do?” Lee-Nin stood between Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa. “There must be something we can do?”

“Wait and hope,” Ogtankaa said.

“And keep Sao-Tauna safe,” Sha-Kutan added.

“If they turn us back, we may be able to try again another day.” Ogtankaa sounded more doubtful than definitive.

Lee-Nin stood at the portal nearest Sha-Kutan, close enough to smell his salt-misted skin and the oil of his hair. There must be a path open to them. Some action they could take. As she thought about it, she considered a notion that endangered her indirectly, yet placed Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa in mortal peril.

“When the two of you are...” Lee-Nin spoke before realizing she did not know the exact words with which to phrase her questions and propose her idea. “When you two are separated from your ... hosts ... how far can you travel?”

Sha-Kutan glanced at Ogtankaa, holding her eyes for a moment before turning to Lee-Nin.

“We can go anywhere at any distance, but the farther we go, the weaker the link between us,” Sha-Kutan said.

“Far enough and the connection can break,” Ogtankaa added.

“But you could ... reconnect ... if you needed to?” Lee-Nin asked.

“Yes.” Ogtankaa looked to where Sao-Tauna slept in the bed. “The risk is to more than ourselves.”

“If they sense us in our natural form, the Taksa Kranee will come for us.” Sha-Kutan looked at Sao-Tauna as well. “And they will come for her.”

“What if you are quick?” Lee-Nin tried to weigh the dangers and benefits of her plan. “We’d be on open water. Would that make it harder for them to find you?”

“Possibly.” Ogtankaa furrowed her brow as she considered the idea. “It depends on how close they are. If they have hosts and if they, too, took the risk to leave them.”

“How long?” From the window, Lee-Nin saw that little more than a span separated the small pilgrim fleet and the two rakthor Alliance ships. Even in the marginal light, at this distance, she easily saw the metal hulls of the rakthor vessels. She ignored the inner image of the hard iron ramming into their own wooden craft.

“A few minutes.” Sha-Kutan nodded his head to her. “No more.”

“Less if possible.” Ogtankaa sighed as she looked between Lee-Nin and Sha-Kutan. “We cannot be on deck. There are too many people.”

Sha-Kutan grabbed the edge of one of the glass portals and pulled at a handle. The metal frame split, allowing the inner portion with the thick glass to swing inward.

“That will work.” Ogtankaa stepped closer to the window beside Sha-Kutan. “We should hurry.”

“I will not abandon you, even if we fail.” Sha-Kutan stared into Lee-Nin’s eyes for a moment.

She understood him to mean that human part of him would continue to protect Sao-Tauna if that other, shadow side, did not return. An unnamable feeling came with that thought. She often wondered how much of the two elements of the man she called Sha-Kutan inhabited each action. How different would he be? Who would he be?

Lee-Nin had no more time to contemplate such thoughts as the beings that occupied the human forms of Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa extended from their physical hosts. A brilliant creature of golden light and an onyx-shadowed being rose into the air, two sets of wings expanding to fill the room. Lee-Nin fell back on the bed as the unworldly creatures stretched and thinned, flowing through the open portal — living plumes of light and shadow fleeing the room.

As the immaterial parts of Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa exited the cabin, Lee-Nin checked that Sao-Tauna still slept. Then she stood once more and moved between their human counterparts at the small portal. Out the window, she saw two forms, one of light and one of darkness, racing low across the water, wings wide but motionless as they approached the rakthor ships.

“So strange.” The man Sha-Kutan blinked as he looked at the scene beyond the ship. “To feel so little after so long.”

“Yes.” The woman Ogtankaa wavered on her feet. “The connection is scarcely there.”

“Can you communicate with them?” Lee-Nin reached out to steady both Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa.

“I can see what it sees,” the man Sha-Kutan said.

“I can feel what it thinks,” the woman Ogtankaa added. “They have reached the ship.”

“They are attacking the crews of the ships.” The man Sha-Kutan’s voice sounded far away, as though speaking of a dream while asleep.

The rakthor ships still approached. Through the misting rain, Lee-Nin saw a cloud of light darting around the deck of one ship while a formless black shadow assailed the other.

“The crew is running,” the man Sha-Kutan said. “Some are jumping into the ocean. It moves below deck.”

“It seeks the source of the ship’s motion,” the woman Ogtankaa said. “It sees something. A machine of some manner.”

“Yes, a machine,” the man Sha-Kutan said. “Metal parts in motion. A metal hearth filled with flame. It bends the metal.”

“Steam and heat,” the woman Ogtankaa said. “The crew runs. The machine wails.”

Lee-Nin saw something explode aboard the rakthor ships, flames leaping up the chimneys of the two vessels as they slowed and came to halt upon the waves.

“It pulled a crewman from the room of flame,” the man Sha-Kutan said.

“It ... they come.” The woman Ogtankaa shivered and leaned closer to the open portal, sea

spray misting her face.

Lee-Nin saw four streaks of light flash overhead, flying swiftly through the air toward the rakthor vessels.

“We have been found.” The woman Ogtankaa turned to the man Sha-Kutan.

“We must not ... they must not return to these bodies or this ship.” The man Sha-Kutan looked back over his shoulder to where Sao-Tauna slept, oblivious to the danger approaching her.

Lee-Nin staggered back from the window. So little time had passed. How had the Taksa Kranee found them so quickly? What could they do now? Could the beings that comprised half of both Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa manage to fend off an attack by twice their number? What would happen if they failed? Would the light beings search out Sao-Tauna with the intent of killing her? Could the wounded girl help?

Lee-Nin knelt beside the bed and shook Sao-Tauna’s shoulder. The girl moaned but did not respond. She’d proved impossible to wake earlier in the day and only roused to consciousness in her own time.

“Sao-Tauna!” Lee-Nee yelled and shook the girl again. Her small face twitched, but nothing more. Lee-Nin looked to where the man Sha-Kutan and the woman Ogtankaa stared at her. “She is too weak to wake.”

The man and woman, each a part of Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa, turned back to the portal, staring out to watch their other selves as the battle between the unnatural beings began aboard the two ships. Lee-Nin stood and joined them. What could she do? She’d set these events in motion. How could she change them? How could she, a mere human, help beings so powerful against foes so numerous? This thought reminded her of a time she did just that.

TWENTY-ONE DAYS AGO

DUSTY BOOTS kicked warm ash, a cloud of fire-desiccated wood particles floating into the air. A hand reached down, palm open to the shallow pit of dirt and charcoal.

“They were here.” A man stood up, sword sheath slapping against his leg. “Not long ago.”

“They must be close,” another man said. He too, like all six men assembled in the hollow between trees, wore a sword and dagger at his belt.

Lee-Nin watched the men around the abandoned campfire through the dense leaves of a small bush. She lay next to Sao-Tauna on the leaf-covered forest floor, watching the militia band that had found them after days of hunting. She clutched the crossbow she’d come to think of as a companion in her hands.

“Ya think that warden will double the reward if we bring the girl in alive?” one of the men asked, his voice carrying through the trees.

“Said to kill her if we saw her, or we’d never live to collect the reward,” another man said.

“Think he’d know one little girl from another?” one of the men asked. The others looked at him in silence and shook their heads. “What? It’d be worth tryin’, no? We could always claim we made a mistake.” The other men shook their heads again.

Lee-Nin turned her face to Sao-Tauna. The girl looked annoyed, not afraid. At least she did not need to worry about her making unwanted noise. Sao-Tauna rarely made any sound at all.

A slight pressure on her hip brought her attention to where Sha-Kutan knelt beside her, his bulky frame hidden behind the wide trunk of a tree. He motioned with his fingers to Ogtankaa standing on the far side of him, also concealed behind a tree. His fingers moved to his sword, held unsheathed in his other hand, and then to the men near the remnant of last night's campsite. Lee-Nin nodded her understanding. Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa would deal with the militiamen. She watched the two of them slip from their hiding places and silently approach the campsite.

Lee-Nin always experienced a discordant surprise when watching Sha-Kutan moving through a forest. How did he manage to pass his massive body so quietly between trees and branches or keep his overlarge feet from snapping a twig? Ogtankaa moved with equal practiced grace. Lee-Nin envied the tall woman. She did not need others to protect her. She wielded a sword, hunted with her bow, and fended for herself in the wild. Lee-Nin yearned to learn to heft a sword or use a bow, but the blade Ogtankaa carried weighed too much and the draw of her bow required a strong arm. Maybe they would find something along the way. Until then, she'd satisfy herself with practicing with the crossbow she held. It required all her strength to rearm the trigger-locked string, but she could aim it with fair accuracy.

She rose to her knees and lifted the stock of the crossbow to her shoulder. She glanced to where Sao-Tauna watched Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa approach the men who hunted her. She tapped the girl on the arm to get her attention, motioning for her to look away. She did not need to see what happened now. Lee-Nin wondered if Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa intended to kill the men, knowing he would try not to while the warrior woman would not hesitate.

A rustle of leaves brought her eyes back to the clearing as Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa leapt from the dense trees and attacked. Sha-Kutan felled one man by slamming the hilt of his sword to the side of the man's head. Ogtankaa dropped another by slicing his throat with her blade as she passed him and ran the sword through the chest of another man. Sha-Kutan blocked the attack of a man's blade and slammed a fist into his chin so hard, the man instantly collapsed. The fugitive defenders now faced only two militiamen, both holding their swords high and ready to attack.

A bird call turned Lee-Nin's attention from the fight to the right of the clearing. A seventh, previously unseen man stood at edge of the opening between the trees, not far behind Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa, an arrow nocked in the bow he held. Lee-Nin watched the man pull the drawstring back to take aim. She spun the crossbow, sighted the man, and pulled the trigger, the thwack of the released drawstring filling her ears. A thumping noise followed, and the bowman screamed as he clutched the bolt in his neck. Lee-Nin frowned. She'd intended to strike his heart. Her frown deepened and queasiness overcame her as she watched the man grip his neck, blood oozing from where the bolt shaft pierced his flesh. She had shot rabbits and squirrels with her crossbow but never aimed it at a man. Never used it to kill something that walked and talked and cried for its mother as it died. She did not enjoy the sensations that accompanied killing someone like this. Killing To-Dang had been different. Justified. Deserved. This felt ... sickening. She did not regret her actions, but she regretted needing to take them.

The bowman's two companions, distracted by his cries, fell to the swift, subtle motion of Ogtankaa's blade sweeping across both of their necks. Sha-Kutan frowned at the woman, his displeasure visibly deepening as she turned and ran her blade through the hearts of the two unconscious men he'd felled with his hands. The large man shook his head as the two walked back to Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna.

Lee-Nin looked to the man she'd killed, knowing she should recover the bolt from his neck, but unwilling to do so. She had others in her pack. She put her foot in the cocking stirrup and used the arming handle to crank the crossbow string back until it locked in place against the catch of the stock. As the other two stepped up beside her, she loaded another bolt into the groove of the crossbow. If one militiaman hid unseen in the woods, more might do the same.

"A good shot." Ogtankaa bent and picked up the pack with her belongings and hefted it over her shoulder. She took an old rag from her coat and wiped her blade free of blood. Lee-Nin wondered how often the woman found the need to kill people if she kept a cloth for cleaning her blade so close to hand.

"I meant to hit him in the heart." Lee-Nin frowned as she admitted her failure. No one would have known she didn't mean to shoot the man in the throat.

"We should have left them unconscious and bound." Sha-Kutan's uneven face held a sour look.

"To free themselves and hunt us again?" Ogtankaa sounded incredulous. "Dead now or dead later, they would still be dead."

Sha-Kutan looked away, seeming to argue with himself. Lee-Nin did not doubt that he did but wondered which part of him took which position.

"We should go. There may be more nearby." Lee-Nin pulled Sao-Tauna to her feet. She slung the strap of a small sack over her shoulder and took Sao-Tauna's hand, keeping the loaded crossbow in her other arm.

"Thank you," Sha-Kutan said to her as he re-sheathed his sword and hefted the large sack with most of their possessions. "It is not easy to take a life."

"It's all too easy sometimes." Lee-Nin looked up at Sha-Kutan, finding his eyes gentle as they stared back at her.

"That it is more difficult afterward than in the doing is what is important," Sha-Kutan said.

"We should avoid the road for a time." Ogtankaa began to lead the way through the trees.

Lee-Nin followed, Sao-Tauna silent as always at her side, and Sha-Kutan soundless behind her. She knew once they reached the trail, she would again miss Ogtankaa's horse. They had hastily abandoned the animal several days prior as they fled a pilgrim band when that infernal warden showed up one night. She focused on the forest, listening for any sounds of possible attack, remembering the sight of the man she'd killed as he died, feeling both a sadness and a sense of pride in finally protecting her protectors.

THE PRESENT

SALT MIST hazed in a halo around the lantern, the smoke of burning oil blending with the vaporous sea air in a sharp, jarring scent. Lee-Nin twitched her nose against the smell as she watched twin orbs of light hounding a living darkness on the deck of one of the motionless iron ships across the waves. A similar battle raged between three beings of light of the deck of the second crippled ship.

Lee-Nin looked from the small portal to the man and woman standing beside her. How could they reunite with their formless halves? How could they become whole once more without endangering Sao-Tauna? Did that possibility even exist? All that happened now occurred at her urging. She held a responsibility to figure out how to save Sao-Tauna's protectors. Thinking of remerging their two halves reminded her something else shattered and made separate.

"The medallion." Lee-Nin placed her hands on the two shoulders opposite her and pulled them away from the window. "Could you send those beings away with the medallion?"

"If we had not destroyed it," the woman Ogtankaa said. "Possibly."

"They would have found us sooner if we still had it," the man Sha-Kutan said.

Lee-Nin raised the skirt of her dress and dug for the hidden pocket sewn into the inner folds of the fabric. The pocket she'd once used to hide coins in the event of catastrophe, but which now held the halves of a different metal disk. She pulled free the two broken and fire-charred parts of the mysterious medallion and held them in her outstretched palm.

"Can you put it back together?" Lee-Nin turned her gaze between the woman Ogtankaa and the man Sha-Kutan. "Can you fix it and use it to send them away? To save the other parts of yourselves."

The woman Ogtankaa stared at the two halves of the medallion, reaching out to take them in her hands.

"It is possible," the man Sha-Kutan said. "It is not metal from this realm. The metals of this realm hurt them. This is more like brittle silver."

"The medallion acts as a lens, magnifying our elemental power and focusing it to open one of two doors, one for each side of the medallion." Ogtankaa examined the pieces of the medallion, fitting them together. "Even if we can melt the pieces to once more form a whole, it is damaged. It may not work."

"With the power of both entities, it might be made to function for a brief time." The man Sha-Kutan turned his attention from the shattered medallion to the oil lamp burning brightly from its sconce on the wall. He sniffed the air. "That's tamak-seed oil. It burns hot enough to melt weak metals such as this."

"Then help me pull that lamp from the wall and let us begin." A sense of hope welled within Lee-Nin to accompany their new, urgent purpose. Her plan might work. She might once more help save the shadow being whose efforts, in combination with its human host, had so often rescued her and Sao-Tauna's lives.

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THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

SHADOWS SWUNG from side to side, the lantern swaying in an erratic arc as it descended through the air to open hands. Raedalus guided the rope holding the lantern as he lowered it from the second level of the temple into the waiting hands of his assistant Zilaya. She stood beside his other two other assistants for the day, Tovus and Ranga, at the top of the broken ramp leading down from the upper level of the temple. With their only remaining lantern safely below, Raedalus grabbed hold of the rope at the edge of the floor and swung his legs down until they found purchase on crumbled stone. A solid iron spike anchored the rope to the floor above, and the thick knots placed every six hands along its length made it easy for him rappel down the shattered slope of the ramp.

They had been surveying the second level of the temple, creating a map of its labyrinthine halls and an inventory of its relics. Zilaya drew sketches of each chamber they found as well as individual items of interest. The Mother Shepherd had set him this task, insisting they needed to know all about the temple in full before they could hope to restore it to its former state.

The earth tremors caught them unawares and unprepared, having left two of the three lanterns balanced high on convenient stone shelves jutting from the wall of a particularly interesting chamber. Zilaya needed the light for her sketches, but the tremors sent the two lamps smashing to the floor. They had huddled in the middle of the room, dust showering around them, until the vibrations subsided. Then they had examined their map and made with all haste toward the nearest egress to the ground level via the half-destroyed ramp in the central well of the temple. Raedalus no longer wondered why the ramp stood shattered, or why only half of it rose to the third level. If the city sustained such ground quakes on a regular basis, he found it surprising the temple walls still remained standing at all.

As he placed his feet on more solid stone next to Zilaya, she held up the lamp to shine a path for them. Tovus, a young man from Juparti with a good eye for noting details and a steady hand for drawing maps, already stood on the ground floor beside Ranga, a woman of middle years from a merchant family in the Juparti Dominion. She had volunteered to help him due to her knowledge of selling relics of Pashist prophets and sages.

Raedalus followed Zilaya as she cautiously placed her feet along the broken ramp, leading the way to the ground level.

“Hopefully the others have all escaped.” Zilaya glanced back at him, her dark hair surrounded in a dusty halo of lamp light. They had seen no one else as they made their way from the outer edge of the second level.

“I’m sure they have.” Raedalus slid on a patch of crushed stone and came to stand with the others at the bottom of the ramp. “We will be outside safely ourselves in...”

The ground shook again, powerful tremors heaving and rippling along the floor as the walls

creaked and cracked and wailed. Raedalus fell to his knees, barely managing to catch the lantern as it fell from Zilaya's hands and she tumbled to the ground beside him. She held close to him as the tiles of the temple wavered beneath them, her pale features white with fear. Her grandparents had immigrated to Punderra from Atheton to avoid religious persecution. A reverse of the journey her ancestors had made thousands of years ago, her own journey an echo of theirs.

Raedalus forced himself to his unsteady feet, pulling Zilaya up beside him. They could not wait for this tremor to end. They needed to flee the temple before it collapsed upon their heads.

"Up!" Raedalus shouted to Ranga and Tovus. "Grab each other's hands and hold tight. This way." He took Zilaya's hand in his own and looked around as she grasped Ranga's, who in turn held to Tovus.

A swirling torrent of dust blocked the passageway back to the main entrance near the plaza at the city's center. A portion of the entry collapsed as he watched. He shook his head, chose the next closest corridor, and began to run, tugging Zilaya and the other two behind him.

"Run!" Raedalus held the lamp high, trying to choose a clear path from among the fallen ceiling stones that littered the floor ahead of them.

They fled in panicked silence, only shouting out when an obstacle blocked their way. Raedalus panted a prayer of protection to the Goddess as he ran. He ignored the curving side corridors, not knowing if they would prove passable and not certain, with the confusion filling his head, that he knew where they led. He saw light ahead and increased his pace.

"There. The second entrance is there." Raedalus gestured with the lamp still raised in his hand. As he did, the ground swelled beneath his feet and the walls wavered, the ceiling falling in chunks around them as powdered stone billowed in thick clouds, erasing all visible evidence of egress.

Raedalus stumbled, dropping the lamp as he used his hand to steady himself against a trembling wall. The lamp glass shattered, and the light flickered out. The dim tint of daylight through the veil of dust told him which way to run. His fingers still gripping Zilaya's hand, he pulled her behind him, dodging falling ceiling stones and waving his free hand before him to avoid crashing into a wall in his erratic path.

Sunlight and fresh air stunned him as he lurched from the entrance into the courtyard at the far side of the temple. The tremors of the earth faded as he coughed and wiped at his eyes. Zilaya stood beside him, still holding his hand. He did not see Ranga and Tovus.

"Tovus! Ranga!" Raedalus peered into the dust-obscured entrance to the temple.

"Ranga let go of my hand." Zilaya looked toward the entry, her face a mixture of fear and guilt.

Raedalus stared at the still trembling temple, knowing he faced a choice that offered no real option at all. He also knew his words from weeks past would haunt him even as he tried to ignore them.

THIRTY-FOUR DAYS AGO

A FIERY, red orb shimmered at the edge of the eastern horizon — dawn climbing out of the

chasm of night to illuminate the world. As the sun pushed the darkness into the west and back beyond the boundary of the sky, cries carried fear and anger out across the waves of the ocean.

Pulled from a fitful and dreamless sleep by the shouts of those on the decks above, Raedalus climbed a ladder from the ship's hold where the pilgrims made their quarters in wooden bunks and hammocks. He stood in the salt-tinged air and butter-tinted morning sunlight. He did not need to interpret the words shouted in various languages. He could see immediately the cause for the cacophony of fear-filled cries.

Only six pilgrim ships sailed together in the dawn light rather than the eight present at the sunset the prior evening.

His stomach suddenly queasy, his head dizzy, and his legs weak, Raedalus momentarily thought they were once more about to be transported away from the fleet. Then he realized his physical ailments originated from simple fear and dread instead of an otherworldly intervention by the urris. They were held at the whims of beings able to cast them across the curve of the world — a child's playthings tossed from one room to another.

He crossed the main deck and climbed the stairs of the aftcastle to find Junari speaking with Captain Tunadar.

"Could they not have drifted away in the night and now lie somewhere close but beyond sight?" Junari stood looking out over the ocean, a fist held tight beneath her chin.

"Not likely, Mother Shepherd." Captain Tunadar took a near-glass from a pouch at his waist and pulled its sections apart before holding it out for Junari. "I have scanned the horizon all about, but there is no sign of a mast that might reveal a ship."

"I trust your eyes, Captain." Junari waved the near-glass away and looked back to the ocean beyond the ship's rails.

"Did no one notice the lanterns of the other ships disappear in the night?" Raedalus stepped beside Junari as he queried the captain.

"The night crew reports seeing all the ships' lanterns 'til near sunrise," Captain Tunadar replied. "When two of them stopped shining, they all assumed the lamps were doused to save oil."

"So, the other two ships may have been missing only a short time." Junari leaned a little farther over the railing as she spoke. "They've likely been gone for less time than we were."

"It seems plausible, Mother Shepherd." Captain Tunadar folded the near-glass and returned it to its pouch.

"Signal all the ships to hold their positions." Junari turned back to the captain.

"Yes, Mother Shepherd." Captain Tunadar gave a slight bow and issued orders to his first mate, who waved two flags at the surrounding ships.

"How long will we wait?" Raedalus stepped closer to Junari.

"I do not know." Junari bit her lower lip. "Until the Goddess returns them to us, or until we have a sign that she is unable to do so."

"The Goddess undid the urris's treachery to bring us back. Surely, she will do so again." Raedalus tried to sound hopeful but did not feel optimistic. The sudden absence of the dreams spoke to the Goddess's more limited ability to touch the world and their lives in it. Raedalus noted

the dark cast of Junari's eyes and recognized the emotions giving rise to it. "This is not your fault, Mother Shepherd."

"Maybe the Goddess only returned this ship because I am aboard." Junari looked to Raedalus, her voice soft and tentative. "I do not sense her presence as I once did. She feels distant. Possibly she cannot act in the world so easily anymore. Perhaps she can only act when the cost is high enough."

"Then we are fortunate you were aboard this ship." Raedalus stepped a little closer to Junari. "But you cannot be on all the ships."

"Why should I be more valuable than all those cast away to unknown seas?" Junari frowned at her question — a variation on the same query she'd constantly posed since being called to lead the Goddess's pilgrimage.

"Because you are." Raedalus wished to put his hand on Junari's shoulder but found he could not, for a mixture of reasons — her being the Mother Shepherd and the station that conveyed — the fondness he sensed growing between her and Bon-Tao — and his own conflicted desires for the physical contact. He placed his emphasis of comfort instead in his words. "We speak like this every time there is a turn of events against us, and the facts do not alter. You are only one woman, and while you are responsible for the safety of the flock you lead, you cannot keep everyone safe. So much of what happens to us is beyond our grasp to understand, much less control. You do not hold the powers of the urris. But you do possess other gifts. You are a leader. Lead us now as we wait to see whether the Goddess can rescue the lost ships."

"And if she does not?" Junari asked.

"Then you will lead us in mourning their loss," Raedalus said.

Junari nodded and patted his arm. An old emotion swelled within him at the touch, but he ignored it.

"Thank you, Raedalus. Have the other ships signaled to pray for the return of our missing brothers and sisters. I will go below and lead the prayers here." Junari descended the stairs to the main deck as Raedalus watched.

He did as instructed, passing word to the first mate to signal their fellow ships to unite in prayer. They prayed for hours, until well past midday, six ships with sails drawn down, drifting with the wind and waves, slowly pulled apart by the currents, their passengers and crew all bent in petition to their goddess, pleading for a benefaction that did not manifest.

Eventually, with the sun climbing down from the height of its path across the sky, and the wind gaining in strength, and the look of concern twisting Captain Tunadar's brow into a field of deep furrows, Raedalus walked over and knelt beside Junari where she prayed between Taksati and Bon-Tao.

"Mother Shepherd, it is time." Raedalus bent and whispered near her ear.

"Another hour." Junari closed her eyes tighter.

"Two hours have passed since you last said that." Raedalus saw Bon-Tao and Taksati staring at him, the looks on their faces similar, both holding agreement with his words, and both looking glad they were not called to speak them.

“Surely, if the Goddess can return the ships, she can return them wherever we may sail.” Raedalus realized the unspoken implication of that positive thought — that if the Goddess could not return the ships, they might never be seen again.

“You are right.” Junari opened her eyes with a sigh. “I must abandon them.”

Raedalus noted with a frown the possessiveness of that statement, the claiming of sole responsibility.

“Tell Captain Tunadar to raise the sails and bring the ships as close together as possible.” Junari stood and took a deep breath. “We must sail on to the Forbidden Realm.”

Raedalus conveyed the order to Captain Tunadar, and within a short time, the six pilgrim ships, sails full with the wind in a tight formation, rode the waves toward the west. The sadness murmuring among the crew and pilgrim passengers did not last, turning to wonder and worry as dark storm clouds began to cover the skies from all directions, moving inward, ignoring the wind, closing the circle of bright sky above, until only a charcoal-tinted canopy remained.

A wall of rain crashed down, followed by violent winds and surging waves.

THE PRESENT

AIRBORNE STONE, pulverized to a fine mist, swirled in the breeze of the small courtyard. Raedalus stepped forward, preparing to head back into the still vibrating temple to retrieve his missing assistants, Tovus and Ranga. The tug against his arm jerked him to a stop. He looked to see his hand still entwined with Zilaya’s.

“It is too dangerous. You can’t go back.” Zilaya’s normally pleasant, round face twisted in concern and fear.

“I must.” Raedalus tried to disengage his hand but found the young woman’s grip firm. “They may have fallen, or they may be trapped beneath collapsed stones.”

“Let me. I will go. You cannot go.” Zilaya released his hand and rushed toward the entrance of the temple.

Raedalus dashed after her, grabbing her arm and pulling her to a halt.

“What are you doing?” Raedalus shouted at the woman, his mind racing to make sense of her words and actions.

“She can’t lose you!” Zilaya defiantly yanked her arm free of Raedalus’s grasp. “The Mother Shepherd can’t lose you. You are too important. I am nothing.”

She turned to head for the temple again and Raedalus leapt in front of her.

“We are all important to the Goddess, but they are my responsibility, and I will be the one to fetch them.” Raedalus stared at Zilaya, his voice filled with equal portions of anger and admiration. Not every pilgrim would offer to risk their life to save another when someone else already volunteered.

“I am responsible because I let go of her hand.” Tears in her eyes, Zilaya tried to push him out of the way.

As Raedalus turned from Zilaya to enact his stated intentions, the entrance to the temple

shuddered and disintegrated in an explosion of sound and dust and fragments of stone. Raedalus shielded Zilaya, wrapping his arms around her as they stumbled back from the cloud of debris. They stopped several paces away, continuing to hold one another as they watched the breeze clear the air and reveal the pile of rubble blocking the demolished entryway to the temple.

Raedalus coughed and looked to Zilaya, the horror and pain on her face expressing the feelings he knew his own visage must reflect back to her. She had saved him. And he her. Had either of them gone into the temple, both would be dead. He wondered if Tovus and Ranga survived somehow. Maybe they were further inside the corridor as the entrance fell to ruin. He tried not to imagine the man and woman dying, crushed beneath a pile of stone blocks.

He did not have long to contemplate the gruesome thought before something in the sky caught his attention. Birds of all colors and sizes flew west over the city. They did not flock together, but instead swarmed across the sky, many of them cawing out loudly as they passed overhead. He looked down and saw squirrels, rats, and other small rodents running along the stones of the open plaza. He pulled Zilaya back as several passed nearby. A deer leapt from one of the vine-encrusted side streets and dashed across the courtyard. He barely had time to question how the deer could avoid being captured by the fire-plants before the import of the fleeing birds and creatures occurred to him.

“What does it mean?” Zilaya looked from the sky of birds to Raedalus, her eyes filled with worry.

He had never witnessed such an event himself, but he remembered hearing stories from priests and attendants back in the Pashist temple in Juparti. People who had lived along the coast. People that had survived what he feared now approached on the heels of the massive earth tremors.

“It means we must run for high ground.” Raedalus grabbed Zilaya’s hand once more as he scanned the courtyard buildings and the temple. He heard a thunderous roar growing louder from the direction of the docks. He spotted what they needed even as he noticed water wash out of a side street and fill the stones of the open commons. They needed to climb high and fast to stay alive. He only hoped someone near the Mother Shepherd knew to do the same.

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

THE THRONE



RHOG-KAN

SOUNDLESS SWORD strikes and silent spear thrusts accompanied the wordless cries of fallen soldiers draped in emerald and crimson. Tigan Rhog-Kan stood atop a hill, near-glass to his eye, watching the meticulously planned battle unfold in a plot of fields beside the town of Texu-Linu six days' march from the Old Border Road and the Tanshen Dominion.

After the initial devastating failures to repel the Tanshen invaders, he spent weeks coordinating ambushes on smaller Tanshen forces with the goal of obtaining shadow steel swords and armor. It took time, but he slowly amassed enough captured weapons and armor to mount an effective counterattack. The use of weapons fashioned by The Sight appalled the Ketolin priests, but as Zhan Tin-Tsu, a former priest himself, approved of the tactic, they could do little to thwart the plan. No other options beyond surrender remained to them. The Tanshen decision to use heretic shadow steel altered the balance of every battle, making the result entirely predictable. The Tanshen forces swept up into the Daeshen Dominion in a matter of days, halted only by the great expense of life, some fortunate weather, Tigan Rhog-Kan luring them into battles that never happened, and ambushing them in small groups.

Rhog-Kan took the near-glass from his eye and surveyed the battle as a whole rather than in parts. It proceeded as his plans envisioned. The Tanshen forces were routed and cut off from retreat. In an hour, maybe less, they would be forced to surrender. And with their capitulation would come another store of the powerful Sight-forged weapons to use against their fellow armies further south and across the border. He smiled. They would upend this invasion, and with the zhan's backing, they would press their advantage deep into Tanshen and put an end to this interminable war.

Thinking of Zhan Tin-Tsu, he raised the near-glass to his eye once more and sought out the man himself. In the days of marching south from the capital, Rhog-Kan considered many ways the zhan might meet an unfortunate death on the battlefield. His father and brother, both men of great martial prowess, died in battle. It would not seem surprising for a former priest to find a similar end. Once engaged with the enemy, however, it became clear that such a death at that particular time might prove the fatal blow to the whole Dominion. The morale of the men in the armies depended as much upon seeing their zhan leading them as it did upon watching their tigan guide them to victory. Were the zhan to die defending the invasion, it might cripple the cause to fight it back.

This did not mean the zhan stood idle at the back of the battles. To his credit, and Rhog-Kan's surprise, Zhan Tin-Tsu insisted on leading men into battle, even if he did not engage in the fighting itself. The tigan assigned him a troop of experienced men to lead in small attacks at the flanks or on Tanshen soldiers separated from the main mass of their forces. Surprisingly, the zhan proved adept at marshaling men in battle. For all his prayers in his tent each night, it did not restrain him

from urging the men in his command to fight.

Rhog-Kan scanned the town beneath the hill, looking for the zhan and his troops. A contingent of Tanshen soldiers became cut off in the town and the zhan led the charge to run them to ground. Zhan Tin-Tsu and his men came into focus in the near-glass and Rhog-Kan realized immediately his mistake. The Tanshen soldiers were not cut off from their comrades. They were placed there, with more soldiers waiting in the abandoned houses and barns. The Tanshen heathens had laid a trap for the zhan, and Rhog-Kan blindly sent him into it.

“Send word to Captain Kudo-Tau.” Rhog-Kan turned to a military aide standing nearby. “Order him to the town. The zhan is under attack and badly outnumbered.”

He turned back to the near-glass and watched the fight in the town below him. The zhan became separated from his men. He stood alone in a dusty yard beside a barn, surrounded by nine Tanshen soldiers. Rhog-Kan swallowed and blinked, uncertain of the feelings that gripped his chest. He had plotted the zhan’s death before the coronation and had contemplated doing so again. But now, watching the man about to be slaughtered, he thought of him as Tin-Tsu, the brother to his beloved wife, not a weak-willed priest endangering the throne and the dominion. He’d come to know the man and to like him, in spite of his inappropriateness to hold his position.

The Tanshen soldiers in the town below circled Tin-Tsu. The zhan’s stolen shadow steel armor would protect him for a time from the similarly forged blades of his adversaries, but not long enough for help to arrive. Tin-Tsu raised his own shadow steel blade to face the men around him. They knew his rank and that they held the zhan of the north at their sword tips. They appeared uncertain whether to kill him or take him hostage. What had the plan been? Rhog-Kan noted with surprise that the former priest knew how to hold a sword if not use it. He also, it seemed, had learned to collect the conviction of authority in the preceding months. He stood before his enemies, calm, waiting for them to move. Rhog-Kan nodded in approval. At least the man would die with dignity and honor. He had feared Tin-Tsu might shame his memory by kneeling and pleading for mercy before being cut down by Tanshen blades.

The first of the Tanshen soldiers standing behind Tin-Tsu stepped forward to swing his sword, and Rhog-Kan held his breath. Surely a killing strike. But the blow did not land. He blinked and pulled the near-glass more tightly to his eye. Tin-Tsu flowed away from the blade behind him, stepping to the side and using the movement to whip his sword out, stabbing into the joint between the helmet and breastplate of the nearest Tanshen soldier. The mortally wounded man fell to his knees, blood gushing from his neck.

What a lucky blow. Maybe, with a little more good fortune, the zhan might acquit himself in battle and be remembered a hero in his demise, like his brother and father. And even if not, Rhog-Kan could now tell a story to strengthen the resolve of the Daeshen soldiers to avenge their brave leader’s death.

As Rhog-Kan watched Tin-Tsu move again, it struck him that it might not be luck sparing the zhan a quick and violent end. Tin-Tsu blocked a sword strike with his own, bent around another incoming blade, took a knife from the second man’s belt, jammed it into one of his eyes, and struck the first man’s knee with a crippling kick. He grasped the second man’s sword as the soldier fell

to the ground, dying from the knife blade in his brain. Armed now with two blades, Tin-Tsu stabbed the first man through his faceplate and then attacked the soldiers around him. He moved with a fluid grace Rhog-Kan had never witnessed. He had himself practiced against fighting three men at a time, but winning such fights relied more on chance unless a man grossly outmatched the ability of his opponents. Somehow, against all reason and expectation, Zhan Tin-Tsu transcended his enemies' skills completely.

With three men dead, the remaining six Tanshen soldiers regrouped as Tin-Tsu fought them, moving to once more encircle him. Tin-Tsu anticipated this and stepped back to place the wall of the barn at his back. Forced to attack in a semicircle, the Tanshen soldiers stabbed at him in unison. Tin-Tsu blocked the blades as best he could with his two swords while his armor absorbed the beatings of those he missed. A pattern began of attack in succession, some soldiers stabbing as others swung their blades, making it impossible for Tin-Tsu to counter all the blows — hunters cornering a wild boar to bleed it to death with their spears. One blade sank between the gap in the armor under Tin-Tsu's left arm. He dropped his second sword but stabbed the man who attacked him in the groin. Another man down, the soldiers tried to close the distance and tighten the circle around the formidable zhan.

The Tanshen soldiers obviously did not expect this fight from the priest become ruler. It surprised Rhog-Kan as well. Even as Tin-Tsu's prowess with a blade raised questions, it answered another long-held conundrum. He knew now how Tin-Tsu managed to escape death at the hands of the night-blades who attacked him in his chambers. The night-blades sent by Rhog-Kan. It had not been Tonken-Wu who saved Tin-Tsu, at least not wholly. He had surely killed several of those men that night himself, as he did now in a yard before a weathered barn. Rhog-Kan wondered where a priest gained such lethal skills, and why. He contemplated the possibility that Tin-Tsu might survive this attack. To his great surprise, he found himself relieved.

The soldiers in the yard mounted a constant attack and Zhan Tin-Tsu continued to defend himself, slowly taking wounds, first on his left leg, then a dent to the side of his helmeted head. But each time a blow struck, he returned the contact with a killing response. One man died, bleeding from a severed arm, a second from a leg removed in a single blow at the knee, and a third from another successful strike to the neck. Only two men remained, but neither held any wounds, and Tin-Tsu now bled profusely. Tin-Tsu edged along the wall of the barn and backed through the open door into the shadows. He obviously hoped to use the new environment to his advantage.

As the two remaining soldiers followed Tin-Tsu into the barn and out of sight, Rhog-Kan wondered why the man kept his martial skills a secret. Had he displayed such prowess on the battlefield, he would have rallied the men of the Daeshen army to even greater enthusiasm for the war, knowing a superior warrior led them. Possibly, he could not reveal the nature of his training, which surely took place at the remote monastery in the north. Another reason occurred to Rhog-Kan. With an attack on his life, Tin-Tsu dared not expose his secret for fear of losing any advantage he might have in facing a second attempt.

Rhog-Kan frowned, his stomach unsettled. His effort to kill Tin-Tsu had weakened the throne and the Daeshen Dominion's chances of success in the war. He set in motion a series of deceptions

that kept himself and the zhan from working together to defeat their enemy. His bold tactics failed completely to fulfill his broader strategy. And now the zhan looked likely to die anyway. And his sister, Dju-Tesha, now Rhog-Kan's wife, the mother of his child, would assume the throne, placing the tigan in the position of consort to the Regent Zhan. All as he originally planned. But now, he found he did not wish that plan to succeed.

Smoke caught his eye through the near-glass. Gray-black clouds billowed out of the door of the barn. Flames followed, eating their way up along the walls to the thatched roof. A goat fled the fire. Then a pair of pigs. A chicken burst from the barn, its wings aflame. But no men exited the burning structure. Rhog-Kan watched as the barn became a bonfire, flames and smoke twisting high into the sky. No one could survive that inferno, no matter what his training. Did the zhan pray to Ni-Kam-Djen for protection? Might not the god who saved the zhan at his coronation from a collapsing ceiling also spare him from a simple fire? While Rhog-Kan did not doubt the power of Ni-Kam-Djen, no one knew the mind of The True God. Who he spared and when and why would always remain a mystery.

The Daeshen soldiers Rhog-Kan had dispatched finally arrived, but they could only watch the fire burn the barn to ashes, waiting to recover the body of their zhan when the flames eventually ceased. Rhog-Kan needed to send word to the palace. To Dju-Tesha. He needed to tell her that her brother died in battle. That she now bore the responsibility of ruling from the throne. He knew it would devastate her and wondered how it might affect the child she carried. How it might alter her love for him, knowing her brother died while under his care.

Rhog-Kan lowered the near-glass and sighed. He now beheld all that he once wished for, and all he now desired was what he once possessed. He put the near-glass aside and drew his stolen shadow steel sword, intending to lead the expedition to recover the zhan's body himself. He frowned as he looked at the blade. A fine powder of rust coated the curve of the steel. How could that be possible? And what might it mean?

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

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

“RUN!”

“To the temple!”

“Run!”

“Now!”

Junari shouted at the pilgrims dashing across the temple plaza, some stumbling, others slow with the burden of children clutched to their chests. Bon-Tao and Taksati stood beside her, shouting and beckoning with their arms. She looked up to black waves undulating through the sky — birds flying overhead in massive numbers.

“We need go now.” Bon-Tao did not shout, but his deep voice rang loud.

“There are more...” Junari started to say.

“There is no time.” Taksati pointed to the where rodents and other small animals now raced from the side streets and threatened to trip the pilgrims fleeing with them. As the first of the pilgrims reached her, she waved them inside the temple. Both Taksati and Bon-Tao had urged her to retreat inside once the earth tremors ceased. They said a great wave headed for the city. She did not understand, but she took the fearful looks in their eyes as motivation to heed their advice.

“We have to get them all inside,” Junari shouted to the pilgrims still at the edge of the plaza, just emerging from the circular buildings reclaimed from millennia of abandonment. *Not enough.* Junari winced. *Not nearly enough.* She needed more time to save them all.

“We go now.” Bon-Tao pulled her by the arm, and she turned to see Atula clinging to his thick neck.

“Water.” Taksati pointed to where a wash of grayish water rolled past the pilgrims at the far edge of the plaza. “It’s too late.”

Taksati pushed her, and Bon-Tao yanked her behind him as they hurried into the temple, pilgrims crowding around them, uncertain what to do. A few of them limped forward, wounded and holding bleeding heads or badly bent arms.

“The second level!” Taksati shouted.

“Up! Up!” Bon-Tao yelled.

They raced along the curved corridors to the central spiral ramp. Kantula and Jupiterus led the way, each carrying a lamp to light the path. A low wave roared across the tiles of the hallway behind them — a beast of water and motion howling in pursuit of its prey.

“The small water comes before the big wave.” Taksati panted as she struggled to keep up with the others. Her age did not normally hinder her activity, but it had been many years since she ran so fast or so far. “We don’t have much time left.”

“This way.” Kantula led the group of fifty or so pilgrims down a curving side hallway and back to the main corridor, cutting several minutes from their race to the center of the temple.

Water splashed over Junari's feet as they rushed into the central chamber with the spiral ramp to the second floor.

"Everyone up!" she shouted. Bon-Tao and Taksati repeated the same instruction. Bon-Tao helped Taksati up the guide ropes, pushing her even as he reached back to hold Junari's hand and help pull her up beside him.

The great growl that hounded them crescendoed, and the temple shook. Junari scrambled up to the floor of the second level from the shattered ramp and looked down behind her. Massive waves rushed from the main corridors, flooding into the central chamber, rapidly filling its volume with a churning swirl of debris-laden water. She helped pull people up, grabbing arms and hands as the water rose toward the ceiling of the lower room, quickly inundating the space. The wave crushed several people against the inner wall of the ramp. She saw Tanagaal smash his head into the stone blocks and fall limp. She started to cry out, but Jupiterus grabbed the seer and hauled him up the remnants of the ramp to safety. With the rapid rise of the water, Junari feared they should flee to the upper level of the temple, but as the last of the pilgrims were hauled up to safety, the water slowed its swell and churned in a seething whirl around the upper edge of the ramp.

"Over here!"

A voice called Junari back from momentarily hopeful thoughts. She stood and looked toward a young man she recognized as part of the masonry crew. He shouted again and beckoned them all down one of the three main passageways spiraling out from the central ramp. Bon-Tao and Taksati came with her, Atula at their heels, followed closely by Kantula and Jupiterus. The boy ran and Junari raced behind him as he cut along a side hall and then back to the main corridor and again down another side passage. She stopped beside him as he stood before one of the many large round windows surrounding the second level.

"There." The young mason pointed out the window with no further explanation.

Junari did not immediately follow the direction of the young man's arm, finding herself overwhelmed by the sight of the city plaza flooded with water, trees, and vegetation undulating in the deluge that swept past the temple. How could so much water overcome such a large city so quickly? A cry called her mind and eyes across the waves roiling around the temple to a man clinging to the trunk of a tree ten paces away, its branches wedged into a large fissure on the side of the wall at the ground level. The steep angle of the tree left the man dangling above the swirling water that separated him from the temple and safety.

The man stared at her with pleading eyes and Junari felt the weight of the choice she knew she needed to make, a choice she once made and which had weighed upon her heart every moment since.

THIRTY-THREE DAYS AGO

WIND HOWLED past ropes and rigging, wailing around doors and windows, screaming through cracks in the hull — a malevolent monster keening with desire to smash and tear and drown those tossed around the inner decks of the ship. Violent waves swelled and crested, raising

the vessel toward the swirling ink-clouds above, only to send the ship crashing back down into the great valley of water before once more carrying it upward with the next wave. Rain beat against the battered shell of the ship, lightning flashing to illuminate the dismal scene to those few crew who braved the topside decks under the direction of Captain Tunadar. The ear-smashing clang of thunder followed short on, informing the crew that the beating heart of the storm did not pass them but rather circled them, keeping the small pilgrim fleet always in its maelstrom vortex.

Beneath the decks of the ship in the passenger hold, Junari vomited once more into a bucket already too full of the reeking effluence of her moaning companions. The pilgrims clung to the sides of bunks and support posts, desperately trying to remain in one place while the storm attempted to launch them around the innards of the cargo hold. Two people had broken arms, four had passed out from the strain, and most could do no more than hold their stomachs and groan. Bon-Tao counted among those number and reached to take the bucket from her, leaning over it, a dry heave leaving him coughing. Even Taksati found the constant tossing of the ship unsettling. While she did not disgorge the contents of her stomach as the others did, she looked palpably ill as she sat in a bunk stroking the hair of a sweating and sobbing Atula. The girl had watched her father tossed from the deck into the turbulent waves, immediately lost from sight. How did you comfort a child after such a loss? Taksati would know.

Junari feared to wonder how much longer they could withstand the storm. How long could the ship hold? How long could the passengers and crew endure? Had the other ships survived? Or had they been ripped apart by waves and the pilgrims tossed into the ocean depths to drown alone, all the while pleading for the assistance of the Goddess? Junari and the pilgrims aboard with her began the storm by chanting prayers of protection, but hour by hour, the effects of the squall above decks rendered them speechless. She barely managed to focus her thoughts well enough to form a silent prayer within her own mind.

She spied Raedalus attempting to comfort a clump of suffering pilgrims even as he shivered, his hands shaking and his brow slick with sweat. She admired his fortitude in the face of disaster. She had done the same until her weakness nearly rendered her unconscious and Bon-Tao pulled her away to rest. She could not rest forever. She held the title of Mother Shepherd, and it conveyed responsibilities as well as rights. She began to push her herself to her feet.

“Sit down. Please.” Bon-Tao looked up and sighed in obvious annoyance. “You will do no one any good if you are thrown to the deck and break your neck.”

“Sea poetry?” Junari tried to smile but found the muscles of her face too tired from wincing in pain.

“Poetry?” Bon-Tao appeared confused for a moment and then shook his head, the best he could manage in place of a laugh.

Junari prepared to say something, to explain the need for her to be among her flock, tending to their needs, when a welcome stillness fell around her. The deck did not tilt. Her stomach did not lurch. The ship did not fall and crash into the bone-shattering water. Rain did not hammer the side of the hull. Wind did not squeal as it slipped past the edges of portals or the seams of the hull. She looked first to Bon-Tao, who shared her expression of surprise, before turning to Taksati and

Raedalus.

“The storm has ended.” Junari straightened up and cleared her throat, raw from the hours of heaving acid and the contents of her stomach into a bucket. She repeated herself for emphasis. “The storm has ended.”

She let Bon-Tao help her up the steep stairs to the upper deck and stood in the fresh, cool breeze, smelling the salt and the sea and the special smell that clung to the air after a storm. Taksati and Raedalus joined them on deck as the other pilgrims made their way up from the hold. She looked toward the aftcastle to find Captain Tunadar still there, strapped to the tiller by a thick rope. He already shouted at the crew to unfurl the sails. He waved for her to join him where he stood. His face spoke words even at a distance she knew she did not wish to hear.

On the aftcastle deck, Captain Tunadar pointed over the portside and starboard railings.

“Two ships are broken in the water.” The captain handed her his near-glass. “Both will be beneath the waves in an hour.”

Junari expanded the brass near-glass and held it to her right eye as she looked over the portside railing. She took a moment to adjust the tubes until the image came into focus. A part of her wished it remained hazy and indistinct. A massive gash clawed across the middle the ship, the main mast torn away by the winds of the storm, the vessel ripped wide open. Pilgrims wailed silently in the small glass lens painting light upon her eye. Several fell to the water and did not resurface. She swung the near-glass to the opposite side of the deck and watched a similar scene unfold with the second sinking ship.

“We must save them.” Junari handed the near-glass back, her voice emphatic. She would not allow more pilgrims to die on this voyage.

“That is the problem, Mother Shepherd.” Captain Tunadar pointed to each ship in turn. “They are too far away from each other for us to save them both.”

“Then signal for the other ships to save one and we will save the other.” Junari looked around for the other ships of the fleet and a sharp pain stabbed to her heart as she saw them off the aft rail — far into the distance, nearly at the horizon.

“They are too distant to be here in time.” Captain Tunadar held his eyes to hers. “We must choose which to save, and we must be quick about it.”

She knew he meant that she must choose. She must select which of the two groups of the Goddess’s chosen should drown and which should be brought to safety. How could she make such a judgment? How could anyone decide such a thing? Should she ask for a coin to toss or for tiles to cast?

As usual, Taksati, in her hardened wisdom, ask the necessary question.

“Which ships are they?” Taksati leaned out, peering at the ocean, her old and wrinkled hands clasped tight on the wood of the railing.

“They are the *Dragon’s Joy* and the *Dragon’s Fortune*,” Captain Tunadar replied. All the ships had been renamed to reflect the goal of their journey.

“We save the *Dragon’s Fortune*, then.” Taksati turned to Junari, her face gentler than her words suggested possible for such a sentiment. “The *Dragon’s Fortune* carries extra water and

food as well as most of the construction supplies,” Taksati said. “The *Dragon’s Joy* carries only extra seeds and farm animals.”

“They both carry our pilgrims.” Junari stared at Taksati, who reached out and took her hand. Taksati understood what they required to survive in the Forbidden Realm. She knew what they could live without and what they could not afford to abandon, even as they yielded in their duty to their fellow pilgrims.

“Set sail for the *Dragon’s Fortune*.” Junari turned away from the others to stare at the people she had condemned to death on the *Dragon’s Joy*. She could not help them, but she would not ignore them in their final moments. She began to speak the words of Moaratana’s Prayer for the Dying even as the captain shouted orders to the crew and put in motion her death sentence of the innocent people she prayed for.

THE PRESENT

LARGE HANDS scraped for purchase along rain-slick bark as water-limp leaves whipped back and forth in the wind. The man clinging to the tree wedged against the temple tried to climb along its length, to get closer to the wall of the structure and to safety. He looked again toward the window where the others watched him.

“Hold tight!” Junari shouted to the man. He heard her but continued to work his way nearer to the temple proper.

She turned from the lone pilgrim on the tree to find other pilgrims around her tracing the spiral across their chests and whispering prayers. They did not have time for prayer. She spoke to the young mason who brought them to the window.

“Run back and get as much rope as you can find.” The young man looked at her in confusion. “Quickly.” She pointed, and he dashed back down the halls toward the central chamber. She turned next to Jupiterus.

“Get Tanagaal,” Junari said. “See if he is fit enough to work The Sight.”

“What shall we do?” Bon-Tao stepped to her side at the window.

“If Tanagaal cannot save the man, we will need to send someone with a rope to get him.” Junari looked out the window again. The man now clung to a thin branch nearer the base of the tree and the wall of the temple. What did he hope to do? He could not leap to the temple wall and would not find handholds there if he did. She assumed he acted in panic rather than with forethought.

“I will go.” Bon-Tao began pulling off his boots.

Junari did not know how to respond to this. She had not contemplated the possibility that Bon-Tao might risk his life to save the man. The thought unsettled her.

Several people gasped and pointed out the window toward the man. Junari snapped her head around to see that he now tried to swim in the churning waters near the temple, attempting to stay close to the building rather than being swept along with the waves of debris still flowing inland. He yelled something she could not make out as his head slipped below the surface of the brackish

soup surrounding him.

“There is no time to wait for ropes or Tanagaal.” Junari looked at Bon-Tao and then Kantula and the others gathered close. At least twenty people stood with her. Not many, but enough. “We need to form a chain, link arms to go and get him.”

“It is too dangerous, Mother Shepherd.” Kantula looked at the man struggling in the violent waters near the temple.

“We must save him.” Junari said to them all. To Bon-Tao, she spoke more quietly. “I cannot stand by and watch another of my flock die and do nothing.”

“We cannot risk all these people for one man.” Bon-Tao spoke in Shen, his tone low and filled with the regret she saw in his eyes.

“You would do so to save me.” Junari too spoke in Shen.

“You are the Mother Shepherd.” Bon-Tao shook his head. He clearly did not grasp what she meant.

“Exactly.”

Junari spun and threw herself over the lip of the window, her legs flipping into the air as she held to the ledge just long enough for her feet to touch dampness. Then she released her grip and plunged into the cold, convulsing waters. She tried to keep to the wall of the temple, swimming toward the man near the tree. He looked at her, his mouth wide with shock as he paddled against the current of the waves.

She heard cries behind her and glanced back. Bon-Tao leapt into the water, followed quickly by Kantula. Junari turned back to focus on getting closer to the pilgrim. Now that she neared him, she recognized his face. She did not know the names of all the pilgrims, but she had tried to meet everyone traveling on the ships. This man, she remembered, used to work for a farmer on an estate in Atheton. She could not remember if he had a wife or children. The man swam towards her, the two of them fighting to reach one another and not get pulled with the flow of the water passing the temple. As her arms began to tire, she realized that the fact they were in the middle of the temple as it faced the ocean was what kept them from being swept aside to crash into the buildings around the plaza. They swam in a pocket of water only slightly less volatile than the mass of waves around them.

Junari reached the man, and he clasped her arm, his face contorted with fear and sadness.

“You should not,” the man said in broken Mumtiba.

“We are all the Goddess’s flock,” Junari replied in Easad. “What is your name?”

“Toseshan, Mother Shepherd.”

“We will survive, Toseshan!” Junari shouted, hoping to reassure herself as much as the man who struggled beside her.

She realized, as she spun in the water, still being pushed farther from the window she’d leapt from moments ago, that the weight of her dress and the fatigue of her arms did not portend an easy return to safety. She wondered if she possessed the strength for the swim back. As she looked to the temple, she saw her previous suggestion made manifest as Bon-Tao headed a line of pilgrims linking arms in the water — a chain of humans reaching out to capture her and her fellow swimmer.

She and Toseshan held to each other's hands, using their free arms to paddle toward Bon-Tao and the string of pilgrims. They kicked against the pulsing motion of the water, dodging around a long wooden object that looked very much like a piece of a broken ship's mast. Finally, her swimming arm burning, her lungs on fire, she placed her hand within Bon-Tao's grip. He glared at her with a look that mixed anger and admiration and something else she feared to name.

"We will speak of this later," Bon-Tao whispered in her ear as he drew her close.

"You will be just as wrong then as you are now." Junari gave Bon-Tao a quick smile as she pushed Toseshan along the line of the swimmers there to save them.

The man grasped the arms and shoulders of the people in the chain and pulled himself toward the window where three people held to the ledge and drew him up to safety. Junari followed Toseshan, and Bon-Tao followed her, each person at the end of the chain hauling themselves back to shelter along the bodies of their companions. In a few minutes, everyone stood at the window, water dripping from their clothes, talking loudly, congratulating themselves, praising Toseshan's courage, and whispering words of awe as they glanced toward Junari.

"That was not acceptable, Mother Shepherd." Kantula stared at Junari, her face twisted between anger and relief.

"We cannot protect you if you throw yourself into danger, Mother Shepherd." Jupiterus stood beside Kantula, water still running from his hair to dampen his face. He had returned without Tanagaal, but in time to join the rescue chain.

"We are all worth saving." Junari did not wish to argue with them. Kantula and Jupiterus were unquestionably loyal, but they saw their duty as protecting her, not to the flock as a whole. "How is Tanagaal?"

"Conscious, but he could barely walk," Jupiterus replied. "He could not help us."

"We managed, thanks to you." Junari looked at the drenched assembly of believers around her and raised her voice. "Thank you all. The Goddess smiles on all of you this day for your bravery."

"Bravery should be left to those with training." Bon-Tao spoke near her side in Shen.

"He is right." Taksati stepped up to Junari and took her hand. "But you are right as well. And I am sorry I am too old not to have been right with you."

"She tried to climb out the window, but I stopped her." Atula spoke up from beside Taksati, her head held high, proud of herself.

"You both take too many liberties." Taksati frowned at Atula in a pleasant way.

Junari started to reply, but a deafening crack of thunder shook the temple, the sound reverberating in her chest. Out of the window, lightning struck upward from around the flooded temple and into the sky, another explosion of thunder shuddering the surrounding air. More lightning and thunder followed, each blinding bolt coursing up from the temple and into the sky in abeyance of all known natural functions.

"What can it mean?"

Junari followed the voice to see Raedalus and his assistant Zilaya.

"You are alive, then." Junari embraced her old friend. He seemed embarrassed by the attention

and affection. Junari ignored his discomfort and held him.

“We climbed the ruins of a building near the back of the temple and got to a window on the second level before the water rose further.” A shadow of sadness darkened Raedalus’s face. “I think we lost Ranga and Tovus.”

“We lost many today.” Junari’s mood darkened as well.

“What is that?” Zilaya pointed to the sky and Junari turned her attention back to the unnatural lightning.

The bolts of blue-white light now concentrated in a single place in the sky, an orange ball of fire suspended within the flickering arcs of energy. The ball of flame moved over the city, gaining speed but losing altitude as it passed, the lightning in pursuit. After a moment, the fireball in the sky fell out of view and the lightning ceased. The last rumble of thunder echoed across the flood waters filling the city and then faded away.

Junari felt it immediately — a cool, refreshing draught of chilled wine after a drought-deprived thirst. The Goddess. She sensed once again the presence of the Goddess.

“What can it mean?” Raedalus asked again, repeating his earlier query.

“It means the Goddess has defeated the urris.” Junari spoke loudly to her friends and followers assembled around her. “We have lost a great deal today, but the Goddess has triumphed, and we will feel her in our dreams and our lives again. And once the waters recede, we will rebuild this temple, and we will witness her glory made manifest in the world.”

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

THE FUGITIVES



OGTANKAA

FLEETING IMPRESSIONS flickered through consciousness. Light and color and sound, sensed but not seen or heard. Form and motion in an abstract aspect of time and space.

Freedom. Immaterial essence untethered from living flesh.

The being of light and thought and energetic formlessness, the entity that considered itself as part of the person Ogtankaa, swept above the foreign metal ship. The iron hull of the vessel repelled it, but only on contact, and the decks of wood offered no impediment. It raced through the air around the ship, expanding its essential essence, blazing bright before the creatures on deck, attacking them with light and waves of power not visible to eyes of flesh.

The creatures of the ship fainted or fled, some leaping over the rails into the dark waters. The light-being Ogtankaa reveled once more in the freedom beyond physicality, its true state of existence, as it exposed itself to a group of the creatures still on the deck. The green-skinned beings raised long, thin, tubular objects toward it, smoke and light blasting forth from the metal tips. The light-being Ogtankaa sensed small masses at great speed passing harmlessly through its form and wondered at the nature of the weapons arrayed against it. These creatures were so different from the humans it knew.

It noted an analogous activity erupting across the decks of the second nearby ship. A being of negative energetic form attacked that vessel in a similar fashion. Surprisingly, it did not kill any of the creatures fleeing from its malevolent, dark presence. The light-being Ogtankaa marveled at this. How could it change its nature? How could it be other than what it had been in its own realm? Could the nature of the light-being Ogtankaa alter as well?

It sensed the physical aspect of itself at a distance, back on the wooden ship with the other humans. It felt the woman's thoughts. It watched her watching it. It knew a limited time remained. Such an expenditure of energy would call attention. The others of its kind would come, and they would attempt to pull it back to its home realm, where it would lose corporeal form and once more regain a singularity of consciousness. Did it desire these things? Did it still wish to return to that realm of its fellow beings? With the medallion broken, it might never do so but at the urging of its own kind.

A thought entered its mind — a sensation of images and concepts unconveyable through the limited language of flesh-formed bodies. The creature of dark energy spoke to her, telling her to cripple the ship, to destroy its mechanism of motion.

The light-being Ogtankaa considered the danger of this as it moved through a metal hatch into the decks below. The iron of the ship restrained its energetic essence. A door could be closed to trap it. And the time it took to accomplish the task only allowed those of its own kind more opportunity to locate them.

To avoid frightening the creatures of the ship into closing hatches and limiting its progress,

the light-being Ogtankaa dimmed its essence, thinning itself to a vaporous trail of bare luminescence. It slid through the air above the heads of the creatures shouting uninterpretable words and running along halls. The light being sensed the source of the ship's power, knowing where it needed to go. Another deck down and along a long corridor near the rear of the vessel, it came to an open door. The room beyond the door arrested the light-being's momentum, the sense of metal and heat and flame and smoke and steam momentarily confusing it. It knew from its time sharing a physical form with the human woman that a massive machine sat before her, turning a dark, rock-like fuel into motion by heating water to make steam and pressure. Sensing this, it also sensed where that pressure most greatly congregated through the metal pipes.

As yet unnoticed by the creatures of the ship's machine room, the light-being focused all of its energetic essence at a single joint along one pipe carrying steam to a chamber that converted it to the motion of a great metal arm. Its energy blazed, a searing sense of anguish coursing through its consciousness as its tendrils of light touched the metal pipe. The steel of the conduit melted and warped, the joint exploding in a cloud of steam.

Another sensation impinged upon its consciousness, formless energy making motion across the ocean. Its fellow light-beings came swiftly. Four of them.

A thought conveying the concept of surrender entered its mind from one of the four beings of light.

Another impression came into its consciousness from the shadow creature on the other ship. A more complex collection of notions unfolding to reveal a clear statement — they could not return to the wooden ship and risk the life of the human girl.

Dread filled its thoughts as the light-being retreated from the room and the great metal machine ground to a screeching halt. It made itself thin and dim, once more racing along corridors near the ceiling, seeking escape from the iron prison around it. It must hurry. The others came. The light-being Ogtankaa emerged into the air of the night and resumed the full form of its nature in this realm.

It saw the four beings of light approaching. Two split off, headed toward the other metal ship. As the light-being Ogtankaa prepared itself for combat with its own kind, other thoughts came to it. Words and feelings through the tenuous link to the woman Ogtankaa. The other woman, Lee-Nin, had saved the pieces of the medallion. They attempted to reform it but needed time to do so. Time to make their plan reality.

The light-being Ogtankaa wondered how it had come to this state of events. Its mission, its duty, had been clear. It had turned from the course it followed for years to help the shadow creature it once hunted. To assist a human girl who posed a potential threat to all three realms. In concert with its human host, it swore an oath. From where in its consciousness did the compulsion arise to fulfill this oath? Had the human half of its now twinned nature altered its essence in a fashion similar to the one so obvious in the spirit of the shadow creature? Did it still desire to return to its own realm? Did it truly wish to risk the existence of the three realms to learn the secret posed by the human girl? Did it want to know how the shadow creatures might change their nature and thus the balance of the stability between their two interlinked realms? Did it crave this beyond the

yearning to fulfill its obligations to its fellow beings of light?

It did not take more time to contemplate these notions, expanding itself to its largest possible form and ignoring the thoughts assailing it from the two approaching light-beings. Instead, it opened its presence wide, gathered the energy of its essential nature, and attacked.

ACRID SMOKE rose from melting metal, curling in the air, rising to pool along the low ceiling. The stinging smell stabbed at the woman Ogtankaa's nose. She ignored it, holding the two pieces of the medallion to the tip of the lantern flame. The man Sha-Kutan proved correct in his assessment of the tamak-seed oil's ability to melt the weak metal of the medallion. Unfortunately, his fingers also proved too large for the task. The woman Ogtankaa held the edges of the medallion, focusing the flame along the rejoined jagged fracture. The metal grew hot as it melted to reform. She gently rotated the medallion and applied the flame to the other side.

"It's working." Lee-Nin leaned close to examine the results of the effort. "How are they doing?"

"Not well." The man Sha-Kutan stood at the ship's portal once more, sensing the events across the waves more than seeing them. "Fighting. Hiding and attacking. Using the iron hull as protection."

The woman Ogtankaa sensed the battle as well. An apprehension of something else filled her inner eye. A tear in the sky. A corridor between realms. The being of light and energy that comprised half of her full nature hovered, evading two light-beings of its own kind, one using a medallion to form the gateway to their home realm. She perceived a second passage between realms erupt and assumed it came from the ship with the shadow creature.

"There is little time now." The man Sha-Kutan looked away from the window.

"This must be done correctly." The woman Ogtankaa tilted the medallion at an angle to inspect her work. "There will only be one chance."

As she returned the medallion to the flame, the woman Ogtankaa considered her actions. Decades of hunting the shadow creature twisted in a few weeks to protecting it. How did such a thing come to pass? Should not the shadow creature be punished for the deaths it caused in this realm? Had it really altered its nature from union with the large human man? Did it remain a danger? Should she still seek revenge? What did she owe to the man and the woman and the child? Had it been her, the human part of that united being, that swore to protect them? Did she need to honor that oath? Did the girl truly pose such a great threat? Were there other possibilities?

She glanced at the Sao-Tauna, sound asleep in the nearby bed. Could she actually allow anyone to harm the child? The warden had tried several times. She would kill him if he crossed her path again. Could she allow the beings of light from her home realm to do the same if they found the girl?

No. She could not. The death of a child set her journey in motion all those years ago, and she would not allow the death of another child to twist that path now.

“It is ready.” The woman Ogtankaa dropped the medallion in a nearby cup of water, steam hissing around its rim.

“They dive into the water.” The man Sha-Kutan stood at the portal again. “The gates between realms cannot be opened as easily beneath water.”

The woman Ogtankaa sensed in her mind the two beings, one of light and one of shadow, racing through the water toward the ship, four more beings of light in close pursuit. She plucked the medallion from the cup and joined the man Sha-Kutan at the round window.

“Is there anything I can do?” Lee-Nin moved to stand before the second glass portal.

“If we fail,” the woman Ogtankaa looked to Lee-Nin, “protect the girl.”

DENSITY OF form restricted motion, water impeding living light and shadow. The light-being Ogtankaa dove deeper into the ocean, beneath the iron ship it had attacked. The being of dark energy followed at her side. The water made movement slower and more difficult, but they still flowed through it with greater speed than the ocean creatures they passed.

The light-being Ogtankaa sensed the fissure between realms above the water snap from existence as the four light-beings pursued it and its dark companion. They led the other light-beings away from the ships and farther out to sea. They did not want to head back to the wooden ships too quickly, or the light-beings chasing them might guess their destination and either sense a trap or emerge into the air and reach the ship first.

As they fled, both the light-being Ogtankaa and the shadow-creature Sha-Kutan dodged waves of concentrated energy hurled by the pursuing beings of light. They did not return the violent gesture. They needed the remainder of their energy stores for their return to the wooden vessel. They darted and wove through the water, curving in a large arc back to where their human hosts awaited. They made no attempt to share thoughts as such impressions might be gleaned by those hunting them. They knew what each needed to accomplish.

A wave of anguish coursed through the extremities of the light-being Ogtankaa. A blast of energy from one of the beings attacking them singed its essence and left it dazed, its speed greatly diminished. The shadow-creature extended its form to embrace it and carry it forward. They could not share energies as those of their own kinds did. Instead, the shadow-being Sha-Kutan expended its own strength to help the light-being Ogtankaa reach their mutual destination. The other four light-beings chased them with increased speed.

The light-being Ogtankaa sensed the wooden ship ahead, feeling the ephemeral link to its human half grow stronger. In that connection, it sensed fear and anger and determination. The light-being and the shadow-creature burst from the water, leaving no trace of their exit, rapidly assuming filament-thin forms, passing through the open portal in the bow of the ship, their natures briefly touching and entwining before separating to once more inhabit their human counterparts.

OGTANKAA OPENED her eyes, waves of contentment and confusion flooding her mind at the reunion of the two aspects of her nature. She turned to Sha-Kutan, her hands holding his, the medallion clasped between their fingers. As the four light-beings, the Taksa Kranee, emerged from the water beyond the bow of the ship, she willed the whole of her remaining energy into the remade medallion, sensing Sha-Kutan do the same. It required all the power they possessed to make the mended medallion function as it should.

A shard of wavering blue-white light shattered the air above the ship. As it widened, opening to an iridescent golden sky, it engulfed the four light-beings rising from the waves, pulling them into the realm beyond before they could correct the course of their flight to avoid it.

Ogtankaa and Sha-Kutan released the energy they'd impelled into the medallion and the rift between realms outside the ship vanished in a crinkling of light. She looked to him, seeing her own exhaustion expressed on his face.

"Thank you." Ogtankaa handed the medallion completely to Sha-Kutan. "You saved me."

"What else would I do?" He sounded genuine in his concern. How could that be? What had changed his nature so thoroughly?

"It worked." Lee-Nin smiled where she stood by the second glass portal.

She sounded very pleased with herself. Ogtankaa understood. It had been her plan, and it had succeeded. She felt satisfied herself at her role in saving them. In saving the girl. She looked to the bed where Sao-Tauna slept, unaware of the events that had occurred around her.

Do we follow the right course?

Our course is now too firmly set to question it.

The girl is a danger and yet we protect her.

The shadow-creature is a danger and yet it protected us.

"You should hold this again." Sha-Kutan offered the damaged medallion to Ogtankaa. "It may never function properly, but we may need it if it can."

Ogtankaa stared at the misshapen medallion. The trust implied by Sha-Kutan offering it to her freely left her torn. Could he trust her? Could she trust him? Did she trust herself?

"You hold it." Ogtankaa snapped the brittle medallion along the weld and passed it back to Sha-Kutan. He closed his hand around the pieces of metal. He asked for no explanation of her actions, and she offered none.

"Another ship!" Lee-Nin nearly shouted as she pointed out the portal. "A third ship in the distance."

Ogtankaa and Sha-Kutan crowded around the still-open portal to confirm with their own eyes what Lee-Nin told them. She saw the ship in question, smoke rising from its chimneys. It would take at least half an hour for it to reach them. It might be time enough.

"I'll go to the captain. If we set sail now and head for open water, the Alliance ship will only have time to stop some of the pilgrim fleet." Ogtankaa walked to the door of the cabin. "At least one ship may be able to escape."

She looked back to see Lee-Nin's worried face, Sha-Kutan's tired eyes, and Sao-Tauna's

gently rising chest. How had she come to defend these people? How had she come to care for what befell them?

What are...

We becoming?

Ogtankaa opened the door and ran to find the captain.

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

THE CARNIVAL



LEOTIN

“QUICK NOW.”

“Step to.”

“We’re wasting daylight standing still.”

The bustle of people and the braying of animals echoed between stone walls. Leotin watched as the carnival completed the last preparations to leave the castle. The moment did not hold the sense of cheer and anticipation that normally accompanied a departure, in part because they ran with haste in hopes of being well gone by the time the Daeshen army arrived. The Tanshen army had dropped its green banners and even its swords and fled at sunset the day prior. Neither Leotin nor the people of the castle knew why. He suspected a rout in the Tanshen forces led the army’s commander to conclude that fleeing made more sense than fighting. He did not know when the Daeshen army might arrive to reclaim the town, but he doubted they would reward him for killing the local tahn and taking over his castle. Best to be far away.

“Tie that down.” Leotin pointed to a loose strap for a canvas on the side of a wagon as he walked along what remained of his carnival caravan.

He did not wait to see if the man he spoke to near the wagon followed his order. They needed to depart promptly more than they needed to leave with the wagons properly stowed and packed. With the sun more than two hours into the sky, they were already behind schedule, a timetable hobbled by the fact that they would need to walk and haul the wagons by hand. None of the horses remained. Food had been extremely scarce over the many weeks of the Tanshen siege. They’d started with the chickens and pigs and goats and then the cows. Then the two oxen. Next came the horses. That had saddened Leotin. Although they looked similar in form, something about a horse seemed more like a person to him than a cow. The dogs followed. Then the cats. Well, two cats. Cats, it turned out, could make themselves impossibly difficult to locate in a castle when they thought humans wanted to eat them. Rats came last. The hunger followed the rats. Thankfully, they had not fallen to the temptation to devour the bodies of those who died from starvation, exhaustion, or the arrows of the frequent Tanshen attacks.

As Leotin looked back at the courtyard filled with carnival folk, pilgrims, and townspeople, he felt a certain gratification in knowing that, while they had not all survived, many had, and in great measure because of him. This sense of pride did nothing, however, to entice him to stay.

“Where will you go?” Pi-Gento, the man-at-arms to the former tahn of the castle, stood near the front of the caravan.

“The pilgrims wish to go to Tanjii, and I desire to be far away from warring armies.” Leotin looked to where Tarak and three men pulled the chains to raise the main gate. It had taken most of the night to clear a path through the rubble and stone they’d used to barricade themselves inside the castle.

“Those seem like two separate directions.” Pi-Gento laughed. The two had come to a surprisingly easy alliance during Leotin’s tenure as temporary tahn.

“I’m hoping the Old Border Road will be safer than a castle.” Leotin watched men and women pull makeshift harnesses over their shoulders to haul the wagons.

“It’s a dangerous journey. Especially with no horses.” Pi-Gento looked to the people preparing to become creatures of cargo. “You may do better to head east and let the pilgrims catch a ship along the coast in Punderra.”

Leotin considered this notion. It implied ignoring the wishes of his master. That thought made him more anxious than the idea of facing the surely approaching Daeshen army.

“Will the townsfolk keep to the bargain?” Leotin decided to change the subject rather than discuss his travel plans any further.

“The coin from the former tahn’s coffers will help to keep their stories straight.” Pi-Gento glanced to where most of the townspeople stood watching the carnival prepare to leave.

More than a dozen townspeople and a handful of former militiamen had joined the pilgrims and a similar number had chosen to enlist in the carnival itself. The pilgrims followed their goddess, even if she no longer came to them in their dreams. The militiamen had nowhere else to go, and the townspeople, it seemed, followed the carnival out of a sense of loyalty to Leotin. Many told him that he had been the best tahn they’d lived under. He considered this a sad indictment of the ruling class of the Daeshen Dominion but did not object. He needed their hands and legs to pull his wagons until he could find a town where they might buy horses. He had split the coin of the previous tahn’s vault in thirds. The first third, he divided among the townspeople and the remaining militiamen to buy their silence. Pi-Gento held the second third in common to help pay for rebuilding the town. Leotin claimed the final third for himself and the carnival to compensate for, as he phrased it, months of captive entertainment.

“What about the future tahn?” Leotin looked past all the people to the door that led to the castle cellars.

“I’ll release him when the army arrives.” Pi-Gento frowned. “He’ll denounce me and everyone else, but it should be easy enough to convince the army he’s deluded of mind. As long as we all tell the same tale.”

“Good luck to you, then.” Leotin clasped Pi-Gento’s hand.

“To you as well.” Pi-Gento walked back to the townspeople, giving orders to the groups readying to scavenge the town in search of anything the Tanshen army left behind that they might eat.

Leotin walked to the front of the wagon line and nodded to Palla, hitched beside Ranna, both ready to pull a small cart.

“Months playing tahn of the castle has made you soft.” Palla grinned at him. “The old Leotin would have had us out of the gate by sunrise.”

“The new Leotin will make sure we march well after sunset to compensate.” Leotin smiled at Palla’s groan and laughed as Ranna smacked her arm.

Palla had proved essential to ruling as temporary tahn, her every suggestion and action making

it clear she had spent a great part of her life within the walls of a castle somewhere. Over the many weeks, Ranna became her assistant of a kind, one rarely seen without the company of the other. This caused rumors, which Leotin assumed Palla to be oblivious to, and which he suspected Ranna grasped well enough. Regardless, the two were in many ways responsible for the survival of the castle and all within its walls. The harrowing months trapped under siege did have one positive result — Leotin no longer worried who he should leave the carnival to in the event he died before producing an heir. An heir required him to find a wife, something he held no desire to do again. On the other hand, Palla might follow the pilgrims to the Forbidden Realm. Then who could he pass the carnival to when the time came?

At the head of the caravan, he found Donjeo waiting for him. Excused from pulling carts due to a sprained ankle, the boy leaned on a makeshift crutch.

“Are you certain you can walk on that?” Leotin gave a skeptical glance to the crude bandage around the boy’s ankle and the flimsy-looking walking stick.

“Sure.” Donjeo gave an optimistic smile. “Are we ready?”

“We are ready.” Leotin raised his arm and gestured forward as he started to walk. Donjeo hobbled beside him, faster than expected. As he glanced back, he saw the wagons moving into motion one-by-one behind him. He looked up to where many of the townspeople lined the castle walls. A few of them waved to him. He waved back, pledging to himself never to stop at this castle town again.

“I’m glad to be on the road again.” Donjeo’s smile shifted to a wince as he placed too much weight on his weak ankle.

“So am I.” Leotin could not remember ever being more pleased to leave a place. He reconsidered that statement. One other departure gave greater relief at the time, though much consternation since.

“Will we have enough coin to buy horses for the wagons?” Donjeo’s face twisted slightly. The memory of the animals being slaughtered clearly bothered the boy. He’d been despondent for days when they ate the first horse.

“I am more worried about finding horses rather than having the coin to pay for them.” Leotin slipped a hand to rest on his flat stomach. His outer garments concealed an undershirt sewn with coins strapped tight to his aged muscles. Considering the likelihood of running into bandits, he preferred to keep the coins close to hand. Tarak and Yeth also carried coins on their persons. He figured if anyone managed to kill the roagg and the yutan, they’d have earned the theft with a hefty price of blood.

As they passed through the town beyond the castle, they found piles of discarded weapons — swords, spears, axes, and armor — all of it rusted and looking brittle to the touch. Leotin watched as Palla examined a sword, its blade flaking away and chipping as she held it. She shrugged at him and threw the weapon down, resuming her place pulling the cart with Ranna. As they continued on, Leotin wondered at the poor state of the armaments. It made sense now why the Tanshen had fled. They possessed no means to attack or defend. But how had their swords and armor come into such a state of disrepair? Had they been forged in a faulty manner? Weak steel that rusted too

easily? He did not know and only cared to be far from any army.

He and Donjeo walked and talked of the carnival and the road for hours. Leotin enjoyed conversing with the boy. He'd grown to a young man, a bit thin with hair too long, and surprisingly blemish-free skin, but a fine boy. A carnival made a good family for a lost boy. A place to learn about life and see a little of the world. An odd thought occurred to Leotin as they walked — would the boy choose to stay with the carnival once he became a man? Might he not wish to head off on adventures of his own? Or might he desire to find a town and settle down with a wife and a hut and a few children and animals to tend? He found himself sad at the notion. He wondered if the boy would ever possess the skills to run a carnival. Might Donjeo, the boy he never sired, the son adopted through chance, be his heir?

“How long do you think it will take us to get to Tanjii?” Donjeo asked.

“Longer than we'd like.” Leotin looked up from his reveries to find that they neared a split in the road. Both led to the Old Border Road, but each headed in a different direction. The path to the right led west, through the countryside, to the Old Border Road, and eventually to Tanjii. The lane to the left led elsewhere, first to the eastern section of the Old Border Road, then to Punderra, and ultimately to Juparti and beyond.

Leotin considered again his earlier conversation with Pi-Gento. Did he need to go to Tanjii? He did if he wanted to follow his master's orders. But did he want to follow his master's orders? Thinking about this reminded him of how his employment for his master began and where and what it had led to. And this caused him to consider what it might lead to in the future.

“Has my minister explained the terms of my proposed arrangement?”

“Yes, my Teyette, he has.”

“Have you thought about the future?” Leotin lowered his voice to keep the conversation between himself and Donjeo.

“The future?” Donjeo scratched his head with his free hand. “What about the future?”

“And do you accept these terms?”

“I do, my Teyette.”

“You're getting older, you know.” Leotin voiced his earlier concern. “You may be wondering about other things beside the carnival.”

“What other things?” Donjeo looked back at the winded people pulling wagons behind them.

“Then you shall have the funds to pay your debts, and in return, you shall provide me with information.”

“How will I communicate with you, my Teyette?”

“There are places we don't go. Things you may wish to see.” Leotin kept his tone even.

“Like what things?” Donjeo asked.

“I shall send you with night jays that know their way home.”

“But how will your night jays know to find me, my Teyette?”

“The Korte Lakes in northern Nevaeo, for instance, or the ruins of the Great Eastern Wall, or the Sky Plains of the Kytain Dominion,” Leotin offered. He had always wished to view the ruins of the Great Eastern Wall and the Sky Plains. He had dreamed of them often in his youth.

“Those sound nice,” Donjeo said. “Are you thinking of going there after Tanjii?”

“I will always know where you are.”

“I see.”

“I’m asking where you wish to be,” Leotin said. Could he find people willing to pay for a carnival in the Sky Plains?

“Why would I want to be anywhere but with the carnival?” Donjeo sounded surprised by the idea.

“And I will always know if you betray me.”

“I understand.”

“It is important to ask ourselves what we truly desire.” Leotin wondered at his own wishes. His own needs. His own fears. “It is important to ask others as well.”

“Are you telling me you want me to leave the carnival?” The look of distress on Donjeo’s face matched the concern in his cracking voice.

“And if you betray me, I will send you and your entire motley folly of fools to labor in the Medra Mines until you are no more than walking bones.”

“I understand, my Teyette.”

“Certainly not.” Leotin turned left as they reached the fork in the road. “I want you to be in the carnival long after I am gone. But I want you to be where you wish to be as well.”

“I want to be with you.” Donjeo looked to the right and then left again, shaking his head. “We’re taking the wrong road. Tanjii is that way.”

“We’re taking a different road.” Leotin’s pace quickened to match the increase in the beating of his heart. “We head for Punderra where the pilgrims can find safe passage to Tanjii on a ship, and then we make for Juparti, and after that, the Kytain Dominion and the Sky Plains.”

“What about your benefactor? What about Tanjii?” Donjeo’s face curled in concern, his voice cracking again.

“Sometimes, when the terms of an agreement are forced upon you, when your cooperation is coerced, you must choose either to follow it or break it and set out anew.” Leotin considered whether this advice held any real wisdom. Would the Teyette of Atheton be so busy she could not find time to track him? Would the war between the Shen dominions provide enough of a distraction to allow him to escape? Or could her wrath reach him in Juparti? Could it find him among the ruins of the Sky Plains of Kytain? Surely, he stood better odds of survival far from the war and the Teyette than he did following the pilgrim path to Tanjii. And whoever he left the carnival to, he would make certain he or she did not bear an endless debt to a power-mad ruler. Of course, if she did fulfill the desires he suspected drove her, if she did become Kimpadess of a Fourth Great Dominion rather than merely the Teyette of Atheton, he might need to flee to the Forbidden Realm to escape the reach of her retribution.

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

THE TEMPLE



BON-TAO

AMBER SUNLIGHT rippled across pools of water — a liquid fire lighting pockets of sunken paving stones between early morning shadows. The waters of the great wave no longer filled the plaza outside the main temple entrance, nor did they flood the streets of the city. Birds called their dawn songs from the tops of buildings, and the breeze carried a smell of broken vegetation soaked with saltwater.

Bon-Tao stood at one of the windows on the second level of the ancient temple watching the sunrise and wondering if the absence of water flooding the city held its cause more in the raised elevation of the plaza or in that the Goddess's power once more touched the world. The resumption of the dream during his sleep the night before confirmed Junari's declaration of the Goddess's success over the urris.

He heard soft footsteps from behind but did not turn to them. He knew who approached him both from the pattern of her step as well as the subtle herbal scent that arrived with her on the shifting morning breeze. Even after immersion on the flood waters the day before, the scented oils she applied daily still held a sweet aroma to a sensitive nose.

"We have lost at least one ship," Junari said as she stood beside him.

He turned, noting that her face looked weary. Behind her, many of the pilgrims still slept where they'd bedded down for the night near the temple windows, along the corridors, and in the rooms of the second floor. He saw a few, Taksati among them, rousing themselves to the day. He wished they would stay slumbering long enough for him to kiss Junari or even to hold her hand. But they rarely found moments alone for such things.

He looked to where she nodded with her delicate chin and saw the broken bow of one of the ships cradled between the crushed roofs of two buildings deep in the spiraling arms of the city.

"We should head to the docks as soon as everyone is awake." Bon-Tao made an attempt to curb his natural skepticism and feigned an optimistic tone. "There will be many who survived by taking shelter in the taller buildings."

"Do you really believe so?" Junari sounded tired, her unflagging strength momentarily wavering.

"The stones along the docks are large and thick to weather storms." Bon-Tao actually did find himself believing his words as he thought them out. "They have stood for thousands of years of storms. I'm sure they could stand against a wave even as great as the one that flooded the city."

"Yes. Yes, there is cause for hope." Junari smiled. "The Goddess has returned to us after all."

"I had dreams of the temple last night." Bon-Tao remembered the images that remained from his slumber. "Dreams of the temple and of a girl."

"I too dreamed of a girl I have never seen." Junari looked up into Bon-Tao's eyes. "She came on a ship with a man and two women. There is something important about her. Something essential

to the Goddess's plans."

"Yes. I understood that as well." Bon-Tao remembered something else from the dreams. "I also sensed that the man and one of the women were dangerous."

"I don't remember them clearly," Junari said. "Only the girl. I would recognize her if I saw her. She is not among the pilgrims we traveled with."

"Then it must mean that there are more pilgrims headed to join us." Bon-Tao saw a flame of passion alight within Junari's eyes and knew she burned again with the Goddess's holy fire. He hoped to one day elicit one-tenth of such a passion for the Goddess. Even after all his time with her, or perhaps because of it, he found his passion for Junari far greater than what he held for the Goddess. Possibly, he possessed too simple and practical a heart for mystical zeal, preferring its more physical counterpart.

"There will be time." Junari looked at him again, the desire in her eyes different now as she spoke in a quieter tone. "When the temple is rebuilt, and the Goddess's plans are fulfilled, there will be time for other things, for all the things between us. Can you wait for that time? Can you wait for me?"

Bon-Tao sighed, wishing to reach out and hold her and convince her with his kisses of his steadfastness and his willingness to wait any number of years until they could be together. He settled for words nearly whispered as he leaned close.

"I have read tales of those who needed to wait for years, separated by seas and vast deserts, before they could be united." Bon-Tao smiled, forcing everything he could not to speak aloud into the cast of his eyes. "I am at your side every day. I can wait as long as needed until I can be at your side every night."

"For a soldier, you are surprisingly eloquent when you want to be," Junari said with a teasing lilt in her voice.

Bon-Tao laughed. "It would not have sounded half as good in mangled Mumtiba."

A distant shout drew their attention to the plaza below and across the wet and jumbled paving stones to where a group of men and woman emerged from the early morning shadows of the main avenue and into the light.

"Survivors." Junari reached out and gripped his fingers with one hand while raising her other to wave at the pilgrims across the plaza.

He knew she did not hold his hand through conscious intention, but rather by being carried away with the emotion of the moment. He did not care. He stood staring out at a sunrise over an ancient metropolis looking at the men and women who would rebuild it from its grave, holding the hand of the woman who would lead them, the woman who stirred a heart he once considered as dead and barren as the city before them. Bon-Tao smiled and raised his hand to wave alongside Junari.

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

THE THRONE



TONKEN-WU

“WE MUST discuss the name of your child.”

“I have chosen names, Mother.”

“I do not doubt that you have, which is why we must discuss it.”

Tonken-Wu listened to Tanheff Dju-Tesha speaking with the Mother Zhan, Pai-Nakee, as they discussed the name of the future heir to the throne. They sat along a bench on a wide balcony several floors above the main garden of the palace. He stood not far away, his eyes scanning the courtyard gardens and the surrounding inner balconies, as he discreetly eavesdropped on the two women.

“If it is a boy, he shall be called Kao-Juush after the famous historian of the Second Great Dominion. And if it is a girl, she shall be called Kan-Lee, after the warrior tahneff of the First Great Dominion.”

“It is as I feared.”

“They are both very proper names.”

“They are names from history books, my dear child. You are not naming your pet dog. You are naming the future heir to the throne of the Dominion. It must be a name that signals the intent of the throne to all who hear it.”

Tonken-Wu sighed inwardly but kept his face still, his eyes always in motion. His displeasure at being assigned as personal guard to the sister of the zhan, and by extension the future heir she carried in her belly, arose not from the woman herself, but from the sense that he did not discharge his true duty in his present station. Zhan Tin-Tsu had insisted the greater importance lay in protecting the future of the throne rather than its current holder. And he had assured Tonken-Wu that he could protect himself. Tonken-Wu did not doubt this, but after the death of the zhan’s intended bride by a night-dagger’s arrow during their wedding ceremony, he considered that he might not be the person best suited to guarding the palace royalty. While his devotion to Zhan Tin-Tsu and his family remained unshakable, he doubted his own abilities to fulfill the duties implied by that loyalty.

“You must choose a name that speaks to the people you wish to influence for generations to come. A name like Yang-Chu if it is a boy.”

“What a horrid name. It means Yellow Rat.”

“It is not pleasant, but Yang-Chu was the brother of Zhan Yang-Kutan, and a tigan in his own right. A man loved by the people of both the north and the south for his generosity and his prowess on the battlefield. A strong name that conveys a history of defending the nation. He also overthrew a rebellion by several lesser tahns and personally removed their heads, a message that is easy to interpret.”

Tonken-Wu watched as Councilor Kao-Rhee approached Tahneff Dju-Tesha and her mother.

The man's pace and his gait spoke to the importance of his arrival, but the stark look on his face worried Tonken-Wu. He stepped closer to the Mother Zhan and tahneff.

"I am familiar with the history, Mother. He slaughtered..."

"Pardon my intrusion." Kao-Rhee bowed to the women. "Mother Zhan. Tahneff. I bring woeful news. Tigan Rhog-Kan has sent word by way of the message riders that ... It is difficult to say this, but the tigan writes that Zhan Tin-Tsu is dead. Killed in battle."

Tonken-Wu blinked, his knees weakening beneath him.

"What? When?" The Mother Zhan rose to her feet, her hands clutched at her heart.

"How is that possible?" Tahneff Dju-Tesha placed a hand on her distended belly, tears already welling in her eyes.

"The tigan reports that two days ago, the zhan led a small squad to attack a group of Tanshen stragglers in a town." Councilor Kao-Rhee lowered his eyes. "It seems to have been a trap. An ambush. The zhan fought valiantly, but there were too many arrayed against him. The fight led him to a barn. A fire started somehow. The blaze was too great by the time our soldiers arrived. The tigan insists on accepting responsibility for the zhan's death."

"As well he should." The Mother Zhan collapsed to the bench, her face expressing the warring effort not to display the pain in her heart. Tahneff Dju-Tesha ignored the protocols of her station, openly weeping.

A dizziness came over Tonken-Wu. He laid a hand on the nearby wall to steady himself. He noticed Councilor Kao-Rhee glance at him, and he straightened his arms, wrapping his hands once more behind his back. How could the zhan be dead? It did not make sense. Why had Ni-Kam-Djen not protected him? How many men did it take to defeat him in combat?

"The zhan's body is being transported back to the palace for funeral rites and interment in the royal mausoleum." Councilor Kao-Rhee looked between the dead zhan's sister and mother. "We will also need to discuss the matter of the coronation."

Tahneff Dju-Tesha looked up into the face of the councilor, realization of the meaning of his words redoubling her tears. She threw her arms around her mother. The Mother Zhan, openly struggling not to imitate the emotional display of her daughter, patted the tahneff on the back as she looked to the councilor.

"The coronation must take place with all haste. Immediately after my son's funeral." The Mother Zhan wiped at her eyes with a kerchief before handing it to her sobbing daughter. "The lesser tahns must not see an opportunity to plot against the succession."

"My assessment exactly, Mother Zhan." Councilor Kao-Rhee bowed once more. "I will begin the preparations for both ceremonies immediately and leave you to grieve in private." The councilor turned to Tonken-Wu. "Commander Tonken-Wu, I think it best if you escort the tahneff and the Mother Zhan inside where they may find more privacy." The councilor glanced in the direction of the nearest balcony where a lesser tahn's wife stood with her servants watching the scene across from them.

"Certainly, Councilor." Tonken-Wu helped Mother Zhan Pai-Nakee guide Tahneff Dju-Tesha to the salon inside, seating her on a couch where she continued sobbing but remained silent, staring

at a [watercolor painting of a Daeshen landscape](#) on the wall.

Tonken-Wu stayed with the two women and their servants until his replacement arrived several hours later. Afterward, he attended to his other duties as Commander Warden. Later, finding himself unable to eat, he lay in his bed, his mind filled with a numbness that could not hold to the fact of the zhan's death. It slipped from his thoughts each time he tried to grasp it — a fish sliding through clutching hands with every attempt at capture. Eventually, he stumbled into sleep and dreamed.

In the dream, he stood at the edge of a field of golden wheat waving in the breeze. Above shone a sun of deep crimson — an angry blister in a blue sky. In the center of the field, Zhan Tin-Tsu stood in his ceremonial robes of state, a sword in his right hand, raised above his head, reflecting blood-tinted light from the sun. Across the field from the zhan, an army of thousands in bone-white armor waited, their war chants thundering across the rippling grain. A voice spoke from nowhere and everywhere, a whisper floating on the wind — *“Find him, Tonken-Wu. Save him.”*

Tonken-Wu woke, panting deeply. He tried to ignore the dream but could not fall back asleep. He attempted to disregard the nightmare the following day, but it clung to him — a scent impossible to wash off. What army had Tin-Tsu faced in the vision? They bore no banners and wore unknown and unmarked armor. That night, the dream came again, and again he struggled to discount it upon waking. He turned his mind to other things throughout the day, but the third night, the dream once more followed him into slumber. He woke the next morning calm and refreshed, filled with purpose.

He rose from his bed, packed the items he thought himself likely to need, wrote a letter to Tahneff Dju-Tesha, took his horse from the stables, and left the palace through a side gate. He knew he abandoned his obligation to the palace, to the throne, and to the tahneff, but he also knew that he fulfilled his duty to the zhan, to the man, Tin-Tsu. He knew beyond any rational knowledge that the zhan yet lived. Tonken-Wu would find him, and if necessary, as the dream implied, he would save Zhan Tin-Tsu.

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

INTERLUDE



RAINWATER RIVULETS run down warped stone contours to pool on slate flagstones. The yutan Sight Master stands in the center of a small town, droplets of a gentle rain soaking her short hair and wool jacket. She stares at one of the anomalies she warned her mate about days ago.

I hope he is safe.

She has not written nor heard from him since. This does not concern her as much as what she looks at. A stone tree — trunk twisted, branches bent in impossible angles, leaves too slender to have been fashioned by chisel.

Beside her, the town's pod leader speaks.

“Could this be the work of The Sight?”

She turns to him, masking as best she can her terror at the stone monstrosity that was once a living tree gracing the town center.

“It is possible,” she lies. Best to avoid panic in the people of the land.

To herself, she thinks other thoughts.

It is not possible. What does this is beyond the power of seers. I must seek assistance.

A seer in the roagg realm comes to mind. An old friend. Wise and gifted in The Sight.

I must contact him with all haste. The world unravels around us.

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



EPISODE NINE



THE THRONE



DJU-TESHA

OLD LEATHER and time-worn books. Lamplight reflecting across polished wood. The scent of fresh-cut chrysanthemums. Dju-Tesha looked around the zhan's private study — soon to be her private study. She sat behind the wide poda-wood desk where her father and brothers once sat, doing as they had done so many times — listening to the advice of Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee.

“With the funeral rites completed and your brother laid to rest, the coronation can finally proceed, my tahneff.” Kao-Rhee placed his arms behind his back. Dju-Tesha had known him long enough to recognize this as the equivalent of pacing the floor in other men. “The arrangements are nearly all in place. The day after tomorrow, you will officially assume the throne. But there are many decisions to be made before then.”

Too many decisions. Choices she had tried to avoid by hiding behind the cloak of grief. With her brother's funeral completed only hours ago, she could no longer procrastinate regarding matters of state. The throne needed a ruler. It did not care for personal loss or pain, and it did not feel pity or self-doubt or fear. It demanded willful action, and she needed to assume that seat whether she desired it or not. And she most certainly did not.

“I understand.” Dju-Tesha did fully grasp the task ahead in ruling the nation. She'd spent her childhood observing her father govern, and her readings in the palace library revealed the burden borne by leaders. This explained her deep reticence to accept the mantle of regent zhan. But no other possible path existed. She needed to focus on the tasks at hand, the greatest of them being the war and the Tanshen invasion. “The latest word from my husband?”

“The tigan reports he has pressed the Tanshen army nearly to the border once more, my tahneff.” Kao-Rhee stepped closer to the desk. “Both sides amass their forces for what we hope will be a final confrontation to decisively expel the invaders from our lands.”

Dju-Tesha worried for her new husband's safety. Especially so soon after the death of her brother. Rhog-Kan's letter to her had been filled with words of regret and self-recrimination, but she did not blame him. She realized that men died in wars. As her father had. As her elder brother had. But this knowledge did not calm her fears. She did not know how to rule a dominion and raise a child without the man she loved.

“I wish to thank you, Councilor.” Dju-Tesha sank more deeply into the cushions of the seat. She sighed and placed her fingers together beneath her chin. She noticed Kao-Rhee raise an eyebrow at the gesture.

“You have nothing to thank me for, my tahneff.” Kao-Rhee looked both confused and embarrassed. “I have only fulfilled my duty.”

“I do not wish to thank you for anything you have done, although you have been very patient and considerate with me in my time of mourning.” Dju-Tesha raised her eyes to his. “No, I wish to thank you now for all that you will inevitably do for me and this dominion in the future. I will

rely upon you and your wisdom even more than my late brother, Tin-Tsu. I have no experience or training in statecraft as my elder brother Fan-Mutig did. I have no charisma to sway people the way my father did. I have no cunning for court affairs the way my mother does, or my grandmother did. I have hidden from the world, reading books my whole life. What makes me fear the future, and know that I must rely upon you so greatly, is my reading of the histories of the many zhans of the past. Those who did not possess the aforementioned qualities, those who were too bookish or too reserved or too unengaged, these rulers invariably led the dominion to unrest and decay.”

A sudden pain in Dju-Tesha’s chest made it hard to breathe. She blinked away the tears that threatened to form in the corners of her eyes. With her fears now spoken aloud, they felt twice as real and threatening. How could she lead a nation at war? How could she do so while bearing and birthing a child? All she had ever wanted to do was read in her library and fall in love. One had led to the other and now she held a child in her womb, a child that might one day assume the throne she herself would shortly hold as regent. How had her life become so filled with the things for which she held no aptitude? Her only comfort came in knowing that Rhog-Kan would sit at her side in the throne room, that he would help her govern and end the war and raise their child. Assuming he did not die in the battle to come. She placed her hand on her rounded belly, feeling the child within give a kick. Did her constant worry disturb the babe? Kao-Rhee once more stepped closer to the desk, drawing her from her thoughts. She needed to rely on him. She hoped she could trust him. She knew she had no choice.

“I have no doubt that you will make an excellent regent, my tahneff.” Kao-Rhee smiled. “I know this because I have seen your many extraordinary qualities ever since you were a child. You were ever the brightest of your siblings. Smart enough to grasp your own limits, to see clearly the boundaries of your person, and wise enough to ask for help in expanding them. Few rulers ever acknowledge their weaknesses because few councilors are brave enough to point them out. As you have spared me the embarrassment of doing so, we can openly work between us to mitigate those challenges and turn them to your advantage.”

“Thank you, Kao-Rhee. You are most generous in your assessment.” Dju-Tesha smiled at the man she thought of as an unrelated uncle. He’d always been kind to her, recommending books to her on numerous occasions.

“I will leave you now, my tahneff. Tomorrow will be a busy day and the following day even more so.” Kao-Rhee bowed and made to leave.

“Have you received any news regarding Commander Tonken-Wu?” Dju-Tesha still wondered at the man’s disappearance and the strange note he left for her, its words filling her with curiosity and hope.

“I go to seek your brother, the zhan. I believe him to be alive, and I intend to find him. My apologies for this disgraceful act of abandoning you and my duty to the throne. When I return, I will accept whatever punishment you demand. Yours in faith and service, Commander Gao Tonken-Wu.”

“I have heard no more, my tahneff.” Kao-Rhee frowned. “There have been no sightings of him.”

“Do you believe him?” Dju-Tesha did her best to keep the hopefulness from her voice.

“I have seen your brother’s body, my tahneff, and the ring of state upon his finger.” Kao-Rhee shook his head. “I believe the commander is so overcome with grief that he has lost his tether to the world of the living. It is a gross negligence of his duty. I doubt he will return to the palace, even if his senses return to him.”

“That is sad.” Dju-Tesha’s hope faded — a sunset bringing shadows to her heart. She had not seen her brother’s body, but she understood how easily death came in battle. Too easy for a priest untrained in war and combat.

“Indeed, my tahneff.” Kao-Rhee bowed. “Good night.”

The councilor left the room and Dju-Tesha’s personal maid, Janu-Gon, entered. The slender woman in her late thirties bowed but remained silent where she stood near the door. Dju-Tesha’s mother insisted that the maid accompany her everywhere when alone. The woman even slept in a cot beside her bed. Her mother claimed it to be a precaution with the stress of Tin-Tsu’s death and the pregnancy. Nothing could be changed in the birth of the future zhan. Dju-Tesha wondered what would happen if she bore a daughter rather than the son everyone desired. When she allowed herself to be honest, in the small hours of the night when she could not fall to sleep, she preferred to have a daughter. But such preferences did not matter to the throne. The throne required a male heir. While history did record several zhaneffs who gained power through birth, they only held to it by remaining unmarried. As Dju-Tesha considered the unfairness of this social arrangement, she reconsidered why she wished to bring a girl into such a manifestly unjust world where her sex might bar her from fulfilling her aptitudes and proclivities. Had she not been born a tahneff with an indulgent father, and beyond the judgment of certain social rules, she would never have been allowed to study in the palace library, the traditional preserve of male scholars.

She stood from the desk and allowed Janu-Gon to hold her arm as they walked back through the lamp-lit halls to her sleeping chambers. The two guards who stood outside the door of the personal study followed her. They followed her everywhere, a precaution set in place by Commander Tonken-Wu before his abrupt departure.

As they approached the door to her chamber, two more guards greeted her. These guards never left the door for fear night-daggers might slip inside and wait for her as they had her brother Tin-Tsu. She still occupied the same room as in her childhood, but in two days, she would transfer her life to the chambers reserved for the zhan. It would be improper for the regent zhan to sleep anywhere else.

Janu-Gon took a lamp from the wall outside the door and held it out to light the way into the room. Once inside, the maid slid the bolt lock of the door in place and went to a long dresser on the opposite side of the room to begin lighting the other lamps. She knew her mistress preferred the room bright while she read herself to sleep each night.

Dju-Tesha wrinkled her nose at the smell of tamak-seed oil. Another scent struggled to overwhelm it. Jasmine. One of the servants must have spilt oil on the floor when refilling the lamp on her dresser and used the perfume to cloak the smell.

As Janu-Gon touched the tip of the flame from the small lamp in her hand to the wick of the

larger one on the dresser, whitish fire erupted across the polished wood to cover the dresser, leaping to consume the fabric of the tapestry hanging on the wall.

“I’m so sorry, tahneff.” Janu-Gon stepped back to place herself between the rapidly expanding fire and Dju-Tesha.

“Someone has spilled oil over the whole dresser.” Even as Dju-Tesha spoke these words, she understood them to be wrong. The fire ran down the chest of drawers and across the rug to the bed, engulfing the mattress and blankets, climbing the walls to eat away at more tapestries and paintings. A simple accident could not cast oil this far around the room. The jasmine perfume had been intended to cover the smell of so much of it.

“We must leave.” Dju-Tesha gestured toward the door with one hand, her other raising to protect her face from the heat of the flames.

“It will not open.” Janu-Gon struggled with the bolt locking the door.

Dju-Tesha joined her hands to Janu-Gon’s, but the bolt did not budge. She noted a jagged spur cut into the bolt that held it on the brace and kept it from moving backward. They banged on the door and shouted for help. They heard the guards outside pounding back on the wood and calling for more men. The door’s massive bolt, thick wood, and large iron hinges repelled the men’s efforts to force it open.

Dju-Tesha looked around the room, now inundated with flame and smoke. She coughed and pointed to the door to her personal balcony. She and Janu-Gon ran through the grasping flames to the balcony door but found the handle frozen solid in place. She looked around for something to break the small glass panes of the door, but every item to hand glowed with fire. Books, vases of flowers, clothes; everything burned with a bright-white flame. She realized with a panic that she and the child she bore would also soon burn with that flame if she did not think of a way out. She spied a small stone table near the bed, the books stacked on it now a bonfire of old paper.

“Help me.” Dju-Tesha covered her nose with her sleeve as she ran to the small stone table and used her forearm to knock the flaming books to the floor. She tilted the table on its side, the hot stone burning her hands. She ignored the pain as she looked to Janu-Gon. “Lift the base.” She would have done so herself, but the size of her belly prevented it.

Between the two of them, they managed to haul the heavy table to the balcony door where Dju-Tesha led the charge, ramming the narrow stone top into the cross frames of the glass. The glass shattered, and the wooden frames splintered. They rammed the door again. And again, smashing a gap in the glass framework of the door large enough to squeeze through.

“Quickly, my tahneff.” Janu-Gon pushed Dju-Tesha toward the hole in the door.

She climbed through the broken door, one arm protectively shielding her belly, glass slicing her dress and the flesh of her back, shards of wood scraping at her face and pulling her hair. Once free of the mangled frame, she turned and helped Janu-Gon climb through the opening in the shattered door. As they stood on the edge of the balcony, calling for help, smoke and flame billowing out behind them, she wondered who wanted her dead and who would attempt it in such a manner. She did not need to wonder why. If someone would attempt to kill a man, a priest, her brother Tin-Tsu, to keep him from assuming the throne, they would not hesitate to prevent a mere

woman from claiming that seat. She found an odd emotion burning in her breast. While she did not desire the throne in any open manner, the notion that someone wished to keep her from it actually made her desire to sit upon it. Whoever tried to kill her this night misjudged in a twofold manner. She had not died. And she would do whatever necessary to find those responsible for the fire and judge them as regent zhan of the Daeshen Dominion.

To continue reading the Throne story arena turn the page.

THE THRONE



KAO-RHEE

SHARP MIDDAY sunlight cut through the humid air, illuminating dust particles caught in eddies that rose and fell on a faint breeze. Dark-red bedsheets reflected the glow to lend a blood-tinted tinge to the private sleeping chamber of the zhan.

“As I said, my tahneff, we are still investigating the fire, but we believe it started as you suggested, with tamak-seed oil spread around the room.” Kao-Rhee stood at the foot of the royal bed, his hands clasped before him. Tahneff Dju-Tesha lay with the sheets pulled up to cover her pregnant belly. Her mother sat in a chair beside her. Mother Zhan Pai-Nakee and the palace physician had insisted that the future regent zhan remain in bed after escaping from the fire in her old chamber. They feared any potential risk to the future heir in her womb. Kao-Rhee agreed with the need to keep the tahneff temporarily confined, but not for medical reasons. He worried that the palace might not yet be safe. However, she needed to be seen shortly in order to quell potential rumors that the fire had left her wounded. A display of weakness after an attack invited further violence.

“Was it one of the servants?” Tahneff Dju-Tesha asked. The tone of her voice made it clear she hoped the betrayal did not originate with her personal staff.

“That was our first thought.” Kao-Rhee glanced at the closed doors of the balcony. “High Commander Nedag-Tong has interviewed the servants personally, and he is of the opinion that the culprit gained entrance to your sleeping chamber through the balcony. There were marks on the wooden railing that indicate the use of a grappling hook. And the handle to the balcony door was broken to hold it closed. Commander Nedag-Tong has ordered guards placed in the gardens below the balconies for all of your private chambers.”

“And those responsible?” Mother Zhan Pai-Nakee leaned forward in her chair.

“I am looking into the matter personally, Mother Zhan.” Kao-Rhee bowed his head. It required more time than he could afford, with the coronation the following day, but he found that after the previous attempts on the life of the former zhan, and this new attempt on the tahneff, he didn’t trust anyone else to investigate. He would have trusted Tonken-Wu, but the man’s disappearance now appeared suspicious in retrospect.

“Do you suspect anyone?” Tahneff Dju-Tesha frowned as she looked at her belly, hands stroking its circumference.

“Unfortunately, there are too many potential sources for an attack on your person, my tahneff.” Kao-Rhee clasped his arms behind his back. “The Tanshen are possible instigators, but they would need assistance from someone here in the palace. Possibly a clutch of lesser tahns seeking to elevate one of their number. Potentially the former in collusion with the later.” He suspected a local tahn or group of tahns more than the Tanshen. Their energies were focused on winning on the battlefield at the moment. “I will be discussing last night’s attempt on your life, and the impact

on the coronation, with the full council this afternoon.”

“I will be there.” Tahneff Dju-Tesha’s face hardened. Kao-Rhee suspected she anticipated her mother’s response.

“You must think of your child.” The Mother Zhan frowned at her daughter.

“I must think of the dominion as well.” Tahneff Dju-Tesha raised her voice. “Even I know that I cannot appear weak after an attempt on my life.”

“You are weak.” The Mother Zhan shook her head. “And your belly grows larger with the weakness every day.”

“I am not that far along.” Dju-Tesha glanced at Kao-Rhee and then back to her mother. He took from that look a subtle acknowledgment that the tahneff’s pregnancy did not begin fortuitously on her wedding night but instead sometime prior.

“It is beneficial for the tahneff to be seen attending to matters of state, Mother Zhan.” Kao-Rhee did not enjoy inserting himself into royal domestic disputes, but in this instance, he had no choice. “We must show that the attack on her life was not only unsuccessful, but that she is not cowed by the fear of another attempt. The condition of her pregnancy will only lend more sympathy to her plight and elicit greater anger toward her attackers, sentiment that we can use at court to solidify her rule after the coronation.”

The Mother Zhan glared at Kao-Rhee for a moment and then eventually sighed. “I will hold you responsible if something happens to my only remaining child.” She grabbed one of Tahneff Dju-Tesha’s hands and held it firmly.

“She will be guarded at all times.” Kao-Rhee bowed his head. “And I will assign two servants to attend her in her chambers when she is alone.”

“Thank you, Counselor.” Tahneff Dju-Tesha gave him a brief smile.

Kao-Rhee excused himself and headed to his personal study. He needed time to think through the events of the previous night and examine what few clues existed for the origins of the fire. As he sat at his desk, he acknowledged to himself with a sigh that none of the evidence pointed toward a particular perpetrator. No one had seen night-daggers assailing ropes to the tahneff’s balcony. No one had witnessed anyone fleeing the palace gardens, and the hounds found too many scents to track. There were no shortages listed in any of the storerooms in the palace of tamak-seed oil. No hints remained to point in any direction.

With two the attempts on the life of the now departed Zhan Tin-Tsu still unexplained, and the guilty parties as yet unpunished, a new effort to unseat the Kon family from the throne could not go unanswered. Unfortunately, given the circumstances, he did not see how to respond. Unless he fabricated that reply and made mockery of the resulting justice by planting evidence against one of the high tahn families. It would eliminate a threat to the future regent zhan’s power, and to his own. It would also provide a public criminal for the crime. The former attempts on the throne could be sewn into the same false evidence and solve several problems. However, it created other complications. Houses that suspected the ruse would turn against the throne. And if he did find the true culprit for the fire, it would then be impossible to accuse them publicly.

He did not like situations that held no decisive choices. He wondered at the fact that he chose

to pursue the path of a court councilor despite this inclination. He would wait. Possibly High Commander Nedag-Tong might uncover evidence that led to the hands that set the fire.

He unlocked a drawer with a key from the chain around his neck and read again the messages from Tigan Rhog-Kan at the battlefield. It seemed the Tanshen forces were massing for a final assault, one the tigan hoped to break and repel within days. Another message, from his spy in the Atheton palace, bore more cryptic information. It described an Atheton Dominion weakened by the recent outbreak of the Living Death but did so in a manner that eschewed protocol. The message used the correct key phrases, clues to the veracity of its sender, but not in the usual manner. Possibly, his spy had been turned. Did this render the intelligence invalid? He needed to assess the reports of his other informants in Atheton and decide how to proceed.

A knock at the door brought his attention away from the papers. His clerk, Tais-Ting, a man of middle years, great intellect, and profound loyalty, but little personal ambition, stood in the open doorway.

“Your former servant, Peda-Leng, seeks a brief audience with you, sir.” Tais-Ting bowed with the completion of his words.

Kao-Rhee held the features of his face firm, making certain not to display any of the emotions elicited by his illegitimate child’s name. He offered a small, non-committal nod to his clerk. “Show her in.”

As he waited, he shuffled the papers on his desk, trying to sort through his thoughts. Why did she come to him now? He had made it very clear at their last meeting that she should not be seen in his quarters again. It saddened him to think of it. Her presence should have been a joy, if however, a secret one. That joy became sorrow by accident one night several weeks past.

THREE WEEKS AGO

SHADOW CHASED form along stone walls lit by moving lantern light. Kao-Rhee held the lamp low, away from his eyes, as he walked down the stairs toward the private kitchen on the lower level. The lateness of the hour left the halls and rooms in the council wing of the palace empty. The councilors and their families all occupied an exclusive section of the palace with sleeping chambers, work rooms, and a common kitchen. They also shared a dining room, where they often discussed matters of state over meals in relative privacy.

Sleep evaded him for hours, and he sought out a late-night repast to fortify himself before heading to his study to work. He might have called for a servant to bring him food but preferred to roam the halls alone. It gave him a slightly different space in which to ruminate on his concerns. While numbering the breaths of his sleeping wife by the light of the two moons did count as one of his favorite pastimes, the papers on his desk concerning trade and the war demanded his attention. He could complete the work left unfinished during the day and gain an advantage in the morning’s pressing endeavors before he retired for the night.

As he reached the door to the kitchen, he heard noises. His first thought, primed by recent events, ran to notions of night-daggers. Although the enemies of the dominion might seek his

sudden death, they would not likely know he rose from his bed in the middle of the night to seek slices of cheese and cured mutton from the kitchen store cabinets. Maybe the cook worked late?

He opened the kitchen door and halted in his progress. The lantern light exposed the image before him, allowing the sounds preceding it to blossom into clarity. Peda-Leng sat on the long oak kitchen table, her woolen dress hiked up about her knees, her legs wrapped around the waist of a young man in fine silks, their arms intertwined as they passionately kissed beside the flame of a small candle.

The arrival of the new source of light gradually drew the entranced couple's attention. Peda-Leng emitted a squeal of surprise, pushing the young man away as she jumped from the table and smoothed the folds of her dress. The young man blinked in bewilderment and stumbled back from Peda-Leng, clasping his hands behind his back — a child caught with a sweet treat he hoped to hide from his mother. Kao-Rhee knew the boy. The fifth son of High Tahn Tiss-Vay. A sweet-natured young man who lacked the cunning and ruthlessness of his father and bothers. Kao-Rhee had discovered the eldest brother in a similar situation several years past, and the man had merely grinned, shrugged, patted the kitchen maid on the rump, and sauntered past him. His youngest brother, Pao-Kowto, followed a different tack.

"Councilor Kao-Rhee," Pao-Kowto mumbled as he continued to blink. "We were..." His lean face twitched as he glanced to Peda-Leng and back to Kao-Rhee. "I was..."

"You were leaving." Kao-Rhee lowered his voice as he turned and raised the lantern toward the kitchen door.

"Yes. I was..." Pao-Kowto gave a quick smile to Peda-Leng and then rushed from the room.

As the boy's footsteps faded down the hall and up the stairs, Kao-Rhee placed the lantern on the kitchen table.

"I apologize, Councilor Kao-Rhee." Peda-Leng looked at the floor, her hands tightly clasping the folds of her dress. "I can explain. We were..."

"You must leave my employ immediately." A wave of nausea washed over Kao-Rhee as he spoke.

"But, sir, nothing..." Peda-Leng's eyes teared as she raised them to look at Kao-Rhee.

"It does not matter that nothing more than what I saw took place." Kao-Rhee forced himself to look into her eyes. "It does not matter that this might be the first time the two of you exchanged more than soft words in empty corridors. It does not matter, because if I can walk in and find you wrapped like ivy vines strangling one another, then the cook, or another councilor, or even my wife might do the same. Whispers of your affair would float through the palace like maple seeds, finding purchase and making roots in very fertile soil."

"It will never..." Peda-Leng did not seem able to finish the intended thought. Kao-Rhee frowned. Maybe she did hold affection for the boy. Possibly he even returned the sentiment. It did not matter.

"While the house of a high tahn might weather such rumors, or their exposure as truth, mine is the house of a palace councilor." Kao-Rhee stepped slightly closer. He needed to explain himself to her. "I am a lesser tahn with a small estate. I have no position but what I have earned, and it can

be stripped from me with ease. My house, not to mention the house of Pao-Kowto's father, cannot afford to be weakened by rumors and scandal. Not now with the war once more inflamed."

While he spoke the truth, a deeper fact motivated him as well. A scandal would bring attention not only to him and his house, but to Peda-Leng herself. If prying court gossips managed to glean her true parentage, the resulting ignominy would weaken his status in the palace hierarchy and likely result in him being forced to step down as Prime Councilor. He could not risk that event, as much for the sake of the dominion as for his own personal standing in society.

"I will never..." Peda-Leng once more made to speak, but Kao-Rhee interrupted her before she continued and altered his resolution.

"I will find you a place in another house in the palace." Kao-Rhee stifled a sigh. He wished to reach out and hold the young woman before him. He saw the pain on her face. He understood how hard she had worked over the years to attain a place as a servant of a lesser tahn, and he knew how she cherished working for his house and his wife. His wife. She would be saddened to learn of the girl's release. She took an immediate liking to Peda-Leng. Everyone did. He, too, had come to enjoy seeing her in the chambers every day. But difficult times demanded sacrifices and hard choices. "I will arrange it in the morning. I will say that I expanded my staff unwisely. No one will guess the reason for your departure from our family chambers. I will caution you, though. Choose wisely how you proceed with that boy. Not all in the palace will treat a woman of your tier so gently. May you find success where you go."

Kao-Rhee hid his face by turning away and walking from the kitchen. He heard quiet sobs behind him. The loss of the closeness to her stung, but possibly, he could still observe her at a distance in the palace. If he obtained a place for her with one of the lesser tahns charged with administering the palace estate, he might have cause to even speak with her on formal occasions. Not until he reached his private study, and his stomach rumbled, did he remember his reason for heading down to the kitchens. He did not know if he should be thankful for discovering the illicit congress between Peda-Leng and the boy Pao-Kowto, but part of him wished he'd never risen from his bed. His unease with his actions left him unable to consider food regardless of his stomach's continued concern. He sat at his desk in the flickering light of a small lamp and sighed, finding it impossible to focus on the papers stacked along the aged wood. He had lost his daughter. Again.

THE PRESENT

A SEA of ink and paper. Kao-Rhee looked up from the documents strewn across his desk as Peda-Leng entered the study and his clerk closed the door behind her. He held his breath as he waited for her to speak, holding his face impassive. He had found her a place in the service of a lesser tahn, but he had not seen her since that night in the private kitchen. He glanced at his left hand as it fiddled with a stray paper and forced his fingers to be still.

Peda-Leng stood silent before him for several moments, her jaw tight with the obvious exertion to control her emotions. Finally, she took a deep breath, straightened her back, and spoke.

“Women of lower tiers have few choices.” Peda-Leng looked at her feet for a moment, seeming uncertain about her opening words. She took another deep breath and raised her head to Kao-Rhee, a look of determination and a hint of fear in her eyes. “If you are born to a lower tier, there are few ways to climb up. Men can gain favor in battle or the market or in court, but not women. Even in the market, they are looked down upon. A good position is difficult to come by. I worked for years to learn how to be a lady’s maid. How to act. How to speak. What to do and when. It is a good life. A tier or two above where I came from, and I would not abandon it casually. But when a man of good standing and a high tier...”

Peda-Leng frowned and glanced away, looking again unclear how to proceed, or even what she wished to say.

“A woman must be careful,” Peda-Leng said. “Many men will make advances. It is what men do. To accept an advance is to accept the consequences of it, which may lead to bearing greater consequences. A woman must be ... selective. A man with limited interests provides limited advantages. If she wishes to advance to a higher tier, a favorable marriage is likely the only clear path. But she must be certain the man wishes more than ... entertainment.”

Peda-Leng paused again, looking out the open balcony doors for a moment. Kao-Rhee found himself impressed with the girl’s assessment of her casting in life as well as her eloquence in describing the constraints of her station. She no longer spoke like a poor candle girl. Yet, for all that, he had no idea what she truly attempted to tell him.

“Pao-Kowto has made me an offer of marriage.” Peda-Leng clasped her fidgeting hands together at her waist.

“I see.” Kao-Rhee understood now. The girl wished to seek his help in gaining favor with the boy’s father.

“It is impossible for you to see, for I have not told you why I am here.” Peda-Leng sounded annoyed.

“Then maybe you should explain yourself more fully.” The girl’s tone unsettled Kao-Rhee.

“You knew my mother.” Peda-Leng stared at him intently. “Her name was Thu-Daa. She sold candles in my grandfather’s shop.”

Peda-Leng stopped, watching Kao-Rhee for any reaction. He held his face firm. He’d been in too many important negotiations to allow his surprise to be evident in his features.

“You helped her with a standing order for the palace.” Peda-Leng stepped closer to the desk and Kao-Rhee. “I found a letter when my grandfather died. I did not know what to make of it. I was too young. Maybe she helped you in some way. Maybe you knew my father. Maybe there is a debt you repay. It is a debt paid to my grandfather’s brother these past ten years. He took the shop and cast me out. But I secured a position, and I worked my way to the palace, and when I heard your name, I thought to learn what the debt was and use it for myself. To gain a better station. But then I found myself working in your house. A servant to your wife. I could not bring myself to broach the subject with you. But now I must.”

“I will speak to Pao-Kowto’s father, but I can make no guarantees as to his compliance with his son’s proposal.” Kao-Rhee swallowed. The girl knew altogether too much, but fortunately not

everything. He could pretend to be an old friend of her “father.” It would throw suspicion away from himself as the true bearer of that role.

“I do not need you to negotiate with Pao-Kowto’s father; I need you to protect us from him.” Peda-Leng clenched her jaw as she stepped still closer to the desk.

“Are you with child?” Kao-Rhee frowned, wondering how much her affair with the boy predated his discovery of them in the kitchen. She did not show signs of bearing a babe.

“If only my circumstances were so easy.” Peda-Leng glanced at the door and lowered her voice. “Pao-Kowto and I were in a small library in his family’s chambers in the palace. His father, his elder brother, and another tahn entered unexpectedly. We hid, crouched behind a reading bench. I did not understand the words they spoke at the time. I thought they plotted to blackmail one of the other tahns, catching him in a tahneff’s chambers. It was not until afterward that I realized what chambers they referred to and which tahneff.”

Kao-Rhee blinked, fearing he now grasped the girl’s situation.

“His father and brother and at least two other tahns were responsible for the fire that nearly killed Tahneff Dju-Tesha.” Peda-Leng took one last step and placed her shaking hands on the edge of the desk. “I will testify to what I have heard, and so will Pao-Kowto, but you must protect us from his family. They will kill us if we speak against them.”

Kao-Rhee saw immediately the great fortune and simple danger in the news Peda-Leng revealed. He now knew who tried to kill Tahneff Dju-Tesha and prevent her from assuming the throne, but revealing this information put the girl at risk. And in exposing her to that danger, he risked someone discovering the truth of her parentage. He foresaw few options, but at least one of them could be bent to suit his needs.

“You were right to come to me.” Kao-Rhee stepped around the desk and took hold of Peda-Leng’s still shaking hands. He smiled at her, admiring her bravery and determination. “I will ensure your protection.”

Kao-Rhee squeezed her hands, resisting the urge to throw his arms wide and embrace her. He could not hint at his affection for her, could not acknowledge his relation to her, but regardless the events that arose in the coming days, no matter the circumstances, he would protect his daughter.

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THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

MINIATURE CONSTELLATIONS of unknown iridescent material floated in sinuous spirals, sparkling in the sunlight. Sketkee held the crystal artifact to the light of the window and then turned to examine it in shadow. The tiny mechanisms within the device continued to glow and glitter. Once more, she wondered what might power the small, supposedly ancient device. A more pressing question demanded an answer — what altered the artifact’s internal composition at random intervals?

“I concur. It is the same configuration as three days ago when I last examined it.” Sketkee held the device in her hands as she spoke to her rakthor compatriot, Viktik, and her human companion, Kadmallin. Both stood near the table by the window, rows of books covering the walls. The library of the rakthor embassy in the city of Tanjii provided the location for their regular meetings.

“My observations agree. It has not changed since the last alteration in its structure ten days ago.” Viktik took the artifact from Sketkee’s hands and returned it to a velvet-lined box with a moon-shaped indentation specially sized for it. He closed the box and inserted a key into a lock, turning it three times. He then placed the key in a pocket of his rakthorian vest. “And no clues yet to the cause of the changes?”

“I have found nothing to definitively indicate either a possible cause or mechanism for the changes.” Sketkee noted that Viktik only feigned placing the key in his vest pocket, and that he still held it clutched in his hand as he slid both his arms behind his back. Distrustful misdirection. The pocket no doubt held a false key. An invitation for her to steal it in an attempt to reveal her disloyalty. “I still suspect the most likely explanation to be a localized disturbance. Much the way flowers will open when struck by the sun.”

“There was the near sinking of two rakthor ships the night the artifact changed.” Kadmallin crossed his arms over his broad chest and looked out the window, seeming to give the conversation the barest portion of his interest.

“With only the vague reports that have reached the shore and the embassy, it is impossible to tell what happened on those ships.” Viktik frowned at Kadmallin. After months in the human’s company, he still openly displayed his contempt for conversing with him, even though they spoke his native rakthor language rather than a human dialect. “We have only rumors of something that sounds like an explosion of volatile gas.”

“The ships are still part of the blockade. We could sail out to them and question the crew.” Kadmallin leaned closer to the window.

“You could do no such thing.” Viktik shook his head.

“He could not, but I could.” Sketkee considered the idea as she had when Kadmallin suggested it in private several days prior. “The disturbance on the ships may be connected to the alteration

of the device. It might provide us with information about what caused the changes and why the device is able to react the way it does.”

“The two events may be utterly unrelated, and the endeavor to connect them a waste of time.” Viktik’s tone made clear his opinion on the matter. “As I have said repeatedly, it makes more sense to examine the device directly instead of investigating everything except the device.”

“I am attempting to assemble the elements necessary to build a magnifying apparatus, but the Tanjii lens grinders are not as expert as those found in our homeland.” Sketkee glanced out the window but saw nothing unusual in the street traffic three stories below. What caught Kadmallin’s attention? “I should have the proper materials in a few days and can begin taking a closer look at the interior workings of the device. It would help if we observed it during a transformation, but to do that, we need to know what causes the transformations.”

“We could put it under arrest.” Kadmallin turned away from the window, a grin on his face.

“The incoherence of your thoughts increases exponentially with the frequency with which you express them.” The leathery skin across Viktik’s hairless skull flexed in an unobtrusive expression of his annoyance.

“He means that we could place the object under constant surveillance, taking shifts to watch it for any changes to its composition.” Sketkee looked toward Kadmallin. The idea sounded promising were it not for the constraints on their time and the fact that such an observation required all three of them.

“Impossible,” Viktik said. “You need to spend your time in the pilgrim village to secure passage for us, and the device must remain here with me. Now that the topic is broached once more, how is that project progressing?”

“Little has changed since we last discussed it.” Sketkee worried that Viktik’s impatience with their ability to leave for the Forbidden Realm, compounded by the blockade of the harbor as much as the shortage of pilgrim ships, might lead him to attempting to take the artifact back to Ranikttak, the rakthor realm. “With the council managing the allotment of the pilgrims convinced that we are sincere in following the dreams, we are assured passage on the first vessel to return from the Forbidden Realm. It is not ideal, but a better option is not available to us.”

“Can you not bribe your fellow humans?” Viktik glared at Kadmallin. “They are usually very susceptible to inducements of currency.”

“I have investigated that possibility, but the pilgrims are too pure of intention, and too fearful of their goddess, to take money for passage on one of the next ships.” Kadmallin rubbed his chin. “One option is to make ourselves invaluable to them somehow, so they will want to take us sooner, but I have not been able to figure out what they might need that we can provide. It’s pointless as long as the so-called Alliance blockades the harbor.”

“Then we should definitely reconsider the idea of hiring a ship,” Kadmallin said.

“We have no funds with which to hire a vessel, assuming we can find a captain willing to take the risk.” Sketkee considered this the preferable option, if only they had the coin to accomplish it. Unfortunately, their combined financial reserves would not cover the cost of hiring a ship for the expedition. She had, of late, considered that they might devise a scheme by which they robbed the

vaults of one of the Tanjii banking establishments. The moral implications of the theft did not concern her as much as the practical problems it posed.

“As to that matter, I have a notion that might resolve our lack of funds.” Viktik turned his steady gaze to Sketkee. “In your training as a natural philosopher, did you learn alchemical procedures?”

Sketkee frowned at Viktik’s question. It took her a moment to discern his meaning, at which point her frown deepened.

“That would be extremely reckless, as well as violating the primary directives on inter-realm interaction of the Central Governing Committee.” Sketkee moved closer to Viktik.

“We would not need to supply the method of manufacture, merely a quantity sufficient to entice a buyer and to provide us the necessary funds to charter a ship.” Viktik’s tone indicated he considered the risk of the plan more than acceptable given the possible outcomes.

“The Central Governing Committee would hear of this break in protocol eventually,” Sketkee said.

“But it is unlikely they could trace that breach back to us,” Viktik said.

“The answer is no.” Kadmallin placed his hands on the edge of the table, his voice as forceful as his posture. “You’re talking about giving rakthor fire-powder to the Tanjii City Elders or some other faction. That is madness. I’ve seen what the fire-powder weapons can do. You do not want to give that to humans. Not unless you want it used against you. Maybe even used against the blockade ships.”

“The quantities involved would not be sufficient to threaten the blockade.” Viktik turned to Sketkee, his eyes seeking affirmation.

“In my experience, any quantity of fire-powder given to humans can be unpredictably dangerous.” Sketkee thought of a particular time she had entrusted Kadmallin with a cask of fire-powder and the resulting explosive event that nearly started a war between the Punderra and Juparti Dominions.

“Particularly when they figure out how to make it themselves.” Kadmallin glanced at Sketkee, his look suggesting that he, too, remembered the incident from their past, but that he still had no intention of apologizing.

“Impossible.” Viktik grunted at the notion. “Humans lack the means, both practical and intellectual.”

“Humans can figure out a surprising number of ways to kill themselves and others when motivated.” Kadmallin shook his head. “Giving them fire-powder is a great motivation to figure out how to make more.”

“This is an unnecessary discussion.” Sketkee straightened her already straight shoulders. “I will not make fire-powder to give to the humans for any reason.” It shocked her that her own thoughts about robbing a human bank seemed rational in comparison to Viktik’s suggested course of action. She worried that the pursuit of the device’s secrets left his mind unstable.

Viktik glared at them both and then picked the box with the device up from the table.

“As that is the case, this entire discussion is unnecessary.” Viktik did not look at them again

as he left the room.

Sketkee and Kadmallin held one another's eyes a moment but said nothing. They could not trust that their conversation might not be eavesdropped upon while in the embassy library. Every rakthor embassy contained secret passages and false walls for listening to conversations of visitors. They only spoke once they were seated in the back of a hired carriage riding through the streets of Tanjii. It would not take them all the way to the pilgrim town up the coast, but far enough they could easily walk the rest of the way.

"We need to come up with a plan to raise the money to hire a ship before Viktik does something reckless." Kadmallin shook his head as he spoke.

"He is impatient for results." Sketkee pulled back the hood of her cloak. With the shades of the carriage windows drawn, she did not need to hide her features. In normal times, the city tolerated rakthors because of the trade they provided, but with the Alliance blockade threatening that trade, cautious rakthors chose to conceal their identity in Tanjii. "I fear that if we are not able to leave for the Forbidden Realm soon, he will disregard my arguments in favor of taking the artifact there and instead return to our home realm."

"We could try thievery." Kadmallin smiled. "Although our history of success is limited."

"I have considered that path as well." Sketkee found it curious that she and Kadmallin might both suggest stealing as a means of obtaining the funds they needed. It did not speak well for her state of mind that her ideas mirrored those of a human, even one such as Kadmallin.

"But you probably thought of breaking into a bank vault or something like that." Kadmallin laughed as he saw the frown on her lips. "I was thinking more of finding local criminals and stealing from them. Smugglers maybe. Gambling dens. Someone likely to have large stashes of coin on hand."

"We could consider that, but we would still need help, and I doubt we could recruit Viktik and his men for such a project. They would be too easy to identify as rakthors for one." Sketkee wondered what other notions Kadmallin had not shared with her. This brought her to wonder at his actions in the library. "Why did you keep staring out the window?"

"Trying to see if there was a building near enough and tall enough to toss a rope through an open library window," Kadmallin replied. "It's the only room we're ever allowed in, so it's the best one to leave a window open to come back through later."

"And? Any likely candidates?" Sketkee admired Kadmallin's relentless deviousness when faced with a problem. It made him a useful companion when under duress.

"One. Maybe." Kadmallin rubbed his chin. "It's not quite close enough and not quite tall enough, but it might work if we're pressed to it."

"Good to know." Sketkee sighed. "We may find that our only option is to steal the artifact and stow away aboard one of the pilgrim ships before it departs."

"I've already figured out which ship is easiest to board and where we could hide for long enough before being found." Kadmallin grinned again. "There's no way we can hide for the entire voyage, and we'd have to hope they wouldn't toss us overboard when they found us, but we might stay hidden for at least a week if not more."

“Your resourcefulness is greatly appreciated.” Sketkee nodded to Kadmallin. His friendship marked the one constant pleasantness in her life. It dawned on her that she would miss him when his short human life left her alone in the world to live another thirty-some years beyond his death. Then again, they might both be dead long before that if her plans unraveled poorly.

They rode the rest of the way in silence. Sketkee assumed Kadmallin’s inner thoughts consumed him, as her own did. They paid for the carriage ride and walked the remaining hour to the edge of the pilgrim town. They arrived just as the planet finally rotated enough to place the sun beyond the sight of the horizon and leave the land in twilight. As they headed to their camp near the beach, they heard a sound like shattering clay. They turned to see flaming arrows descending upon the houses of the pilgrim town from the hills to the west. Balls of fire erupted where the arrows struck, engulfing the nearest homes. Screams followed the fire.

Sketkee ran forward, toward the flames. She did not need to look to know that Kadmallin ran beside her. Another reason she appreciated his company. Like her, he always ran toward danger rather than away from it.

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

THE TEMPLE



TAKSATI

MID-MORNING SUNLIGHT burnt away the last remnants of a chill air from the previous night, warming the streets and the walls of buildings. As the shadows along the lane grew short in the glow of the climbing sun, wildflowers, scrambling up between paving stones, opened to catch the light, releasing a sweet fragrance that filled the air. Taksati and Atula walked down a wide avenue in the mysterious city only a few blocks from the temple. Bon-Tao and his teams had spent most of the previous two days clearing the area of the vicious, flammable plants infesting the city. Now, Taksati and several groups of her people combed through the newly safe streets and buildings to determine how much work each structure needed to be habitable for the pilgrims working to rebuild the temple. The streets still held a great deal of debris and sunbaked seaweed that needed to be cleared but no longer posed a threat to those walking their broad, ancient stones.

Atula carried a slate board and a piece of chalk, noting the buildings that Taksati thought looked large enough to hold people. They planned to walk to the edge of the safely cleared streets and then work their way back, exploring the interiors in more detail. When they finished the street they followed, it would be time for the midday meal. Taksati spent the morning after breakfast assigning tasks to pilgrims not yet working on the temple reconstruction. She still found it odd that a former lowly temple servant should be in charge of so many and have such responsibility. It had surprised her, back in the pilgrim town in the Iron Realm, that people followed her orders after so many years only following orders herself. But Junari trusted her to ensure everyone had a place to sleep, enough to eat, and understood what to do with themselves when not working on the temple. And she trusted Junari to know her abilities. Not that she actually doubted her skills. Her many years serving the Pashist temple taught her to discern when she could do something alone and when she required help. Managing the pilgrims' food and housing merely required asking many people for help. However, some things she liked to do herself, like inspecting the archaic buildings. For that, she needed only one person's assistance: that of her now constant companion.

"Do you see anything that looks promising?" Taksati found the architecture of the city beautiful and imposing — large, sensuous lines, massive doorways, tall ceilings, and wide rooms. What kind of people required such space? She felt dwarfed by her surroundings.

"That one at the end of the street might be good." Atula pointed to a building near the intersection they approached. "Its walls and windows are intact, and it has a second floor."

"Good choice." Taksati patted the girl's shoulder. The child had a quick mind. Too quick to stay long as assistant to an old servant. She'd need greater challenges soon enough. Taksati did not look forward to that day. She appreciated having Atula underfoot at all times.

"Do you enjoy your work with me?" Taksati decided to broach the issue again. Their last discussion of Atula's future before sighting the temple had been left unresolved.

"Yes, very much." Atula nodded her head and smiled.

“Might you not enjoy helping Raedalus in the temple?” Taksati glanced back over her shoulder toward the massive stone structure rising above the tops of the buildings. “He needs people who know how to notice things and keep track of them.”

“Have I done something wrong?” Atula looked up, her face serious.

“No, not at all.” Taksati shook her head.

“Do you not want me to be your assistant anymore?” Atula’s eyes were wide, her voice high.

“No. You are an invaluable assistant.” Taksati now saw she needed to approach the idea differently.

“Can’t I stay with you?” Atula hugged the slate board. “Can’t I keep helping you? I can work harder. I can come to help after dinners.”

“I want you to be happy.” Taksati did not really need to wonder why. She disregarded the count in her mind of all the times her own talents had been ignored, all the instances people saw in her what they assumed to be her true nature. “I thought you might enjoy helping Raedalus in the temple to uncover the mysteries of the builders. Wouldn’t you like to explore the temple?”

“Can’t I explore the temple with you?” Atula also looked back at the holy structure.

“We each have our gifts to give the Goddess. Mine are best put to use outside the temple.” Taksati considered the irony of that as she remembered all the decades she’d devoted to serving inside a temple. Years she spent wishing to be a priest. A life given in service without the hoped-for reward.

“That’s where I should be too.” Atula’s voice sounded firm and forceful. “With you.”

“Maybe you could spend a few hours a day in the temple with Raedalus and the rest of the day helping me.” Taksati found her feelings for the girl pressing at her throat and constricting her chest. That the girl obviously felt so much for her, so wished to continue being with her, made it all the more difficult to do what she knew was best for the child. A girl bright enough to be a priest for the Goddess should not be left counting food stores and planning meals.

“Maybe. I guess. That would be okay.” Atula’s face expressed both interest and suspicion. “I would like to see more of the temple. I like the paintings on the walls. I wonder who scratched all the people out of them.”

“We all wonder that. Maybe you can help find out.” Taksati relaxed, knowing she’d planted the seed for the girl’s future. With care and nurturing, Atula would blossom into a singular woman.

“Okay.” Atula bounced a bit as she walked.

“I will talk with Raedalus, then.” Taksati smiled at Atula. “But be warned, he may be more demanding a master than myself.”

Atula said nothing, merely grinning. Taksati couldn’t decide if the grin mocked the notion that someone could be a firmer master than herself, or if the girl smiled for simply knowing she would soon learn more about the secrets of the mysterious temple.

As they neared the building they intended to inspect, a rasping sound caught Taksati’s attention. She turned to see one of the exploding plants the size of a large dog in the middle of the street. She stopped. That could not be right. They had not walked past it. Then she noticed its thick tendrils quivering as it rolled forward. Toward them. Fast.

“Quick, girl. Run.” Taksati grabbed Atula’s hand and pulled her toward a side street.

Atula squeaked when she saw what pursued them and ran faster. Taksati hoped to cut through to another street and circle back to the safety of the temple. A moving fire-plant! What kind of realm had the Goddess brought them to?

They dashed into the narrow, curving side street, pushing past foliage grown up over centuries through the cracks in the paving stones. As they emerged into the next main avenue, Taksati looked back. The roving plant still followed. Closer now. The vegetation of the side street did not seem to slow it down at all.

“This way.” Taksati pulled Atula toward a small alley twenty paces away. If they got out of sight, possibly the murderous, mobile shrub would not find them. As they skittered into the slender alley, she looked back at the roving plant emerging from the other side street into the larger lane. She didn’t wait to see if it noticed her. How could it track them? How did it see? For that matter, how did it move? What plant moved?

She pushed through the vines and occasional low bushes growing up in the alley, pulling Atula behind her. The opening of the alley ahead looked different. As she stepped past its threshold, she understood why, and realized her mistake. The alley did not open into a street but instead a closed courtyard filled with low vegetation — dozens and dozens of the exploding plants rising from cracks in the paving stones. She had led them from an open street to a killing nest — mice that ran into a den of cats.

She pulled Atula close. The girl trembled in her arms. She looked back just as the roving plant entered the alley. Trapped. She turned to the courtyard of deadly plants, green-tentacled beasts the size of large dinner pots, waiting to burst into flame. The sight resembled a similar scene from far in her past.

FIFTY-SIX YEARS AGO

THE GUTTURAL caw of a seagull brought bright sunshine into blinking eyes. And pain. Taksati coughed seawater from her mouth, wincing at the ache in her left arm and her right knee. She struggled to sit up, wiping sand from her face and eyes with her good hand. Her head throbbed as she tried to figure out where she was and why.

She sat on the forward bench of a small rowing boat. Water from a large hole in the back hull filled the bottom, covering her feet and part of her legs. She looked around. The boat rested on a sandy shore. A line of trees grew several hundred paces away. Where was her father? Her heart pounded faster against the pain in her body and the memories of the previous night. She and her father had been fishing, when the skies grew dark. Her father, drinking from a jug of wine more than fishing, insisted on staying out long after it began to rain, claiming the fish loved to come up for the drops of water. Then the storm hit hard, and they’d tried to get to shore. They must have made it. Sort of. She rubbed her head, feeling a knot on the back of her scalp. She remembered the wind taking an oar from her father’s hand and sending it crashing into her skull. She noticed the boat held no oars.

Taksati looked to the shore and spotted boot prints in the sand weaving away from the boat toward the village in the distance. Jellyfish covered the shoreline, their tendrils twitching in the sand. Taksati frowned, her young face trembling as she fought back tears.

Her father had left her! The drunken sod got out of the boat and left her! Taksati's anger burned hot enough that she momentarily forgot the pain in her limbs. He left her in a broken boat with a useless arm, a hurt leg, and surrounded by jellyfish. She brushed tears and sand from her cheeks. After her mother's death two years prior, just a day shy of her twelfth naming day, she had tried to be the best daughter possible for her father. Keeping their small village hut clean. Cooking the meals. Gutting the few fish he managed to catch when sober. Smoking them for sale. But he only drank more and yelled more and hit her more often. And now he'd abandoned her. Left her to fend for herself.

She looked again at the jellyfish, noticing their color and the movement of their thin tentacles. These were not common jellyfish. These were Red Catcher jellyfish, so called not only for their crimson color, but because they sensed motion near them in the water or land and struck out to catch nearby limbs. Unlike a normal jellyfish, their stings could prove fatal. One sting could paralyze a limb. Two stings seized the lungs and heart, leaving a person dead in minutes. She sighed. The jellyfish were too numerous to hope to find a way through them barefoot.

Taksati sat upright in the bench, pulling her feet from the water collected in the bottom of the boat. The small vessel moved slightly with each wave that struck the shore. She used her good hand to hold her bruised arm close to her chest. It didn't feel broken, but it hurt to move. She wiggled the fingers of her left hand. They responded slowly and with little coordination. She looked at the knee of her right leg. Swelled to twice its normal size, it appeared three shades darker than her already dark skin. She tried to bend it and cried out at the pain. The cry gave her a thought, and she yelled again, calling out for help. She shouted again and again, looking both ways along the desolate beach. She sighed and fell silent. The boat sat too far from the village for anyone to hear her.

She considered her options. The hole in the boat left it unrowable, even if she had the oars, which she did not. She could not outrun the jellyfish tentacles with her swollen knee. She could sit and wait for her father to come back but knew the likelihood of that. He'd probably sleep most of the day before getting up to drink more. He might notice her missing around mealtime, but that gave no guarantee he would think to look for her in the boat he'd abandoned her in. She could wait for someone from the town to find her. That might take hours, or it might never happen at all. How long would she last in the hot sun? Her head pulsed with pain at the question. When was the last time she had something to drink? Midday of the day before?

She looked at the hundreds of jellyfish crowding the beach. She considered one option, but it wasn't a very good idea. She thought about it more, regarding it a worse idea each time she contemplated it. Finally, she acknowledged that a bad idea gave her a better chance of getting home than waiting for her father to rescue her.

She pulled herself over the edge of the boat and steadied her legs in the shallow surf. She sighed at the coolness of the sand and water on her feet. She took a limping step. Then another.

The next step would bring her in striking distance of two Red Catcher jellyfish. Already their tentacles twitched in her direction. She moved so that the closest one blocked the second. Then she bent forward and dangled her sprained left arm near the jellyfish. The creature's poisonous appendages sprung upward and grasped at her hand.

A sharp wave of pain shot up from her hand and along her arm — fire and ice and lightning all bathing her flesh at once. She ignored the agony and brought the fist of her right arm down with all her strength into the bulbous body of the jellyfish before it could sting her again. The creature exploded in a burst of briny ichor. The stabbing sensation ceased shooting into her left arm, but it still pulsed with the aftereffects of the creature's venom. She stood and rubbed her left arm for a moment until the aching had subsided and numbness from the creature's poison filled the limb. Though her left arm now hung paralyzed and useless from her shoulder, she much preferred that to the pain she'd felt since waking.

Taksati took a deep breath and looked at the beach again, plotting a course through the jellyfish, figuring out the quickest way past the poisoned obstacles. Clenching her jaw with determination, she bent down and grabbed the dead jellyfish by its limp tentacles with her right hand. Staying bent at the waist, she spun the jellyfish carcass in a circle, using the remains of its rubbery body to smack the nearest of its companions out of her path. She had to hit it twice, but the force and momentum of the spinning jellyfish corpse knocked the next potentially deadly creature out of the way. Satisfied with the result, she repeated her effort with a similar outcome. Again and again, she whacked the jellyfishes from her course with the dead sea monster in her hand.

Five minutes later, she stood on the other side of the beach, safe from the threat of the jellyfish and feeling immensely proud of her accomplishment. Proud enough to make a decision. To act with bravery upon the notion she'd fallen asleep with each night after her final prayers for more than a year. She limped home to her hut at the edge of the village and found her father still snoring in his cot. She took her second set of clothes, her one pair of thin-soled sandals, some food from the pantry, and placed them in an old burlap sack. Then she went outside and dug up the pouch of coins she'd buried in the backyard under a rock. Coins she'd hidden from her father's drinking, half of them inherited from her mother, discovered by spying on her in the months before her death.

She took a last look at the hut, and through the open door, at her still-sleeping father. She could not think of one thing she would miss. She hitched the burlap sack over her shoulder and limped out of the village, heading toward the future she'd been dreaming of, toward the city of Lanassa, the capital of the Juparti Dominion, and home to the greatest host of Pashist temples in the world.

THE PRESENT

LEAVES SCRABBLED against stone — the sound of a plant in motion. Taksati stared down the alley at the roving fire-plant tumbling toward her. She grabbed Atula's hand and pulled the girl

to the side, pressing her against the back wall of the courtyard.

“Stay behind me and run when you see fire.” Taksati held the girl’s shoulders tight to reinforce her words.

“What?” Atula looked around, confused.

“Run when you see fire.” Taksati held Atula’s chin to face her.

“I know what you said, but I don’t know what you mean.” Atula nearly shouted in panic.

“You will.” Taksati turned away from Atula, listening close to the sound of the roving fire-plant as it approached.

Gauging the distance of the horrible creature as best she could, she stepped into the courtyard and grabbed the closest of the stationary fire-plants by two of its thick vines. The plant reacted by wrapping its tendrils around her wrists as it began to smoke, flames emerging among the leaves tight to its rounded trunk. Taksati grunted and she yanked at the plant, pulling as she cried out. The roots of the plant, not nearly as deep as she’d expected, ripped free of the hole between two shattered flagstones. As the fire-plant burst into flame, its other vines flailed in search of prey. She spun her body, swinging the buring plant in a wide arc, once, then again, smashing its flaming mass into the roving fire-plant, just as it rolled into the courtyard.

Both plants exploded in fire, the vines that clutched at Taksati’s wrists blown free. Knocked to the ground by the force of the explosion, she raised her singed hands against the heat of the flames, fire lapping at her clothes and hair. She tried to stand, pushing herself back from the blazing ball of the plants, kicking with her feet to get away from the searing heat. Small hands grabbed her elbow and helped her to her feet.

“I told you to run when you saw the fire.” Taksati swatted at her smoldering dress as they stumbled though the alley, fleeing the conflagration in the courtyard behind them. She winced at the pain in her blistered hands and wrists. She’d need to apply a salve soon to ease the discomfort and help heal the skin.

“I didn’t think *you* would be the fire.” Atula looked behind them as they staggered into the main avenue. “How did you think of that so fast?”

“One of the benefits of being very old is that you occasionally happen across things that seem very similar to things that happened in the past.” Taksati pulled Atula close as they walked down the curving street back toward the temple at the city’s center.

“You’ve done that before?” Atula’s voice pitched high in surprise.

“Not that, but something close enough.” Taksati looked behind, scanning the street for signs of another roving fire-plant. She did not know how she might stop a second one.

“Thank you. For saving me.” Atula squeezed Taksati’s arm tight, making sure to stay clear of her burned hands.

“I couldn’t let the fire-plants have you.” Taksati grimaced against the pain her hands. “We still have the daily inventory to complete.”

Atula moaned. Taksati wanted to smile, but the thought of roving fire-plants hunting throughout the city stilled any humor in her heart. She needed to inform Junari and Bon-Tao as quickly as possible. And they would need to post guards day and night. She looked around the

silent stone buildings, finding the beauty of them dimmed considerably by the new danger they harbored. A threat that nearly took her life and that of her young ward. Considering what might have happened to Atula, she vowed to make certain not a single fire-plant remained in the city by the time the pilgrims completed the work on the temple.

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THE THRONE



TIANG-RHU

THE SNUFFLING of a cow in a pile of hay mingled with the grunting of a sow and the clucking of chickens. Farmyard sounds filled the small barn and the fenced yard beside it. A one-room hut with mud-daubed walls and a thatched roof stood thirty paces away. Hazy sunlight drifted through the open barn door, revealing two forms among the interior shadows. Two men. One lay in a thin stack of hay while another knelt beside him, carefully removing a cloth bandage from the prone man's stomach.

Tiang-Rhu gently pulled the thin, blood-crusting strip of woolen dressing away from the flesh of Tin-Tsu's belly. He smiled as he noted the color of the wound crawling along the other man's skin. It no longer glared red, radiating heat, or smelled of putrefaction. The stitches, while not straight, held firm. He placed the back of his hand to Tin-Tsu's forehead, pleased to find that while warm, it did not feel damp and hot with fever. He dipped his finger in a small bowl of herbed honey and applied the mixture to the laceration. The farm-woman's remedy proved efficacious. It was fortunate he had stumbled upon the farm in the night almost a week ago. Tin-Tsu would surely have died had the farm widow not helped sew and tend the gash that nearly bled him dry. What would Tiang-Rhu have done then? His gamble appeared to be paying in his favor, but fate could easily turn fortune to a debt.

As he wrapped a clean strip of wool around Tin-Tsu's midriff, he heard a motion through the open barn door and across the yard. He turned to see the farm woman emerging from her hut with a wooden bowl in her hands. She crossed the yard with a small dog running at her heels and nipping at the hem of her faded dress. She kicked at the dog, spilling liquid from the bowl along the back of her hand. She licked her hand clean while the dog stopped to investigate the dampened grass. She stepped up to the doorway of the barn but made no move to enter. After the first night, she'd stayed out of the barn. She held the bowl out with one hand, wiping a lock of tangled black-and-gray hair from her face. She looked at least fifty but probably counted far fewer years in her age. Farming made for hard work and short lives, especially when widowed and alone, far from any town. Tiang-Rhu got to his feet to greet her.

"Bone broth." The woman nodded at the bowl.

"Thank you, Kofan-Druz." Tiang-Rhu took the bowl from her and sat it on the ground beside the hay mound where Tin-Tsu slept.

"He looks better." Kofan-Druz looked past his shoulder.

"He is." Tiang-Rhu smiled.

"You'll be goin' soon, then." Kofan-Druz extended an open palm.

"A few more days." Tiang-Rhu pulled a leather pouch from beneath the slip cord of his trousers. It did not jingle as he removed the final bronze coin and placed it in the woman's hand. He tried to keep the smile upon his face.

“More days means more coin.” Kofan-Druz gave him a hard look.

“You can have the sword and the armor.” Tiang-Rhu gestured toward one corner of the barn where a soot-stained metal breastplate sat beside a sheathed sword.

“Can’t plow with ’em and can’t milk ’em, then I got no use for ’em.” Kofan-Druz spat into the dirt beside her feet. The dog, its matted fur patchy with baldness, came and sat behind her, lifting a hind leg to scratch an ear.

Tiang-Rhu hoped to receive pity and compassion by revealing the exhaustion of his funds. He should have known better. The woman helped only when he paid. A pile of hay to rest in cost coin. The roof of the barn cost coin. Food, or what passed for it, cost coin. Bandages cost coin. The herbed medicine for Tin-Tsu’s wounds cost coin. He had not been planning to fund a farm woman’s pension when he rose from his bed all those days ago. But she demanded coin, so he needed to find it. He knew that a more unscrupulous man might threaten the woman, or worse, to get what he required. But a priest needed to abide by some of his vows, even as he broke others.

“I will need a few days, but I can trade the armor and sword for coin.” Tiang-Rhu looked past the woman’s shoulder. “You said a town was two days’ walk away.”

“How do I know ya won’t leave ’im behind and stick me with more problems than I got now?” Kofan-Druz frowned at him.

“I would never leave my friend.” Tiang-Rhu did not need to try and sound convincing in his tone. He would risk or do anything for Tin-Tsu.

Kofan-Druz scowled again, spat once more, then turned and stomped back to her hut.

Tiang-Rhu watched the raggedy mutt chase after the woman for a moment, then he knelt beside Tin-Tsu and began slowly feeding him the pork bone broth while he slumbered. As he slipped spoon after spoon past his friend’s lips, he quietly spoke a simple prayer of thanks.

“Thank you, Great Father, Ni-Kam-Djen, True God, protector of the innocent, defender of the righteous, for delivering us from harm and protecting the life of this great man, Zhan Tin-Tsu.”

He thanked his god for sparing his friend and zhan against significant odds. Tin-Tsu lost a great deal of blood that first day before they found the farm. It had taken hours to reach a place of safety where, with the farm woman’s well-paid assistance, he tended his friend’s wounds. He still did not know if his decision marked the greatest mistake of his life or the wisest choice. Why had he chosen this path when so many others presented themselves? He did not question the risk to his own life, but all else seemed madness. Even after days in the barn praying and tending to Tin-Tsu, he still did not know if he’d done the right thing. When he ran into the burning barn that day, he did not guess at the future he lunged toward.

TEN DAYS AGO

THE CLANGING clash of metal against metal fought with the cries emitted as steel met flesh, echoing among the houses and shops of the small town. Tiang-Rhu crouched behind a short stone fence, a prayer of protection tumbling past his lips as his eyes scanned the streets. Throughout the twenty-some years of war between the Tanshen and Daeshen dominions, the Kam-Djen priests of

both the Ketolin and Zatolin persuasion regularly accompanied their armies into battle, offering prayers for victory, for the healing of the wounded, and for swift passage to the Pure Lands for the fallen heroes of the battlefield. The clashes over the previous weeks marked the first time Tiang-Rhu had performed such a function as a priest. He had volunteered, insisted actually, that he be sent to the head of the fight to represent his temple and his faith. His actual motivation had more to do with the man leading that conflict than his desire to promulgate his beliefs in the midst of combat. Hiding behind the too-low stones of the hedge, defenseless and terrified, he wondered at the wisdom of his decision to follow his childhood friend into war.

Tiang-Rhu risked a peek over the edge of the fence, seeing a group of fifty Tanshen soldiers surround a smaller clutch of Daeshen fighters. When he'd followed his fellow Daeshen men to the town, it seemed they would prevail in the coming conflict. Now it appeared to have been a trap, a ruse of weakness to invite an unprepared force. An armed opposition led by the Daeshen ruler himself, Zhan Kon Tin-Tsu. Tiang-Rhu searched frantically for any sight of Tin-Tsu. Even now he had trouble thinking of him as a zhan. How had the shy and slender boy beneath the poda tree become a man leading a nation at war?

A motion far to the right at the edge of the town caught his attention. A single crimson sash among a small forest of emerald. Tin-Tsu. He fought against several Tanshen soldiers. As Tiang-Rhu watched, Tin-Tsu felled one of his opponents. He fought well. He fought very well for a priest who'd just assumed the throne. A memory of a vague rumor as to the true purpose of Tin-Tsu's former temple floated to the fore of Tiang-Rhu's mind. The Kan-Djen. *The Warriors of God*. It explained Tin-Tsu's apparent prowess with a sword. He watched as Tin-Tsu struck another opponent, suffering a strike himself in return.

Tiang-Rhu looked deeper into the town to where the main Daeshen forces battled against overwhelming odds. They could not help their zhan. He scanned around the town, desperate. There were a few other isolated groups of Daeshen soldiers, but all fought equal or larger numbers of Tanshen men. No one would come to aid Tin-Tsu. Tiang-Rhu ground his teeth as he bent low and ran along the stone fence, breaking from it to leap behind a nearby clay-brick house. He needed to do something to save Tin-Tsu, but what threat might an unarmed priest pose to Tanshen soldiers wielding shadow steel blades?

He dashed from house to barn to house to fence to shed, edging closer to where Tin-Tsu fought for his life. Twenty paces from the melee, he watched as Tin-Tsu led the two remaining Tanshen soldiers into a nearby barn. How had he killed the others so swiftly? The legends of the Kan-Djen warriors appeared more truth than fable.

From his vantage at the side of the barn, Tiang-Rhu saw another Tanshen soldier running around the back of the structure. He apparently hoped to help his comrades by attacking Tin-Tsu unawares from the rear. Tiang-Rhu watched as the soldier pulled a loose board away from an already gaping hole in the back wall and slid inside the barn. Tiang-Rhu shook his head. He must do something. Ignoring all caution, he dashed toward the hole in the barn wall. If the lone soldier might surprise Tin-Tsu, hopefully, he could accomplish a similar feat against the soldier. But he needed a weapon. As he raced through the yard behind the barn, he spied a hay fork leaning against

a tree. He snatched it as he ran, pausing at the gap between wooden slats in the back wall of the barn. He pushed himself through the tight opening, surprised to find plenty of light inside. And smoke. And flame.

Tiang-Rhu stood temporarily frozen as his eyes embraced the sight before him. Tin-Tsu fought two men at once while a third lay bleeding and moaning as he held on to the stump of his missing arm. Flame ate at the walls and devoured the hay strewn around the barn in small piles. He noticed a lantern broken beside one of the clumps of hay. He jumped as a noise beside him drew his eyes to an old man, a farmer by his clothes, pushing past him to jump out through the hole in the back wall of the barn. The man must have been tending the animals, using the lantern to light in the dim confines of the barn. It didn't matter how the lantern came to fall and set the barn ablaze. It mattered that Tin-Tsu fought for his life, one hand clutched to a gushing wound at his side, a gash in the armor that should have protected him.

As Tin-Tsu felled one of the two men with a cut that sliced through the man's groin, the other soldier redoubled his attacks. Tiang-Rhu snapped from his confused stupor and charged the soldier, hay fork held high, yelling an incomprehensible battle cry he hoped would inspire fear rather than amusement. The soldier turned to the sound of Tiang-Rhu's assault at the most inopportune moment possible, two of the thin tongs of the hay fork sinking deeply into the man's eyes and skull. Shocked by the impact and the violence of his action, Tiang-Rhu released the handle of the hay fork, the farm implement still wedged in the man's cranium as he fell to the ground, limbs flailing. Tiang-Rhu watched as the man's motion stilled, flames reaching out to lick at his lifeless hands as smoke curled in the air above him.

"Tiang-Rhu?"

Tiang-Rhu turned to see Tin-Tsu staring at him, a look of bewilderment clouding his friend's face as he blinked his eyes. Then Tin-Tsu, zhan of the Daeshen Dominion, collapsed and fell unconscious to the ground. Tiang-Rhu ran to him and tried to revive him, coughing against the thickening smoke.

"Tin-Tsu!" Tiang-Rhu knelt and shook his friend but gained no response. He looked around, raising an arm to shield himself from the heat of the flames. The fire at the door of the barn held thick because of the larger piles of hay. It would be safer to pull him out through the hole in the wall at the back.

Then a notion occurred to him, one whose source eluded him. He did not pause to consider this aberrant thought, instead acting upon it with all haste. He looked down to Tin-Tsu's hands and saw what he wanted. Clutching at a large, ruby-studded ring, he pulled it from Tin-Tsu's right middle finger. Stumbling through the smoke to the nearest soldier, a man of similar height and build to the zhan, he slipped the ring on the man's right middle finger and then ran back to Tin-Tsu. Grabbing his arms, he pulled the zhan through the flames and out the back of the barn. In the sparse grass behind the burning building, he yanked the red vestment sash from his robes and stuffed it beneath the armor to staunch the flow of blood from Tin-Tsu's wound. Or from his primary wound, as Tiang-Rhu now noted that several cuts sliced the zhan's armor and the flesh beneath it.

He continued to follow his earlier deviant notion, his eyes probing the neighboring buildings and farms. He saw what he hoped for three houses down. Grasping Tin-Tsu's arms, he pulled the unconscious zhan up and then bent at the knees to get under his midriff and hefted him over his right shoulder. Tiang-Rhu stumbled under the weight, but he had always been the larger and stronger of the two as boys, a fact not changed as they became men. He carried Tin-Tsu across the intervening yards to his destination — another barn, a horse tied in the stable near the open door. A wagon sat nearby.

It did not take long for Tiang-Rhu to place Tin-Tsu in the wagon, hitch the horse, and ride from the town. He drove the wagon south, along slender side roads, away from the battle and the Daeshen forces, deeper toward Tanshen-held territory and farther from settlements of people. He stopped as often as he dared to check the zhan's wounds. Tin-Tsu's bleeding slowed, but only after a great deal of blood coated the wagon bed.

Tiang-Rhu could not explain to himself why he had acted in such a manner. His diversion would lead the Tanshen army to believe the Daeshen zhan to be dead. But the Daeshen army would also believe the same. Should he have tried to get the zhan to his army rather than to safety? Did they ride toward safety, or did he hasten his childhood friend's death with his actions?

He considered these questions long after nightfall and even as he spotted firelight through the window of a small hut.

THE PRESENT

“TIANG-RHU?”

He turned from staring out the barn door at the fields beyond to the call of his name. He looked down to the blinking, blurry-eyed gaze of his boyhood friend, the zhan of the Daeshen Dominion.

“I am here.” Tiang-Rhu smiled. “It is good to hear you finally speak.”

Tin-Tsu looked around the barn, then out the door at the hut and the field and the woods beyond and brought his gaze back to Tiang-Rhu.

“I do not understand.”

“You are well, and you are safe.” Tiang-Rhu took Tin-Tsu's closest hand and patted it between both of his own. “We are in a barn on a small farm in the south of Daeshen, far from the battlefield.”

“How is that...?” Tin-Tsu made to sit up but clutched at his side and groaned as he leaned back. He looked at the bandages wrapping his abdomen, touching them gently. “The barn with the Tanshen soldiers. And the fire. You were there.”

“Yes,” Tiang-Rhu said. “I found you.”

“How?” Tin-Tsu winced as he prodded his wounds.

“I came to the battlefield to pray for our soldiers' victory.” Tiang-Rhu's throat grew tight. “And for you.”

“Where is the battlefield? Where is the army? Tigan Rhog-Kan?” Tin-Tsu looked out the door of the barn.

“Many strides away.” Tiang-Rhu had spent the past days trying to decide how to tell Tin-Tsu

what he'd done. He still could not fully explain his actions. He did not truly understand them. Were they inspired by divine benevolent intervention, or more worldly selfish concerns? Had he spirited the zhan away to keep him safe, or to keep Tin-Tsu to himself? He could not look at him without thinking of what they had once been to one another. He found those thoughts both painful and joyous, feelings of shame mingled with deep upwellings of love. Words escaped his attempt to capture them and set them to his purpose. He, too, stared out the door of the barn, seeking some distraction from the conversation he dreaded.

He followed the line of Tin-Tsu's sight across the yard, past the feral dog scratching at its fleas beside the hut where the farm woman, Kofan-Druz, stood speaking with two Tanshen soldiers.

"Not far enough from the battlefield."

Tiang-Rhu winced at Tin-Tsu's words. He saw one of the soldiers hand something to the farm woman. Her betrayal for coin stung at him. A Daeshen woman turning over fellow countrymen for coin. He pushed away the injustice eating at his mind and focused on less philosophical concerns. He tightened his grip on Tin-Tsu's hand.

"We must run."

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

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

THE AROMA of hot black beans with onion and garlic, boiled corn, and warm dinbao mingled with the sunset sea scents of saltwater and fish. The smells gave comfort in the still air. Lee-Nin sat with her back to the wall of the forecastle, watching the crew and pilgrim passengers eating an evening meal. Small pockets of conversation in groups around the ship's deck competed with the gentle flapping of the limp sails hanging from the yards of the ship's masts. The lack of any real wind throughout the day left many thinking of the potential intervention of the urris to thwart their voyage. The captain assured them that such things happened. Winds died for a spell. He spoke confidently about the sails filling again by morning. She hoped his words proved true, even though she did enjoy the sudden calmness of the ship. She'd been violently ill the first few days until she grew accustomed to the vessel's constant heaving motion in the churning ocean waves.

Sao-Tauna sat to her right, with Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa seated cross-legged before them, their backs to the rest of the deck. They ate their bean and corn soup from tin bowls with wooden spoons, sharing pieces of dinbao from a small loaf in a basket on the deck. She tore another piece of bread free to sop up the dregs at the bottom of her bowl.

"Do you think it's the urris?" Lee-Nin asked. She glanced at Sao-Tauna but knew the girl would be unperturbed by anything the adults might discuss. She seemed to have unshakable faith that they would reach the Forbidden Realm safely. Lee-Nin did not possess such unwavering confidence.

"It is possible." Ogtankaa wiped her chin on the back of the sleeve of her tight-fitting jacket. She wore pants and dressed like a man, but no one on board dared make any remark about it. The Goddess's pilgrims were widely accepting, and her demeanor dissuaded comments. She made people wary even from a distance. Were it not for Sha-Kutan, she would have been the most imposing figure on the ship. "Did your dreams show the urris attempting to thwart the first ships?"

"Yes." Lee-Nin thought about the dreams, recently returned to the collective slumber of the pilgrims. "One of the dreams showed the aftermath of a great flood among ruins and pilgrims working to rebuild a temple. The tone of them is victorious. Like the Goddess has defeated the urris."

"That is also possible." Sha-Kutan sat his spoon in the empty bowl and placed it upon the deck. "There are powers far greater than our own acting in the world. As in all things, one will inevitably be stronger than the others."

"And one of those mighty powers draws us to it for unknown reasons." Ogtankaa looked directly at Sao-Tauna as she spoke.

Sao-Tauna stared back at Ogtankaa with a placid expression.

"Star temple," Sao-Tauna said.

Ogtankaa glared at Sao-Tauna a moment before looking away. Lee-Nin understood her

concern. They knew what Sao-Tauna could do, and they feared what she might be asked to accomplish once they arrived in the Forbidden Realm.

“It will all become clear once we reach the temple ruins.” Sha-Kutan sounded as calm as ever about that possibility. He seemed to place his faith in Sao-Tauna the way others put their faith in gods.

What holds my faith? Lee-Nin wondered.

“It may become clear, but that does not mean it will be pleasant.” Ogtankaa scowled at Sha-Kutan. They debated this point frequently, neither altering their opinion. “We can guess what she will be asked to do.”

“We do not even know if such a thing is possible.” Sha-Kutan frowned.

“If there are realms for the likes of you and me, there may be realms for beings that call themselves gods.” Ogtankaa leaned closer and lowered her voice to avoid being heard by any of the groups of pilgrims seated nearby. “We’ve both seen what happens when a door between realms is unwisely opened.”

“Yes, that is true.” Sha-Kutan nodded solemnly. “But the two of us sitting here speaks to another truth. That new and beautiful things can arise from such a mistake.”

“What if it’s not a mistake?” Lee-Nin considered alternative possibilities. “What if opening such a door, if releasing such a being, brought a better world? Look at the pilgrims who follow the Goddess. Compare them to those who follow other so-called gods. Maybe it is the knowledge that faith is not required in order to believe in the Goddess, but you must admit that the pilgrims are more just and fair than the peoples of even Juparti and Punderra.”

“This is also true.” Ogtankaa squinted at Lee-Nin in the light of the setting sun. “But what if more than one such being enters this world? What if they clash? What if their faithful clash and war?”

“How would this be different from the world now, where people believe in gods forever silent in the world and fight wars because of them?” Lee-Nin did not honestly know if encouraging Sao-Tauna toward the Forbidden Realm, and possibly opening a portal to a realm of god-like beings made sense, but it felt in her heart as the thing she should do. But her heart had led her astray in the past. It might do so now.

Sha-Kutan’s demeanor shifted, and a darkness fell upon his face as he turned to look over his shoulder. Without a word, he stood and walked toward the aft of the ship.

“Where is he going?” Lee-Nin’s eyes followed Sha-Kutan as he wove a path through the groups of pilgrims seated and eating on the deck.

“He senses something.” Ogtankaa did not turn around, nor looked inclined to elaborate.

Sao-Tauna watched Sha-Kutan as well, but the girl appeared unconcerned, munching on her dinbao.

“Danger?” Lee-Nin whispered as she leaned toward Ogtankaa.

“Not for us.” Ogtankaa took the last bite of her soup.

At the rear of the ship, a man climbed up the stairs from the hold and stepped onto the deck from a hatch near the aftcastle. She did not remember the man’s name and had seen little of him

on the voyage so far. He held a canvas bag in one hand as he walked toward the portside railing. Sha-Kutan headed straight to the man, stopping him before he reached the edge of the deck. She did not hear what they said, but Sha-Kutan extended his hand in an obvious gesture. The man hesitated and said something, his face both frightened and defensive. Fear seemed to outweigh any other reaction as the man handed over the sack. Sha-Kutan wasted no further words on the man and turned to carry the sack back along the deck of the ship to rejoin the others. As he sat down, Lee-Nin noticed that the bag wriggled in his hand.

The motion of the bag excited Sao-Tauna's attention and she craned her neck as Sha-Kutan untied the knot at the top of the canvas sack and spilled its yapping contents onto the deck. Two slightly dazed puppies, black with brown paws, tumbled around each other as they struggled to stand upright.

"Puppies!" Sao-Tauna's voice rose in pitch and volume in an uncharacteristic display of joy. Sha-Kutan handed the two puppies to Sao-Tauna, and the girl giggled as they licked her hands.

"A dog gave birth." Sha-Kutan stared at Sao-Tauna with the puppies. "The man thought they would eat too much and meant to throw them overboard."

Lee-Nin noted the rare expression of pleasure on Sha-Kutan's face as he observed Sao-Tauna playing with the puppies. She felt an odd sensation in that moment. An attraction for the man, and possibly even the thing within the man, that could not easily be expressed. His scarred, misshapen face repelled most people, but she now found comfort in its unsymmetrical contours. Odd to be glad at having such a man in one's company. She noted Ogtankaa eyeing her, rather than Sao-Tauna and the puppies, and turned her attention away from Sha-Kutan.

A motion in the sack drew her eyes as two small brown paws scrambled out of the folds of canvas. A third puppy. Smaller than its siblings. The runt. But adorable for being even more petite. A girl puppy from the looks. Sha-Kutan picked up the tiny beast in his massive hands and held it up to his face. The puppy licked him, and he blinked at it, seeming uncertain how to react. Had a puppy never licked him before? He extended his arms and handed the diminutive dog to Lee-Nin. The puppy scrambled out of his hands to fall against her chest. She caught it as it rolled down to her lap. It yapped and nibbled at her hands as she held it up. She smiled as it licked her cheek. She had been licked by a puppy before.

"It likes you." Sha-Kutan leaned back, looking between her and Sao-Tauna.

Lee-Nin petted the puppy, rubbing the downy fur of its tummy as it flapped its paws and whipped its tail back and forth. It reminded her of another time a man gave her a puppy.

THREE YEARS AGO

"IT'S A PUPPY."

"I am an educated woman. I have seen a puppy before."

"You hold it as though it were some fearsome creature from a bedtime tale."

"They are known to urinate indiscriminately, and this is a new dress."

Lee-Nin laughed as the gray-furred puppy squirmed in her hands. The man before her, Kin-

Yai, laughed as well. More at her reaction to the puppy than from its own actions, she assumed. They stood in a corner of the main gardens of the Tanshen palace in the capital of Tsee-Kaanlin. He had invited her to meet him there after his shift as sub-commander of the palace guards, as he had each day for the past several weeks. They usually met near sunset and spoke until dark when Lee-Nin returned to the private wing of Tahn Lin-Pi to read bedtime stories to his children. He sometimes suggested that they meet later in the evening. Secretly. To spend more time together. Alone. She demurred on each occasion. She claimed, rightly, that her standing in the palace depended on her reputation as a good tutor and a respectable woman. She would not jeopardize her position by calling either of those conditions into question.

Privately, she had other reasons to reject the handsome young man's more amorous attentions. Reasons she preferred not to ponder. Reasons that brought to mind a woman named Bon-Daanka and a life very far from the palace in distance and deeds. Thoughts and memories and emotions she could not bring herself to face.

"He likes you." Kin-Yai reached out a hand to pet the puppy's small head.

"He's a puppy. He likes everyone." Lee-Nin smiled as the puppy nipped at her finger. She looked at Kin-Yai, still smiling, and clutched his shirt collar to pull him into to a kiss. They held the kiss longer than any before, breaking apart not for fear some palace staff might see them in the corner of the garden, but because the puppy became impatient with being ignored and stuffed its snout down the bodice of her dress.

"Little rascal. That's a good name for you. Foa-Jowdan." Lee-Nin laughed again as she pulled the puppy free from her dress and held it up to scold it.

"I have never been jealous of a puppy before." Kin-Yai eyed the flesh-revealing dip in her gown.

"If your manners are similar, you, too, will be reprimanded." Lee-Nin's heart beat fast, conflicted by the desire to kiss Kin-Yai again, and to do more, and the sense of revulsion that arose with that thought.

"Am I not the most well-mannered man you have ever met?" Kin-Yai stood straighter, his tone one of mock indignation.

"You are." Lee-Nin took his hand, an acceptable gesture in public. "You are truly the sweetest man I have ever known. Sweeter than any man in any story I have ever read. And you gave me a puppy. No one has ever given me a puppy."

"Well, I had to give you something." Kin-Yai looked at the slate stones of the garden path where they stood. "To remember me by."

"Will I not remember you when I see you each evening?" Lee-Nin tried to keep her voice light, but the look on Kin-Yai's face made her throat tighten.

"Unfortunately, you will not see me in the evenings for some time." Kin-Yai straightened himself again and looked at her. "The Daeshen incursion in the north is becoming serious. Our forces are short of experienced commanders. I have been asked by Tigan Kudo-Lan to recuse my post here in the palace guards and resume command of my old battalion at the battlefield along the Old Border Road."

“But your wounds...” Lee-Nin did not know what else to say and found his injuries the best argument for him to stay. He’d been wounded in battle two years prior, leaving his right leg damaged enough to give him a pronounced limp. She found the deformity attractive, a sign of a man with character. After his convalescence, he’d been assigned a recuperative position as a warden and sub-commander of the palace guards, a significant station for a man of only thirty-one years.

“My leg is healed well enough.” Kin-Yai patted his thigh. “The army needs me on a horse giving orders, not standing face-to-face smashing swords with some Daeshen heretic. They value my mind.”

“I value your life.” Lee-Nin blinked repeatedly, unsure at the emotions now coursing through her mind and making it difficult to breathe.

“It is good to hear you say so.” Kin-Yai placed a hand at her waist.

“How long will you be gone?” Lee-Nin asked.

“Months. Weeks. It is always hard to tell. And I do not know if my position here at the palace will remain unfilled,” Kin-Yai said.

“So, you may not return?” Lee-Nin found it difficult to speak that question aloud.

“Oh, I will return.” Kin-Yai laughed. “I have the most beautiful and intelligent incentive in the world to encourage me to return.”

Lee-Nin ignored the tears in her eyes as she kissed Kin-Yai again. She did not understand how to measure her great fortune. Escaping her former life. Finding a place in the palace as a tutor. Finding a man who respected her for her mind as much as he desired her beauty. She made a decision then, one she did not dare think too much about before voicing it.

“Meet me here after the ninth bell. After the children are put to bed. I know a place we can be alone.” Lee-Nin held the wriggling puppy to her chest with one hand and clasped Kin-Yai’s hand with the other.

“Are you certain?” Kin-Yai sounded genuinely confused. “I did not tell you this to persuade you against your previous decision.”

“*A wise woman changes her mind as the facts alter around her.*” Lee-Nin did not remember the source of the saying and so assumed it to be one of her own. “I am certain. Meet me tonight.”

“I will. I most certainly will.” Kin-Yai’s grin threatened to leap from his face and take flight in the dusky night air. He turned to leave but paused. “Don’t bring the puppy.” He smiled again and wandered back along the garden path toward the palace entrance. They always departed the gardens separately. She usually let him go first, enjoying staring at his broad shoulders and narrow hips as he strolled across the stone paths away from her. She did not realize in that moment she watched him for the last time.

THE PRESENT

“I HAVE shown them six times how to coil a rope.”

Ogtankaa looked back over her shoulder at three pilgrim men attempting to loop ropes at the

mid-deck. It looked more like they attempted to make piles of knots. Ogtankaa stood without saying more and headed to give instruction to the men. They noticed her walking toward them, worried looks crossing their faces. She had not mentioned where she learned to sail, and Lee-Nin did not ask.

The puppy squirmed in her arms. She looked at it and sighed. Beside her, Sao-Tauna played with her two puppies, engrossed by their antics.

“You do not seem happy with the puppy.” Sha-Kutan’s voice sounded both curious and sad.

“It reminds me of someone.” Lee-Nin scratched the puppy’s stomach again. “Someone who died.” Kin-Yai did not meet her that night. A palace emergency called him away, and the tigan ordered him to the battlefield the next morning. He left her a note, written in a graceful script, expressing his regret and his desire to keep their appointment upon his homecoming. He never returned from the battlefield to fulfil that promise. He stayed there forever, struck by an arrow, and buried in a mass grave. She only learned of his death by chance, overhearing the conversation of two palace guards. Weeks passed as she mourned him, and she clung to the puppy, Foa-Jowdan each night. A month after learning of his death, she set the puppy down in the wrong place and turned her attention away for too long. A horse’s hoof crushed it. A mercifully swift death, but one for which she blamed herself. A guilt she carried with a question — should she have slept with Kin-Yai before his death on one of the frequent occasions he suggested it? Might that have been a memory more powerful than receiving a puppy to remember him by?

“I am sorry to make you sad.” Sha-Kutan looked confused and uncomfortable. “I hoped for the opposite.”

“It was a sweet gesture.” Lee-Nin forced herself to smile briefly. “I do appreciate it.”

“I would offer to care for it, but dogs do not usually like me.” Sha-Kutan did not need to explain why.

“Hold her and see.” Lee-Nin passed the puppy to Sha-Kutan. He took it into his massive hands, making a bowl of them as the puppy ran around in circles chasing its tail. “It seems to like you well enough.”

“Very strange.” Sha-Kutan squinted at the puppy.

“She takes to you quicker than most.” Lee-Nin thought about how many months it took for her to appreciate Sha-Kutan. Even now she did not really understand him. Understand them. How could two minds coexist in the same body? How did they decide how to act? Did they even know whose thoughts belonged to whom? The same could be asked of Ogtankaa. Lee-Nin suspected it took longer than a few months to appreciate the two minds in that woman’s one body.

“A friend? A husband?” Sha-Kutan stared at the puppy with great interest. “Who does she remind you of?”

Lee-Nin swallowed as she hesitated. They did not ask each other such questions. Questions about their pasts. She did not know if she wanted to reply, or how to do so. How much did she wish to reveal of herself? From which life? She decided that sharing her past might be reciprocated.

“A suitor.” Lee-Nin refused to raise her hand to wipe at her eyes. “The only man I think I’ve ever loved. One who promised to return but could not.”

“I see.” Sha-Kutan’s tone suggested just the opposite. Had the man never felt love?

“Has no one ever failed to return to you?” Lee-Nin wondered if he would answer such a query.

“There has never been anyone who could fail to return.” Sha-Kutan continued to stare at the puppy.

“What did you do before...?” Lee-Nin wasn’t certain how to phrase her thought. “Before you became as you are.”

“I was a monk. A Pashist monk.” Sha-Kutan looked up.

Lee-Nin blinked in surprise. A monk. She could not imagine Sha-Kutan in priestly robes. She remembered the books on his table in his house where they met that first night. Pashist books.

“And before I was a monk, I was a bandit.” A sadness filled Sha-Kutan’s eyes. “I was a very wicked man. A man with no friends and no concern for others. A most villainous man.”

Lee-Nin decided she did not wish to know what that villainy entailed.

“And how did you become a monk?” This she did wish to know.

“A man found me. Another monk. He showed me that I could walk a different path. That I could be something other than what I was.” Sha-Kutan returned his attention to the puppy, petting it gently.

“And how did you become as you are?” Lee-Nin voiced the question that had worried her since that night in the woods when they met the other *thing* on the road.

“A trick.” Sha-Kutan looked up, seeming to speak to himself in his mind, his eyes darting from side to side. “A trick that became a truce and then a way of being. One side showing the other a different way to exist.”

Lee-Nin thought about his words in silence. A bandit. A wicked man. A monk. A ... what? A demon? How could she feel so at ease with such a man? How could she trust him more than she had trusted anyone in her life? She glanced at Sao-Tauna, still playing with the puppies, and knew why she trusted him.

“And what were you before you were a tutor?” Sha-Kutan did not look up from the puppy as he spoke.

“Something else.” Lee-Nin trusted him but did not trust herself with that forgotten part of her past, a life she preferred to imagine never existed. But she had told him more than anyone else. In the past, when people asked about her time before the palace, she said she was the daughter of a merchant who died. A story with a clear ending. Her true story had a definite ending as well, and she wished to keep it that way. Best to speak of other things. She looked toward Ogtankaa, who was working with the pilgrims near the main mast. “Will you really go with her once we know what Sao-Tauna’s role in all this is?”

“I will do as I have promised,” Sha-Kutan said. “But I hope to convince her before then that there is another road we might both travel.”

“I, too, learned to walk a different path.” She could not speak more than that of her past. “I will do my best to persuade her to follow yours.”

“That is...” A cry rose from the pilgrims on the deck of the ship, interrupting Sha-Kutan’s words.

The vessel lurched into motion, and Lee-Nin looked up as the sails filled with wind. She smiled as a gust pushed her hair back from her face. Sha-Kutan did not look at the sails. She followed his eyes to a woman leaning over the edge of the portside railing at midship, vomiting her dinner into the sea. Another poor pilgrim having trouble adjusting to life on the ocean. She understood. She felt much the same herself now that the wind pushed the ship again to rise and fall against the waves. Then she saw another woman join her. And a man. And then two more ran to the starboard side rail. And then three children. She knew it could not be seasickness and feared the cause. Sao-Tauna moaned beside her, holding her stomach.

“What is happening?” She looked around as she spoke aloud, a pain stabbing her gut as an upsurge of nausea gripped her.

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

EMBERS CAUGHT the wind, dancing and rising through the air, riding serpentine waves of smoke up into the black night sky. Kadmallin cursed the breeze and threw his back into yanking another shovel full of dirt from the hard-packed ground of the street and throwing it onto the burning walls of the small house. He watched the cinders floating through the air to land on the thatched roof of a nearby home. Too much fire, too much wind, and not enough time.

“There are too many fires to fight at once.” Sketkee stood beside him, the hood of her cloak uncharacteristically cast back to reveal the green-tinged skin of her head as she heaved soil onto the flames of the house. “We must prioritize stopping the Kam-Djen fanatics instead.”

“We’ll need help.” Kadmallin dropped his shovel and unbuckled the one of the two sword belts at his waist. He handed Sketkee her blade and belt as he looked up to the hills beyond the town. More jars of what smelled like tamak-seed oil soared through the air, crashing upon a large barn forty paces away. Four flaming arrows followed, the roof of the building bursting into fire. Ten buildings already burned. Too many for the pilgrims to extinguish quickly. A chain of men and women passed buckets of water from the nearby ocean to attack the flames of the houses. There were not enough buckets to provide water for all the burning structures. Fortunately, the hillside stood too far from the docks for the arrows to reach the ships.

“If we climb the hill to the right, we can pass behind that stand of trees and take them from the rear.” Sketkee pointed to the hill where more than ten shadowed shapes shifted in the darkness.

“We’ll need at least two more men with swords.” Kadmallin looked back at the chaotic mass of people running through the streets, fleeing the flames or racing to put them out. He didn’t see any of the town’s guards. Maybe they fought the fires. Possibly, they’d already climbed the hill to repel the Kam-Djen fanatics.

“My own fire may be enough to give us the advantage we need.” Sketkee still eyed the shadows on the hillside. He knew her superior sight gave her a better view of the attackers. “I count twelve. If we can break the jars with the flammable oil, I can set them aflame and at least end their primary means of attack.”

“We’ll need to be fast and silent to avoid getting a flaming arrow in our chests.” Kadmallin did not like the odds of two against twelve. Even with Sketkee’s strength and her breath of fire, as well as his own skill, they stood a good chance of ending up dead. However, the circumstances provided little alternative. “This way. We can reach the hills quicker if we...”

Kadmallin stopped and cocked his head toward the fire-shrouded house where he stood.

“Do you hear that?” He moved closer to the flames.

“A human child. Female and below the age of five by the tenor of her screams.” Sketkee stepped beside him, the flames casting flickering shadows across the sharp angles of her face. “I should go. My hide is more resistant to fire, and I have a higher pain threshold than you.”

“You might scare her into running toward the flames,” Kadmallin said.

“Possibly, but I am quick,” Sketkee replied. “I could catch her.”

“Hand me your cloak.” Kadmallin extended his hand. In customary fashion, Sketkee did not waste time arguing a point she had already lost. She untied the cloak from her neck and passed it to Kadmallin.

“Take care.”

He had time to notice her frown at her own unnecessary statement as he threw the cloak over his head and shoulders and kicked the door of the house open. Smoke trapped by the door rolled past him in a great wave of gray and black. He coughed as he pressed into the main room of the house, flames jumping up walls and sliding across the ceiling. Fire-ringed doorways to two separate rooms stood nearby, but he could not tell which room held the crying child. He pushed his way through the wall of smoke, coughing and bending at the waist to stay low.

Kadmallin entered the room on the right as the ceiling collapsed, wood and flame-filled thatching falling on an empty bed. He shielded himself against the heat with the cloak just long enough to assure himself the child did not hide under the bed or in a corner, and then ran to the second room, pushing past the flames devouring the door frame. The girl sat on a narrow bed, screaming, her slender limbs wrapped around a blanket. Kadmallin ignored the desire to comfort the girl and instead scooped her up in his arms, pulling the blanket over her as he held her close under the cloak that now smoked with flames of its own.

The girl continued to scream as he carried her from the room, through the fires of the house, and out into the night air. He threw the smoldering cloak from his shoulders and rose to his full height. Sketkee stood nearby, an outstretched muscular arm restraining a large, wailing woman from pushing toward the burning home. As Kadmallin pulled the blanket from the still screaming girl, the woman cried out and Sketkee released her. The woman rushed forward and snatched the child from Kadmallin’s hands, shouting her thanks against the roar of the fire as tears dug lines through her soot-caked cheeks.

“You do not look injured,” Sketkee said.

“The new beard is singed, but I am whole.” Kadmallin brushed embers from his whiskers.

“No loss then.” Sketkee pointed past his shoulder. “They’ve set another house on fire. We must stop them soon or they will burn the entire town to the ground.”

The Kam-Djen fanatics were systematic about their attack, choosing targets situated close to one another to help the fire spread, but not so far apart that only some buildings would be burned. Even if the fanatics stopped now, the pilgrims would likely lose a fifth of the town. As he looked at the new blaze consuming the fuel of the tamak-seed oil from shattered clay jars, another fire caught his attention. The flames encasing a building fifty paces away rapidly dwindled and then fluttered out. He saw no townspeople nearby with buckets or shovels. Could the wind have blown the fire out rather than feeding it to grow and spread? That seemed impossible. He scanned his eyes around and saw three people standing ten paces from the now smoldering but still intact home. He recognized them. He’d seen them around the town. As he watched, the woman turned and faced another house recently set to flames. One of the men with her, the smaller one he remembered as

her husband, looked around as the fires of the second building shrank and quickly died out.

“We must go now.” Sketkee reached a hand to his arm.

“I think I have a new plan for how to stop the fanatics.” Kadmallin grinned at Sketkee, his smile encompassing a joy at realizing a way to end the fanatics’ attack as well as a means of potentially solving the other problem that consumed their lives.

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

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

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

THE WIND rustled the leaves of the treetops, long, black-barked trunks swaying gently from side to side. The normal noises of the woods — bird calls, chirping insects, small animals foraging — fell silent in the presence of human scents and sounds. Tin-Tsu leaned against a tree, clutching his side as he listened for the sound of the soldiers hunting them. He heard his own shallow breath, and the excited exhalations of Tiang-Rhu beside him.

They had pushed out two wooden slats from the back wall of the barn and slipped away before the soldiers arrived. The action seemed familiar, but he could not determine why. They had stumbled to the nearby woods and pressed forward into the leafy gloom, one of Tiang-Rhu's arms around him for support, and the free hand of the other arm holding the shadow steel blade. Tin-Tsu had wanted to flee in a circle and come back to the barn, hoping the Tanshen soldiers would not check it twice.

Unfortunately, the men split up upon entering the woods, which made doubling back impossible. However, neither soldier appeared to have any affinity for tracking. Probably raised in a large town or the southern capital of Tsee-Kaanlin. It didn't matter. They would either find Tin-Tsu and Tiang-Rhu, or they would not. He could go no further with the pain in his side, and any additional progress through the dense vegetation would only create noise for the silent trees to amplify and reveal their location.

"I am sorry. I should have found a way to pay her more." Tiang-Rhu spoke quietly beside his ear.

"You owe me no apologies." Tin-Tsu's legs buckled and Tiang-Rhu held him tight to steady him. He kept his voice low, just above a whisper. "You saved me when I thought myself dead."

"And I have led you to this." Tiang-Rhu looked around to indicate their present predicament.

"We will survive again." Tin-Tsu leaned more of his weight against Tiang-Rhu and the tree. "Now we wait. Maybe they will give up and move on."

"I will pray for it." Tiang-Rhu's lips began to move in a silent prayer of protection as his eyes scanned the trees for motion.

Tin-Tsu did the same, watching and praying. As he did so, he noted the shadow steel sword in Tiang-Rhu's hand. It looked utterly out of place and Tiang-Rhu held it more like a dead animal than an implement of death. Tin-Tsu squinted in the shadowed light beneath the canopy of interweaving branches and noticed that the blade appeared rusted. How could that be? Shadow steel should be impervious to rust and the wear that accompanied normal metal. As he found no answer to the mystery and could do nothing about it, he ignored it. Years of daily prayer meant his mind easily held other thoughts while appealing to his god, and his attention turned to the memory of the last time he and Tiang-Rhu stood so close beneath a tree trying to avoid the sight of others.

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

“WE CAN run away.”

“Impossible.”

“My family has a small estate house in the north that is never used. We could go there.”

“My father would hunt for me. They would find us.”

“Somewhere else, then.”

“There is nowhere we can hide.”

“I will not leave you.”

Tin-Tsu sighed and looked up into the moonlit branches of the poda tree. He loved Tiang-Rhu’s inexhaustible optimism, but it often meant that he refused to confront reality. They could not run away. They could not be together. He must follow his father’s commands. He must go to the temple in Rantu-Ting Mountains. And Tiang-Rhu must leave the palace.

He reached out and took Tiang-Rhu’s hand. “I leave tomorrow. You must leave as well. Go somewhere for a time. You must not be in the palace. My father agreed to take no action against you if I do as he bids, but your presence in the palace, and even the city, will remind him of his loss of me and my disgrace. I do not trust that he may not act against you in my absence.”

“What can he do to me that is worse than sending you away?” Tiang-Rhu squeezed at Tin-Tsu’s hand.

“Banish you. Banish your family. Have you murdered by night-daggers. Many things.” Tin-Tsu stared into his friend’s eyes, attempting to will him into compliance.

“What if I do go away? What if I go north with you? There must be a town near temple Ten-Fan-Het. We could find a way to see one another.” Tiang-Rhu’s eye brightened with excitement.

Tin-Tsu’s stomach soured as his heart beat faster. He always found Tiang-Rhu most alluring when excited by a new idea. Why did this need to hurt so? He did not want to leave him. Did not want to go away. But they had shattered a pane in the grand window of society, crossed from being childhood playmates to something abhorrent in the eyes of their faith and the world. They could not go on as they had. Could not risk being seen once more. Could not jeopardize his father’s rule with scandal. But why must his heart ache so?

Romantic tales of love described the sensation well enough that he understood his feelings to be true, however aberrant. His love for Tiang-Rhu went deeper than simple friendship. And that love expressed itself in ways inexpressible without censure from those who did not understand it. And how could they? Tin-Tsu did not fathom it himself. Why must he feel so for Tiang-Rhu when he felt nothing for the young tahneffs of the palace who smiled at him and courted his affections? Yet he felt everything imaginable for Tiang-Rhu. His sole desire in that moment extended only to embracing and kissing him as they had so many times.

But he could not. He would not. If he allowed himself to succumb to his desires, to once more abandon faith and family and the strictures of society, he would not obey his father’s mandate to retreat to some distant mountain temple, but would instead do as Tiang-Rhu suggested and run away with him, ignoring the consequences for himself and his sire, his zhan, and hiding away to

follow his heart.

As though reading his thoughts, Tiang-Rhu leaned close, his lips coming near. Tin-Tsu leaned back, the pained look in Tiang-Rhu's face reflected in his own heart.

"I must go." Tin-Tsu tried to disengage his hand.

"Do not go. Go away with me." Tiang-Rhu smiled once more. "It can work. We can fake our deaths. Make it seem as though we have drowned in a river. Then no one will come for us."

"My father would never believe I am dead without seeing my body." Tin-Tsu freed his hand and stepped back. "It is a beautiful dream, but a dream only. I must do as I am instructed. I must go."

"But we..." Tiang-Rhu began to speak, and Tin-Tsu interrupted him.

"And you must leave. You cannot remain. Promise me." Tin-Tsu preferred not to contemplate what might happen to Tiang-Rhu if his friend stayed in the palace. He must protect him. Must convince him to leave. "If your affection for me is as deep as you claim, then you must promise me to flee the palace after I am gone. Wait for a few days or a week, so that none will suspect the connection in our departures, but then you go. Promise me."

Tiang-Rhu stood motionless, arms at his side, face slack, eyes blinking back tears. Tin-Tsu ignored the tears forming in his own eyes.

"Promise me."

A long sigh and two words.

"I promise."

"I will see you again." Tin-Tsu stepped backward once more. "That is my promise to you. I will see you again."

Then he turned and ran through the tree shadows beneath the double moons illuminating the palace gardens. He did not look back. He would never have run away if he looked back. He ran onward. Toward his chambers, toward the morning, and toward his destiny in the mountain temple in the north.

THE PRESENT

THE CRACK of a snapping twig ricocheted through the trees. Tin-Tsu snapped his head toward the sound. Through the wide trunks and low branches, he spotted one of the Tanshen soldiers nearing their position. He reached out his hand.

"Give me the sword."

Tiang-Rhu frowned. "You are too weak. You'll barely be able to lift it."

"And you have no experience." Tin-Tsu straightened himself, leaning away from the tree and Tiang-Rhu's steadying embrace. "The sword. Quickly."

Tiang-Rhu handed him the hilt of the shadow steel blade, looking simultaneously worried to do so and relieved to free it from his hand. Tin-Tsu raised a finger to his lips to signal the need for silence as the sound of the approaching Tanshen soldier grew louder. He took a deep breath and centered his mind, the pulsing of his veins slowing with the calming of his thoughts. He sought

that inner stillness at the heart of his Kan-Djen training. He saw the woods more clearly. The shafts of light through the branches above blazed more brightly. He felt united with the trees and the bushes. Heard now the slight rustling of small animals as they moved to avoid the approaching soldier. Tin-Tsu sensed the man's movement and distance as much with his inner eye as with his ears. He waited, immersing himself in the deep connection of what the Kan-Djen warriors called the Djen-Thili, the God Sight, the view closest to the way Ni-Kam-Djen must view the world.

He held his stillness to the last possible moment, waiting until the soldier stepped within arm's length of where they hid behind the tree. Then he moved, stepping around the wide trunk and swinging the shadow steel blade with all his strength at the soldier's exposed neck. Unfortunately, all his strength amounted to much less than normal. His blade did not move with its accustomed speed, and the soldier blocked it with his own out-raised weapon. The impact sent Tin-Tsu stumbling back, but he pressed the attack and thrust his sword, attempting to stab the soldier through his thin leather armor. The man blocked the blade and made an attack of his own. Tin-Tsu leapt to the side and extended himself as he parried the attack and flicked the blade down, slicing through the back of the soldier's knee. The man cried out. The pain of Tin-Tsu's wound ripping open made him gasp in agony. He recovered quickly and hefted the sword once more, slicing it across the soldier's neck. The man fell to the ground, gurgling as blood coated the dead leaves beneath the trees.

Tin-Tsu staggered and fell against a nearby tree as he clutched his side. Tiang-Rhu's hands supported him a moment later.

"You're bleeding again." Tiang-Rhu made to examine the wound, but Tin-Tsu gently brushed his hands away.

"I'm fine." He watched the Tanshen soldier die. The man stared at him with angry eyes that rapidly grew dim. He looked at the man's sword and then his own, its edge jagged, large chunks missing. The shadow steel should have sliced through the weaker metal of the common sword. It had done so weeks ago. Why did it fail now? While he had never wielded shadow steel before the battles in the south, from all he knew, they should never have weakened like this. Possibly, it had been poorly forged.

The second soldier crashed through the trees nearby, yelling as he raised his sword. Tin-Tsu pushed away from the tree with his foot, clutching at his side as he met the charging man's attack. He blocked the swing of the blade and kicked at the man's stomach and swung at his head. The man dodged back and attacked again, his blade shattering Tin-Tsu's shadow-steel sword in half. Tin-Tsu fell back, using the stump of his sword to defend against his opponent's violent onslaught. He did not possess the strength in his weakened condition to offer a full defense, much less the deadly threat he needed to present. He thudded to a halt as his back slammed into a tree. The soldier thrust at him, and he turned away, the wound in his side tearing again, sending a spasm of pain up through his chest. The man's sword sank into the trunk of the tree, leaving him momentarily unguarded. Tin-Tsu used the proximity to the man and the shortness of his own broken blade to his advantage, pulling the soldier closer with one hand and slamming the shattered edge of the sword into the man's chest. The shadow steel bent but still held enough strength and sharpness to

slide through the soldier's leather armor and into his chest. The soldier clutched at the blade, falling back to the ground, limbs flailing as he cursed. The man stared at the broken steel sticking from his chest for a few more moments before becoming still, his hands falling limp as his bowels released their contents into his breeches.

Tin-Tsu fell to the ground and leaned back against the same tree. Tiang-Rhu rushed to his side, the other soldier's sword in his hand.

"I am sorry. I was too slow." Tiang-Rhu dropped the sword and bent to examine the wound in Tin-Tsu's side, pulling the shirt away to reveal dark-red bandages. "We need to get you back to the barn. I need to tend to these stitches again."

"What about the farm woman?" Tin-Tsu winced as he tried to get to his feet. His head spun with the effort and the woods became blurry.

"I'll tend to her as well." Tiang-Rhu helped him up, grabbing the sword once more.

They staggered together through the woods back to the barn. The farm woman saw them, looked at the sword in Tiang-Rhu's hand, and ran down the path toward the road.

"Stay here. I will be right back." Tiang-Rhu helped Tin-Tsu to lie on a pile of hay in the barn and then ran after the farm woman.

"What will you do?" Tin-Tsu called after Tiang-Rhu, his voice barely audible.

Tiang-Rhu slowed and looked back. "Stop her. Somehow." He glanced at the sword still in his hand and frowned.

Tin-Tsu lay on the hay, stalks pricking into the flesh of his back, as he watched Tiang-Rhu run after the farm woman, down the narrow wagon lane that cut into the high grass. The woman disappeared around a curved patch of close-set trees. Tiang-Rhu followed her a few moments later. How had Tiang-Rhu found this farm? How far from the battlefields were they? How many days had passed while he slept? He did not question why Tiang-Rhu thought to hide him away on a farm rather than take him to his generals. He knew the answer to this. He also did not ask himself what he thought of this, as he feared his own reply.

Tin-Tsu grimaced as he turned his attention to the bandage around his abdomen. He pulled up the edge of the cloth, blood oozing out to drip down his skin and stain the yellow hay. The wound had opened, but it could be stitched again. It did not bleed profusely and would heal eventually.

He leaned his head back, intending to close his eyes and recite the [Prayer of Turing](#) to calm his mind. He woke an unknown time later to the sound of boots crunching gravel near the barn door. He opened his eyes to see Tiang-Rhu carrying the limp form of the farm woman in his arms. Blood dribbled across the back of her head, leaving her hair matted and glistening wet.

"Kofan-Druz is dead." Tiang-Rhu's anguish found expression in the tone of his voice and the cast of his eyes.

Tin-Tsu did not need to be told of the woman's mortal end. He knew by the blood, her motionless chest, and the stillness of her sun-aged face.

"What happened?"

"She tripped and fell and hit her head on a rock." Tiang-Rhu looked at the woman's body in his arms. "When I got to her, she was dying. I prayed for her as she passed. I don't understand. Is

this an omen for good or ill?"

"It may merely be luck. Our weal. Her woe." Tin-Tsu frowned at the dead woman. He did not wish her death, even though she had betrayed her own countrymen, and unwittingly, her rightful zhan. He did not wish anyone's death. "Where is the dog?"

"It ran away. I think it was afraid of me."

"And the sword?"

Tiang-Rhu blinked. "I left it in the lane."

"We'll need the swords. Both of them."

"Yes. Of course." Tiang-Rhu still held the woman, his strong arms giving no hint of tiring. "What do we do?"

"Put her here in the hay." Tin-Tsu gestured beside himself. Tiang-Rhu laid the dead farm woman on the far side of the hay pile. Tiang-Rhu had called her Kofan-Druz. No one would speak her name now. "Help me to the hut. We'll be more comfortable there. You'll need to stitch my wound again. And then we'll eat. And then we'll sleep. And tomorrow, you will bury the bodies and we will say the prayers for swift passage to the Pure Lands."

"There is a reason you became a zhan rather than a priest," Tiang-Rhu said.

"Yes, my brother died." Tin-Tsu frowned at the memory and the tone of his own voice. "I would much rather have remained a priest."

"You can now. If you choose." Tiang-Rhu knelt beside him, his gaze oddly refusing to meet Tin-Tsu's own.

"Once I am well enough for travel, I must return to the battlefield." Tin-Tsu wondered how many more days that might take. "Tigan Rhog-Kan will be searching for me."

"No one is looking for you." Tiang-Rhu held his eyes for a moment and then looked away again. "They all believe you to be dead."

"I do not understand." A dizziness subsumed Tin-Tsu's mind, but he knew it did not result from blood loss or exhaustion. "I remember a fire. In the barn where I fought the Tanshen. But they will know I did not die there."

"I followed the third man through a hole in the back of the barn." Tiang-Rhu's broad shoulders slumped. "I killed him."

"I remember that." Tin-Tsu recollected the look of horror in Tiang-Rhu's eyes when the tines of the hay fork sank into the Tanshen soldier's face in the burning barn. "I do not remember what happened after that."

"I did something I had no right to do." Tiang-Rhu stared at Tin-Tsu's right hand.

Tin-Tsu lifted his hand to examine it. Only then did he notice the absence of his ring of state. He'd grown so accustomed to its presence on his finger, he had not discerned its disappearance. He stared at his hand longer than necessary. It did not take him long to understand what inappropriate action Tiang-Rhu referred to. After the barn in that town burned to ash, Tigan Rhog-Kan no doubt found a charred body similar in size to his own, wearing shadow steel armor and bearing a ring on its right middle finger that marked it as the corpse of the zhan.

"You must say something." Tiang-Rhu reached out and took Tin-Tsu's right hand in his own.

“I do not know what to say. What to think.” Tin-Tsu struggled to clear his thoughts. The world considered him dead. For the first time in his life, he could choose what he wished to be. He could return and be zhan once more, fighting to save an embattled nation, hoping to lead it to victory. He could assume another name and once more become a priest. He raised his gaze to Tiang-Rhu’s gentle eyes. Or he could choose another path altogether, one he’d once dreamed of as a boy. He could. If he were not the zhan.

“You do not know what you have done.” Tin-Tsu took a deep breath, ignoring the pain that came with it. “The dominion is without a zhan.”

“The dominion will always have a zhan.” Tiang-Rhu’s voice sounded stubborn.

“I must get well.” Tin-Tsu felt both sad and angry. “I must...” He did not know how he wished to finish that statement.

Tiang-Rhu said nothing as he helped Tin-Tsu to his feet and guided him across the yard to the small hut. He longed to sleep, to have his mind thrown elsewhere, so he did not need to consider what lay before him. He slept fitfully that night, dreaming of a palace in disarray as troops marched on the city beyond its gates.

To continue reading the Throne story arena turn the page.

THE THRONE



TONKEN-WU

EARLY AUTUMN aromas scented the shade beneath the trees arching over the narrow road. The sweet smell of leaves just turned from green to red and orange to pale yellow. The musk of summer flowers fading at the roadside. Pungent tree bark and the dirt of the lane still damp from afternoon showers.

The heavy, humid air tasted cool and refreshing. Tonken-Wu breathed deep as he walked beside his horse down the road that cut through fields of cotton. He'd ridden at a quick trot for most of the day, but his steed required a respite, as did his ass and thighs. Both man and horse yearned for a long drink of water, a good meal, and a rest. They ambled toward a small town at the bottom of a gently sloping hill.

"Not long now, Longen." He patted the side of the horse's head. Longen nodded and shook his mane in response.

As he continued toward the town, Tonken-Wu ruminated on the same concerns that dominated his thoughts every step, pace, stride, and leap, since sneaking from the palace. He had abandoned his duty to pursue his loyalty. Everyone believed Zhan Tin-Tsu to be dead. No one held any doubts. Only him. Because of the dreams. Dreams that still came to him each night. Dreams so vivid, so compelling, he could not ignore their call. He believed these night reveries came from the True God, Ni-Kam-Djen. If thousands dreamed of a heretic god, might not the True God grant a vision to guide him to his zhan? And if the dreams, indeed, offered him a glimpse of truth, then Zhan Tin-Tsu needed his help urgently. But where to find him? If he had not been killed in battle, his body not burned in a barn fire, then where could he be? And how could he have escaped? And why would he not reveal himself to his people? Did injuries or capture prevent him from doing so?

Tonken-Wu knew answers to these questions could only be obtained by seeing the place of the zhan's supposed death with his own eyes. It would be days yet before he reached the site of the battle. He pressed ahead as quickly as possible, but Longen could only travel so far and so fast in a day. And when his horse tired, he could only walk so long before his own legs gave way. He did not have the advantages possessed by the message riders Tigan Rhog-Kan established along the route to the southern battlefields. With waystation stables strategically located in towns and villages, riders galloped their horses at top speed and switched them for fresh steeds just as the animals reached the limit of their exhaustion. Riders were also swapped as necessary in carrying sealed messages between the tigans and the palace. A letter from the tigans in the south might reach the palace councilors in less than two days. The reverse journey would take Tonken-Wu at least a dozen days at his fastest pace.

As he neared the small town, he spotted one of the waystation stables. They marked their presence with a red battle flag carrying the embroidered image of a horse in motion. He wondered

what other news they brought from the palace to the battlefield. How did Tahneff Dju-Tesha fare in the face of her brother's death? Would she soon assume the throne? Did she, too, believe her brother dead? Should he have confided his suspicions to her in person before leaving? Should he have confessed to having the dream? His letter to her made no mention of the reason for his belief that her brother, the zhan, lived. Did she think him mad? Did madness possess his mind?

A better question arose, one more pertinent to his predicament — would Tahneff Dju-Tesha, the new Regent Zhan, be safe in his absence? Could she truly trust those now charged with her protection? Had he misplaced his priorities in leaving her safeguarded only by the men he had chosen to defend her? Might they be swayed by money or contrived scandal? He trusted Councilor Kao-Rhee to ensure her assumption of the throne, but were the other councilors loyal to that seat and its newest occupant?

He walked his horse into the town, heading for a building that declared itself an inn by its size and structure as much as the wooden sign hanging above its door. *The White Willow*. With the sun nearing its departure for the day, locals and travelers would gather for an evening meal. He could find both sustenance and news. Some of that information might relate to him. He feared message riders bringing warrants for his arrest with their battlefield missives. He could not risk a likeness of him being posted in each town along his path. So far, he had seen no evidence the palace cared to pursue him. Maybe the tahneff believed him? Maybe they thought him unhinged in his grief? That he might die or never return. He had committed no crime greater than abandoning his duty, but the palace guards did not take well to such infringements.

Tonken-Wu stabled Longen and paid for him to be fed, watered, and brushed down. He would not likely stay the night, but the horse needed the reprieve from the road. Inside the inn, he found the usual assortment of locals drinking after a day in the fields and wayfarers seeking comfort and a meal. He avoided the empty table far in the corner. Men who sat too much alone drew too much attention. He chose a table near an old man with dark skin and tightly curled gray hair who sat with a boy of about ten by a narrow window.

“We gots chicken dumplings and with peas and carrots. Or we gots a meat soup with fresh vegetables from the garden out back, or we gots a plate of pork hocks and roots.” A serving woman in her middle years spoke as she stepped up beside the table, eyes as dark as her hair, her face brightened by a pleasant smile.

At the table nearby, the boy and the old man seemed to be enjoying the dumplings and soup. They certainly smelled good. His mouth watered as he replied.

“I’ll take the dumplings. And loaf of dinbao. And an ale. A dark one if you have it.”

“Be right out, darlin’.” The woman turned and gave him a smile over her shoulder before heading back to the kitchen.

Had he been another man, he might have been intrigued by that look. He might have thought about staying the night and pursuing that smile toward something more intimate. While Tonken-Wu enjoyed the company of women, both in and out of a bedroom, he never allowed his baser desires to interfere with the pursuit of his duty. Having forsaken his loyalty to the palace and Tahneff Dju-Tesha, he now considered his obligation to Zhan Tin-Tsu the paramount impetus in

his life.

As he looked around the common room of the inn — noting which people acknowledged his presence, which eyes lingered, which mouths turned to whisper, which shoulders shrugged with indifference — a melodic sound came to his ears. The boy, now finished with his dumplings, sat with his hands clasped before him, humming. Tonken-Wu knew the tune, although he had not heard it in many, many years. The boy looked to the old man, who nodded back. A smile on his face, the boy slipped from the bench at the table and went to stand before the empty fire hearth. There the boy's humming became song, the words filling the room, the sweet, lulling voice, catching every ear.

*The daisy maid fell down the hill,
And tumbled to the grass.
The shepherd boy put down his crook,
And bent to help the lass.*

Tonken-Wu remembered those words. His sister sang them to him as a boy not much older than the one who now sang them now. The last time she sang that song was also the last time he saw his sister alive.

TWENTY YEARS AGO

*THE TWO ran off to find the moon,
And play among the stars.
And when they wandered home again,
They brought two back in jars.*

Tonken-Wu giggled and laughed as he held his tummy. He never tired of hearing Kushaa-Ning sing the silly song. It made no sense, and he liked that best about it. It caused him to wonder strange things. How many stars could you put in a jar? He smiled and bounced on the wagon bench between his father and sister. They rode along a bumpy lane toward a small town where they hoped to sell the silks and cooking pans they had picked up three towns prior. His father's three merchant wagons ran the same long loop through the settlements of southern Daeshen twice a year, stopping only for a brief few months in the winter, when they settled in rented lodgings near the capital of Tagu-Lan. They sold what they bought to buy more and sell more, squeezing out a small profit along the way. Enough to feed and clothe the family and put a bit aside for hard times. Times like the year before when bad weather led to collapsed crops and less funds in farmers' pockets to buy blankets and baskets and knives and knickknacks and all assorted implements for the home and farm. It had also been the year his mother died in her sleep after weeks carrying a cough along the road. A bad year.

Tonken-Wu's mirth faded at thoughts of his mother. As his sister finished singing, he brought his smile back to life and beamed up at her. He smiled wider as she tousled his hair and pulled him close. Ten summers past his nine years, and the sole girl of a family with five brothers, she now bore the maternal mantle all alone. She filled the role as easily as her deceased mother's discarded

dresses.

“What song you want next, l’il man?” Kushaa-Ning brushed her thick black hair away from her face.

“*Hangman’s Noose*.” It wasn’t a funny song, but Tonken-Wu liked the melody.

“That’s no song for a fine sunny day.” Kushaa-Ning wrinkled her small nose. “What about *The Tahn’s Ransom* or maybe *Pirate Pete and the Whale*?”

His sister knew a lot of songs.

“*The Goat and the Sow*,” Tonken-Wu said.

“A good choice.” His father’s voice sounded like fire crackling along wood. He could not carry a tune, but he loved to sing loud. And he loved *The Goat and the Sow*.

“Pa!” Tonken-Wu’s eldest brother, Keeya-Azri, called back from the lead wagon several paces ahead. Tonken-Wu looked to where his brother pointed. Three men stood across the road, swords drawn.

“Whoa.” His father pulled hard on the reins to halt the horse and wagon. “Stay here. Both of you. Put your cloak on and pull your hood up, Kushaa-Ning.”

As his father climbed down, Tonken-Wu sat higher on the bench, trying to see around the lead wagon. His father approached the three men blocking the road, and four more men, two on either side, stepped from around the trees, sword blades glinting the sunlight. His brothers in the wagons before and behind him raised their hands. Tonken-Wu’s stomach tightened as his heart thundered in his chest. Kushaa-Ning reached out and took his hand. Bandits rarely assaulted travelers on this road, and never that he knew of during the day. This was why his father insisted on always making camp at the edge of a town or village. And why they never traveled by night.

“We’ll take all yer coin.”

Tonken-Wu gasped as he saw the size of the bandit who spoke. He had never before seen a man that big. Or one with such a misshapen face.

“We don’t have much coin, but ya can takes what ya wants.” Tonken-Wu’s father gestured toward the back of the first wagon. “Give me the box, Keetan.” Keetan-Azri, the second eldest son, looked down at the sword at his waist, but his father shook his head. Keetan-Azri frowned and followed his father’s instructions, pulling back the tarp covering the back of the wagon. The young man pushed several bags of rice flour to the side and tugged up a loose board before hauling a small wooden box up into the light. Tonken-Wu noted that while he knew his brother to be strong, the box did not seem very heavy as his father took it into his hands.

His father carried the locked box to the bandits in the road as Tonken-Wu looked up to his sister. He saw tears in her eyes, and she clasped his hand hard. He did not mind. He squeezed back, the pressure giving him comfort.

“Open it.”

Tonken-Wu looked back to the bandits where the large leader pointed at the box as his father handed it to one of the smaller men. He watched as his father removed a key on a leather lanyard from beneath his shirt and around his neck. He opened the box and left the key inside as he stepped backward several paces.

The large bandit grabbed the box from his companion and lifted the lid. He scowled.

“Not enough,” the bandit bellowed, his face darkening in anger.

“We’re only a merchant family,” Tonken-Wu’s father stammered. “All the wealth we got is in our wares. We trade from town to town. And last year was a bad...”

“I wants more.” The large bandit raised his sword in a swift motion, the tip reflecting sunlight just beneath the chin of Tonken-Wu’s father. “I wants more now.”

“We gots no more.” Tonken-Wu’s father stumbled back a pace and the bandit’s blade followed.

Tonken-Wu nearly yelped from the pain of his sister’s nails biting into the back of his hand.

“I’s can give ya food.” Tonken-Wu’s father raised his arms in the air. “And blankets. And knives. Anything. Take anything in the wagons. Take the wagons if’n ya want.”

“I’s always takes what I wants.” The large bandit walked past his father and pulled the tarp of the first wagon back all the way to inspect the cargo. He spat. “Shit. Shit food and shit wares.”

Tonken-Wu’s breath stopped as the massive bandit looked toward him and his sister in the second wagon. The bandit smiled and stepped closer. His sister made a quiet whimpering sound beside him.

“Ya do gots somethin’ a’ value.” The bandit walked to the edge of the wagon. The man stood eye-even with Tonken-Wu’s sister, even though she sat in the high bench of a wagon. “I’ll takes the girl.”

The well-muscled bandit snatched Kushaa-Ning so quickly and powerfully that her hand yanked free from Tonken-Wu’s. She screamed as the bandit tossed her over his shoulder with ease. His eldest brother, Keeya-Azri, leapt from the wagon and drew his sword to confront the bandit. The bandit slashed at his brother’s sword, knocking it to the side and, in a second fluid motion, ran the huge blade into the smaller man’s belly. Keeya-Azri collapsed to the ground, wailing as Kushaa-Ning cried and beat the back of the bandit who held her. Tonken-Wu’s second eldest brother, Keetan-Azri, made to jump from the lead wagon, but the bandit smashed him in the face with the elbow of his sword arm, sending the young man tumbling to the ground.

Tonken-Wu jumped from the wagon, seeing his two other brothers held at sword point in the rear wagon. He ran beside the wheels and horses and snatched the knife from the belt of his unconscious brother, throwing himself at the large bandit, sinking the blade into the man’s thigh.

His father cried out and the bandit roared. In the next moment, Tonken-Wu hovered in the air, giant fingers wrapped around his neck, his feet swinging violently as he stared into the dark eyes of the bandit holding him.

“Leave ’im. Leave ’im and I’ll do whatever ya wants.” His sister pounded ineffectually at the large arm grasping her youngest brother.

“You’ll do what I wants alright.”

Tonken-Wu saw bright points of light dancing before his eyes as he tried to breathe. His eyes began to dim, the voice of one of the other bandits filling his ears.

“Leave ’im be, Sha. Ain’t but a boy. An’ he hardly grazed ya. Knife didn’t even stay sunk in yer leg.”

Tonken-Wu looked into cold, night-black eyes of the bandit, feeling himself fading from the world. Then the bandit sneered and tossed him through the air — a scrap of trash discarded in the wind.

Tonken-Wu fell to the ground and struck his head on something hard. Something that knocked the sight from his eyes and the will from his heart. Darkness ate his senses, and his sister's cries faded away.

THE PRESENT

“HERE YA go, darlin’.”

Tonken-Wu lowered his eyes to see a plate of steaming chicken dumplings sitting on his table beside a loaf of dinbao and a cup of ale. The serving woman smiled at him.

“If’n ya need anything else, my name’s Thugaa-Gua.” She winked at him and walked away.

He stared at the dumplings. In spite of their hearty aroma and the rumblings of his stomach, Tonken-Wu found his appetite stilled by the flood of memories brought on by the boy’s singing. He had woken well past sunset to find his eldest brother dead and his father weeping inconsolably. They buried his brother and left before dawn in search of his sister. They found her two days later, lying in a muddy ditch beside the road, naked, milky eyes staring at the sun.

His father died a year later from unending sadness. His second eldest brother died in a fight in an inn a month after that. His two other brothers left to fight the Tanshen in the war that everyone said would end any day but never did. Tonken-Wu ended up living with his father’s sister in a hovel in the shanty town encircling the capital city of Tagu-Lan. There he joined the local city guards when he came of age. He trained. Proved himself. Got promoted. Moved to the palace. Proved his worth and gained promotion and trained again and again. In his youth, he’d hoped to find justice on the road one day, but years in the palace halls dulled that impulse. Now, he realized, walking and riding the roads of the land, he might be fortunate enough to come across an oversized bandit, aged but still destroying people’s lives. He knew finding Zhan Tin-Tsu took precedence before all considerations, but he held close the hope of meeting the man who killed his sister and brother, to once more plunge a blade into the man’s flesh.

He grabbed a dumpling in his hand and bit into it as the boy began to sing another song.

“He sings beautifully.” Tonken-Wu spoke between bites of the dumpling, hot juice stinging his lips.

“Yes, he does.” The old man took a spoonful of soup.

“Where did he learn that song?” Tonken-Wu watched the boy as he sang. “I haven’t heard that song in a very long time.”

“I don’t know how he knows all the songs he sings.” The old man slurped another spoonful of soup. “It is a mystery.”

“Where are you traveling from?” Tonken-Wu hoped to glean a bit of local news from the man. Something about him felt familiar. Made him think again of his sister’s burial. The boy’s song infecting his thoughts, no doubt.

“We travel all over.” The old man gave him a quizzical look. His brief answers and the way he phrased them made it sound as if he did not often speak with people.

“Any news from the palace or the battlefield?” Tonken-Wu held a dumpling in his hand but did not bite into it.

“None I have gathered in the last day.” A thin smile bent the old man’s lips. “What puts you on the road? Are you traveling to, or traveling from?”

“All travelers do both. Leaving one place, so they may get to another.” Tonken-Wu still held the dumpling in his hand.

“But why do we go where we go?” The old man looked deep into the bowl between his hands. “Do we leave a place to flee it? Do we travel toward another place because it holds something for us? Is one place really more important than another? Are the people and their stories that much different? If all places are so similar, why the constant traveling between them?”

He considered the man’s words as the dumpling cooled in his hand. The man’s questions appeared directed more to himself than Tonken-Wu. An answer came to him, nonetheless.

“I am searching for a friend in danger.” Tonken-Wu thought on these words. He never sought nor maintained friendships the way others did. He worked closely with the men of the palace guards, but he rarely spent time with them when not on duty. Not that he did not like them, simply that he found other matters more urgent. Training for the next promotion. It hindered him in his advancement, he knew, but he would rather succeed upon his merit than the nepotism of casual friendships. His high tier meant that Zhan Tin-Tsu could never be a friend to Tonken-Wu, but that did not mean that he might not be a friend to the zhan.

“It is hard to know our friends are in danger.” The old man glanced to the boy, almost as though checking to make sure he still sang next to the hearth. “I hope you find your friend soon.”

“I will. I have seen it in a dream.” Tonken-Wu finally took a bite of the dumpling, wondering why he would reveal the dream to the old man. It did not matter. The old man would tell no one.

A commotion near the entrance drew Tonken-Wu’s attention from the old man. A boy in his late teens pushed through the door and past the crowd to the ale counter near the back. He recognized the insignia on the boy’s vest. One of the army’s messenger riders. They liked to use young boys. Lighter on the horses. Tonken-Wu’s chest tightened. Did the rider carry a likeness of him and a warrant for his arrest?

“What news from the palace, boy?” a large man with a great belly and a greater beard shouted from a bench near the ale counter.

“Night-daggers set Tahneff Dju-Tesha’s chambers afire and nearly kill’t her.” The young rider wiped sweat and grime from his forehead with the back of his sleeve.

Shouts and curses erupted around the room, drowning out the small boy’s song. Tonken-Wu watched the boy return to the table beside the old man as the people of the inn discussed the news and pestered the message rider for more details. Tonken-Wu listened with the part of his mind not occupied with self-recrimination. He had abandoned his oath to protect Tahneff Dju-Tesha and she had nearly been killed. Might he have learned of the plot in advance and thwarted it before it endangered her life? Should he not now turn and head back north to accept his punishment and

ensure the safety of the throne? Could he even be accepted again among the guards? Would he be demoted from warden to sentinel, or imprisoned for misconduct?

“Good fortune and safe travels.”

The old man and boy stood ready to leave. Tonken-Wu nodded to them.

“Safe travels to you as well.”

He watched them go and then gave the serving woman, Thugaa-Gua, an extra copper coin and a smile. He left a few minutes later, also giving the stable boy an extra copper coin when he mounted his horse. He sat on Longen at the main road through town, looking first to the north and then to the south. Back to the palace and the demands of duty, or toward the battlefields and the imperatives of loyalty and friendship? One defined his life and his past. One spoke of an undefinable future. One felt right and righteous. One felt frightening and unsettling. One he knew the outcome for. One he could not know.

He sat on Longen for several minutes before finally making his decision and squeezing his thighs to urge the animal in the direction he desired.

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

THE SEER



RANKARUS

“ONE CHERRY for you and one cherry for me. Now two cherries for you and one, two, for me.”

“Wait? What?”

“And with one more, you have three cherries, and so one, two, three for me.”

“That’s cheating.”

“It’s maths, Luntadus.”

Rankarus stifled the laughter that wanted to bust from his chest but did not repress the grin on his face even as Kellatra frowned at him.

“She is made in your mold entirely too much.” Kellatra glared at their children at the end of the table, a small bowl of red-black cherries sitting between them. “Lantili, stop robbing your brother and split the cherries as I told you.”

“But, Mom, it’s...” Lantili began to pout but could not control the giggle that bubbled up from her belly.

“It is not maths.” Kellatra’s voice sounded firm.

“I knew that wasn’t right.” Luntadus plopped one of Lantili’s cherries into his mouth while his sister still looked to their mother.

“Hey, wait.” Lantili scowled as she looked to her pile of cherries, now numbering five, rather than six to his three.

“It seems Luntadus is learning to subtract.” Abananthus raised a hand to cover his grin.

“I thought that looked like addition.” Rankarus winked at his friend.

“Had he not eaten it, I think it would count as addition, but as it is in his belly, I think must be called subtraction.” Abananthus looked again as Luntadus spit out the cherry pit. “Maybe division if you want to be pedantic.”

“I don’t know how to be pedantic, as I don’t know what it means.” Rankarus laughed at his friend. “But it sounds like something I might enjoy.”

“You enjoy it all too much whether you know it or not.” Kellatra shook her head. “Jadaloo, please take the children to their room so we adults may speak as adults among ourselves.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Jadaloo, smiling broadly at the color of the conversation, took Lantili and Luntadus from the small common area and to the tiny storage closet that served as the sleeping quarters for herself and the children.

Rankarus watched her go, wondering both why she insisted on staying with such a dangerous and demanding family, and how difficult their lives would be without her. More an elder daughter than a servant, which was what they told the pilgrims. A lie that felt more like truth than the actual fact. He never wondered why Abananthus followed them, as the answer came too easily — the large man couldn’t help himself from helping those he cared for. He probably knew an ancient

obscure saying to explain it.

They'd eaten an early meal at the communal dining tables by the docks and returned home for a dessert of cherries before putting the children to bed and resuming their ongoing conversation from the preceding days and weeks and months.

"Any luck today?" Kellatra took the last cherry from the table before Rankarus could snatch it. He frowned. She smiled. "You are apparently an unfortunate influence on all of us."

Rankarus laughed.

"No," he said, answering her question. "There is no more lead to be had in the town. We'll need to venture into Tanjii if we hope to get more."

"That can wait." Kellatra daintily took the seed of the cherry from her lips and placed it on the table next to a small pile of pits. "It will take me two weeks or more to transmute the lead we have now. Once we have enough, we can pay someone to secure more. Besides, we do not wish to leave before the first ships return."

They'd both agreed not to place the children on any ship headed to the Forbidden Realm until the passage proved safe for the pilgrims. They were willing to risk a great deal in order to uncover the secrets of the codex, but not their children's lives.

"We can use a portion of the gold we have to secure Captain Tasmanat's interest. We may have enough already." Rankarus looked at the ceiling, calculating how much gold they needed and how long the captain might be willing to wait for more.

"Is he likely to sail off with it?" Abananthus held his final cherry between a meaty thumb and forefinger.

"Not with the blockade in place," Rankarus said.

"And if the blockade is lifted?" Kellatra asked.

"He is a man averse to risk," Rankarus replied. "He'd prefer a steady deposit of gold while in dock to sailing away from port with Tanjii goods in his hold."

"Then I should spend more time in our room." Kellatra made no move to stand.

"You are alone too much, between this project and the other." Rankarus had insisted they always refer indirectly to the codex when speaking about it. One never knew when a stranger might overhear something that needed to remain a secret.

"Any progress last night?" Abananthus still examined his cherry.

"None." Kellatra glared at the pits on the table, poking them with a slender finger. "The more I look at it, the more impossible it seems. Yet, the more I examine it, the more tantalizing it appears. There must be a connection between the illustrations and the text. If only there were more of them."

"It is no easy task to copy an unreadable manuscript by candlelight in a tent." Rankarus ignored the memory of how that secretive task nearly ended in catastrophe for his family. "I copied as many of them as possible."

"You did wonderful work." Kellatra took his hand and held it tight.

"*The reward of work comes in its doing, not its completion or its success.*" Abananthus turned the cherry in the light of the lantern on the table.

"I don't know what that means either, but if you don't eat that cherry, I will reward myself

with it for all the work I did today.” Rankarus raised a hand toward Abananthus’s cherry.

Abananthus tossed the tiny fruit into the air and tilted his head back to catch it in his mouth. He bit into it with a wide, juicy grin.

“As bad as the children.” Kellatra shook her head. She looked to the storage room where the sound of Jadaloo singing to the children seeped beneath the thin, wooden door. Rankarus watched as she sighed.

“What troubles you?” he asked.

“We must talk about Luntadus.” Kellatra turned back to him and he noted the worry in her eyes.

“What has he done now?” Rankarus repressed an urge to sigh himself. The boy took after him too much as well.

“Nothing he can be chided for.” Kellatra leaned closer. “Jadaloo complained again of this table and these chairs being moved while the children were napping.”

“It’s a heavy table.” Abananthus stared at the sturdy wooden legs of the table he’d helped Rankarus fashion with scraps from the shipyard.

“He was likely bored and restless and could not sleep.” Rankarus, too, had enjoyed pushing tables and chairs around the house as a boy. Before his parents’ deaths. Before his life on the streets of Kahara Nattaa. He whisked those memories away lest they taint his mood.

“I do not think Luntadus moved the table knowingly.” Kellatra lowered her voice. “There is a manner of The Sight not commonly known and rarely encountered. It is called The Sight of the Unseen Mind. It is when the silent part of our minds, the part that makes our dreams, can access The Sight and acts upon the world without the knowledge of the person who unwittingly wields the power.”

“And you believe our son possessed of this Unseen Sight?” Rankarus’s thoughts pursued several paths at the suggestion.

“It is often a precursor to full possession of The Sight.” Kellatra took his hand. “Many things may happen without the seer being aware they are responsible. Like moving tables and chairs while asleep.”

He noticed Abananthus stroking his broad chin in thought. Two of the many thoughts clamoring in his own mind collided and erupted in realization.

“Or like setting an inn on fire.” Rankarus sighed now himself.

“Just so.” Kellatra squeezed his hand.

“What a family.” Abananthus blinked and added his own sigh to the conversation.

“What can we do?” Rankarus asked. How did one deal with a boy possessed of The Sight when he did not know he possessed The Sight?

“Nothing for now.” Kellatra looked again to the door where the children slept. “It will likely fade and cease with time, but we should be watchful, as the reverse may also occur.”

“If you need help in…” Rankarus fell to silence as a scream erupted outside the house.

The three paused and looked between themselves for a moment before they rushed to the entrance. Rankarus reached the door first, even though he had been sitting farthest from it. While

he knew that his wife could surely handle any crisis better than himself and Abananthus combined, he still considered it his duty as her husband to assess that danger. He opened the door and stepped outside, hand tight on the hilt of his dagger. He smelled smoke in the night air before seeing the flames or hearing the further screams and shouts of the neighboring pilgrims.

Several houses and buildings burned, flames clawing up the sides of walls and over roofs. Fire shrouded more houses along the street and still more several streets away.

“Arrows.” Abananthus pointed to the sky, as a flock of flaming projectiles arced through the star-stained blackness to land on the roofs of two nearby homes.

“Fanatics.” Rankarus traced the arc of the arrows back to their origin point in the hills behind the town. The movement of people-sized shadows in the moonless dark were barely visible. When he turned back, he saw the flaming shafts on the house nearby fluttering out in a burst of smoke. He looked to Kellatra, her hands held low, her face veiled in concentration, her eyes focused.

“Well done, Kell.” Rankarus made to pat his wife on the shoulder but decided against it. *Best not to disturb her*, he thought. “Can you do more?”

“Fire is easier to start than to extinguish once it gets going. Simpler to stop it before it can begin.” She turned toward the nearest flaming house and stood still, her face golden in the flickering light.

“What’s happening?” Jadaloo poked her head from the door of their home.

“Kam-Djen fanatics have set the town on fire.” Abananthus sounded worried as he looked between Kellatra and the building where the flames consuming it gradually evaporated.

“Take the children to the water.” Rankarus went to Jadaloo at the door. “And take the bag from our room. The one under the floorboard by the bed. Keep them both safe but drop the bag if you or the children are at risk.”

Jadaloo looked past his shoulder to Kellatra and the house with the fire fading away, and swallowed. He knew she tried to ignore the powers Kellatra possessed. “Yes, sir.”

She ran into the house. She emerged moments later with the bag slung over her shoulder and pulling the sleepy children by their hands.

“Mommy, what’s happening?” Lantili clutched at Kellatra as she came to kiss the children.

“Daddy, the town is on fire.” Luntadus’s eyes were wide as Rankarus hugged him.

“Mommy’s going to deal with that. Don’t you worry.” Rankarus gave them both his widest and most reassuring grin. Only Luntadus smiled back. “Get them to the water.” He hated to separate from them, especially as they both feared flames so deeply after the blaze that destroyed their inn, but the pilgrim town would not survive if Kellatra did not put out the fires, and he needed to protect her while she did so.

As Jadaloo ran with the children to the beachfront near the docks, Abananthus pointed again. Small, dark objects fell out of the night sky, making a sound of shattering clay as they struck the house just next door. The flaming arrows followed so swiftly that Kellatra barely had time to raise her eyes much less her hands before the fiery projectiles impacted with the roof. Rankarus shielded his face with his arm against the explosion of flame. The scent of tamak-seed oil rolled through the streets with the smoke.

Kellatra placed her feet and tilted her head forward, her fingers making small, circular motions as she waved her hands from side to side. Rankarus turned from the fire, and Abananthus did the same. They needed to keep Kellatra's secret, the fact of her being a seer, from being accidentally revealed, even while she attempted to save the town. Their adopted faith took no stance against The Sight, but the fanatics of Tanjii certainly did, and they would happily target a seer if they heard tell of one living among the pilgrims.

Townsppeople ran from burning houses while others grabbed shovels and tried to throw dirt on the flames to douse them. Some stood tracing a spiral on their chest, eyes closed in prayer. He spotted a chain of buckets running water from the shore. Not enough buckets. Not enough water. As Rankarus looked back to Kellatra, he saw the house smoldering rather than burning.

"Can you do more than one at a time?" Rankarus looked back at the town. He didn't see how to save it if they didn't stop the fires from spreading.

"Maybe. I'll try with those two down the street." Kellatra walked toward the nearest houses on fire. Several men tried to attack the flames with shovelfuls of dirt. "If I could see more of them at once, I might have a chance."

"The hills." Abananthus looked beyond the town. "We can try to find a place away from the fanatics."

"Maybe we should get close to the fanatics." Rankarus took Kellatra's arm. "Maybe start a few fires of our own."

"This is why I asked you to marry me." Kellatra smiled. "For your devious mind and dangerous ideas."

"It's a good plan."

Rankarus turned to the strange voice nearby, blinking in surprise to see a man with a sword standing beside a tall rakthor female, her hairless, gray-green head towering above her companion. He'd seen them both in town and remembered they camped outside the town limits.

"We had the same idea." The man glanced at the hills behind the town.

"It will have a greater chance of success if we combine your use of The Sight with our swords," the rakthor female addressed Kellatra.

No one spoke for a moment, each person checking the others to see what reply would be made by whom.

"They're right. They've seen you." Rankarus looked between the man and the rakthor and Kellatra.

"And they have swords." Abananthus stared at the size of the blade in the rakthor female's fist.

"Yes." Kellatra grabbed Rankarus's hand and pulled him into a run. "We should hurry before the town is ash."

"We can leave introductions until we know who survives." The man with the rakthor female sounded simultaneously serious and amused as he broke into a run.

"Expedient, given the circumstances," the rakthor female said as she loped beside the swordsman.

As Rankarus ran with Kellatra and Abananthus down a street leading to the hills beyond the town, he wondered, as he had so many times in the past months, why he felt so elated and alive. Only a fool found danger so exciting. His only comfort came in knowing that his wife showed far too much good judgment to marry a fool. A reckless seeker of danger maybe — a fool, no.

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

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

THE THRONE



DJU-TESHA

DUST MOTES floated along shafts of light that stabbed through tall, narrow windows and illuminated the multitude of shelves and books below. The palace library in mid-afternoon held a single occupant. Dju-Tesha scratched her itching nose with one hand as she ran her fingers along the spines of a row of books. She could not remember where the volume she looked for resided. Maybe a librarian had moved it. Possibly, she misremembered where she last saw it. She bent down to examine the books of the lower shelves, her back aching, and her distended belly making the act cumbersome. No. Not there. Perhaps another row. She rose and looked around. Yes. She stood in the wrong row. How did her mind get so muddled? Though she had found her thoughts less ordered on occasion as her pregnancy progressed, the source of her distraction likely sat with the events of that morning. She walked around the corner of the row of shelves and reentered the following aisle thinking of the hours not long past.

The morning. A sunrise in a strange bed. Her new bed. The coronation. A ceremony she'd witnessed twice in her life and then, against all anticipated probabilities, participated in herself. Regent Zhan. How could such a thing be possible? She stroked her swollen stomach, considering the child within, and feeling sorry for it. No matter the sex, the child's life lay plotted out even before its birth. She understood now what that felt like. She had never considered the lack of freedom her father and both her brothers sacrificed to sit on the throne. All true choices evaporated — replaced with a series of dutiful obligations demanded by the seat of state.

She touched her finger to the spine of a leather-bound volume, its cover cracked with age. *The History of Zhan Fao-Kon of the First Great Dominion*. Exactly where she remembered it. Mostly. A book that might give her some insight into the predicament of a ruler newly ascended to the throne. The fourth child in succession, Zhan Fao-Kon assumed the throne after old age, a war, a plague, and an early death from a weak heart took the lives of his father and three brothers. A man of little training and no experience beset by usurpers and saddled with widespread discontent among the dominions. Yet, he became remembered as one of the most just and successful zhans of all three Great Dominions. She hoped to imbue herself with the long-dead zhan's wisdom — to cull from his triumphs and defeats an insight into how she herself should rule under such similar circumstances.

"I suspected I would find you here."

Dju-Tesha squeezed her eyes closed for a moment and held her breath against the voice she did not wish to hear. One of the many voices she sought to avoid by retreating deep into the library's cavernous expanse of shelves. Bracing herself, she inhaled slowly, opened her eyes, and turned to face her mother.

"Your presence is required." Dju-Tesha's mother, Pai-Nakee, stood at the end of the aisle of bookshelves, her arms crossed over the bust of her crimson silk dress.

“I needed to find a book.” Dju-Tesha forced herself to speak calmly so as not to stutter her words. How could she be the ruler of a vast nation and yet flustered by her mother’s reproachful tone?

“You are hiding.” Her mother frowned and stepped closer.

“Events in the past can give insight to the present.” Dju-Tesha held the book to her chest, more comfortable having something between herself and her mother.

“You do not need a book to tell you what you must do today.” Her mother peered at the title of the book but gave no hint of recognizing it or the subject of its contents. This did not surprise Dju-Tesha. Few people evidenced much interest in ancient history.

“I know what I must do, Mother.” Dju-Tesha met her mother’s hard eyes. “I simply do not know how I can do what must be done.”

“You do as all zhans and rulers do. You speak the words demanded by the situation and suggested to you by your councilors.” Her mother stood close to her now, and a twin dichotomous impulse arose in Dju-Tesha, leaving her desiring both to step away from her mother, and paradoxically, to throw her arms around her to seek maternal comfort.

She did neither.

“They are simple words to take so many lives.” Dju-Tesha’s stomach tightened as she thought about the event she avoided by looking for books about a dead zhan. How many lives had Zhan Fao-Kon taken in his time?

“There is no other way.” Dju-Tesha’s mother placed a hand on her shoulder, her tone and her face softening. “I know it is difficult for you. That it is not in your nature. That none of what has been forced upon you comes easily. It is a great burden to bear while you also carry a child.” Her mother patted Dju-Tesha’s curving tummy.

“I wish it could all go back to the way it was before.” The child within her moved, and she revised that thought. “Except Rhog-Kan and the baby.”

“Time passes in one direction only. From birth to death with little stops for joy and sorrow along the way. Today is neither sorrow nor joy.” Her mother took her arm. “Today is a day of justice.”

“I am not wise enough to dispense justice.” Dju-Tesha clutched the book a little more tightly. “They were Fan-Mutig’s closest friends.”

“Which makes their treachery all the more galling, and the need for harsh punishment all the more necessary.” Her mother looked toward the doors at the far end of the library hall. “Come. The accused are assembled in the council chamber. The trial awaits only your attendance.”

Dju-Tesha said nothing and did not move. Her mother placed both palms on her daughter’s shoulders.

“I understand this is difficult.” Her mother peered into her eyes. “I watched your father for decades as he ruled this dominion. I know how unforgiving and thankless a task it can be. I have seen other men covet the position, watched their wives planning with them to gain advantage in hopes of one day sitting beside the throne, even dreaming of being in that seat themselves. They are fools with no notion of what the office demands and how few rewards it offers. We have fine

rooms and fine clothes and servants to tend our every need. But, so does every tahn and wealthy merchant in the land. And all the responsibilities of their stations are inconsequential to those assumed by the one who sits upon the throne.”

“If you seek to put my mind at ease, Mother, you are failing gravely.” Dju-Tesha frowned at her mother’s words.

“I cannot sweeten the meat pie you must eat.” Her mother smiled slightly. “I intend only to tell you that I have seen your father make harsh choices, every day for years, and however ... unconventional a choice for ruler you may be ... you are your father’s child, and you will do well with this new role. But you must learn to act, not hide. Hiding is for children. You hid once in the library as a child when your father faced a similar day as this. Do you remember?”

“Yes. I remember.”

Dju-Tesha thought of that day in her ninth year, a day she and her father both lost their best friends.

SEVENTEEN YEARS AGO

FIRE-TINTED leaves cascaded through the still air to coat the grass and the bench beneath the wide branches of the poda tree. Dju-Tesha sat beneath the massive tree, wrapped in a white, woolen blanket, her small hands clutching a book as she huddled against the late autumn chill in the narrow private garden behind the library. Her favorite place to do her favorite thing.

“It is too cold to be outside reading.”

Dju-Tesha did not raise her eyes from the faded pages at the sound of her father’s voice.

“I have a blanket.”

“You’ll catch a cold.” Her father brushed a layer of leaves aside and sat down on the bench.

Dju-Tesha clutched the book more firmly, keeping her eyes on the words of the page.

“I never get sick before midwinter.”

“That is true.” Her father sighed and leaned back on the bench.

They sat in silence for some time. She sensed her father watching her as she read but would not look to him. Eventually, she could no longer make the words focus into meaning. She could only think the thoughts she wished to push away with the stories recounting the perils of the white wolf, Pai-Kutan. But the thoughts would not move from her mind.

“It’s not fair.”

“It is not fair for anyone, even if it is justice for a few.” Her father sighed again.

“She’s my only friend.” Dju-Tesha finally looked up to her father’s soft eyes and neatly trimmed beard. He looked as sad as she felt.

“And her father was *my* closest friend. Or so I believed.” Her father took one of her hands in his own. “Your fingers are chilled to ice.” He clasped both of her hands together between his own and rubbed them to generate warmth.

“I only need my hands to turn the pages.” A warmth moved down from Dju-Tesha’s hands to her tummy.

“A girl of nine reading on a cold bench. You are strange and stubborn.” Her father wrapped his arm around her and drew her close as he continued to warm her hands with his own. “But you are my strange and stubborn daughter. So, you must forgive me when I do things that I have no choice but to do and which bring you pain.”

“But couldn’t you banish everyone else except Kee-Kuzee?” Dju-Tesha wiped at the tears suddenly forming in her eyes. She had no real friends in the palace beyond Kee-Kuzee. The other girls would play with her, but she did not wish to play with them. They wanted to play dress-up games and pretend to be tahneffs trapped by monsters and needing to be rescued by handsome, young tahns. She liked to read and to wander the library halls, and only Kee-Kuzee seemed to like the same things as her. Now she would have no friends at all.

“Even if I could, do you think she would wish to be your friend when your father killed her own?” Her father’s voice rumbled softly in her ear.

“But her father tried to kill *you*.” Dju-Tesha hated the grown-up world of the palace. Everyone smiling but really hating everyone else. Everyone fighting with gestures of kindness and feuding with acts of compassion. And best friends trying to kill a man, so they could take his throne. She did not blame her father for hanging the man who’d tried to poison him. But his daughter took no part in that plan.

“He did try to take my life, but he doubtless had assistance from many in his family.” Her father’s voice sounded mournful. “While he confessed to being solely responsible, I suspect he did so to spare his wife and brother from any incrimination. I cannot prove their involvement, but I cannot trust them to be near. And I must send a harsh sign to all who would attempt the same act that the consequences are severe for all connected to the perpetrator.”

“But if she’s banished, Kee-Kuzee can never come back.” Dju-Tesha wondered what her friend would look like in a few years. How would she herself appear? Would she still be short and skinny, or would she be tall and pretty like her mother?

“That is the purpose of banishment.” Her father brushed a blood-red leaf from his chest. “The throne is a hard seat to sit upon. It demands you do things you would prefer to avoid. It requires you to act to protect yourself as well as others. If I did not act harshly in this case, it would weaken not only my own rule, but the eventual rule of your brother. Yet, if I acted more severely, I would become a tyrant and undermine your brother’s future rule just as surely. So, I must banish your friend and her family, even as I must confiscate their estates, and as I must condemn to death a man I loved as a brother.”

“I understand.” Dju-Tesha was not certain she did fully understand, but she knew that her father found his decision as troubling as she did, and she did not wish to cause him further pain. “But I don’t have to like it.”

“I will not like it, either.” Her father kissed her head. “But together we will struggle through. Our wounds can sometimes make us stronger for the pain they cause.”

“Philosopher Wiku-Lee.” Dju-Tesha brightened at recognizing the quote her father spoke. She smiled up at him.

“Not strange and stubborn.” Her father pulled her tighter and kissed her head again. “Clever

and insightful is my daughter.”

Dju-Tesha’s face grew warm under the force of her father’s compliment, a warmth that spread throughout her body and erased all the chill of that sad, autumn day.

THE PRESENT

A LOUD sigh filled the air. Dju-Tesha wrinkled her nose as she considered what her father would think of her hiding among shelves of books, pretending to search for answers he already gave to her so many years ago.

“Let us go.” Dju-Tesha took her mother’s hands from her shoulder, replaced the book on the shelf, and marched down the aisle toward the entrance.

“Hmm.” Her mother stepped abreast of her as they walked toward the library doors. “You still obey your father better than me, even when following his memory.”

“He saw me for who I am, not who he wanted me to be,” Dju-Tesha said.

“I see what you can be, which is far more than what you are,” her mother replied.

Dju-Tesha did not say more. What more could she say? She did need to be more than she had ever been. She needed to learn to rule the dominion. And part of that rule would entail casting judgment on those who tried to kill her.

When they arrived in the council chamber, they found the full council of nine men standing, two chairs reserved at a long, polished pada-wood table, one at the head, beside Councilor Kao-Rhee, and one opposite him. The accused, three men, tahns of high houses, stood before the tall, narrow windows, the fine hairs of their necks glowing in the bright, afternoon light. The men glared at Dju-Tesha, iron shackles binding their wrists and ankles. Three soldiers, standing one to each prisoner, ensured no harm came to those in the room, especially the Regent Zhan.

“My apologies, councilmen. The constraints of pregnancy delayed me unduly.” Dju-Tesha looked at the members of the council, her eyes ending on Kao-Rhee, pleased with herself that her lie came so easily to her tongue. She paused before the chair at the head of the table as she looked at the three men who had conspired to burn her alive. “Please begin.”

“Thank you, Regent Zhan Kon Dju-Tesha.” Kao-Rhee bowed to her as she sat. She noted his use of her full name as well as her new title.

For the next hour, the Prime Councilor presented witnesses and reviewed the charges arrayed against the three high tahns in their failed attempt to take her life with what would have appeared to be an accidental fire. First, he brought in the head storekeeper for Tahn Ja-Chu’s estate house in the city. The man explained how several small casks of tamak-seed oil went missing from the storeroom a week past. Next, a house guard in Tahn Ki-Fhe’s estate house told how he stood as lookout in the palace gardens while two fellow guardsmen used hooks and ropes to ascend to Dju-Tesha’s former balcony and douse the room with the “missing” tamak-seed oil. They also heard from Kao-Rhee’s former servant, later employed by Tahn Ni-Fee’s house. She recounted an overheard conversation between the tahn and his eldest son where they spoke about planting something in an unnamed tahneff’s sleeping chambers. Lastly, Tahn Ni-Fee’s own son, his

youngest, Pao-Kowto, a thin man with a gentle voice and shy appearance, explained how he, too, heard the same conversation between his father and brother. He also told of the many times both had spoken against Zhan Kon Tin-Tsu and then Regent Zhan Kon Dju-Tesha before she assumed the throne.

At the end of the hour, Dju-Tesha's back ached and her bladder screamed for relief. She wished she had thought to take time to find a privy before attending the hearing. She also experienced a nausea that she attributed more to the story of how the three chained men had plotted to kill her than the usual stomach ills of bearing a child. She looked at the men and they stared back, silent and defiant. They did not regret trying to burn her alive. The only remorse in evidence on their faces arose from the fact that she did not die by those flames.

"Do the accused have anything to say in their defense?" Councilman Kao-Rhee stepped over to the three tahns. They glared at Dju-Tesha.

"We do not recognize the authority of this pretender to the throne, this halfwit girl, to judge us." Tahn Ni-Fee spat his words at her. "We did what was necessary to save the dominion from the ruin of an ill-bred and degenerate family. When you are living under the heel of the Tanshen heretic, you will regret the day we failed to set this nation on the proper course and spare it the ignominious defeat that will surely come at this simpleton's hands." He ended by spitting on the floor before jerking his head back to stare at the ceiling.

"A clear confession, and a declaration of guilt absent of any contrition." Councilman Kao-Rhee looked around the room and finally to Dju-Tesha. "Regent Zhan Dju-Tesha, you have only to pass judgment, as guilt is no longer in doubt."

Dju-Tesha stood, placing the tips of her fingers down upon the table to steady herself against dizziness of the moment as much as the loss of balance attendant to carrying an ever-growing child in her womb. She looked at the nine councilmen around the table, especially Kao-Rhee, and then her mother. The elder woman's face appeared stern yet encouraging. Finally, she brought her eyes to the three traitorous tahns.

"The renowned philosopher of the Second Great Dominion, Zhan Ni-Taotan, once wrote, '*We are each of us a single strand in the greater tapestry of the universe. When any one strand becomes frayed or fades, it mars the beauty of the full fabric.*'" Dju-Tesha enjoyed the expression of surprise on Tahn Ni-Fee's face as she quoted her favorite philosopher. "You three traitors have stained the fabric of this dominion. You have shamed yourselves and your families and condemned both by your actions."

Dju-Tesha took much of the time during the presentation of evidence over the past hour to consider her punishment. She knew she had little choice in the case of the three conspirators, but she did have greater freedom to impose her justice on the families of the men. She thought of her childhood friend, Kee-Kuzee, the one girl among all in the palace who enjoyed her company. What had the girl seen in her that others missed? Now, about to sentence the men who wished her dead, another, darker notion occurred to Dju-Tesha in regard to her childhood companion. Maybe, the girl had seen nothing in her at all, her friendship as false as that between their fathers. Possibly, the girl befriended her to learn more of her father's doings and to pass that information on to her

own sire to assist in his plans for betrayal. She did remember Kee-Kuzee often asking questions about Dju-Tesha's father. What he liked to eat. Where he went on certain days. What he did in the evenings. Perhaps she never really had a childhood friend.

“For your treachery, I assert the following sentence.” Dju-Tesha took her hands from the table and clasped them behind her. “Your estates in the city and in the countryside shall be confiscated, their monies and lands and contents to be divided equally among loyal tahns. Your families, your wives and children, your brothers and sisters and their spouses, your parents, your entire brood, shall be gathered with all haste and placed on a ship to sail for Punderra or Juparti. They will be banished for the entirety of their lives and for the lives of all their progeny. Your family names will never be spoken again in this land.”

Tahn Ni-Fee cursed her while the other men looked stunned. Banishment generally encompassed a generation, the children of the banished allowed to return. She would have had them carted to the Atheton border that very day were it not for the fact that the Athetons had closed the crossings into their land, claiming concerns over the outbreak of the Living Death still afflicting some of their towns.

“As for yourselves, you shall suffer the death you intended for me.” She looked at the men before her, ignoring their profanities. “At sunset this day, you shall be burned at the stake like common heretics.”

The men fell silent at their sentence. Dju-Tesha held their eyes a moment longer and then turned back to the table. Kao-Rhee seemed surprised, but pleasantly so. She noted that her mother's gaze more greatly resembled pride than she could remember seeing at any time prior in her life. She nodded to both her mother and Kao-Rhee and then turned and walked from the room.

She made it all the way to the private library of the zhan, now her private library as regent, before the tears came to wash down her cheeks. She sat in the large chair behind the same polished poda-wood desk her father once sat behind and wept. She did not know if she wept for the loss of her father and brothers, the forfeiture of her innocence in passing judgment against her would-be killers, for the girl she had been long ago, missing a friend she never really had, or for the child she would birth and who would one day sit in this same chair and make similar difficult decisions without ever having a choice in assuming that role of ruler.

When the tears ended, she called for her servants and retired to her private chambers in search of that privy, and to change her dress. She would need something regal and imposing to wear for the execution that evening. Something that looked appealing by firelight. She sighed at the callous calculations she now made. Sighed again as she selected a crimson gown she knew would more readily hide her belly and catch the light of a setting sun and three large bonfires.

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

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

THE AROMA of spiced meats rising from flames at street-side stands, the smell of pack-animal droppings fresh on the paving stones, voices shouting out wares from shop doors, men calling advances to passing women, women walking in twos and threes and talking in loud tones, pedestrians jostling for room as carts and horses crowd the narrow lane — the sunset sights and sounds on the streets of Tsee-Kaanlin, capital of the Tanshen Dominion.

Ondromead inhaled deeply of the swelter of smells as he listened to the voices and noises around him. He walked through the city holding tight to Hashel's hand. They ate from skewers of spice-laden meat. He tasted more cumin than animal flesh, leading him to suspect that the beef he chewed found its origin in some beast other than a cow. Hashel grinned up at him, clearly enjoying the early evening stroll. The boy always liked seeing new places and new things. Ondromead wondered if any unseen places in the Iron Realm still existed for his ancient eyes to observe.

They wandered all day, waiting for the event they were intended to witness. A vague humming in the back of Ondromead's mind led him through the thoroughfares and side streets, leaving him speculating that the location of the incident he needed to behold moved, or that the people it involved stayed in motion. Either way, the afternoon had progressed in measured steps of food and walking, with Ondromead explaining the local history of each section of the city as he remembered it.

“Over there in that inn across the street, a tahneff from a prominent family eloped with the young tahn of a rival clan, the action leading to a decades-long feud between the two families. I witnessed the elopement as well as their unfortunate deaths several months later. I also saw the boy born from that union hidden with an uncle in the countryside. He grew up to be a fine carpenter and built ornate tables for both the families. This was nearly a hundred years ago. Not too long.”

Ondromead steered the boy around a puddle in the street, narrowly avoiding a splash of murky water caused by a passing horse's hooves. Hashel used his stick of meat to point to a man sitting near a carpet shop. The man had no legs and held a bowl in his hands, begging for food and coins. Ondromead frowned. He'd explained numerous times that he could not interfere with the lives of those he witnessed, even if in passing. To give money to pay for a meal in a tavern did not seem to upset any significant balance in the affairs of the world but giving a coin to a beggar in need of a meal might have ramifications for years and years. It made no sense to him, but he'd seen the truth of it too many times. However, it so far appeared that Hashel could affect events as he wished. And Ondromead, it seemed, could buy the boy food to do with as he pleased. This held no logic. It felt as though the rules governing his life were not essential but rather arbitrary, put in place and enforced at random.

He bought another stick of skewered meat from a nearby vendor and handed it to Hashel.

“Your compassion is a credit to you.” He patted the boy's head.

Hashel smiled and walked over to the legless man, handing him the meat with his usual silence.

“Thank ya, little ’un.” The man beamed toothlessly at Hashel and began to gnaw on the skewer as best he could.

Ondromead frowned. He should have purchased a dumpling. It would have been easier for the man to consume. Hashel rejoined him and they continued down the thoroughfare. After a few blocks, the humming in his head grew louder, a buzz that became a trill. He stopped before the door of an inn.

“I think we have found our place and our moment of the day.” Ondromead tilted his head back to see the masthead above the door lit by the amber rays of the setting sun. *The Sword Tree*. A weather-faded and very poorly rendered painting of a tree composed of swords accompanied the paint-flecked letters declaring the title of the inn.

“I know this place.” Ondromead put an arm around Hashel and guided him toward the door. “I was here several decades ago, shortly after it was built. An unpleasant day. Let us hope the evening proves more enjoyable.” The tenor of the trill in his mind told him it would likely be otherwise, but he made sure not to let this affect his face or the tone of voice. No need to ruin the boy’s good time. They’d spent the day doing what they both enjoyed most — exploring, seeing things never seen for Hashel, and seeing things again with the benefit of new eyes for Ondromead.

He wandered into the main room of the inn; the din of noise from the patrons eating and drinking and telling stories of their day gave the place a lively, welcoming feel. He started to make for an empty table, but the pulse in his head pulled him in another direction, down the side hall, toward where he knew several private rooms sat in the rear of the establishment. He walked slowly with Hashel down the hall, knowing now where he needed to go, a place he’d been long ago. He did not bother to glance around as he opened a door to a storeroom and stepped inside. Hashel gave a curious look, but followed, silent as ever.

In the back of the storeroom, he found a wooden wall panel beside a row of shelves stacked high with cloth sacks of flour and nuts. He poked his finger into a knot in the wall panel and stepped back as it swung open to reveal a dark, narrow passage. Hashel gasped beside him, clearly surprised at finding a secret hallway so easily revealed.

“This way. Mind the cobwebs.” Ondromead ushered Hashel into the tiny space and pulled the wooden panel closed behind them.

The secret passage led past four private dining rooms — places patrons came for seclusion during their clandestine meetings. The passage allowed the owner of the establishment to eavesdrop on those confidential conversations and later use the knowledge gleaned from them to advance his station. Or, he had for several months after building the inn, until the day Ondromead witnessed him being caught in the act and stabbed through the heart for his treachery. Ondromead wondered if the current innkeeper used this hidden hallway for a similar purpose. By the thickness of the dust on the floor, and the density of spiderwebs, he doubted it.

They stepped toward a slender beam of light illuminating the shadowed corridor. A peep hole sat at eye level for Ondromead. No such similar portal existed at Hashel’s height. He suspected

this would be for the best. He placed his finger to his lips and Hashel nodded. The boy and silence were always as one.

From the private dining room, Ondromead heard voices.

“My apologies for bringing you so far from your workshop in the palace. I had matters to attend to near here, and this seemed a better place to meet.”

“No trouble, Councilor. What I have to say can be said with a plate of chicken before me and a cup of wine in my hand.”

Ondromead leaned close enough to see through the peep hole and put faces to the voices. A short, bearded man with the chest of an oak tree sat chewing at a chicken leg in his hand. A thin-faced man across from him wore simple gray robes, giving no indication of his status or profession. The bearded man had referred to him as *councilor*, so possibly they both originated from the palace.

“What is it that you wish to speak to me about with such urgency?” the thin-faced councilor asked.

The bearded man stopped eating and looked up from his plate.

“I been an arms master at the palace for thirty years, and I seen weapons in all sorts of states of use, from fresh hammered to battle broken to rusted in a field. But I never seen what I seen with this Juparti shadow steel.” The bearded man shook his head.

An arms master and a councilor from the palace. Ondromead suspected he knew where this conversation would head.

“What have you seen?” The councilor leaned in and lowered his voice.

“Rusted armor and brittle blades.” The arms master nearly whispered. “Looks to me like the Juparti heretics sold us a sour lot of goods.”

“Are you certain?” The councilor reached for a fresh clay bottle of wine.

“I am,” the arms master said. “I tested ten pieces of armor and more than twenty swords and it all come out the same. All the metal’s gettin’ weak. The more use they get, the more likely they are to fail. I seen six sword shatter in my hands.”

“That is indeed worrisome.” The councilor poured the arms master more wine. The man nodded his thanks and took a long drink before returning to his chicken with renewed enthusiasm.

“I think ya needs to tell our Juparti supplier to make good on the deal and either give back what you paid or give us the shadow steel we was promised.” The arms master wiped his greasy chin with the back of his hand. “And tell the tigans at the battlefront, of course. They’ll need to swap out their swords for common steel at least.” He took another drink of the wine.

“Yes. I will advise them immediately.” The councilor folded his hands on the table again.

“That’s good, I’d...” The arms master’s face twisted and he grunted. “I don’t feel...” He looked down at his hands as he blinked. “I can’t move...” His head rolled to the side, and he slouched back into the wooden bench. His eyes remained open, looking at the councilor, his mouth working wordlessly.

“I had hoped you would not examine the shadow steel too closely.” The councilor took the new bottle of wine from the table, inserted the cork, and slid it into a leather satchel. “You see, it

is not Juparti shadow steel, and it does not fail through negligence. The swords and armor you and I convinced the zhan to purchase in order to end the war with the north come from entirely different forges and were always meant to fail.” The councilor stood and leaned close to the dying arms master, his voice a murmur, his long face tight with anger. “What I wish to tell you, what I have wished to tell someone for so long, is that I have not betrayed my zhan and my nation for advantage or profit. I have had no choice. Just as I had no choice but to poison your wine. Were the tigans to learn of it now, it would undo too much, and I would be called to account, and the lives of my sons held hostage against me would be forfeit. I am sorry. But blood means more than the zhan or the dominion or coin or anything else.”

The councilor looked down at the still form of the arms master, blinking as he realized he spoke his conscience to a corpse. He reached out a hand to close the arms master’s unmoving eyelids and then slipped quietly from the room.

Ondromead pulled away from the peephole and looked down to Hashel’s sad face. His own sadness blended with the desire to write down what he’d seen in the black book.

“That’s all we need to see tonight.” He patted Hashel’s shoulder. He wondered if the boy understood the implications of the conversation. Did he realize what it meant for the battle now being fought between the Tanshen and Daeshen armies? Did he understand the connection to the other troops they witnessed marching? Did he comprehend where it all likely led? Having witnessed many similar concatenated events throughout the history of the world, Ondromead could guess the fruition of what he’d seen and heard. He decided to explain it to Hashel later.

“Come. Let us leave this dank spider nest and find a proper meal for the night. Something more filling than a stick of meat. Maybe a fruit pie to end the meal. Cherries maybe. I know a tavern not far from here that once had very good cherry pie.”

Hashel’s face brightened at the mention of pie. Yes. There would be plenty of time to explain the complexities of war to the boy. And it would be better digested with a serving of cherry pie.

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

SMOKE AND ash drifted on the wind, stinging lungs and dimming visibility in the moonless night. Sketkee walked beside Kadmallin as they led the three humans through the last dark streets of the town. They reached a sparsely wooded field that sloped up toward a grassy hill. She saw the human fanatics raining fire upon the town from the hilltop. Her vision at night exceeded that of humans, and she made out at least twelve forms. Human males from what she assessed of their shape and size. Their behavior marked one of the central curiosities of the human propensity to pursue violence as a first course of action to evade rationality. To attack other humans solely because they did not share the same belief in an imaginary and unprovable supernatural being could only be described as completely irrational. A congenital deformity of their brains seemed the most likely culprit.

As she picked her way quietly between the thin trees crawling up the hillside, she mimicked Kadmallin in turning her blade sideways, away from the humans on the hill, eliminating any chance that a stray reflection of firelight might give away their position. She glanced back at the three humans behind her. The large male and the female did not move as silently as herself and Kadmallin, but fortunately, they did not make undue noise as they followed. Oddly, the smaller male, the one who appeared to be the mate of the female, made even less sound than Kadmallin in his passage through the thinly populated woods. Possibly he had experience in woodcraft from hunting.

Kadmallin stopped and raised a hand as the small patch of trees gave way to tall grass. Sketkee stepped beside him. They were still thirty ganots from the height of the human attackers on the hill and at least another fifty ganots from the humans' position. One of the humans operated what looked like an oversized sling. He placed three small jars of oil in a large canvas pocket attached to two leather straps as long as his own body, which he then spun in an ever-faster circle. He released the straps at the proper moment, and the flammable projectiles sailed through the night sky in a high arc, falling to shatter upon the houses of the pilgrim town at the bottom of the hill. A simple and efficient system she had once seen used in an attack on a Nevaeo castle years ago.

"You three stay here." Kadmallin turned to the three humans and spoke in a low voice. "We'll circle around the back side of the hill and come over the top. If you can break a few of the jars of oil and create a fire, it will give us a good diversion to sweep down from above and attack."

The plan seemed sound to Sketkee, if somewhat time-consuming given the circumstances. However, the human woman shook her head.

"I won't need any help." The human female stepped up beside a slender hickory tree. "I can see them well enough now. There aren't as many as I thought."

The human archers on the hill lit six more arrows. They accomplished this by dipping the arrows in a jar of oil and then placing them in iron buckets of hot coals. By the light of the flames

eating the tightly wrapped cloth at the tips of the arrows, Sketkee saw the men draw their bows and tilt back, aiming for the town. The men released, and the arrows soared skyward.

The human female raised both hands in front of her chest, palms facing the attackers on the hill. A massive cracking sound filled the air. The human attackers cried out as the clay jars of tamak-seed oil at their feet exploded, smashed by a massive invisible hand. Oil splashed into one of the buckets of hot coals, igniting in a small blaze that illuminated the startled and frightened faces of the humans near it.

Sketkee had seen displays of The Sight on many occasions and always found that they elicited a strange trilling in her mind. To have the fabric of reality so warped and distorted with such ease suggested the possibility that all reality might be manipulated at all times, meaning that any rational assessment of the world would prove impossible.

The human female ignored the cries of the attackers on the hill and turned to look at the six flaming arrows just reaching their apex in the black sky above. She extended her arms as though reaching out to the arrows. After a moment, instead of descending toward the town, the arrows gained height and turned on a wide arc back toward the hill. As the arrows came into line with the spot marking their origin, the female swept her arms to the side, the arrows following the motion, accelerating until they became streaks of light. Only one human attacker on the hill noticed the fire diving at them from the sky. He shouted out a warning to his accomplices just as the arrows impacted near their feet. The spilled tamak-seed oil burst into flame, rapidly spreading in a fiery wave along the ground and racing up over the attackers to ignite the oil soaking their clothes. The men screamed and ran and fell, tumbling down the hill, flames leaping from their fire-shrouded limbs to light the grassy hill aflame.

“That was a much better plan.” Kadmallin grinned wide at the female. Sketkee found she experienced an odd sensation in his appreciation of the human female. She could not place it, and so ignored it.

“Exceptionally efficient.” Sketkee wondered what other skills the woman possessed with The Sight.

“I have an affinity for fire.” The female watched the men beating at their limbs and rolling through the grass.

“If they are dead, they can’t tell their fanatic friends not to do this again.” The smaller male leaned close to his mate as he spoke.

“*Wounds remind us of our missteps and misdeeds.*” The large male wiped his forehead as he watched the humans burning on the hillside. Sketkee recognized the phrase as originating with a lesser-known human poet from Juparti named Juvaltana. She wondered how the man came to know such a phrase. Possibly he had been a philosopher himself before becoming a pilgrim.

“They deserve to receive what they’ve given.” The female glared at the fires on the hillside. “But you’re right.” She raised both hands and then slowly pressed them down, the flames gnawing at the humans on the hillside squashed to smoke.

Sketkee considered it an impressive display of skill with The Sight until the female stepped from the tree line and looked down toward the town. As the female raised her palms toward the

town, Sketkee and the others emerged from the tree line to join her. Below them, at the base of the hill, twenty houses and buildings across the small pilgrim town raged with fire, the light bright enough to reflect off the waves of the ocean in the background. As the female turned her body and her arms from left to right, the flames below in the town dissipated into smoke, a wave of darkness passing through the town in less than a minute. The female appeared to have extinguished all flames, even lanterns, cook fires and candles. A great cheer of human voices arose, from the town.

“Well done, Kell.” The smaller human male took the female’s hand.

“Once I could see all the fires at the same time, it wasn’t so hard.” The female sounded pleased with her accomplishment. Sketkee had encountered other seers as powerful and adept with The Sight, but only at the Academy of Sight in the City of Leaves. She presumed, by the female’s Mumtiba accent, that she had studied at the Academy and wondered how she came to be in the pilgrim town. She and Kadmallin had never encountered seers among the pilgrims.

“That was impressive.” Kadmallin extended his hand to the female with a grin. “I’m Kadmallin. This is Sketkee. I’m her guard.”

“She needs a guard?” The smaller man looked up at Sketkee. She stared back.

“Kellatra.” The female frowned at the male as she accepted Kadmallin’s hand. “This is my husband, Rankarus, and our friend, Abananthus. Thank you for your help.”

“We were of minimal assistance.” Sketkee shook Kellatra’s hand as custom prescribed. “I am a natural philosopher from the Sun Realm. I am studying the pilgrims and the dreams.” The frequent repetition of the lie made it easy to speak.

“Do you have the dreams?” The larger male, Abananthus, made a face expressing curiosity.

“On occasion.” She rarely admitted to having the dreams, although she experienced them more often than she revealed, even to Kadmallin.

“We’re innkeepers from Punderra,” Rankarus said. “We’d appreciate it if you didn’t mention this to anyone. The pilgrims will assume it’s the work of the Goddess and we’d like to let them.”

“The pilgrims accept seers, but the Kam-Djen fanatics hate them, and I have no desire to end up with an arrow in me.” Kellatra’s rationale made sense, but the tenor of her voice and the cast of her face indicated to Sketkee that other reasons existed to urge her toward secrecy.

“We’re good at keeping secrets.” Kadmallin smiled again but said no more.

“We should get to our children.” Kellatra looked to the town. A few relit oil lamps dimly illuminated the damage. “And people will need help.”

“Yes. We have wasted enough time in unnecessary conversation.” Sketkee walked downhill toward the town. The others fell in behind her. The two parties exchanged brief farewells and followed separate paths once they reached the town’s border. She and Kadmallin assisted the townspeople as best as possible. Many people suffered burns, and a few had broken limbs. Several humans had died in the fires. Family members and friends wept over scorched bodies retrieved from charred homes. After a short time, it became clear that without her cloak, Sketkee could not hope to be of assistance as her countenance too greatly disturbed the humans, even in the dim light of the lanterns set up around the affected streets. She dispensed advice on what herbs to blend for healing burns and headed back to their camp at the edge of town, leaving Kadmallin to further help

the humans.

As she walked from the town, she heard as many prayers of thanks to the human goddess as comments on her appearance and speculation as to her nature. Humans, she found, did not easily accept differences, their first reaction being suspicion, followed quickly by imagined grievances, and then, inexorably, violence. The fiery assault on the town by the Kam-Djen fanatics proved the near inevitability of this proclivity. Kadmallin's openness of mind marked him as unusual among his people, and one of the chief reasons she preferred his company.

Back at their camp, she stripped and bathed naked in the cool ocean waters, scrubbing away the soot and smell of smoke. Once in her tent, she lit a small lantern and removed her journal to examine her notes. An idea nagged at her mind, one which seemed obvious only in retrospect. If the crystal artifact did originate in the Forbidden Realm, if it were, indeed, an ancient urris device, it stood as a significant possibility that it required The Sight in order to operate. The urris were historically known to use The Sight in extraordinary ways. A device they fashioned would likely need some manner of The Sight for its use. Indeed, it might be created with the power of The Sight. This could also explain the infrequent alteration of the artifact in Viktik's possession. Possibly, the device responded to the nearby use of The Sight. It may have responded to the human female's use of The Sight. She needed to inspect it again in the morning. However, to do so, she had to convince Viktik of the validity of her supposition.

Kadmallin returned near dawn. As he went to the ocean, she brewed a pot of tea. After bathing, he stood by the tent drying himself with a shirt. In the pre-dawn glow lighting the clear sky, she examined his naked body, noting how well he had kept his physique over the years. His age showed in his face rather than a paunch at the stomach as in most human males. It endowed him with an enduring physical symmetry she found pleasing.

"Seein' somethin' you haven't seen before?" Kadmallin pulled a pair of breeches up over his pale legs.

"Noting an absence of alteration over time." Sketkee handed him a cup of tea.

"Must be the tea." Kadmallin smiled and held the warm cup cradled in his hands as he sipped at it.

"More likely it is a propensity handed down through breeding, probably in your father's line." Sketkee accepted the cup while Kadmallin frowned and pulled a dry shirt over his head.

"The town survived well enough." Kadmallin took the tea again. "Twelve dead. One child. They'll be holding a funeral on the north side of town later today. We should attend. Be seen to be mourning. The whole town will be there."

"I will need to borrow your cloak." Sketkee considered whether to share her musings with Kadmallin and came to the conclusion she always did when faced with that question. "It is fortunate the entire town will be present."

After explaining her reasons for wishing to attend the funeral, Kadmallin nodded in agreement.

"It makes sense. May be risky, trusting people we don't know, but it makes sense. At the least, we know who to stand behind in a fight." Kadmallin laughed. Sketkee did not attempt to decipher

the source of his amusement.

Later that afternoon, with the sun hiding behind clouds that had already deposited their stores of rain while passing over and heading east, Sketkee and Kadmallin stood with the rest of the pilgrims as they said prayers and chanted for the dead lined up to be cremated on a single pyre. Kadmallin's borrowed cloak hung short on her long legs and fit tight around the shoulders, but it covered her face well enough, and she attracted minimal attention. She noticed a human girl of around ten years of age staring at the rear of the cloak, no doubt looking to catch a glimpse of Sketkee's tail, which she customarily kept wrapped at her waist beneath her long, rakthorian vest. She experienced an irrational urge to uncoil her tail and let it fall within the girl's view but repressed it. Causing children to scream at a funeral would not endear her to the pilgrims.

A little while later, she and Kadmallin located the Juparti seer and her family. As she stepped up beside Kellatra, the woman ceased her melodic prayers. The husband and the rest of her family noted her and Kadmallin's presence but said nothing.

"A sad day." Kellatra wiped a tear from her eye.

Not feeling sadness, and incapable of doing so, Sketkee responded as she had learned to do in such exchanges with humans — by echoing their sentiments.

"Yes." She added another more relevant observation. "It would have been far worse without your intervention."

"I did what I could because I can." Kellatra shrugged. Sketkee found this statement interesting. It reminded her of things Kadmallin often said. It gave her what she considered a rational hope for the progress of their conversation and possible future interactions.

"I have come to ask your assistance with something that requires someone with your particular skills." Sketkee looked at Kellatra.

"My so-called skills are not for hire." Kellatra frowned.

"I am not suggesting such an arrangement." Sketkee stared into Kellatra's eyes, noting that the woman did not respond with the typical involuntary repulsion so common with her people. "I merely want to show you something. You will determine if it is worth your time to help me investigate it."

"What do you want to show me?" Kellatra's eyebrows raised with the pitch of her voice.

Sketkee had considered how to broach this subject and how to convince the woman to accede to her plan. She decided to begin at the beginning.

"What do you know of the urris?"

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

THE THRONE



RHOG-KAN

STEEL SMASHED against steel, two swords meeting in midair, reverberations of the impact racing down the blades, through the hilts and into the arms of the men wielding them. Rhog-Kan ignored the pain in his wrist and pressed close before his opponent could swing again, smashing the man in the chest with his armored shoulder, knocking him off balance, and thrusting the tip of his blade into the gap in the metal joint under the man's right arm. The Tanshen soldier cried out and Rhog-Kan rammed his rounded shield into the man's face, driving him to the ground. He dispatched the fallen man with another thrust of his sword — this time, through the helmet visor. The man's body twitched, but Rhog-Kan did not take time to look at the death he inflicted, yanking the blade free to launch an attack at a nearby Tanshen soldier fighting one of his own Daeshen men.

Oddly, Rhog-Kan fought with an enthusiasm he rarely attained in his youth, driven on by an anger not entirely directed at his opponents. The stabbing pain in his heart that fired his rage found its origin in the news of the recent attack on his wife in her chambers. He should have been present to protect her. He should not need to stand battering swords against Tanshen invaders. Every blow he landed spoke of his outrage that his duty to defend his nation called him away from shielding his wife and unborn child. The sooner he repelled the Tanshen army, the faster he could return to the palace. The sooner he won this battle, the quicker he could accomplish the goal of turning back the enemy army. And the more Tanshen soldiers he killed on the battlefield, the more rapidly their assault would crumble.

He and his men fought at the base of a hill at the northern end of a shallow valley between two long stands of woods. The field normally held barley, corn, and rye in separate plots divided by low stone fences intended to mark land more than impede trespass. Due to its placement and natural formation, the valley had hosted several battles over the centuries. Rhog-Kan had studied all of them. He knew the advantages of the ground he held and the disadvantages of attempting to take the position the Tanshen forces fought from. Their armies were nearly matched in numbers, with the Tanshen having slightly more troops than his 10,000. He split the Daeshen forces into three divisions, the center holding the largest contingent at 6,000 men while the flanks each held 2,000. The Tanshen tigan arrayed his forces in four divisions of roughly 2,500 each. Rhog-Kan stood at the base of the command hill near the northern end of the valley because the two central Tanshen divisions, armed with shadow steel, had punched a narrow hole through his opposing center forces. While nearly half of the men in his flanking divisions were armed with stolen shadow steel blades from previous successful encounters, the central division used only common steel. He did not have enough stolen shadow steel to arm all his men, and he'd learned in his first battle as a tigan to always protect his flanks.

A violent impact on his left shoulder sent him tumbling sideways to the ground. He rolled

with the force of the blow and came to his feet, crouched, his sword in his right hand. His left arm dangled useless at his side. He fought to ignore the pain as he glanced at it. The shadow steel blade of the man standing before him had slid through the common metal of Rhog-Kan's armor. Blood ran down his arm to his empty hand, his shield dropped from the shock of the laceration.

He did not wait to assess his wound, or for his opponent to attack again. He charged forward, bellowing his rage. He feinted a thrust the Tanshen soldier could easily block with his shield only to step to the side and divert his blow toward the man's knees. The soldier's shadow steel blade glanced off of the metal of Rhog-Kan's breastplate as the man screamed in pain and fell to the ground. Rhog-Kan quickly stabbed the soldier through the neck gap between his helmet and breast armor. Blood gushed upward. The man gurgled and clutched his throat as he died.

Rhog-Kan could not afford to hold his wounded left arm, as it would hinder his sword hand. He needed to remove the scored steel of the left shoulder plate soon and have his arm tended to or he would bleed out. If he died, the battle would likely die with him. He needed to retreat, even as he asked his men to fight harder. This enraged him as much as the thought of dying and leaving Dju-Tesha and their child unprotected. As he turned, a bellow of frustration building in his chest, he noticed the fallen Tanshen soldier's sword, a small divot marring the blade. His bellow turned to a howl as hope surged to match his anger.

He attacked the nearest Tanshen soldier, two shadow steel blades meeting in a shattering, screeching contact. He smiled as he saw that both blades held deep fissures from the impact. He attacked again, swiping at the man's sword itself rather than the man. His blade caught the other from the side and sliced it in half. The Tanshen soldier stared at his blade in such disbelief that he barely noticed Rhog-Kan's sword until it crashed into his helmet, the blow rendering the weapon bent beyond use. The man stumbled to his knees. Rhog-Kan reached to his waist and pulled a second sword made of common steel from his sheath. In a single motion, he severed the kneeling man's head from his shoulders.

Rhog-Kan knew that he would win this battle. The event he'd hoped and planned for now came to pass. He'd worried at the rust he'd seen on the captured shadow steel blades, spending days testing random swords and armor with hammering blows. Whether intentionally, or through incompetence, the Juparti seers who furnished the Tanshen army with their shadow steel gave them swords and armor that could withstand limited abuse. Each sword and each plate of armor seemed capable of enduring only a certain amount of punishment, a finite number of blows, which grew less and less as the days passed. For this reason, Rhog-Kan insisted his men carry an additional common steel sword if they used one made of shadow steel. He looked around as he backed toward the command hill. He saw shadow steel failing in contest after contest between the men fighting around him.

"Abandon the shadow steel!" He shouted to be heard over the din of combat. "Spread the word! Abandon the shadow steel!" He yelled again to his men near him. Prepared in advance for such a possible order, the men did not hesitate to drop the blasphemous shadow steel blades and draw their common weapons, shouting to those nearest to do the same. The men had never been comfortable with the order to use shadow steel and now fought with a renewed enthusiasm as the

shift in the wind of events gave them a decisive supremacy over their adversaries.

Rhog-Kan climbed the hill as his men began to close the gap in the line previously penetrated by the Tanshen fighters. By the time he mounted the apex of the small knoll, the turn in the battle looked clear for any to see. He took the near-glass from the pouch at his waist and pulled it open. As he looked through the eyepiece, distant fighting came close. He saw shadow steel deteriorating across the battlefield, his own men dropping their useless blades to pull free common steel swords and slay the Tanshen men fleeing before them. He lowered the near-glass and turned to his battle aide near the tent atop the hill.

“Send flag signals to close the flanks. Order the center to reform. I want pikes at the forefront. March the heretics down the valley. And send the fire runners through the woods. Give them no place to hide.”

“Your arm, sir.” His battle aide, Tando-Ganshu, waved a field surgeon toward the tigan.

“My arm will hold for now. Send the flag signals.” Rhog-Kan pointed to the flag station twenty paces away.

“As you command, my tigan.” Tando-Ganshu bowed slightly and then dashed to the flag master, relaying the message.

Rhog-Kan allowed the field surgeon to remove the plate and padding from the armor encasing his left shoulder and arm. He ignored the surgeon’s ministrations as the man staunched the bleeding. Instead, he watched the battle, using the near-glass when needed, and calling out orders to his aides as the conditions shifted below in the valley. The Tanshen fled before the Daeshen men, dropping their useless weapons, and pulling their heavy armor free as they ran. Some tried to hide in the woods, but smoke soon rose up from the trees that covered the sloping sides of the vale. Fire riders, invisible through the colorful, autumn foliage even with the near-glass, pulled braziers of hot coals chained to their steeds through the dense, dry underbrush of the twin forests. Other riders carried large sacks filled with clay jars of tamak-seed oil. As the men rode through the trees, flames and smoke followed them, setting vegetation aflame, boxing the Tanshen army into the lowland, keeping them from using the cover of the woodland to regroup.

“Shall I give the order to chase them down and finish them, sir?” Tando-Ganshu once more stood at his side.

Rhog-Kan watched the Tanshen army flee before his own, the anger still pounding in his chest, his heart still hungering for retribution. He did not know if the Tanshen usurper gave the order to try and burn his beloved to death, but he had given the order to invade the nation. He had caused the death of the zhan, a death that Rhog-Kan once sought to orchestrate and now regretted having witnessed. He needed vengeance. The Daeshen Dominion needed retribution. He opened his mouth to speak the words, to give the order to hound the Tanshen to the border and beyond, but the sight of the forests on fire, and the soldiers fleeing the flames, recalled a similar moment years ago.

THIRTY YEARS AGO

SMOKE AND ash fought with flames as screams of pain and anguish echoed through the night air. Men with swords battled similarly armed men through the narrow streets of a burning town. Commander Rhog-Kan ran with his men, charging through the flame-drenched streets toward the main road leading south. The fire ate away at the fields and trees beyond, a stiff wind pushing it past the confines of the thatched roofs and hay-strewn lanes. The flames drove the Atheton invaders out and routed their previous dominance on the pitched battlefield just outside the northern town. The two companies, each with fewer than 150 men at the start, fought for over an hour, the Daeshen losing ground and lives with each passing minute.

Rhog-Kan feared his first field command in battle would be his last. The Atheton commander, who, shockingly, appeared to be a woman, seemed to anticipate his every command, thwarting the Daeshen advances, ignoring their feints, and cutting off their retreats. Only his desperate idea to set the town and nearby forest aflame managed to curb the Atheton assault. Now his troops numbered less than 100 while the fleeing forces before him still had at least that many men.

“Run them down!” Rhog-Kan shouted to the man near him. “Assemble and march and run them down.” He would kill every last one of them. He would cut the throat of that Atherton commander himself.

As the Daeshen men charged down the road out of town, keeping to the far left to avoid the flames eating at the trees on the right, they quickly formed themselves into a tight, long unit five men wide and twenty deep. They followed the Atheton soldiers for nearly half an hour at a fast march, losing sight of them around a tight bend in the lane. The Athetons had invaded the north a month prior, marching troops around the tip of the Rantu-Ting Mountains and delivering others by ship along the coast of the Daeling Bay. They fought to liberate the northern peninsula, claiming it to be an historically Atheton province. Rhog-Kan would do his best to see the invaders driven into the cold waters of the Daefan Sea.

As Rhog-Kan and his men rounded the corner in the bend, smoke chasing them on the wind, they found the Atheton soldiers massed tight, filling the lane eight men across. He ordered his soldiers to charge, bellowing the command with all the air in his lungs. He regretted his impetuosity as soon as the sound of the words finished rolling from his lips. Atheton fighters emerged from the wooded sides of the lane to attack the flanks of his small company. He looked back over his shoulder to see more Atheton soldiers run from the trees and attack at the rear of the Daeshen line.

He sliced at the nearest Atheton soldier, bashing the man with his small, round shield, screaming his frustration, using his anger to fuel his attacks. A fool. A self-absorbed neophyte commander leading his men into an ambush. He could have let the Athetons flee and set his men to quell the flames and save the town. He did not. He followed his pride and acted in anger rather than considering his options and taking the most rational course. He'd behaved as a warrior rather than a leader. He watched his men cut down beside him. More stepped forward to take their places and be slaughtered. He considered how short his military career would likely be, the youngest commander in the army dead from his own hubris and his men dead with him. He saw the Atheton leader slice down one of his men. Tall and lean, but recognizable as a woman even in her armor,

she fought well and fought near the front. Stronger than he would have expected, she dispatched one of his men with a series of blows to the skull, the first two knocking his helmet free, and the last relieving him of his head.

As Rhog-Kan prepared to meet the woman himself, a wave of dense, black smoke rolled over the clashing companies of men. The fire, driven by the strong summer wind, finally reached their battle site. Flames followed the smoke, leaping from the trees along the right side of the lane as men on both warring sides cried out. The Atheton commander looked around and shouted the retreat to her men. She did not hesitate or pause to consider her action. She seemed to intuit the correct course without thought. She looked at Rhog-Kan and nodded to him. A gesture not of defeat or even admiration; simply an acknowledgment. They had met twice, and his fire had saved him both times. Her look made clear what she thought would happen should they meet a third time.

The Atheton forces turned in full retreat up the road as Rhog-Kan called to what remained of his men, urging them into the woods on the left side of the lane. They ran through the trees, carrying the wounded with them and abandoning their dead comrades to the blaze. They ran for hours to find safety in a clearing far from the fire. Luck, or maybe Ni-Kam-Djen answering his prayers, turned the sky black at sunset, rain pouring in heavy waves from the clouds to extinguish the fires.

The next morning, Rhog-Kan returned to the site of the battle at the bend and collected the ashes of his fallen men. He'd chased down the road with near 100 soldiers and now almost 75 of them could fit in five salvaged vegetable baskets as ash and bones. As he buried them and the other dead men once under his command in a field scorched to black, he swore to himself a dual oath — he would one day find that Atheton commander and acquit himself against her in combat or battle. And he would never again allow his pride or his anger to dictate his decisions on a battlefield.

THE PRESENT

“SIR. THE ORDER?”

Rhog-Kan turned to Tando-Ganshu. He'd recovered from the failure at the bend in the road that day to become the high tigan of the entire dominion. His adversary, he later learned, bore the blood of the Atheton Tey. His daughter. She now sat on the throne. He'd never seen her again, but he still respected the lesson she taught him all those years ago. A schooling he paid heed to now.

“Order the men to follow at a distance.” Rhog-Kan watched the smoke from the burning woods drift across the battlefield on a light, autumn breeze. “We will follow them but not engage them.”

“Sir?” Tando-Ganshu appeared uncertain he'd heard correctly.

“Bring the archers to the fore.” Rhog-Kan had enough men to chase the Tanshen down and likely slaughter them all, but only at the cost of many of his own weary troops. He needed to return to the palace with a defensive force in place along the border, not a depleted army stretched too thin. “We follow them to the border, but if they halt for more than an hour, we bring the arrows down upon them. And get the supply wagons in motion. Our men will need to eat while they

march. Have the flag master signal for the divisions to remain in lockstep. They are to be separate but follow as one. Archers, then cavalry, then infantry.”

“Yes, sir.” Tando-Ganshu bowed his head and ran off to convey the orders.

Rhog-Kan watched his army slowly take shape to follow his directions. After a brief stitching and bandaging of his wound, he climbed into the saddle. Arm hanging in a sling, he rode down the hill to join his troops. He’d hound the Tanshen heretics to the border, but he’d avoid getting tangled in another battle. With luck, he would see his enemies cross the Old Border Road in a few days, and with more fortune, he’d be back in the palace, back in the arms of his beloved, two weeks later. Then they could plan for how to conclude this war. With the Tanshen defeated, he saw a sliver of opportunity that might be widened to use statesmanship, and the threat of invasion, to end the war and once more unify the north and south into a single Shen dominion.

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

THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

DUST AND dirt, sun and shade, horseflies and horse droppings. These things marked Palla's journey along the Old Border Road with the carnival. These and pain. Her back complained. Her legs yelled. Her feet screamed from her worn boots. She walked beside Ranna near the front of the caravan line. They'd given up their shift pulling one of the smaller wagons after passing through a village. They'd hoped to purchase supplies and horses to hitch to the wagons, but as with all the settlements they'd passed through since leaving the castle, they found the availability of goods and livestock at a bare minimum. Leotin paid a ridiculous price for the one horse they found, and nearly as much for a sow. The new horse pulled the wagon Palla and Ranna had spent days drawing. Draft animals now hauled a third of the wagons. And the pig would provide the company its best nightly meal in months. She swallowed, the saliva arising with the thought of roasted pork.

"Think'n 'bout that sow?" Ranna grinned beside her.

"Stay out of my mind, woman." Palla laughed. "People will accuse you of The Sight."

"Don't take no Sight to know what yer think'n." Ranna licked her lips. "Can't stop thinking of it myself."

Palla laughed again. She enjoyed being with Ranna. More than anything. She'd never had a close friend growing up on her father's estate. As the daughter of the local tsentey, her mother only allowed her to befriend girls of her own station, few of whom lived nearby. Those girls never held her interest, as they always concerned themselves with things she considered tedious — which dresses from the capital were in fashion, which young man might make an eligible husband, which girl had slighted another, and who should find favor with whom. She considered it odd she should feel so close to a woman raised so differently from herself. A farm woman and a tsetet as companions. She thought they complemented each other well — Ranna's more earthy and grounded nature balancing her own often lofty and idealized disposition, and her more educated and sophisticated tone harmonizing with Ranna's blunt, native intelligence. A good team.

"See that?" Ranna pointed to a small hut and barn on a hill a thousand paces off the road. Smoke drifted up from a hole in the hut's roof.

"I do." Palla raised her hand to shield her eyes against the sun. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm think'n they might have another pig they can spare." Ranna smiled at her.

"Let's talk with Leotin." Palla led the way up the side of the caravan to the front of the carnival line where Leotin walked beside Donjeo. He looked weary but determined. He took a turn each day pulling a wagon like the rest of the troop. It left him exhausted, but he insisted on it. In private, he confessed that while he loathed the strain on his back, it kept the pilgrims, former townspeople from the castle, and the carnival folk from complaining at the labor when he performed the same work they did. She admired that kind of leadership. It brought the group closer together to follow someone they saw sacrificing for their common wellbeing. She doubted her father would ever have

considered such a thing.

“Looking for some coins?” Leotin wiped his sweaty brow as she and Ranna stepped up beside him.

“You saw the farm?” Palla asked. He regularly sent people off the road to check with local farmers if they had livestock or foodstuffs to sell. Palla and Ranna often fulfilled that role.

“Hard to miss.” Leotin pulled a coin pouch from beneath the waist of his pants. He opened it and handed two silver coins to Ranna.

“Why do you always hand the coins to her?” Palla suppressed a minor wave of indignation.

“Because she does not pay more than a goat is worth simply because the girl holding its rope looks dirty, hungry, and adorable.” Leotin frowned at her.

“One goat. I overpaid for one goat.” Palla shook her head in annoyance and embarrassment.

“It is not that you overpaid for a goat once, but that you can’t be trusted not to do so again.” Leotin winked at Ranna.

“You could’a got the girl *and* goat for what you paid,” Ranna said.

“The girl didn’t want to come with the carnival.” Palla realized too late her statement did not reinforce her argument.

“We don’t need more mouths to feed.” Leotin glanced back at the long line of the carnival behind them.

“Sometimes, strays work out fine.” Donjeo looked up at the clouds passing before the sun.

“Yes. Yes, sometimes they do.” Leotin patted Donjeo’s shoulder. He turned to Palla and Ranna. “Be quick about it. We’re slow, but we can’t stop. It’s too late in the day and we might not get moving again.”

“We’ll be back soon.” Palla stepped to the side of the road.

“I’ll get fair price fer whatever we find.” Ranna held up the two coins.

“Take care.” Leotin’s voice deepened as his tone changed in seriousness.

Palla and Ranna both patted the swords strapped to their hips in unison, laughing as they did so. Leotin shook his head. They walked back along the caravan line, nodding to their friends and fellow travelers, carnival folk, townspeople, and pilgrims alike. Leotin insisted that the wagons be drawn in teams mixed between the three groups, forcing them to work together during the day and setting camp and make meals together at night. They segregated themselves less and less as the days passed, although they all slept near those they knew best. Palla took to sleeping near Ranna, the two of them camping between the pilgrims and the carnival folk. Only the two outlanders remained truly separate, usually staying up late to stand guard after a long day pulling a wagon together. Palla waved to Yeth and Tarak as they passed. The yutan and roagg had not seemed to mourn the death of their wyrin companion for long. Palla found that odd, but then she barely fathomed the customs of the different human cultures. She had no way to judge the actions of such very different peoples. She had not known the wyrin well, but she suspected he would have complained at needing to pull a wagon like a pack animal.

They said little as they walked up to the small farm on the hill. They often went hours without speaking and then talked for hours of all things. Palla avoided much talk of her past, not wishing

to lie to Ranna more than necessary. Not that she needed to now, but once beginning a lie, it demanded adherence. She would tell her the truth of her origins eventually, but how did one confess to such a lie after having deceived the person you cared about most? That thought made Palla blink, even though they passed from the sun to tree-shrouded shade along the path. The realization left her glad they did not speak, as she felt uncertain what to think. When had Ranna gained such prominence in her heart?

As they crested the top of the hill, an old woman opened the door of the hut, closing it behind her as she stepped into the front yard.

“Kinao.” Palla raised her hand as she offered the common Shen greeting. Ranna raised her hand as well, though she understood little of the language. As they came closer, Palla realized that the woman had probably passed no more than forty summers, yet she looked half again that age — her face wrinkled and deeply tanned by years in the sun. Only the numerous strands of black hair in amongst the gray gave an indication of her actual maturity.

“Whatcha want?” The woman coughed and crossed her arms over her rather ample breasts. She looked at the swords on Palla and Ranna’s waists with curiosity.

“Good day.” Palla put forth her most charming smile. “I am Palla and this is Ranna. We’re from a traveling carnival. You may have seen us pass a while ago.”

“Whatcha want?” The woman coughed again and squinted as she restated her question.

“We were wondering if you might have any livestock or food to spare for sale.” Palla looked around the farmyard, her hopes dwindling as she noted two emaciated chickens pecking at the ground behind a fence surrounding a ramshackle barn.

“Ain’t got noth’n ta spare.” The woman glanced back at the hut. She coughed again, more violently than before.

“Maybe one of the chickens?” Palla noted a shadow move in the hut through the waxed paper covering the only window. Probably a child within. She wondered what illness befell the woman and if it afflicted the child. “Maybe a bag of beans or rice or possibly some corn? Or some squash?”

“Told ya. Ain’t got noth’n ta spare. Nows get on.” The woman pointed back down the path to the road.

“We have coin.” Palla looked to Ranna, noting the downward curl of her friend’s lips.

“I’s told ya. We’s ain’t got noth’n fer sale. Nows get.” The woman jabbed her finger toward the road. She took a step closer but stopped as another coughing fit erupted.

Palla did not like the woman’s tone. It seemed mixed with fear as much as anger. What did she have to fear and what caused her anger? Palla began to bid the woman goodbye, when the door of the hut banged open. A spindle-thin girl of around fourteen in a pale-gray dress ran barefoot from the hut.

“Run. Run ’er he’ll kills ya!” The girl ran into the yard looking back at the hut.

Palla’s hand found the hilt of her sword and pulled it free of its sheath before she even knew she did so. Days of training while under siege in the castle proved their worth. As her blade came free, a man stumbled from the doorway of the hut, a sword in one hand, his other covering his mouth. He pulled his hand away, a large, bloody bite mark piercing the skin between thumb and

forefinger.

“Filthy bitch, I’ll cut ya’s good fer that.” The man, likely a Tanshen soldier deserted from his army by the look of his clothes, shook his blade at the girl. He turned to Palla and Ranna, the anger on his face transforming first to confusion and then amusement. He laughed. “Daeshen army got so desperate they’s haul’n in women now?”

Palla looked to Ranna, seeing that the other woman also had her sword drawn, both hands on the hilt. She understood now the farm woman’s anger and fear. How long had the soldier held them captive? Had he found them alone or did a husband lie dead somewhere nearby?

“Leave now.” Palla grasped both hands to the hilt of her sword and raised the tip toward the soldier’s head. She glanced to Ranna, who nodded and stepped sideways, putting more distance between them as they flanked the soldier.

The soldier laughed again and spat blood from his hand on the ground as he swaggered forward. The woman rushed to the girl, holding her tight as they backed away behind a tree, both looking uncertain if they should flee or wait to see what transpired.

“First I’s gonna cut ya, then I’s gonna hurt ya, then I’s gonna...”

The man didn’t have time to finish his threat. Palla had heard plenty of similar intimidations. So had Ranna. Both struck out at the same time, swinging their swords, Palla toward the man’s legs, and Ranna toward his head. The soldier cursed and stumbled back, blocking Ranna’s strike to his head and just dodging Palla’s blow toward his legs.

“What the tuss...”

The soldier may have intended further curses, but he had little time to utter them. Months in the castle practicing fighting opponents with greater size and training, such as Pi-Gento, Tarak, and Yeth, left them knowledgeable about how to attack a soldier like the one they faced. Having worked together to kill similar men bequeathed them a level of confidence the Tanshen soldier did not anticipate. And while they spent hours training to fight alone or together against one or more opponents, the soldier did not seem similarly well-versed with his sword. Likely the reason he’d deserted his army. Palla considered this as she thrust toward his head then again toward his chest.

With Ranna flanking him to assault from the rear, the soldier had no choice but to swing around in a circle, striking out at both of them, trying to block their attacks as best he could. He managed for a moment or two before Ranna’s blade caught his left arm, unfortunately not one that held the sword. He yelled and jumped back, spinning quickly to Palla rather than the source of the strike against him. She blocked his blade, the force of the impact painful as it vibrated up her arms. Before she mounted a counter-attack, the man kicked at her, shoving his boot into her stomach and sending her sprawling to the ground.

The wind gone from her lungs, her eyes stinging, she watched from the ground as the soldier spun around to attack Ranna with all his strength, smashing his sword at her again and again, driving her back. Ranna countered the blows but lost ground with each attack. Unable to look behind her, she tripped over a bucket in the yard and fell to the ground.

Palla rolled to her feet and into a run, her sword coming up and around her head even as the soldier’s blade swung over his shoulder. Palla’s sword edge dug into the side of the man’s neck,

severing sinew and flesh and bone as Ranna rolled away from his axe-like swing. Blood gushed from the man's throat as he dropped his weapon. Palla drew back, preparing for the second strike, one that would sever his head from his body. She did not have time to swing her blade. The man fell to the ground, holding his neck, fruitlessly trying to staunch the deep-red rivulet pouring through his hands.

Ranna rolled to her feet, sword tip aimed at the soldier. He looked up, his eyes blinking in confusion, his mouth working wordlessly, his throat no longer connected to his lungs. Palla read his lips well enough to understand the word he called them. Ranna must have guessed the meaning of the man's silent curses. She spit on his chest just as his eyes closed.

They stared at the dead soldier a moment longer before turning to each other.

"Ya alright?" Ranna put her hand on Palla's shoulder.

"I'm fine." Dizziness washed over Palla, causing her to blink. While more accustomed to seeing men die, she still had no heart for killing them, even when needed. The man's blood still pulsed from his nearly severed head. Such an awful lot of blood.

"Ya saved me." Ranna took Palla's hand. "Thank ya."

"You have done the same. Many times." Palla squeezed her hand and tried not to look too deeply in her grateful eyes. She needed to focus on other things. She turned to the woman and the girl, slowly approaching them from their hiding place behind the tree. "What happened here?"

"He kilt my pa." The girl stared at the dead body of the soldier, hatred in her eyes.

"We come back from the fields a few days ago to find 'im in the hut." The woman looked at Palla and not the dead man. She coughed and wiped at her eyes. "Me man tried to kick 'im out, but all he got was a sword in his belly fer his trouble."

"He won't bother anyone again." Palla looked from the woman to girl. The way the girl clung to her mother and the hatred with which she still stared at the dead body of the soldier told Palla more of what transpired in the previous days. Things the farm woman and her daughter did not need to speak of. As much as she hated killing, Palla found herself very pleased at the man's death.

"We should bury the body. Case someone comes look'n fer him." Ranna re-sheathed her blade and walked back toward the dead man.

"Yes. We can put him in the woods." Palla turned to the farm woman. "Do you have a shovel?"

The farm woman looked at them in confusion a moment, seeming to have trouble accepting the new path her life had taken. She patted her daughter's arm. "Get 'em the shovel."

While they waited for the girl to retrieve the shovel, Palla used water from the nearby well to wash the blood from her blade, wiping it clean and dry before sliding it back in its sheath. She would oil it to avoid rust later that night, by the campfire, with Ranna. The girl returned with the shovel and Palla and Ranna dragged the body into the woods behind the barn. As they did so, they discovered another corpse at the edge of the copse, bloated with death and eaten at by insects and animals. The father. Apparently, the soldier had felt no compulsion to dig a grave.

She and Ranna found two open pieces of ground among the trees and dug shallow graves. They buried the soldier first. After patting the ground down, Palla thought to say a few words.

"May the Goddess find you and give you justice for eternity."

“Anaha, Ahana.” Ranna did not make the sign of the spiral on her chest as usual.

They went back to the edge of the woods and pulled the husband to the grave, holding one hand over their noses against the stench. They buried him quickly, taking turns as they gulped fresh air a few feet away and then traded off the shoveling as fast as possible. Once finished, they brought the woman and girl to the grave.

“We don’t know what prayers you might say, but we’ll listen as you say them,” Palla said.

“Ain’t got no prayer words.” The woman coughed as she cried, holding the girl close.

“You can come with us.” Palla glanced to Ranna and pointed toward the road. They’d discussed the offer while digging the graves. “We’re a big carnival. We have little food, but you’ll be safe with us.”

“I can’t goes nowhere.” The woman coughed into her hand for a long time. “Ain’t gots enough in me to walk the old road. Won’t last long now.”

“Ya need to rest, Ma.” The girl took her mother’s hand.

“Ya’s take my daughter. Pankee-Jao. Ya’s take her and teach her ta fight.” The woman stared at Palla, her eyes begging as much as the tone of her voice.

“No, Ma.” The girl cried and wrapped her arms around her mother’s wide waist. The action drove the mother into another coughing fit.

“No. Ya’s gots to go wit ’em.” The woman held the girl’s face, wiping away her tears. “They’s can protect ya. I can’t no more, and I ain’t gonna be here much longer. And then what? With yer pa dead and me dead, what’s to become of ya? What if another soldier comes by? Or a whole mess of ’em?”

Palla admitted that the woman’s plan made sense. She had no training in healing, but she had seen enough people close to death to know the woman had only a few days, maybe few weeks, before she went to meet her god or the Goddess.

“We’ll take care of her.” Palla took the woman’s hands in her own. “I promise.”

While she might not have understood the words, Ranna understood the flow of the conversation. She, too, stepped up to take the woman’s hands, looking her in the eyes and nodding solemnly.

They left the farm a short time later, the girl walking between them, a dead chicken hanging from Ranna’s hand. The woman had insisted they take the chicken, and Palla gratefully accepted. They walked for several hours along the Old Border Road before finally catching up with the carnival near sunset. The carnival folk made camp in a small clearing beside a fork in the road. Leotin met them when they walked up. He looked between them and the girl. Ranna handed him the two silver coins. He shook his head as he stared at the currency.

“At least you didn’t pay for them.” Leotin looked up to the frightened face of the girl. “What happened?”

“We ran into a problem.” Palla didn’t want to recount the events in front of Pankee-Jao.

“But we fixed it.” Ranna raised her hand. “And we got a chicken.”

“You can tell me about it later.” Leotin waved a hand toward the camp. “We’re setting camp here tonight and heading south on this side road in the morning.”

“South?”

Palla and Ranna spoke at the same time, smiling at each other afterward.

“Yes. South.” Leotin’s face grew serious. “We can avoid running into bandits and Tanshen deserters, and if the road stays true to my map, we can cut a week from our travel to Punderra.”

“That’s sounds like a good plan.” Palla nodded her head in appreciation.

“I come up with one now and again.” Leotin squinted at her. “Usually, in your absence. I’ve begun to wonder how many good plans I might have if you were not around.”

“But then who would implement them and make them actually work?” Palla gave him her best face of mock-innocent questioning.

“Hmmm. Indeed.” Leotin looked at the girl and spoke in Shen. “I’m Leotin. This is my carnival. What is your name?”

“Pankee-Jao.” The girl looked between Palla and Ranna before turning to Leotin.

“A carnival is hard work.” Leotin stared at the girl. “And another mouth to feed means more hard work. Can you handle hard work?”

“I used ta help my pa and ma with the animals and the crops and such.” Pankee-Jao raised her head and stood a little straighter. She looked as if a good wind might cast her away, but her feet stood firm on the dirt of the road.

“Then you’ll do fine.” Leotin glanced at Palla. “These two will take care of you.”

Leotin walked back to the camp.

“You’ll like it here.” Palla thought of something that had not yet occurred to her. “Do you have the dreams?”

Pankee-Jao hesitated a moment and then nodded.

“So do we.” Palla patted her arm. “Plenty of us here do. But we don’t talk about it except to the people in the carnival. Never in towns.”

Pankee-Jao nodded again. She understood.

Palla and Ranna led the girl to the camp and introduced her to the others. The three of them helped setting up tents and making fires and fixing food. After a meal of roasted pork, they put the girl in their tent to sleep and took a turn at the watchfire. They sat in silence, staring at the moonlit roads, the fire warming their backs. After a length of time that Palla could not quantify, Ranna’s fingers pressed against her arm. When she turned to her, she felt warm lips against her own. She blinked, unmoving, not knowing what to do. She saw Ranna’s closed eyes and closed her own, kissing her friend back, returning the passion behind the gesture. She had been kissed before, by a stable hand at her father’s estate, by a man seeking to be her suitor, and by the man who became her husband for a night, but she’d never experienced a kiss like this. Her stomach warmed and fluttered. Her face flushed. Her hands trembled. Finally, Ranna leaned away.

“I been think’n about do’n that and think’n it was wrong, but after nearly bein’ dead and you savin’ me and all, well, I don’t care if it’s wrong, and I don’t care what people think about it.” Ranna looked into her eyes, seeking something. Acceptance? Understanding? A reciprocation of her feelings?

“I have to tell you something.” Palla could not continue to lie to Ranna about her real past.

Not after that kiss. A kiss? A woman? A kiss? What did it mean? What would it lead to? What would happen to them? The Tot Gioth forbid such things, but what about the Goddess? Was it wrong? Was it blasphemous? Why did she want so badly to do it again?

“You don’t have to say noth’n.” Ranna took her hand and looked away into the darkness.

“I’m not who I said I was. I’m not a merchant’s daughter.” A wave of relief arose in Palla as she blurted out her secret.

Ranna laughed, lifting a hand to cover her mouth and stifle the sound.

“We all know that.” Ranna smiled at her. “Ain’t no merchant daughter ever been like you.”

“I’m really from...” Palla started to say more, but Ranna placed a finger on her lips.

“Ya don’t gots to tell me,” Ranna said.

“But I want to.” Palla wanted to tell Ranna her story so desperately, she didn’t know if she could contain the words pent up over the preceding months, bursting for release, looking for an accepting ear to fall upon.

“Well, if I like what I hear, might be I’ll kiss you again.” Ranna grinned at her.

“I’m a very good storyteller.” Palla looked into Ranna’s eyes, glimpsing there something she had seen for many weeks, yet only just then realizing its importance and value. She hoped her eyes conveyed the same thing in return.

“I’m count’n on it.” Ranna laughed again as Palla began to tell her story.

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

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

THE SOUND of steel splitting wood rolled across the low grass and through the open door of the hut, into the large, shadowed room, and over the bed in the corner, near a small window covered in thin, waxed animal skin. The first day of Tin-Tsu's conscious convalescence. He lay in the bed watching Tiang-Rhu perform chores around the farm. Chopping wood. Hauling water. Feeding livestock. Tending the garden. Bringing in fresh vegetables. Cooking meals. Checking and dressing his wounds. Tin-Tsu did not see him tend to the main chore that day — burying the bodies of the farm woman and the two soldiers. Tiang-Rhu brought back the soldiers' clothes, swords, helmets, and leather armor. Then he picked wildflowers from beside the barn and carried them into the woods toward the graves.

The second and third days passed much as the first, Tin-Tsu lying in bed while Tiang-Rhu worked the farm as best as possible for a city-born priest. By the fourth day, he observed Tiang-Rhu's labors for an hour or so from a chair taken from the hut and placed in the shade of a tree near the barn. On the fifth day, he walked to the chair unaided. By the sixth day, he sat in the chair for two whole hours before the pain in his side urged him to lie down again and sleep. On the seventh day, he abandoned the chair for a blanket and lay in the shade under the tree all morning. On the eighth day, he slept until noon and then lay beneath the tree until sunset.

In the later afternoon of the ninth day, he lay on the blanket beneath the shade tree watching Tiang-Rhu chop the wood for the evening. He thought about the preceding week and chided himself. While he had watched Tiang-Rhu each day in his efforts to maintain the farm, had eaten meals with him, had lain still while allowing his wounds to be cleaned and dressed, he had not spoken directly to his old friend the entire time. A silence borne of anger, confusion, fear, and petulance clung to him. He fumed at the knowledge that he recuperated in peace while his nation fought for its survival only a few days' ride away. It annoyed him that Tiang-Rhu presumed to fake his death. That he assumed Tin-Tsu wished a choice in what to be after that supposed death. It angered him most that he did not possess a clear answer to the question Tiang-Rhu's deception posed. Should he return to the throne as zhan? Should he abandon his name to become a priest in some small village that would never know the truth of his birth? Should he choose another path? What other paths might there be? How could he start now with such a momentous decision? Better to begin with something trivial and easy. Something like speaking.

"You are very good at manual labor for a priest." Tin-Tsu found his voice odd in his ears after so many days of quiet. As a priest in the mountain temple of Ten-Fan-Het, he'd once participated in a silent prayer retreat that lasted nine weeks. It had taken him days to reacquaint himself with the sound of his voice.

"I like chopping wood." Tiang-Rhu let the axe in his hands rest against a muscular shoulder. "As a novice in the temple, I chopped wood and carried water every day, day after day. I found it

soothing to the mind. The stroke of the axe handle, the impact on the wood. The sound of it. It can be very pacifying.”

“I, too, found it pacifying as a novice. It seems we were both engaged in the same tasks, even though we were in opposite ends of the dominion.” Tin-Tsu noted that Tiang-Rhu did not mention his days of silence, engaging in conversation as though they had been talking every day since he awoke.

“It is strange. That we should both become priests. But that was much of what brought us together in our youth. Two strange boys concerned with the prophets and the scriptures and the mysteries of Ni-Kam-Djen. Of course, your training took you to learn more than how to swing an axe. I had assumed stories of the Kan-Djen sect to be mythical until I witnessed you in combat.” Tiang-Rhu smiled as he swung the axe down, grunting as the blade split the small log in half.

Tin-Tsu had wondered how much of his fight with the Tanshen soldiers Tiang-Rhu had observed. Enough to guess the source of his skill. As always, he shared his secrets with Tiang-Rhu whether he wanted to or not.

“I am well enough to ride in a wagon.” Tin-Tsu’s stomach muscles clenched with his words, a sharp pain radiating through the wound at his side. He needed to speak the words aloud, to set himself once more in motion, but he had not expected them to cause such discomfort.

“You’ve been well enough to travel for several days.” Tiang-Rhu released the axe to lean it against the splitting stump of a long-dead tree. “Our silent retreat comes to an end.”

“I must go.” Tin-Tsu noted the tone in Tiang-Rhu’s voice but didn’t know if it denoted sadness, annoyance, or anger.

“Must you?” Tiang-Rhu stepped into the shade and sat at the edge of the blanket. “And if you must, where must you go?”

“You know what I must do.” Tin-Tsu found it hard to look at Tiang-Rhu with him seated so close.

“I know you must make a decision, but I also know the decision is yours to make.” Tiang-Rhu folded his hands in his lap as though in meditative prayer. It reminded Tin-Tsu of the way his mentor, Toyen-Wen, often sat when they debated theological issues back in the temple.

“The dominion depends upon me to fulfill my duty.” Tin-Tsu looked north toward Tagu-Lan as he spoke.

“The dominion has survived for millennia, and it will endure with or without you on the throne,” Tiang-Rhu said.

“We have no idea what has happened outside this small farm.” Tin-Tsu waved his arm northward. “The Tanshen may even now sit in the palace.”

“And if so, what can you do about it?” Tiang-Rhu’s face remained passive, but his eyes held a barely checked fire.

“I do not know, but I swore an oath.” Tin-Tsu looked away from Tiang-Rhu’s eyes. He’d always found those eyes distracting when he needed to focus on what he wanted to say.

“You swore oaths to your temple and to Ni-Kam-Djen as well.” Tiang-Rhu raised a single accusatory eyebrow.

“I bear many oaths, and I must obey and strive to abide by them all.” Tin-Tsu pushed himself up on his pillow to better see Tiang-Rhu.

“Have you ever had a choice in swearing those oaths?” Tiang-Rhu leaned a little closer. “If you had been given a choice, which oaths would you have sworn and to whom?”

Tin-Tsu did not respond. The question stabbed at the soft center of all the worries he’d ruminated on over the past nine days. He faced a choice but did not understand how to choose because he had never been presented with options. He could be the zhan. He could be a priest. He recognized now he could not be both. But he could choose between them. He could be anything. He could stay and learn to tend a farm with a man he did not know how to think about because he’d spent years trying not to think of him at all. He could go away with that man. They could go anywhere. They could do anything. So many possibilities where before only duty existed.

“Why could you not leave the ring on my finger?” Tin-Tsu sighed, feeling defeated but not even knowing how he had failed.

“I am uncertain.” Tiang-Rhu looked away. “I suppose, so I could have you to myself for a time after so long without you.”

Tin-Tsu stared at Tiang-Rhu, feeling long-hidden desires creep out to announce themselves. With those feelings came a question as important as those he’d been asking of himself.

“What do you want?” Tin-Tsu wondered why he only now considered this inquiry.

“I want what I have always wanted.” Tiang-Rhu’s voice deepened. “I want to be with you wherever you are.”

They sat and stared at one another in silence beneath the shade of the tree, the truth of Tiang-Rhu’s words louder than the bird calls and cricket songs or the clattering of branches in the breeze. They did not speak. Tin-Tsu did not reply. He did not fathom how to respond. What did he want? Or better phrased, what did he want that he refused to admit he desired? He perceived the unspoken answer and dreaded to voice it. Feared what it meant. What it might lead to. What he might become.

“Fire.”

Tiang-Rhu spoke the word loudly a second time. “Fire.”

“What?” Tin-Tsu glanced around, wondering if Tiang-Rhu saw smoke in the woods or the hut.

“We should perform the fire cleansing ritual.” Tiang-Rhu nodded his head in enthusiasm. “That is exactly what you need. Fire to purify the mind and heart and grasp the will of Ni-Kam-Djen. Yes. The fire ritual. We’ll need more wood.”

Tiang-Rhu leapt to his feet and dashed to the splitting stump. He grabbed the axe and strode to the woods, glancing over his shoulder. “I’ll be back soon.”

By the time Tin-Tsu opened his mouth to speak, Tiang-Rhu already trudged through the low bushes at the boundary of the woods. In a moment, he disappeared into a wall of bark and leaves. Tin-Tsu regarded his suggestion. More than a suggestion. It made sense. He had always found the fire ritual brought him clarity of mind. Maybe it would do so in this circumstance as well. If nothing else, it might reveal the path that Ni-Kam-Djen wished him to follow.

By sunset, a large bonfire blazed in an open space between the hut and the barn. They did not eat, as the ritual traditionally demanded fasting. Tin-Tsu and Tiang-Rhu sat shirtless beside one another in front of the flames, the fiery orb of the sun crawling behind the tree line, its amber glow reflected across the thin clouds above, the whole world seeming aflame.

Tiang-Rhu began the prayers.

“Ni-Kam-Djen, Great Father, True God, bestower of all blessings, we beseech you to inhabit our hearts and minds as you dwell within this fire and the whole of the world and the heavens beyond. Grant us your wisdom to see your will and to seek your way. Transform us into pure vessels and fill us with your holy fire that we might burn bright and illumine all others with your radiant grace.”

They mimed eating and drinking and bathing with the fire, chanting ritual prayers, calling upon their god to fill them with his presence. They repeated the ritual actions and prayers the prescribed nine times. Tin-Tsu ignored the burning pain of his wound, taking it to be part of the ritual, part of his purification. As they completed the final repetition of the prayers, they sat in silence, staring into the flames, their bodies slick with sweat from the heat of the blaze.

Looking into the dancing fingers of yellow and orange and red, Tin-Tsu’s eyesight narrowed until he saw only conflagration, heard only the roar of heated air and embers around the logs. In that restricted field of view came an inner seeing, a sight of a place not of his world.

He stood in a field of golden wheat, a blood-orange sun looming in an azure sky. He held a sword in his hand and wore cobalt-blue robes neither of state nor temple. Across the field from him, stood an army in white, faces hidden by alabaster helmets. As the army charged, he raised his sword, the wheat rippling away from him in small waves. A power surged within him. A certainty. As he witnessed the sky and the sun and the wheat and the army and his sword, he understood them to be aspects of his own being, of one Essential Being.

Tin-Tsu blinked and gasped for air, uncertain of his surroundings. Strong arms held him upright. He leaned against Tiang-Rhu’s embrace.

“You fainted.” Tiang-Rhu brushed the hair from his sweat-drenched face.

“I saw something.” Tin-Tsu’s voice rasped through his dry throat.

“A vision?” Tiang-Rhu looked in his eyes. “A fire vision from Ni-Kam-Djen?”

“I do not know.” Tin-Tsu took a deep breath. “I do not know where the vision comes from, nor is it clear in its meaning, but I can take one thing from it with certainty.” He took Tiang-Rhu’s hand, the passion of what he’d witnessed still vibrating through his body and filling his mind. “It does not show me in a temple or on a throne. I must find its import and how to fulfill its command.” He squeezed Tiang-Rhu’s hand tighter. “Thank you. Thank you for the fire ritual. For giving me this choice. For being a friend after so long. For staying with me.”

“I will stay with you always if I can.” Tiang-Rhu grinned in the firelight.

Tin-Tsu smiled back. He did not know what his future held, but he now intuited a new path, one with potential never known to him. He would find the meaning of the fire vision. And he would have Tiang-Rhu at his side to help him. An unnamable emotion arose to choke his throat and tear his eyes. He did not remember ever feeling so happy and content in his entire life.

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

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

PIROUETTING LEAVES of crimson and gold floated down from the trees to blanket the narrow, wheel-furrowed lane in a quilt of autumnal colors. Hashel kicked at the leaves as he walked beside Ondromead. The sun already sat low behind the trees, giving the foliage still clinging to the branches above a fiery tint. Hashel breathed in the smell of the dry leaves and the tall grass lining the dirt lane and the wildflowers in the fields nearby. He liked the scent of the woods. It made him feel at home. It reminded him of walking with his mother and father down the road from their farm to the village to sell their vegetables. He blinked, surprised that thinking of his family did not bring a great stabbing pain in his heart. It hurt — stung like a nettle — but did not pierce him with the force it had months ago. Maybe that came with time. Maybe it came from walking beside Ondromead. It felt like home to walk with him. He wished to tell Ondromead this, but that would require doing the thing he no longer knew if he could do. While once the loss of his words seemed like a way for him to hide from the world, over time, it had become a way to be in the world.

Hashel's stomach growled. At least part of him still spoke when it wanted to.

"I agree." Ondromead's deep voice rumbled above him. "It's been a long time since that spiced carrot bun in the village this morning."

They had awoken by a stream near a village and paid a local baker for the rolls. They should have...

"Should have taken some to eat on the road," Ondromead said.

Hashel nodded. It helped that Ondromead often finished his thoughts. It made not speaking them aloud himself much easier. They had left the village when Ondromead said he sensed a call to the road. Hashel knew this meant they needed to witness something somewhere else.

"Didn't expect to walk all day to find what we need to see." Ondromead scratched his head. "I can't remember the last time I had to walk this far to find the place I needed to be."

Hashel didn't so much mind the walking, as he enjoyed the trees and leaves and the sounds of the small animals scurrying in the bushes and high grass, but he hoped they got where they needed be soon. He didn't like being out on the road at night. The kinds of things they witnessed on dark roads in the late hours of the night made him sad.

The clatter of wooden wheels on leaf-coated dirt and rocks turned Hashel's head. A wagon approached; a thin man in a large gray coat drove a single horse from a low bench.

"Kinao, friends," the wagon driver called out.

"Kinao." Ondromead stepped to the edge of the road, his hand guiding Hashel's shoulder to join him.

Hashel still marveled that he understood what everyone said no matter where they traveled. He guessed they were in the north of the Tanshen Dominion from hearing the village people speak of the war that morning, but it still felt weird to comprehend a foreign language. He wondered if

he could speak Shen — if he could speak. Another reason to stay in silence. He wasn't sure he'd enjoy strange words filling his mouth.

"Need a ride?" The wagon driver pulled the reins of the horse, and it slowed to a halt.

"That would be much appreciated." Ondromead bowed his head in thanks. "How close is the next village?"

"Ain't much of a village, but it's 'bout two hours' ride yet. Should get there 'bout sundown. Get in. Got room here on the seat, and the boy can sit in the back." The man gestured toward the rear of the wagon.

Hashel climbed into the wagon and found an open space between two large, clay jars. From the odor and the number of jars, he took the man for an oilmonger. As Ondromead climbed up to the wagon bench, the oilmonger flicked the reins and drove the horse forward. Hashel found it odd that people ignored Ondromead when it seemed to suit his purpose yet stopped to help him when he needed transportation. He wondered if he would ever find answers to the mysteries of the old man.

"Name's Jan-Vu," the oilmonger said. Ondromead looked like he might make to reply, but the man continued speaking. "Don't see many folks along the road twixt these two villages. Only here myself two or three times a year. Sell oil, I do. Ya probably guessed that from the smell." Jan-Vu laughed. "Can't smell it myself no more, but my wife sure complains about it when I get home. Makes me take a bath in a wooden tub in the backyard 'fore she'll let me in the door. Good woman, though. It's her thought of the lock boxes." He pointed to five small iron boxes bolted to the wagon bed behind the driver's bench. "See those slots on top? I can drop my coins inside, but I can't get 'em out cause I ain't got the keys. Don't mean I don't get robbed, but they don't get the coin; my wife does, 'cause only she's got the keys. Course, someday some bandit's gonna take the whole wagon and then I'll be stuffed." Jan-Vu laughed again. "The oil is almost worth stealin' as much as the coin. Got olive oil from the south, got safflower oil from Juparti, got rapeseed oil that comes through Tanjii, got the tamak-seed oil, too. Good for lamps, that is. Burns bright. Got to mind you don't spill it, though. Lights up quick and fierce. Also got the linseed oil for woodworkin'. Can't leave it doused on a rag, though. Starts to smoke and catches fire like a carnival magic trick. Also got kali-nut oil, which is good for cookin' an' ailments. My grandmamma used to take a big ol' spoon each morning. Said it helped the joints. Lived to be seventy-one, she did. And then there's the pine oil. That powerful smellin' and you..."

Jan-Vu, the oilmonger, continued to talk about oils, those he had and those he did not, their uses, which smoked most when cooking, which were best for lamps, which aided health, and which were like poison to eat. Hashel found the lecture fascinating. He'd never known there were so many different oils, or that they each had a different purpose. He saw the look on Ondromead's face and knew the old man also appreciated the talkative oilmonger for a different reason. The more the oilmonger spoke, the less Ondromead needed to say. Ondromead often seem to appreciate silence as much as Hashel. Maybe this was why they traveled together. To see things, one needed to pay attention and to hear them, one needed to remain silent.

The oilmonger, Jan-Vu, talked all the way to the small village. By the time the wagon pulled

up to the first building, only a few tendrils of light touched the world from the sun as it fled over the horizon.

“I’ll leave ya here.” Jan-Vu pointed toward a nearby farmhouse and barn. “Village’s too small for an inn, but I got a friend I stay with when I pass through. He ain’t got much room, though. Ya might find a space in this farmer’s barn. Heard he sometimes takes people in. Feeds ’em, too, if yer hungry.”

“Thank you.” Ondromead helped Hashel down from the wagon. “Good luck to you.”

“Luck ta ya both as well.” Jan-Vu drove the wagon down the street toward the other side of the village.

“This is where we’re supposed to be. I sense it clearly.” Ondromead looked around at the small houses and the few shops that lined the street. “Let us see about a meal and a haystack. And maybe a bath. You reek of oil.”

Hashel sniffed his shirt and curled his nose at the scent. They found the farmer and his barn, and each had a bowl of soup with a tangy meat and potatoes in it, but the farmer had no tub for a bath. Hashel shrugged. He would wake in clean clothes as he always did since traveling with Ondromead. A little while after eating, they lay in a haystack in the loft of the barn, near an open hay door. They watched the stars brighten in the moonless sky.

“Odd.” Ondromead looked out of the hayloft. “This is where we should be, but what can we witness here? Maybe I am wrong. Maybe this is not the right place.”

As if in answer to his question, a scream slashed through the still night air. Hashel and Ondromead leaned toward the hayloft door. Another scream cut at the silence of the village. Then another. And then more and more until the night became a wall of cries and shouts and wails and moans of people being chased and calling for help and dying.

“Yes.” Ondromead’s voice ached with sadness. “This is the correct place.”

Hashel reached out and clung to Ondromead’s arm as more and more screams rang out in the darkness.

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

INTERLUDE



MATTED FUR and gnarled limbs match the stink of rotted flesh.

The roagg seer stares down at the creature among the rocks of the grassy plateau. Not a fox. Not a rabbit. Once both, but now neither. Two animals fused into one by some inexplicable force.

How long did it live? The roagg prods the carcass with a stick.

He thinks of the message received days ago from his acquaintance in the Sky Realm.

She is right. This threatens everything. If it has spread this far, it may encompass the world.

Has the Alliance acted too slowly? Have the sheetoo pilgrims already reached the Forbidden Realm? Do they now set the world toward disaster? Or were these events more localized?

I must know how far this reaches. What realms are afflicted? I will send a night jay to the wyrin merchant. He may have heard more of these ... anomalies.

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



EPISODE TEN



THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

FLICKERING SHADOWS from swinging lanterns ran along streets, up the plastered walls of houses, across roofs, and over fences. From the safety of the barn's hayloft, Ondromead watched the chaos engulfing the small village. He held Hashel close. He did not want the boy to witness what befell the villagers, but he feared letting him too far from his side. While he knew no harm could happen to himself, that did not mean Hashel would be exempt from the violence taking more and more lives as each moment passed.

"Best you look away," Ondromead whispered above the screams. Hashel clung tight to his arm. The boy looked up from the carnage below and to the stars above them.

A few villagers ran from house to house, shouting for their neighbors to wake up and arm themselves. They yelled that the village was under attack. No one understood from what. Lantern light in the moonless darkness revealed bodies lying in the streets. One man lowered his lantern to inspect a dead woman. Even from many paces away, Ondromead saw the bloody, torn flesh of her torso and face, one arm absent. The wounds looked animal in origin rather than from a weapon. The man raised the lantern as he stood. A swift-moving shadow the width of a small wagon darted toward the man with extraordinary speed. Ondromead suppressed a desire to call out. He could not interfere. The tiny flame winked out with a smashing sound, the man's screams melding with a guttural roar. The dim light from a nearby hut revealed the creature savagely killing the hapless village man.

He knew the creature, though he hadn't seen one in thirty years. Created by Juparti seers over a thousand years ago for the amusement of the ruling rhegans, they had been sent into the territory in advance of a battle to terrorize the civilians and weaken the opposing army. Twice the size of a tiger, with a similar head and teeth, midnight black spikes covered its body instead of fur. The Juparti called them *kellitsara*. *Razor-cats*. Named for the sharpness of their spiny quills, each one capable of slicing through flesh with ease. They attacked viciously and indiscriminately, killing for the taste of blood more than to feed. If trained, they would continue to slaughter until called off.

Where had it come from? Possibly a small clan survived in the wilds of some remote mountain region, but how did one come to be in the farming plains of northern Tanshen? Could they have lived for centuries in the Fao-Na Mountains? What might have driven them down to hunt and kill? Or might one have been found and raised to once again run at the vanguard of an invading army? Such a notion seemed all too plausible. One more fact of the *kellitsara* came to Ondromead's mind as another soul-piercing wail erupted several houses away. The creatures hunted in packs.

As the razor-cat dragged its lifeless prey by the neck into the shadows, a sound in the barn below caught Ondromead's attention. He turned toward the large door under the loft. Unlocked, and set ajar, the door suddenly swung outward. Ondromead pulled Hashel tighter as they both

peered over the edge of the platform to the straw-strewn ground. In the darkness, they heard the breathing of a large animal padding into the building. With the door open, more light seeped in to illuminate the space. The razor-cat, one of at least three, sniffed the air. Ondromead leaned back, pulling Hashel with him as the creature raised its head.

His heart hammered in his chest, sweat breaking out on his brow. The unfamiliar feeling of fear gripped him. He did not worry for himself, but for Hashel. While a ladder twice the height of a man separated the hayloft from the ground, a razor-cat could easily leap that distance. Even if he threw himself between the boy and the monster, it would have little impact on the outcome. Hashel trembled in his arms. Ondromead looked to see the boy holding his breath. Realizing it to be a wise action, he did the same.

Below, the razor-cat walked to the bottom of the ladder and sniffed the air again. Ondromead tried not to move. Not to breathe. Not even to think. After another long snort, the razor-cat turned and leapt back to the street. Hashel sighed in relief, and Ondromead released the breath from his own lungs.

“Razor-cats.”

He wanted to say more, but he doubted Hashel cared just then for a history lesson on the creature that nearly ate him. Why had it run off? Did Ondromead’s presence affect the outcome of the encounter in some way? Had the razor-cat not been able to smell the boy? The scent of Hashel tickled his nose. Not the smell of a child, but the stink of cooking and lantern oil. The razor-cat had not attacked because it only smelled the oil still soaked into Hashel’s clothes from the ride in the oilmonger’s wagon.

“This is why we were called so far away to this village.” Ondromead loosened his grip on Hashel as they stared out the hayloft door.

The night air carried only a few final screams. Two. Then one. Then silence. They spotted the creatures a few more times, then not at all. They waited for an hour to see if anyone moved in the village. No one did. With nothing left to witness, Ondromead pulled the black book from his satchel and opened the ink bottle to dip the quill. He did not need light to write by. The page accepted his words regardless of their form. He kept his summary of the events brief but found Hashel curled tight in a hay pile when he finished. He lay next to the boy and closed his eyes, trying to forget what he had seen, but knowing it to be impossible.

To continue reading the Witness story arena turn the page.

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

MORNING BROUGHT the warmth of sunlight against skin, the calls of birds in nearby trees, and the sight of dew-soaked hay. Hashel sat up blinking, dizziness clouding his mind as he looked at his surroundings. Ondromead sat beside him, staring out the door of the hayloft, the door they had peered through the previous night. They sat in the same pile of hay they fell asleep in hours ago. How could that be? Why had they awoken in the same place they fell asleep? Such a thing never happened, not for as long as Hashel had traveled with Ondromead. Maybe it wasn't so rare. A glance at Ondromead's long face and the concern in his eyes told him otherwise.

"This is very odd." Ondromead rubbed at the stubble of beard on his chin. "This has never happened. Not once. Not in all the thousands of years." He looked to Hashel, his eyes wide with worry. "What can it mean?"

Hashel shrugged. He did not know. But if it gave Ondromead such obvious concern, he decided he should worry about it as well. They both stood and looked out the door of the hayloft. No villagers walked the streets. No sounds of daily life echoed between the houses and shops. Even the birdsong sounded subdued. A small, brown cat darted out the window of a house across the street, dashing through the open door of another. As Hashel looked closer, he realized something very large and powerful had shattered the door. He noted the dark, stained earth between the houses. He had witnessed enough of the carnage the night before to realize what it was and how it got there.

"We should look around." Ondromead picked up his leather satchel from the pile of hay.

Hashel looked through the door again and then back at Ondromead. Could those creatures, the razor-cats, still be out there? The one in the barn the previous night seemed likely to leap up to the hay loft and do to him what he'd seen the other one do to the man in the street. He wasn't sure why it had left. Maybe it didn't smell him. That made sense, as he'd reeked of lamp and cooking oil from his ride in Jan-Vu's wagon. But he didn't reek today. He'd slept, and as always, he'd awoke with clean clothes. His hair still smelled a bit, but he doubted it would be enough to fool one of those creatures again. Especially not in the daylight. Ondromead must have noticed his worried face because he patted Hashel's shoulder.

"They will be gone. You'll be safe. Razor-cats prefer to hunt at night and doze during the day. They'll only attack in the day if they are wounded or provoked."

Hashel had no desire to provoke a razor-cat. And he hoped to be far from the village by sundown.

Ondromead led the way down the ladder to the barn floor and out the door to the street. They walked along a narrow lane toward the village center.

"Hopefully, we can find someone who survived." Ondromead did not sound hopeful.

The path they walked along held few houses, most with plaster walls, thatched roofs, and

small, fenced yards that might have once held livestock, but which now looked as deserted as the streets. The doors of the houses all sat open or smashed inward, wood splintered to large slivers. As they passed one of the homes, Hashel heard something. A scratching. Nails against wood. He looked up to Ondromead.

“Yes, I hear it too.” Ondromead took Hashel’s hand and led him to the house.

As they peeked through the open doorway, they spotted a black dog with floppy ears scratching at a small wooden cupboard in the kitchen area of the one room hut. The dog whined and sniffed at the cupboard. It turned and stared at them, then went back to scratching at the door. Hashel let go of Ondromead’s hand and stepped into the small house.

“Careful.” Ondromead followed him to the cupboard. The dog stepped back and watched them, its tail between its hind legs. “Let me.” Ondromead leaned down to the cupboard and pulled at a small knob on the age-stained wooden door.

Hashel gasped but did not move. Inside the cupboard sat an old woman, arms pulled up around her knees, long gray hair tied in a knot, eyes open and unmoving. His lower lip twitched, and he sighed. He’d seen enough dead people to recognize the old woman passed away many hours prior. Probably right in the midst of the attack on the village by the razor-cats.

“Must have died from fright.” Ondromead shook his head.

They stared at the old woman’s corpse cowering in the cupboard. She must have been so afraid. Terrified to be killed like her friends and neighbors by the monsters in the night. And the fear had stopped her heart. Hashel had heard stories of people dying from fear. He’d once hoped he’d die from fear himself. He wished they could take the woman from the cupboard and bury her in her backyard, but Ondromead could not interfere, and Hashel could not accomplish the task alone. She probably would have liked that. Likely thought throughout her life of lying in the yard when she passed. And now she crouched in a cobweb-crusted cupboard until — maybe forever.

Hashel reached out and closed the cupboard. The dog looked him quizzically, sniffing at him as it cocked his head. Hashel petted the dog. It did not move and made no reaction to the gesture. How had it escaped the monster cats? Probably ran and hid in the nearby woods. A good idea. He wondered if any of the villagers had thought to do the same.

“There’s nothing we can do here. Let’s keep looking.” Ondromead took Hashel’s hand again and led the way out of the hut and up the street.

The dog followed them at a distance as they checked through the windows and doors of houses along the lane. They found nothing but broken doors, smashed tables, cracked walls, and pools of dried blood. Evidence of violence, but no sign of the victims.

“Where can they all be?” Ondromead scratched his head as they checked another house. “Very strange.”

Hashel also found it bizarre. Did the monsters eat all the villagers? How could that be possible? Were there more than three razor-cats? How many villagers had there been? They reached the village center, finding it as empty as the side streets. The houses there sat closer together, with several small shops interspersed between them. He noticed a sign on a building for a baker, recognizing the painted loaf of bread as much as the Shen word written underneath it. A

butcher's building sat across the street, and a blacksmith's forge at the end of the road. They walked further, checking houses and shops for survivors. They found none.

As they passed a cross street, a girl of twelve or thirteen with dark-black hair and rich-brown skin turned to face them. She brandished a hayfork in her shaking hands. Hashel noted the blood on her face and her pale-blue dress. The girl shifted her worried gaze between Ondromead and Hashel. She looked at the dog last. It stood far to the side. She nodded to the animal and it barked in response.

"Kinao." Ondromead raised a hand, his voice soft and tentative.

Hashel mimicked the gesture. The girl looked at them again and then turned and ran between two houses, leaping over a low fence. The dog barked and ran after her, jumping the fence, and skidding around the corner of the house to follow. Hashel dashed up the street to where the girl once stood and looked after her. She jumped over another fence and stopped to glance back at him for a moment before loping across a field of autumn wheat and into the woods surrounding the village.

Hashel wondered why the girl ran. What did she fear from him and Ondromead? Or did she understand what he himself had learned — that no one can really protect you. Maybe she thought she would be safer on her own, or with the dog, rather than following a small boy and an old man. Hashel sighed to himself. She was probably right. He hoped she would be safe in the woods. That she knew where to hide. Where to go. That she found a hiding place before nightfall. Before the monsters came out again. Possibly, she planned to warn the nearest village. That thought gave Hashel hope. He sighed again, realizing that even if the girl warned the next village, it likely wouldn't do any good.

"Come. There's nothing we can do for her, either."

Hashel hadn't noticed Ondromead step up beside him. He nodded, his shoulders sagging. They could do little or nothing for anyone they found. As they walked back along the street, he wondered again where all the villagers were. Had the survivors taken the dead and wounded to a single place? Did they hide in a large barn somewhere? They checked barns and huts nearby but found no one. They discovered Jan-Vu's wagon, but no sign of the oilmonger.

Hashel's stomach rumbled, informing him of its displeasure at being empty. He put his hand on his belly to quiet the noise as they turned the corner of a street. His feet fell to a stop and his hand went to his mouth, his gut tightening in silence, any notion of food fleeing from his mind. Ondromead halted beside him.

"What happened here?"

Before them, in the middle of the narrow street, lay the bodies of the dead villagers, piled haphazardly — trophies tossed by a hunting animal for its master. The corpses did not yet stink in the heat of the rising sun, but the sight of them — women, girls, boys, men, dogs, pigs, chickens, and even horses — made for a horrific scene that left Hashel wishing to retch and cleanse himself of the sight and all that came with it.

"I have never seen the creatures do this." Ondromead rubbed his worried face. "I do not like this. Waking in the same place for the first time to see something I have never seen." His hand

twitched.

Hashel presumed Ondromead needed to write down what he'd witnessed. Maybe it meant they could leave. He did not grasp why they had stayed in the village upon waking, but he hoped he did not need to witness anything else there. He took Ondromead's hand and pulled him back the way they came.

"Yes. A good idea." Ondromead squeezed Hashel's hand.

They walked away from the street and back to the village center. There they sat on a low stone bench by the village well and Ondromead transcribed what he'd seen. What they'd both seen. He wondered how Ondromead withstood all he'd witnessed through the many years he talked of. Hashel liked being Ondromead's companion, but some things were harder to observe than others. What he experienced stayed with him, not written in a black-leather book with endless pages but etched into his heart and mind.

"No good." Ondromead sighed as he closed the book and returned the quill and ink to his satchel. He put his chin in his hand. "No good at all. The sensation is still there. I need to witness something else here."

Hashel patted Ondromead's hand. He understood the old man's sadness. He, too, wished to leave. It occurred to Hashel that *he* could leave. He could do as the girl with the hayfork did and run away into the woods, hoping to find safety somewhere else. But that truth held constant. He could always leave Ondromead if he no longer wanted to witness events like the attack on the village. But why should he? He liked being with Ondromead. And while the old man could not protect him, he felt safer near him. Hashel knew he would witness things he did not want to see no matter who stood beside him. He'd beheld a great deal before he even met Ondromead. His stomach rumbled once more, taking his mind from thoughts of the village and the benefits and disadvantages of being with Ondromead.

"Yes. We should find something to eat." Ondromead stood up and slung the satchel over his shoulder. "And then we should find a place to wait for what comes next."

They found bread in the bake shop, cured meat in the butcher's, and a chunk of cheese and a crock of olives in an empty house. They chose to return to the sitting stones near the well at the edge of the village center. They found a position that allowed them to see both directions down the dirt-packed road, without needing to gaze at too many dark patches in the lane. Hashel found it harder to eat while staring at the dark areas of dirt. Fortunately, the rising sun dried the blood-soaked earth, making it less nauseating.

They sat there all morning and all afternoon. Near sunset, they spotted something moving on the road from the east. As the shadows grew longer in the setting sun, the objects on the road came closer. Eventually, Hashel could make them out. A line of wagons and people. A merchant caravan maybe? His mood lightened slightly. A merchant caravan might have guards with swords to fend off the monsters if they came back at night. He hoped they had swords. Lots of swords. He felt bad about feeling it, but he hoped the monsters had moved on to hunt prey somewhere else. They would kill someone that night, but at least then he wouldn't need to witness it, nor worry if it would be him they tore to pieces.

“I’ve seen those wagons. Some of them at least.” Ondromead stood up, squinting at the line of men, women, wagons, and horses getting closer.

Hashel hopped atop a sitting stone, hoping to get a better view. Had he, too, seen the wagons? He did not remember.

“Yes. I recognize the man who leads them.” Ondromead lowered a hand to Hashel’s shoulder, sadness filling his voice. “They are a carnival. I’ve seen them perform several times at events over the years. Since the man was a boy and even before he was born. It will be a great sorrow to me if this is the last time I ever see them or him.”

Hashel had always wanted to visit a carnival. His father had told him of going to a carnival himself once as a boy. All his life, he had quoted a line from the play they performed. “*Majesty is as majesty makes.*” Hashel did not understand that saying, but it sparked a deep curiosity in him to find its meaning at a carnival one day. He leaned into the pressure of Ondromead’s hand on his shoulder, finding a comfort against the knowledge that while he would experience a carnival that night, it would not be in the way he’d always imagined, but instead in the worst way imaginable.

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

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

THE TEMPLE



BON-TAO

LONG SHADOWS crept along wide stones, winding through sinuous streets, and up along curved walls. Bon-Tao held his lamp low in his left hand, keeping the light out of his eyes, his right hand holding a spear aloft near his shoulder, ready to throw. He stalked the streets of the ancient city, hunting the hunters, the roving fire-plants that threatened the pilgrims. Beside him walked Tanagaal, the seer, and two men and two women. A part of him still felt unease with women armed and heading into danger. There were no women in the troops of the Tanjii city guards. The Shen frowned on women holding weapons, unlike the Juparti or the Athetons. Kantula, the Mother Shepherd's personal guard, convinced him to allow women on the hunt. First, because she demanded it, and he'd found refusing her an unwise strategy, and second, because she'd impressed him in combat several times. He trained the women himself. It made the men often over competitive, but he found the women's presence helpful as they regularly noticed things the men did not.

They'd spent weeks with five teams of six roving the city, checking buildings and clearing streets of the rooted fire-plants. They'd made good progress, but the roving plants, those able to move in their shambling, tumbling way, still posed a threat. They'd tried erecting fences and barriers to close off streets and plazas, but the queer plants managed to climb over them every time. At least one found its way into the pilgrim-occupied quarter of the city near the temple each day. The temple itself was the only place they had made wholly clear of the incendiary creatures.

Fortunately, they became dormant at night, unlikely to move and easier to stalk. It also seemed they did not respond to the light of lanterns and torches, and so it was not an impossible task to track them down, stab them with spears, and burn them. Fire proved the only way to destroy the strange monsters as even a single short vine might re-root to propagate a whole new plant. Burning led to the plant inevitably exploding in even greater flame, but with a few spears in the central body of the creature, it could not move to attack.

Bon-Tao still did not understand how plants moved of their own will. Nor how they discerned human from dog to attack the former and not the latter. Or how they exploded in flames. The Sight, Tanagaal assured him, but that gave little explanation. The man had captured several by dowsing them in water. He'd killed and dissected them while wet, but their inner workings revealed little about them that could be understood even by a man trained in The Sight.

"Odd we haven't seen one yet." Tanagaal walked with his own lantern in hand. The man spoke Shen well enough to keep Bon-Tao from practicing his Mumtiba. He preferred to practice that language with another, more attractive partner. He set thoughts of her aside to concentrate on Tanagaal's words.

"Yes. Do you think they may have moved districts? Making night nests elsewhere?" Bon-Tao knew better than to hope for such a thing. Two decades as city guard and warden commander had

leeches all optimism from his bones.

“My fear is rather the opposite.” Tanagaal briefly swung into the open doorway of a nearby building before rejoining the others. “At first, I thought maybe they were like the old hawk-hounds of Juparti, creatures fashioned with The Sight for amusement and cast off to breed and become a nuisance.”

“Dangerous amusements.” Bon-Tao had witnessed three people burned alive by fire-plants. Horrible deaths, the memories of which brought a grimace to his face.

“Exactly.” Tanagaal nodded, eyes still scanning the shadows of the curved street. “These are not creatures accidentally overrunning a dead city like a pack of wild animals. They are too prevalent. They are everywhere. And yet, they only attack humans. I think they were set upon the city intentionally.”

“To what end?” Bon-Tao considered this striking notion and all it suggested. “Keeping out humans means the builders of the city were definitely not human.”

“As we’ve suspected from the nature of the buildings,” Tanagaal said. “But what if keeping humans out is only incidental? What if these fire-plants were set loose to keep another adversary at bay?”

The answer seemed apparent to Bon-Tao, though he did not like the reasoning behind it, for it implied more problems than presently evident. “The urris.”

“Exactly.” Tanagaal smiled at the conclusion. “But why would the builders feel driven to protect themselves from the urris?”

“And did they release the fire-plants on the city before they disappeared or as they left?” Bon-Tao knew these questions represented only two of the possibilities.

“Or did they release them, and they did not work against the urris?” Tanagaal asked.

“Which leaves only one more question.” Bon-Tao saw the grin fade from Tanagaal’s face. “Did the urris destroy the builders and leave no trace of them whatsoever?”

“Yes.” Tanagaal sighed. He looked ready to continue the conversation when he raised a hand to halt the small troop. “I sense something ahead.”

Sometimes, the seer perceived the presence of the plants, usually only when in large numbers. Possibly a clutch of the roving fire-plants nested around the bend of the street. Or a small planting of them clustered together.

“We’ll spread out and...” Bon-Tao started to say.

“Wait!” Tanagaal’s voice jumped in pitch. “They are moving toward us.”

“At night?” Bon-Tao raised the lantern to better see where the shadows consumed the curve of the lane. “How many?” Roving fire-plants hunted alone unless they encountered another by chance.

“I’d say eight by the looks of it.” Tanagaal pointed to where a pack of roving fire-plants tumbled around the curve of the street, their limb-like vines scrabbling along the stones.

“Well, burn them, man.” Bon-Tao glanced at Tanagaal, seeing the fear in his face.

“As soon as I can command The Sight, I will do just that.” Tanagaal closed his eyes tight and breathed deeply.

“Behind you!” one of the women shouted.

Bon-Tao looked back to see a second pack of at least five fire-plants advancing from the rear.

“Tanagaal!” Bon-Tao turned to the seer.

“I’m trying!” Tanagaal’s voice quavered. “I am not trained to gain The Sight in combat.”

Bon-Tao had noted that man had difficulty gaining The Sight under duress, but this had seemed to ease with the familiarity of attacking the fire-plants with a team. A single fire-plant, while dangerous, posed a manageable threat. Two packs of roving fire-plants advancing in the dark presented a more stressful and potentially deadly situation.

“Everyone, with me!” Bon-Tao grabbed Tanagaal by the arm and hauled him toward the open doorway of a nearby building. “Inside! Barricade the entrance! Quickly!”

The two men and two women of his team rushed to follow his commands as he pulled Tanagaal through the wide, arched entrance to momentary safety. He pushed the man into a space far from the doorway.

“Find The Sight or we are all dead!” Bon-Tao tried not to shout at the man, knowing that would not help his concentration. The notion of dying by fire terrified him. He and his team could handle two, or maybe three, of the plants but not a pack of more than a dozen.

“I need a moment.” Tanagaal closed his eyes once more and made a visible effort to slow his rapid breathing.

As Bon-Tao rushed to help two men pull an oversized table toward the entrance and flip it on its side, he wondered how he’d come to stand in an alien building in a dead city on the coast of the Forbidden Realm hiding from plants that moved and erupted in flame. One word explained the entire chain of events.

Junari.

EIGHTY-ONE DAYS AGO

“MOTHER SHEPHERD!”

“Please, Mother Shepherd!”

“Pray for our sick child!”

A small sea of hands waved, arms outstretched, as the crowd crushed around the carriage. Bon-Tao and his squadron of city guards pushed the people back, trying to keep them from Junari, the woman called Mother Shepherd by those who followed her. Swords drawn and held sideways, the men shoved the crowd away, hoping to create enough distance for security without angering the faithful into rash action. They also kept their eyes on the mob, looking for any sign of fanatics who might attack the heretic priest.

Junari and her adviser, Raedalus, had been attending another meeting with the Speaker of the Circle of Elders, Kuth-Von. Only days before, she had stood before the full council, defending herself and her goddess in the wake of the fire that swept through several neighborhoods. A fire he’d seen her call down to protect her people with prayers to her goddess. A fire he’d witnessed quenched by the sacrifice she’d offered of her own life. A life the Goddess apparently restored.

Now he hoped to avoid any similar sequence of events, get her in the carriage, safely to the docks, and on her way to the pilgrim town up the coast.

“Please, Mother Shepherd.”

Bon-Tao sighed as Junari paused near a couple who held forth their limp, unconscious daughter. The girl could not have been more than four years old and looked malnourished, the state of her and her parents’ clothes a testament to their poverty. Junari stepped toward them and placed her hands on the child’s head.

“She is burning.” Junari’s face twisted in surprise. “What ails her?”

“We don’t know,” the mother said.

“She fell to fever three nights past,” the father added.

Three nights. The night after the great fire. Bon-Tao wondered if this represented coincidence or divine confluence.

“I can pray for her, but I am merely the voice of the Goddess.” Junari placed a hand on the mother’s arm. “It is the Goddess who chooses whether to bestow her blessing.”

“Mother Shepherd, it may not be safe here.” Raedalus leaned close to Junari’s ear, but Bon-Tao heard his words.

“He is right,” Bon-Tao said. “There are too many people here. Pray for one and you will be asked to pray for each.”

“I will pray for this one and through this one for all.” Junari’s voice and the look on her face made it clear she intended to do as she wished.

He understood the only way to stop her would be to physically shove her into the carriage, an act that might provoke the crowd into violence against him and his men.

“Quickly,” Bon-Tao said, staying close to her shoulder.

Junari bowed her head and placed both hands on the child’s forehead. Bon-Tao listened to her whispered prayers, wondering at the inner forces that drove the woman to the actions she took. The third son of a family with a long tradition of serving in the city guards, Bon-Tao’s life had been charted out for him long before his birth. As he grew to manhood and trained with his father and brother to enforce the laws and defend the city, his own desires turned toward the notion of joining the priesthood. That idea never became more than a dream. In his family, men did not abandon their hard duty to the city for the silk robes and soft lives of a temple priest. He quashed the fancy as the wild imaginings of youth, but the latent echoes of that priestly call ingrained in him a devotion to Ni-Kam-Djen. He attended the local Zatolin temple regularly and read the scriptures of the nine prophets each evening. He could not be a priest, but he intended to uphold the laws of Ni-Kam-Djen as he upheld those of the Circle of Elders. And he had done so until the dreams came to him. Until this woman, this heretic, arrived in his city and filled the days of his life.

“Mother Goddess, bless this child and heal her of her illness. Cast upon me the suffering she endures. Make my burden heavy that hers might be light. Protect her now as you have sheltered me. Mother Goddess...”

Bon-Tao listened as Junari repeated her prayer, turning it from petition to chant. He saw the

lips of the girl's parents repeating the words with her. Others around her did as well. Raedalus, in particular. They treated the prayer as a communal address to their goddess. He had never seen people pray in this manner. The Ketolin sect believed that only the temple priests could pray to Ni-Kam-Djen to intercede on behalf of the faithful. His own sect, the Zanolins, believed that anyone might pray to their god. But he'd never known any priest of either sect to lay hands on the poor and pray for the sick. To offer of their own health as bondage in return for the wellbeing of another. He did not know the practices of priests in Daeshen or Tanshen, but the priests of Tanjii kept to their temples, letting the people come to them with their tithes of coin from the wealthy and vegetables and livestock from the poor.

"Mother Goddess, bless this child..."

Bon-Tao blinked and fell silent as he realized he heard the words of the prayer from his own lips rather than Junari's. He glanced around to make sure none of his men had noticed. What brought those words forth from him? He'd tried his best to ignore the dreams of the heretic goddess and the pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm. They still came to him each night, but he cast them aside upon waking. And he dreamed now not merely of an ancient temple in a far-off land, but of the woman who stood beside him, tears in her eyes as she prayed for a dying child. She came to him in his dreams, but not in the manner of the goddess or the pilgrimage. She came as a lover might, appearing to walk with him, to speak of their hearts under the stars. He had known women, had been engaged once, but he'd never encountered a woman such as Junari. She existed as a singular representation of her sex.

The girl blinked and moaned. Junari held her hands away, wiping her eyes as the mother clasped the child to her breast. A sigh of awe passed through the assembly of the faithful pressed close around, transforming in moments to cheers and cries of praise for the Goddess and the Mother Shepherd.

"Now we may go." Junari turned and led the way toward the waiting carriage. She swayed, appearing dizzy, and Raedalus held out a hand to steady her. Maybe she had taken the child's illness upon herself.

As Bon-Tao helped her up into the seat of the carriage and closed the door, a realization came over him that filled him with fear, elation, resignation, and sadness in equal measure. He recognized he could not bury the true desires of his heart as he had when he remained a soldier in the city guard rather than take up the robes of a priest. And he understood it had not been the dreams that swayed him, nor the appearance of the star in the sky, nor the fire called forth by prayers, but Junari herself, a woman willing to give her life to save his city, willing to accept an illness into her own body to spare the suffering of a child.

He knew then he loved her more than he could love any goddess, and that he would follow her no matter how far or how dangerous the path.

THE PRESENT

FLAMES LICKED at the edges of dust-caked wood, a sweet smoky scent filling the air. Bon-

Tao stood with his shoulder jammed into the planks of the upturned table blocking the wide door to the squat, circular structure. He slashed at the grasping vines that snaked around the table with his sword. The two women stood beside him, helping hold the table in place, while the two men each held smaller tables jammed up against the two open window portals.

“Do you hold it yet?” Bon-Tao shouted to Tanagaal in the back of the room.

“It is elusive in the terror of the moment.” Tanagaal sighed with frustration, his eyes going wide as he opened them to see what Bon-Tao and the others struggled to hold at bay.

“Stop worrying about these damn plants killing you and start worrying what I’ll do to you if you don’t destroy them.” Bon-Tao didn’t often find threats useful in motivating those under his command, but it seem appropriate given the situation. And it felt good. He did not desire to die in flames. And he especially did not want to fail Junari. More importantly, he did not wish to leave her side, to be denied her kisses in some spirit world after this life.

“I have it.” Tanagaal’s voice calmed and his face slackened as he raised his hands.

Light and heat exploded behind the thick wood of the table behind Bon-Tao’s shoulder, shoving him forward and nearly knocking him to his knees. The women beside him held their balance as well. The fire-plants never made noise when they ignited, but the heat did often cause a wail of steam from moisture trapped in their vines and inner root-like compartments. That scream of released gasses also signaled the plant’s demise.

He coughed at the smoke as he waited for the flames to die down, then tugged at the table to make space for them all to exit back into the street. He stepped carefully past a mass of charred plant matter. The initial fire-plant that trapped them in the building had been joined by the others. He counted more than twenty in the street, all within five paces of the entrance. His crew joined him. Tanagaal still expressed the serene countenance that spoke to holding The Sight.

“I apologize, Commander.” Tanagaal shook his head. “I often find it hard to grasp The Sight when under duress.”

“I think, in the future, it would be best if you made to hold it before we begin the hunt.” Bon-Tao waved the pungent, sweet stench of roasted plant carcass from his face.

“A good idea. Especially now.” Tanagaal looked around. “We face a greater danger, it seems.”

“Yes,” Bon-Tao agreed. “These damn things have learned to hunt in packs, and now they’ll be hunting us.”

The Temple story arena continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*.

THE CARNIVAL



YETH

GOLDEN SUNLIGHT set flame-colored autumn leaves aglow. An early evening breeze shifted branches, creating a living mosaic of red, orange, pink, yellow, and stubborn green. Yeth looked up the light-filled foliage as she pulled a wagon beside Tarak. The leaves reminded her of walking through the Ulan forest with her son, Jann, the previous autumn. They had talked of his schooling with the local education master, his enjoyment of learning the history of his people, their art and literature, of his desire to, one day, apprentice with a sight master, of his fear that she would not return from her latest assignment by the Great Pod to apprehend a criminal called Fell.

She had not known that it would be their last time alone. Their last words of any significance. Had she considered the possibility that she would be separated from him by thousands of korids for an unknowable time, she would have spoken to him more of her pride in his learning. She would have encouraged him to practice the rudimentary exercises for training in The Sight. She would have held him close and made certain he knew of her love for him. She had conveyed her love, but in the usual and nearly perfunctory manner. The way a yutan spoke to her child when she did not foresee the possibility of never speaking with him again.

“Village.”

Yeth experienced a wave of relief as her thoughts shifted from the autumn forest of her past to Tarak and the road ahead. She saw the first buildings of a small village coming into view around a bend in the lane, only now visible behind the rest of the wagons and carnival folk. It would be good to make camp and settle in for the night. Her shoulders and legs ached from pulling the wagon, and she looked forward to a good night’s sleep after their customary nightly guard duty. Maybe the village would have a few horses Leotin could purchase and relieve them of their burden as pack animals.

Tarak sniffed the air and grunted, the sound rumbling through his massive furred chest.

“What is wrong?” Yeth looked to the village again. She knew Tarak well enough to know the import of that grumble.

“The village smells of death.” Tarak wrinkled his long snout.

As more and more houses came into view, Yeth noted the stillness of the village. She saw no people. No smoke rose from chimneys. Odd for the time of day.

“Bandits?” Yeth had never seen a bandit band large enough to attack a village of this size.

“I cannot tell.” Tarak sniffed the breeze again. “I smell blood. And dead flesh.”

“We should warn Leotin,” Yeth said.

“Yes. You go.” Tarak nodded to her.

Yeth shrugged out of the makeshift harness attached to the wagon. As usual, she and Tarak brought up the rear, in the event of an ambush on the road. She claimed her spear from the wagon bed and ran alongside the caravan toward the front. She ignored the looks of those she passed. She

did not wish to worry the humans. They were an easily upset and distracted people, prone to unpredictable acts when frightened. Near the front of the carnival line, she saw Palla and Ranna leading an ox hitched to a wagon. She caught their eyes long enough to nod and gesture with her head to Palla. It would be helpful to have her present when speaking with Leotin. For a human of such limited age, she often displayed a perceptive mind in difficult situations. Palla patted her companion's shoulder and then ran to catch up with Yeth.

"What is it?" Palla asked as she loped beside Yeth, her boots smacking the packed earth.

"Tarak smells something wrong," Yeth said as they slowed to a walk beside Leotin in the lead wagon.

Leotin frowned when he saw Yeth and Palla beside him.

"What does Tarak smell?" Leotin's hearing had not faded with the color of his hair in his later years.

"He is uncertain, but he says blood and death." Yeth wondered what that could mean but had no real desire to find out.

Leotin looked toward the falling sun behind a line of trees across the fields. He shook his head and pulled the reins of the horse, drawing the wagon to a stop. The rest of the caravan slowly halted behind him. He stood up on the wagon, looking toward the village, now only a thousand paces away.

"It doesn't look right, does it?" Leotin climbed down from the wagon.

"Maybe a few of us could go in and take a look." Palla joined Leotin in staring at the houses and barns at the edge of the village.

"Yes." Leotin looked to Palla. "Get Ranna. And choose a few others. Tell the rest to pull up as close together as the lane will allow and to set guards along the line on both sides." As Palla nodded and ran off, Leotin turned to Yeth. "Ask Tarak to stay here and patrol the perimeter. While it would be good to have him, he tends to frighten the folk in small villages."

"Of course." Yeth ran back down the line of wagons and informed Tarak of Leotin's orders.

"A good plan." Tarak had removed the harness and stood with his twin axes in his giant paws. "I will find our friend and see if he can learn more from circling around the village. I am certain he smells what I do and will be just as worried."

"Also a good plan." Yeth grabbed her cloak from the wagon and ran back toward the front of the caravan line. Tarak's idea to have Shifhuul circumnavigate the village made sense. The wyrin had chosen not to reveal his false death upon leaving the castle. He felt it might prove helpful to the party to have a silent member shadowing the carnival at a distance and keeping watch over them. It also negated the need to explain his miraculous recovery without reference to Yeth's ability with The Sight. Each night, Yeth and Tarak took turns quietly disappearing into the woods to make contact with Shifhuul and bring him food. The wyrin had lost weight, as they all had, but still seemed in good health after so many days hiding and walking in the woods and fields beside and behind the carnival. Maybe he would learn something they could not.

At the head of the caravan line, Yeth found Leotin, sword strapped to his waist, standing beside Palla and Ranna and six men, two apiece of the carnival folk, castle folk, and pilgrims. All

wore swords. Yeth noted that Palla and Ranna seemed the most comfortable carrying the weapons. The two had completely abandoned wearing dresses in exchange for woolen breeches since leaving the castle. She understood that easily enough. She had never worn such a costume, but she assumed it could easily impede one's legs in a sword fight.

"Let's go." Leotin began walking toward the village. "Yeth, bring up the rear. No need for people to see you first. And, everyone, remember to smile when we meet people. We're looking for a place to make camp for the night and to buy supplies and maybe a few horses. And if there's time tonight, and enough interest, we might put on a little show. Never hurts to make some coins with honest work."

"I don't see anyone to smile at." Palla gestured with her hand toward the village.

"Smile, anyway," Leotin said. "It will be good practice for you."

Yeth pulled up the hood of her cloak and stepped to the rear of the group. They passed several houses along the road, some single room huts and a few larger dwellings with barns nearby. Doors stood open to all the buildings. One door to a house sat smashed aside, the plaster door frame smeared with blood. The door of the barn just up the road hung askew, nearly ripped from its hinges. The ground in front of the barn held a blackish stain the size of a small table. She distinguished a large paw print in the blood-infused dirt. She looked down and breathed a bit deeper to hold firm to her concentration. The paw prints mixed the ground with those of human boots, bare feet, horses' hooves, and dogs. She'd never seen these particular prints before, but they reminded her of the wild cats of the Mansho Mountains near Oskalth in her home realm. She'd never witnessed prints this large before of any animal.

"There are animal prints everywhere." Yeth held her spear tight in both hands. "You should draw your swords."

"A very good idea." Leotin pulled his blade free and glanced down toward his feet. Palla and the others did the same.

As they walked into the village proper, Yeth saw more dried pools of blood, more smashed doors, more crimson-black stains on walls, more large paw prints. They did not see any people until passing around the edge of a house. Near a well sat an old man with dark skin and close, curling gray hair and a young boy with dark-brown flesh and a flat nose.

"Maybe they know what happened." Leotin lowered his sword slightly as he led the group toward the old man and boy. "Stay alert."

"That won't be difficult in an empty village with blood everywhere." Palla glanced over her shoulder.

Yeth also looked behind them but saw nothing besides the carnival wagons parked at the border of the village. She took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, stilling her mind, repeating the centering phrase of her training, and embracing The Sight. She felt her heart beat slower in her chest, the pressure of the slight breeze on her skin, the difference in the colors of the dried blood in the street, heard the call of birds from the woods nearby, and the bee hovering near a flower beside the lane. As the party stepped up before the old man and boy, she moved to the side, her back to the wall of a nearby shop, a position from where she could see the village center and

anything that might enter it. Palla and Ranna faced the old man with Leotin, but Palla instructed the others to turn outward, ready for any appearance of danger.

Yeth looked at the old man from the side. Something about his face reminded her of a time long ago during her training. Her concentration wavered as memories of that tragic day flitted through her mind. She exhaled slowly and focused once more on the continuous moment unfolding in the present.

“Kinao.” Leotin raised his hand that did not hold a sword. “What happened here?”

The old man looked down at the boy beside him, then back to Leotin. They seemed strangely calm for sitting in a village bedecked in blood.

“The people of the village were killed.” The old man looked uncomfortable as he spoke.

“How did you survive?” Leotin asked.

The old man seemed to think a moment before speaking.

“Luck.”

“Did bandits do this?” Leotin looked around the village and then at a set of animal prints near the well.

The old man shook his head. He seemed reluctant to say more.

“An animal of some kind?” Leotin stepped a little closer to the old man.

The old man nodded.

“What kind of animal?” Leotin asked.

“I cannot answer all of your questions,” the old man replied.

“Is the animal still nearby?” Leotin again looked around the village.

“I do not know.” The old man sighed.

“I am Palla. This is Leotin.” Palla stepped forward. “He leads a carnival. You can see it waiting back down the road.” She pointed behind her but continued to look at the boy and old man. “What are your names?”

The old man looked to the boy, who shrugged his small shoulders.

“My name is unimportant.” The old man shifted where he sat, looking increasingly uncomfortable.

“Surely, you have a name.” Palla bent down to the boy, who stared back at her with sad eyes.

“The boy does not speak.” The old man put an arm around the boy. “His name is Hashel.” The old man glanced at the boy. “I think.”

“Is that true?” Palla asked the boy.

The boy nodded to her.

“Where are the villagers?” Yeth understood Palla’s attempt to put the old man and boy at ease, but they needed more important information. They needed to know if they were in danger or if someone needed help. “Did anyone survive?”

The old man turned to look at Yeth, as did the others. Seeing him again reminded her of that day she did not wish to remember. She suppressed the thought.

The old man shook his head. The boy raised an arm and pointed down a side street from the village center.

Leotin turned to follow the boy's outstretched arm. "What's down there?"

The old man sighed, shook his head, and lowered his gaze to the ground. The boy frowned, looked to the old man, and then joined him in staring at the dirt.

"Will you stay here?" Leotin asked the old man.

"I must." The old man sighed again.

Leotin looked to Yeth and Palla. "Let us take a look."

They reassumed their defensive positions as they walked down the side street away from the village center.

"That old man don't seem right." Ranna kept her eyes in motion, scanning around her.

Yeth agreed. Something about the old man disturbed her as well. But not as much as the absence of any people in the village. She stepped over another splotch of black-red dirt in the lane.

"I could swear I've seen him before." Palla switched hands, holding her sword to wipe her palm on her pants leg before returning the blade to her right hand.

"All old men look alike." Leotin slowed as they neared a fork in the lane. "I'll look much the same one..."

Leotin fell silent and stopped. He stood in the middle of the lane, looking down the fork to the right. Yeth and the others stepped up beside him.

A massive pile of bodies filled the center of the narrow street. Yeth stared at the dead eyes of men, women, children, and even farm animals. More than a hundred bodies lay piled in the dust. What animal could kill an entire village? What animal would stack the dead like this? To what end? And how had the old man and the boy escaped the slaughter?

Yeth stepped back from the others, rotating to make sure the streets behind them remained clear. She saw no one. When she turned around, she saw Palla and Ranna and one of the men making the sign of the spiral on their chests. Yeth looked at the mountain of death before her. The sight of the hundreds of dead eyes reminded her of a dead face she'd stared at not so long ago.

"We should leave this village now," she said.

27 DAYS AGO

SWALLOWS, ROBINS, night jays, red-winged sparks, and other avians all sang their morning songs from tree and bush, the blended harmonies competing and clashing as they masked another constant noise — the moans of three men. Yeth looked over the castle wall, staring out into the dim, golden light breaking slowly upon the world. Four human males stood tied to a wagon in the lane several hundred human paces beyond the castle gate. One more male was bound next to them, slumped rigidly in death, his body turned dark in the days since his demise. Birds occasionally flew down to peck at their rotting flesh, but the sounds of the living humans usually drove them away after a short time.

Five human males and three females had stolen a rope and descended the side of the castle wall three days past. Yeth did not understand the rationale behind their flight, but she assumed they had hoped to evade the soldiers besieging the castle and flee into the nearby woods. Instead,

the Tanshen soldiers caught them. The three females disappeared into the soldier camp, to be raped and held captive if fortunate, or raped until death if not. The soldiers tied the five human males to a wagon and left them in the sun without food or water. One of the human men died from the wounds suffered during their capture. Three Tanshen soldiers stood nearby, warming their hands against the early morning chill around a small fire.

“Can you neck break?”

Yeth looked over to where Shifhuul and Tarak stood beside her. The wyrin lurked in the shadows near the closest tower, in case a human approached them during their watch.

“Not at this distance.” Yeth wished she possessed the power in The Sight to end the suffering of the three humans. She did not think she could break their necks or stop their hearts without getting closer. She might be able to guide arrows the distance needed to kill them, but she could easily miss their vital organs and merely enhance their agony.

Tarak stood closer to her, near enough that he did not need to raise his voice much to be heard.

“Any action that smells of The Sight will only enrage the soldiers more and make the humans here in the castle further agitated.” Tarak looked away from the dying humans to Shifhuul.

The roagg had been surprised when Yeth revealed that the wyrin lived, thanks to her healing use of The Sight. Surprised but pleased. The large roagg had lifted the diminutive wyrin up and grinned at him until Shifhuul protested about not being a child’s pet. Yeth agreed with Tarak’s sentiment. They were better as a unit of three. They complemented each other in surprising ways.

“We could try to rescue them.” Yeth wondered how such a thing might be accomplished but did not find an answer readily forthcoming.

“Leotin would not sanction it.” Tarak placed his massive paws on two merlons of the stone ramparts along the wall.

“Leotin right.” Shifhuul leaned against the stones of the outer wall. “Too much risk for humans who run from castle.”

“A point well made, but it is not easy to watch humans die slowly.” Yeth avoided turning back to the men tied to the wagon in the distance. She could hear their muffled lamentations well enough.

“Even I do not enjoy seeing sheetoo suffer in this way.” Tarak sniffed the air and nodded with his snout toward the road leading from the town to the castle. “The Tanshen leader comes again.”

Yeth looked to see a human soldier with a bright-green silk sash across his armor riding a white mare toward the wagon. The three soldiers from the fire noticed him and stood to attention. The Tanshen commander brought the horse to a halt near the wagon and slid from its saddle. One of the soldiers took the reins of the horse. The horse stamped the ground and pulled back, shy of the dead human and the moans of the near-dead.

“Kill this one.” Shifhuul peered over the edge of the parapet to the wagon and humans as the commander limped toward his captives. The Tanshen commander appeared to have been wounded in some conflict prior to his arrival at the castle. It did not seem life-threatening, but it did ensure that he always arrived at the castle on a horse.

“It would not end the siege.” Yeth considered again how far she could guide and enhance the

flight of an arrow. Not far enough, she suspected. She needed more training in using The Sight as a weapon in battle. Yutans did not typically use it in such a way. Unfortunately, the close confines of the castle, populated with so many Shen townspeople fearful of The Sight, gave her little opportunity for training. If and when they managed to escape the siege and return to the road, following the pilgrim star and the new god, she determined she would practice The Sight at every opportunity.

Thinking of The Sight made her remember the sorrowful news she'd received the previous night when using the special metal disk to report back their lack of progress to the Great Yutan Pod in her home realm. The disks functioned in a simple fashion. Letters drawn with a knife tip in one side would replicate momentarily across the other three linked disks. It made communication slow and necessarily succinct. After informing the yutan, roagg, and wyrin seers holding the other three disks that the siege continued, she received an unexpected reply. *Lamna dead*. She had assumed that she communicated with her mentor, Sight Master Lamna. To learn of her death shocked Yeth into a stupor that only ceased with the commencement of her tears. A mother of sorts, Lamna believed in her when all others lost faith. All she knew of The Sight, and much of what it meant to be a yutan, she gained from Sight Master Lamna.

She shoved the thoughts of her mentor and friend from her mind as she leaned on the stones of the castle wall and concentrated on the present. Lamna had always said she did not pay enough attention to the current moment.

“What does he say? Can you hear him?” Tarak turned to Shifhuul. While Tarak possessed better sight, smell, and hearing than humans or yutans, the wyrin exceeded him in all three.

“Talk too small.” Shifhuul turned an ear toward the humans at the wagon. “Say something about sun and blood and screams and castle. Maybe. Too far for ears.”

The Tanshen commander returned to his horse and mounted into the saddle. Yeth raised an eyebrow as the human guided the horse into a trot toward the castle gates below them. She watched with increasing curiosity as the human rode to within a hundred human paces of the castle.

“Kill him now?” Shifhuul pointed to Yeth's bow leaning nearby against the wall.

“Possibly.” Yeth picked up the bow and pulled an arrow from the quiver. Would Leotin approve of killing the Tanshen commander? Would it have any positive impact on the siege? Or would it only enrage the Tanshen into hastening their attempts to build their siege machines to toss even more rocks at and over the castle walls.

“Open the gates and they will be spared!” the Tanshen commander shouted as his horse pranced beneath him. “Hold your gates closed to us and you will suffer as they suffer for days and days until you are all dead!”

The Tanshen commander raised his arm and quickly swung it down. Cries of pain rose from the wagon as the commander's hand reached the nadir of its arc. Yeth shifted her gaze to see the four men tied to the wagon each being stabbed in the arm by a soldier with a knife. The soldiers then stood back and began to beat their captives with the flats of their swords. The restrained townsmen wailed and cursed.

“Open the gates, and live or die as they do.” The Tanshen commander turned his horse and

galloped away.

Yeth held the bow and arrow in separate hands, hesitating, knowing what she wished to do, but fearing her inability to accomplish the task and what the consequences might be.

“I can take him down if I do so quickly.” Tarak held his own large bow in his paws.

“Shoot. Shoot good.” Shifhuul stated his opinion clearly if not eloquently.

“We should wake Leotin.” Yeth lowered her bow. “He will wish to see this.”

Yeth knew what she felt they should do — kill the townspeople or rescue them. But what would Leotin decide? And would she follow his orders?

THE PRESENT

BIRD CAWS and the sound of wings flapping called Yeth back from the past. The birds feasted on the dead, as the birds had done with the dead tied to that wagon outside the castle. Yeth had followed Leotin’s orders, but she had regretted it. Would she regret following his orders now?

“Back to the center of the village. We make camp here tonight.” Leotin turned from the towering pile of dead humans and animals in the middle of the street, his hand covering his nose.

“We should leave now.” Yeth walked beside Leotin. “We should get as far from here as possible.”

“On the road, we’re exposed. Stretched in a line. Easy to attack.” Leotin walked around a dried pool of blood. “Whatever did this is worse than any bandits or militia we’ve ever faced.”

While Yeth agreed with his assessment of the threat, and his arguments against leaving the village, her instincts told that fleeing would garner a higher chance of living than remaining and potentially fighting.

“Maybe it moved on. Whatever it was.” Palla caught up with them.

“Whatever they were.” Ranna pointed at the dirt in the street. “Look at the tracks. Must be at least two of ’em.”

“At least three. Possibly four.” Yeth reappraised Ranna. The woman noticed things that escaped Palla. The reverse as well. They made a good team.

“You and Tarak are in charge of figuring out how to keep us safe tonight.” Leotin led them around a corner and back toward the village center. “Tell Palla what you need. And how many people you need to help.”

“Sundown is close.” Yeth began thinking of how to protect the carnival troop from creatures that could kill an entire village. She wished she could easily consult with Shifhuul. He had a mind for such things in a way that she and Tarak did not. Another good team. He must be watching from the nearby woods. Maybe she could go to him. “We will need to work quickly.”

“I’ll make sure everyone knows what to do once you have a plan.” Palla kept her eyes darting from empty house to empty house as though waiting for something to burst from one of the wood-and-plaster huts.

“Good.” Leotin picked up his pace. “While you are at that, I am going to have another talk with that old man. He knows more than he is saying, and I want to know why.”

The old human male and the boy came into view as they neared the village center. Yeth agreed. The old man did know more than he said. Why would he remain silent? How had they survived? Something about him still disturbed her and made her think of times in her life she wished to keep from her mind. Why should that be? Had she encountered him before? When they were both younger? Might that explain it? But why would a human be in the yutan realm? Too many questions and too much work to do.

“Did you find anyone alive?” Tarak asked as she walked up to him.

“An old man and a boy. The rest of the village is dead.” Yeth looked up to Tarak, staring into his large, black eyes. “Now we must ensure we do not meet the same fate.”

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

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

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

“DID YOU see what happened?”

“Yes. I saw.”

“What was it? What kind of animal?”

“It is hard to say.”

“Were there more than one?”

“I am uncertain.”

“What did it look like?”

“It was dark.”

“Why does the boy not speak?”

Ondromead looked from the faces of the man and young woman who questioned him, Leotin and Palla, and turned to Hashel beside him on the sitting stones near the village well. Why did the boy not speak? Had he always been thus? Unlikely. Something happened to silence him. But what? He’d never asked, in part for fear the boy might speak and tell him. He counted it a great fortune he had not been called to witness whatever event drove Hashel into permanent quietude.

“I do not know why he does not speak.” Ondromead placed a hand on Hashel’s shoulder. “It is a mystery he will answer when he is ready.”

Hashel nodded at him solemnly.

“Would you like to help me?” Palla knelt before Hashel. “I need to prepare the carnival to camp here tonight and I could use help finding the right place. You’ve been here. You know the village.” She looked up to Ondromead. “You don’t mind, do you?”

Ondromead did mind. He did not like being separated from the boy for any length of time. Particularly after the events months ago at the Daeshen palace. However, the village appeared safe until nightfall. And the young woman, Palla, seemed trustworthy enough, based on what he had witnessed of her life years ago. And what he understood of Leotin from having witnessed him several times throughout the years spoke to him being a decent man. Hashel did not need to fear the carnival or the people in it. He looked to see Hashel gazing up at him, excited by the idea of accompanying Palla. Probably aching for the company of someone who wasn’t an old man.

“It is up to Hashel.”

Hashel smiled and patted Ondromead’s leg before extending his hand to Palla. She took it and guided him toward where the carnival wagons rolled along the main street of the village. As the two walked away, Ondromead experienced a physical pang, a visceral worry he would not see the boy again. He experienced it every time Hashel no longer stood within eyesight. He collected his thoughts as Leotin sat beside him.

“I am not an enemy.” The carnival master folded his hands before him. “I am a man trying his best to keep his people safe. A task that grows more difficult the harder I apply myself to it.” He

nodded toward the people disembarking from the wagons. “For their sake, you must tell me what you know.”

“I can tell you little.” A buzzing filled Ondromead’s head, the sensation that always accompanied his interactions in the world, a signal that told him when he strayed too close to interfering in the outcome of events. The buzzing waxed and waned in intensity during his previous conversation with Leotin — a beehive shaken and ready to burst at any moment. He tried to deflect the questions. “I am old, and my mind is not what it once was.”

“Ah.” Leotin looked away and sighed. “Do you remember anything that might be of use to us in knowing what we face?”

“I wish I could tell you more. I truly do.” The hum in his mind shrank as the sorrow in his heart expanded.

“Can the boy tell us? Draw something, maybe?” Leotin asked.

“I doubt it.” Ondromead decided to lie, and the buzzing diminished. “He had his eyes closed most of the time in fright. And as I said, it was dark. It’s hard to know what happened.”

“Then we will prepare as best we can to face an unknown threat.” Leotin pushed his shoulders back as he looked at the people of his carnival. “Are you from here? Did you know the people of this village?”

“We travel. A great deal. We came to this village just last evening.” The buzzing dimmed to a low hum.

“I travel much as well. Have we met before?” Leotin stared at him intently.

“It is possible.” More than possible. Ondromead remembered seeing the man four times throughout his life. The buzzing increased in pitch. “But I do not remember your face. I forget many faces.” If only he could forget the faces and names and places and the things he saw.

“Hmm.” Leotin looked around the village. “Did no one survive? Might someone be hiding?”

“We found one survivor. A girl. Maybe twelve or thirteen ... and a dog. They both ran into the woods.” Ondromead wondered what became of the girl. And the dog. Did they escape? Were they already dead?

“Is there anything you can tell me that might help us?” Leotin turned again to Ondromead.

“I can tell you nothing more than I already have.” Ondromead considered what he might say if it were possible. Would he tell them to flee? To hide? To pray? He did not know. After so many years of watching people in similar situations, he should have known what advice to give.

Another question came to him — what should he and Hashel do? They had remained in the village against all previous experience. There must be a reason. To witness the death of those in the carnival? Had he not witnessed enough death the preceding night? The previous month? The years past? The centuries gone by? He let a spark of hope arise in his breast that he might witness more than mere slaughter by the kellitsaras. He wished to tell Leotin what they faced, but the thought caused the bees to stir again.

“I have much to do before the day is gone.” Leotin stood and looked along the road from the village as the sun neared the edge of the world. “Help us if you can. Stay with us regardless. You may not be safe with us tonight, but you will be safer than you were last night.”

“Thank you.” Ondromead watched Leotin walk toward the carnival wagons. He wondered if Hashel would be safer than the previous night. The night might have ended badly had the boy not happened to reek of lamp oil.

Thinking of Hashel brought Ondromead to his feet. Where was he? Darkness approached, and likely the creatures. Should they stay with the carnival? Did that put Hashel in more danger? Or was he safer with so many other possible prey nearby? What could he do to keep Hashel safe? At the least he could place himself between the creatures and the boy should the need arise and damn the buzzing it caused. Hopefully, he and Hashel would fall asleep and awaken somewhere else before ever hearing those deep, vicious growls again. For that to be true, he needed to witness the event that held him in the village.

As he walked toward the carnival wagons, he noticed several in motion. As he drew closer, he discovered the intent. Horses pulled wagons into a tight ring between two nearby barns, leaving an open space to the street between them. He recognized one of the barns as the same he and Hashel had found sanctuary in the prior night. He stepped beside the barn and watched as the people from the carnival pulled the wagons around to create a barrier against potential intruders. They guided the horses and two oxen and a pig into the barn he knew well. Some hauled crates from the wagons and placed them between the wagon wheels to make it harder for anything to crawl underneath. Some took up defensive positions atop the wagons, eyes looking outward. Others began to dig and build fire pits while still more prepared an evening meal around a fire already roaring. Even though he had seen carnivals and armies set camp many times, the efficiency still impressed him.

The longer he watched, the more a division within the carnival became clear. People worked in groups of three, but the three were not alike. One person in each triad he easily marked as carnival folk. And he recognized the fervent look in the eyes of the second person in each group as belonging to a pilgrim. The third person in each team he found harder to identify. They dressed as simple townsfolk. Why did the carnival hold townsfolk and pilgrims beside carnival workers? He wondered if this would become obvious, or whether it would remain a mystery to him. He could ask someone but doing so might begin a larger conversation he did not wish to have.

Another thing struck him as he watched the camp being assembled — he had witnessed many of the people there before. He remembered Leotin, of course, from his previous encounters with the carnival. The first time he saw Leotin, he had been a young man in his early twenties, standing beside the grave of his father, vowing to take up the mantle of master and honor his father’s memory and his life’s work by making the carnival the best in the whole of the Iron Realm.

He also remembered the young woman, Palla. As a girl of ten or eleven, he’d witnessed her dive into the swift waters of a river on her home estate to rescue a servant boy who fell in and looked likely to drown. The men of her family had stood waiting for a female servant to fetch male servants to assist the boy while the boy’s mother cried at the riverbank. Her father and her eldest brother dived in to save her as she clung to the boy. A clever ploy, as she did not swim well enough to save the boy herself, and her father would not have moved had she not been endangered. Servant boys evidently did not warrant such effort or risk on the estate.

He also recognized the female yutan. He'd witnessed her in her youth as well. Yeth, Leotin had called her. He saw her the day she passed her examination to apprentice with her sight master in the Sky Realm. She'd been nervous and had failed twice in a row to light a candle with only the power of her mind. Her potential sight master had whispered something to her, to the vocal objection of the other sight masters in attendance. The young Yeth stared at the candle so long without blinking that Ondromead began to think she might pass out from the exertion. Instead, she blinked and sighed and looked away in defeat, then turned back to the candle and sighed again, her eyes going wide as a flame erupted into life atop the wick. Her sight master had congratulated her and young Yeth had cried. Ondromead had seen that same sight master not long ago.

He recognized the roagg as well. The name Tarak came to mind. He'd observed from a distance on a sparsely wooded mountain in the Stone Realm as the roagg and another male hunted a deer across rocky ground. They tracked the buck to a stand of rocks and the other male had been about to shoot it with his bow when Tarak held his hand to the arrow shaft. He pointed to a doe and a fawn emerging from the woods to join the male deer. A family. The other male roagg shouted at him, the ruckus scaring the deer into the woods. Ondromead had not understood why the event deserved his witnessing, but then he rarely did. Nor did he understand why an event in one realm demanded his presence when a similar event in another realm did not.

He finally spotted Hashel, standing with Palla and the other woman, Ranna, near the barn with the horses. They helped a boy of fifteen or so feed the animals. Hashel offered hay from the barn to a horse. As Ondromead walked toward them, the carnival boy turned and offered more than merely his profile. He squinted. He remembered this boy. He'd seen him a few years past with the carnival but had thought him dead or lost. For some reason, the memory of that meeting came to him more vividly than the others.

TWO YEARS AGO

“WHAT NEWS comes by foot and wing of our machinations in the south?”

“Our troops have crossed the border and are marching by moonlight, drawing closer with each step to their fulfillment of your destiny, my tey.”

“How soon before they meet their own destiny in battle, Kenagal?”

“They sweep through village after village, meeting no resistance, and soon will pound at the gates of the capital itself, my tey.”

“Good, good. Our plan unfolds as a cloak upon the land, draping our will across the realm, bringing our rightful rule to each and all.”

“May the twin gods bless it to be so, my tey.”

As the actors paced from the stage, a wave of applause erupted through the grand hall of the Atheton palace in the capital city of Havataz. Ondromead watched from a darkened balcony alcove near the rear of the massive chamber as stagehands struck scenery representing the fictional palace of the play and unfurled a backdrop painted to look like a forest of tall trees. He'd seen the play, *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*, performed many times over the centuries and centuries of his

witnessing, but he acknowledged this performance to be especially well done. Every troupe of actors manipulated the text of the drama to suit their audience, but the carnival of traveling performers below excelled at both the adjustment of the play and the acting. He'd seen them mount the play at a Juparti wedding for a powerful rhexan a decade previous, and they had altered the titles of the royalty and the religion as usual, but had also adjusted the language of the performance, provided appropriate costuming, and even changed the scenery to match the local flavor of architecture. It showed a unique attention to detail that helped the audience, particularly the more cultured and wealthy benefactors, to appreciate the show.

As a trill reverberated through his mind, Ondromead sighed. At last, the moment he stood present to witness neared. He'd wandered the palace the whole of the day, hoping to find the person or event he needed to see. Now, well into the evening hours, after a banquet to celebrate the anniversary of the Teyette of Atheton's coronation day and reviewing nearly the entirety of the most ancient play of the Iron Realm, the moment he needed to witness neared. An indescribable force pulled at his mind, leading his body out of the balcony and away from the great hall. He followed this gentle tugging sensation through lamp-lit halls and down spiraling staircases, across stone courtyards and flower-filled gardens to the palace stables. There he found a collection of brightly painted wagons he recognized as belonging to the carnival. As he approached, he noticed a boy of thirteen or so watering the horses and brushing them down. The trill in his mind grew and Ondromead stepped into the shadows of the stable awning to watch the boy.

He did not need to observe the boy for long before two large men approached from across the courtyard. As they stepped into the stables, the horses skittered and the boy looked up.

"Hello?" The boy seemed surprised to find someone standing in the stables with him.

"You the animal boy with the carnival?" the wider of the two men asked.

"That's me." The boy pointed toward the far side of the palace. "The carnival's all in the great hall. They're stagin' the *Fallen Lands* play. Leotin says I can be in it next year when I'm older."

"You Donjeo?" the older of the two men asked. He sounded as though he knew the answer to his question.

"Yes." The boy named Donjeo blinked as the two men stepped closer.

"Yer master works for our master now," the wider man said.

"Ya need ta come with us," the older man added.

"But I got work to do. Leotin said..."

Ondromead never learned what Leotin had told the boy. The older man whipped a grain sack from behind his back and threw it over the boy's head. The second man brought a meaty fist into forceful contact with the side of the Donjeo's covered head, and the boy crumpled to the ground. The horse nearby reared at the commotion. The older man patted the horse's head to calm it as the wider man picked up the unconscious Donjeo and tossed him over a broad shoulder.

"How long does it need?" the wider man asked his companion.

"Says an hour at least," the older man said. "Best get movin' before the play is done and over."

The two men walked from the stables, the limp form of the young boy dangling over the larger man's shoulder. As they disappeared into the shadows of the buildings near the palace's main

courtyard, Ondromead wondered at the import of what he'd witnessed. Why did the men kidnap the boy? Had his master displeased the men's employer? Would the boy be held for ransom?

As with most things he witnessed, Ondromead accepted that he'd never likely see the conclusion of the story set in motion that night. Or if he did, he might never learn the series of events that led to that possible end. The trill in his mind resumed, and he sighed. A large palace often held many moments to witness, and another nagged for his attention. He walked back toward the great hall wondering what else he might need to see and whether it related to the kidnapping of the boy.

THE PRESENT

HORSES WHINNIED in mild confusion as human hands guided them into a crowded barn. Ondromead watched Hashel standing beside the boy Donjeo and Palla. How had Donjeo escaped? Had he been held ransom for Leotin's compliance with the kidnapper's demands? Had Leotin paid that ransom and what might it have been? He released such speculative thoughts as Hashel noticed him and ran to his side. Ondromead nodded to Palla across the short distance to the barn. She nodded back and turned to give instructions to a woman and man helping Donjeo.

"Have you been making yourself useful?" Ondromead looked at Hashel. The boy gazed up at him and shrugged.

"Did you help them choose the barn?" Ondromead asked. This time, Hashel nodded.

"A good notion. We can try to settle in our same hayloft." Ondromead looked around the camp, smelling the scent of campfires mixing with a newly made soup in a large cast-iron pot hanging over nearby flames. "I have not yet felt what we are here to witness, and I fear we will see more of the same. Good to be in a place we know offers some safety."

Ondromead thought about this as he and Hashel watched the last of the camp defenses being put into place, the wagons and their contents used to create twin barricade walls encircling the space between the two barns. He noted the symmetry as he focused on the dual occurrences of the low trill indicating he needed to be present to witness something and the gentle buzzing informing him he risked disturbing events he should not interfere with. He'd hoped that his purpose in being present became clear before the sun set and the razor-cats turned to hunting once more. Why did he need to be present for another slaughter?

As darkness draped the village, the campfires lit the barns and wagons with a flickering yellow light. Bowls came out of a box, and two women served soup from the steaming pot hanging on a tripod above a fire. The woman named Ranna brought bowls of soup to Ondromead and Hashel. She offered them small pieces of dinbao before returning to help distribute the evening meal. The soup tasted surprisingly good for containing a single chicken among the autumn root vegetables of parsnip, turnip, celery root, parsley, dill, and onion.

After finishing his bowl of soup and wiping it clean with the flat bread, Hashel looked up to Ondromead. He nodded to the boy. Hashel stood and walked to the nearest fire, close to where most of the carnival people sat on the ground eating. He stood there a moment, people ignoring

him. A girl about his age eyed him with interest, holding her bread near her mouth but not eating. After a few quick breaths, Hashel closed his eyes and began to sing in Easad.

Stars above the veil of night

Fall like tears when we fight

The sun cries and the moons weep

Casting light when we should sleep

As usual, Ondromead wondered how the boy knew the song. Ondromead remembered hearing it a century ago, but its popularity faded with the years. Sometimes, the lyrics matched an old melody, sometimes a new tune gave life to old words, and occasionally, the boy sang a song he'd never heard before in all his years. So many puzzles arrived in his life with the surprising appearance of Hashel beside the lake that morning.

"How can he sing so beautifully and yet not speak?"

Ondromead looked to his right as Palla sat beside him.

"It is a great mystery." One Ondromead wished he understood.

"I know that song. I heard my aunt sing it once." Palla listened for a time before speaking again. "You'll be safe here tonight." She sounded certain of herself, but Ondromead caught a shadow of doubt in the firelight reflected in her eyes.

"Thank you." A noncommittal response. Ondromead hoped he and Hashel fell asleep before any danger arrived and awoke somewhere far away.

"You can stay with us if you like. Travel with us. We're heading for Juparti." Palla's lips tightened. "Some of us. Others will find a ship along the coast and sail for Tanjii and eventually, the Forbidden Realm. Are you two pilgrims?"

"No." Ondromead shook his head. "We are merely travelers."

"Where are you heading?" Palla asked.

"We never know that." How could he explain the inexplicable? Fortunately, the young woman did not find his answer interesting enough to pursue.

"Are you his grandfather?" Palla turned from the fire and Hashel's song to examine Ondromead more closely.

"We met on the road." The buzzing began to hum more loudly in his head, but he did not see how his answer might affect the events to happen that night.

"It's good to have companions." Palla's gaze fell toward the woman Ranna and lingered there for a time.

"Yes, it is." The hum quieted.

"In the morning, let me know if you want to come with us." Palla stood.

"I will." He'd be gone before morning. Or he hoped so. Normally, it would not have been in question.

Palla walked away as Hashel began to sing another song.

"This is not right."

He recognized the voice at his side well enough that he did not bother turning toward its face.

"Do you have a part in this?" Ondromead did not trust the answers he received from the

enigmatic woman he called Meraeu, but he needed to ask them all the same.

“We both have a part in all things.” Meraeu sounded weary. “But I am not responsible for you remaining in this village.”

“Do you understand what it means?” Ondromead looked at Meraeu’s ebony face illuminated with a golden glow from the fires.

“There is an imbalance growing in the world.” She stared at him, her eyes fierce with the gravity of her words.

“What causes it?” Ondromead wondered if Hashel’s continued presence at his side after so many centuries of solitude constituted an aspect of this imbalance. If so, he hoped that balance did not return to the world.

“You know as much as I.” Meraeu gave him the look he’d seen so many times through the millennia of his life — the look that told him he held the answers to all his questions but refused to acknowledge them.

“Why are you here, then? Why now? More imbalance?” Ondromead hated these conversations. Always dancing around a subject he did not understand with questions he could not properly express.

“To warn you.” Meraeu looked to where Hashel sang near the fire. “If the old rules do not apply, the new rules may be more dangerous than we can anticipate.”

Ondromead followed Meraeu’s eyes toward Hashel, sensing a brief flicker of wind and a vibration within his mind. He knew his nemesis no longer sat beside him. Why did she come to him now? What did her words really mean? How could he protect Hashel if the unwritten rules guiding his life for thousands of years now suddenly shifted in unpredictable ways? One thought occurred to him, and the bees in his mind buzzed in rebellion against it.

The bees hummed louder and louder as he refused to release the thought, growing in intensity as Hashel stopped singing to a round of enthusiastic applause. The buzzing continued, shifting pitch as Ondromead picked up a small clay jar from a wagon. The trill became a mind-splitting whine as he and Hashel retired to the same hayloft they’d slept in the night before. The whine became a scream as he uncorked the clay jar and poured lamp oil onto his hand, rubbing it over Hashel’s clothes. The boy looked up to him with a thankful face and a small smile as Ondromead corked the bottle and the scream became a wail.

Ondromead ignored the wailing in his mind as he lay close to Hashel, placing himself between the boy and anything that might ascend to the loft from the floor of the barn beneath them. As he closed his eyes for the night, Hashel close by, the wail receded and he wondered if his transgression would cause greater tragedy, as it always had in the past. He found he did not care. If his actions served to save Hashel from a preordained fate upended by his interference, he would happily face whatever consequence arose from his deed. He fell asleep faster than he had in weeks.

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

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

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

SWEAT AND excrement. Blood and urine. Death and fear.

Sha-Kutan ignored the smells that assaulted his senses. Especially the fear. The scent clung to the air in the cargo hold of the ship — black moss growing to cover living trees.

Hazy yellow light from several lanterns hanging on posts revealed nearly a hundred people sprawled along the floor of the hold, moaning, holding their stomachs or heads, mumbling prayers to their goddess, or motionless and silent, waiting for the suffering to end with finality, to be washed in scented oils, wrapped in linen cloths, and lowered gently into the dark embrace of the ocean depths.

Sha-Kutan sat beside Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna, tending to their illness, wiping the sweat from their foreheads with a damp cloth, holding the bucket as they vomited the bile of their empty stomachs, cleaning them when their bowels released against their will, feeding them honeyed-water when they rose to consciousness, doing his best to keep them alive while others died around them. The puppy sat curled beside Sao-Tauna, both whimpering in their sleep. There were so many sick and so few to tend to those struck ill. Fortunately, the power of the twinned essence of his nature fortified him against most illnesses. He felt unwell, his stomach tight with pain, his head hot with fever, but he could still function almost as normal. Gifted with a similar protection, Ogtankaa also helped to nurse the stricken. He watched her across the hold of the ship as she tended to two men who would likely die within hours. She met his eyes and shook her head, a gesture that spoke to her judgment of, and resignation toward, their situation as much to the prognosis of the men she tended.

She worries she has made a mistake in joining us.

We should worry over this as well.

What other choice did we have?

We had many choices, but none we could choose.

He nodded and returned his attentions to Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. He would do whatever possible to keep them alive.

So many dead in such a short time. A third of the ship in just three days. The first day had been the worst, when the illness spread with such swiftness that panic broke out among the pilgrims. The captain warned the companion ships to stay clear, but passengers of all the ships succumbed to the illness by the second day. It wasn't until that evening Ogtankaa finally determined the source of the mysterious malady that left most of the passengers racing toward their deaths. A simple explanation — tainted drinking water. Poisoned. Contaminated with a water-borne disease common in cities and towns with poor hygiene and sewage containment. He'd seen the illness wipe out whole villages where the water of a well became corrupted by human or animal feces.

Luckily, Ogtankaa's more ephemeral nature could sense the corruption in the water casks stored below decks. Someone deliberately poisoned the pilgrims' water supply, cunningly lacing the middle of the stack of casks to ensure the ship would be too far from shore to sail for assistance. Kam-Djen fanatics of Tanjii no doubt. Not all the water casks remaining in the hold held the toxin, but only a quarter of their original stores remained, with half the journey left to complete. Ogtankaa had rowed to the other ships to help them each purge their impure water. Those not immobilized by sickness helped those who were and hoped they could save as many as possible.

While Sha-Kutan recited the Pashist prayers of healing for all the pilgrims and crew suffering from the illness, his especial attention and devotion rested with Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. He found it paralyzing to envision their deaths. Seeing them suffer as they did, left him hard of breath, his chest tight with emotions he did not recognize. He knew fear, a rare but old and intimate acquaintance. But he had never feared for the life of another. The other feelings he had even less familiarity with. Compassion he understood, but in the abstract, from his prayers, not directly related to specific individuals. And love? Was that love that stirred in his breast to stab at his heart?

He looked at the sweat-soaked faces of Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. To feel so much for another people! He had only ever experienced concern for one person, for Nukapan, the Pashist priest who had coaxed him from his life as a murderous bandit.

This is what others speak of? What the prayers call us to?

This is something else. Something more powerful.

It is unpleasant and intoxicating at the same time.

It is joy and fear and solace and suffering all in the same breath.

Sha-Kutan took the warm rags from the heated heads of Sao-Tauna and Lee-Nin, rinsing them in a bucket of cool, clean water before replacing them. He checked Sao-Tauna's breathing. She labored her breaths through the night, but now seemed to breathe with greater ease. He cupped her head in his massive palm for a moment.

So small.

She is strong.

But so small.

He brushed the hair from Lee-Nin's forehead, touching her cheek with the back of his hand.

She is also strong.

Yes. But frail as well.

We are all frail in our own ways.

Yes. Yes, we are.

Thoughts of a similar moment came to Sha-Kutan's mind, an event of reversed roles. As he thought of it, he wondered what feelings had been in Lee-Nin's heart at the time.

FIVE WEEKS AGO

NEEDLE AND thread. Blood and flesh. Fingers dabbed at sliced skin with a piece of cloth torn from a shirt. Sha-Kutan did not flinch, did not blink, as Lee-Nin sank the needle once more into

the gash along the upper shoulder of his right arm.

“Do you not feel the needle?” Lee-Nin continued to suture the cut made by a militiaman’s blade short minutes ago.

“I feel the needle.” Sha-Kutan turned his head to her handiwork. Looking at the haphazard flow of the stitches, he decided Lee-Nin would never be a seamstress. “I choose not to respond to it.”

“How is that possible?” Lee-Nin held his eyes a moment before returning to her task.

“Many years of training my mind.” Sha-Kutan looked toward the slender road they traveled along. “And many cuts and scars for years before that.”

Other people, pilgrims, sat by the road, some tending the wounds of companions, some setting camp for the night, some weeping and praying over the body of a lone fallen man. They had been lucky to lose only one. Fortunate the pilgrim band of twenty traveled with Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa. Blessed the band of militia numbered only six. One of the militiamen still lay dead by the road, unattended by anyone, his empty eyes staring at the stars beginning to appear in the evening sky. Later, Sha-Kutan would say prayers for the man’s passing into a more favorable rebirth.

He’d been fortunate to kill the militiaman before the man took another pilgrim life. The militia came upon the pilgrim band by stealth while they paused along the road to take a midday meal. Only his otherworldly nature gave him early notice of the ambush. Long ago, when he had used a sword with frequency as a bandit, he might have killed three of them before the rest fled. During his training with his tutor, Nakupan, they sparred with swords daily, using the practice to focus his mind in preparation for meditation. After Nukapan’s death, he kept the sword but did not use it. After meeting the Kaya Kranee, the Ting-Gentu, the shadow creature who would become part of him, he hid the sword in the wall of his home, only to pick it up the day he met Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. While he still had greater skill with a sword than many militiaman, his many years without practice left him at a disadvantage when facing so many opponents. He had hoped only to wound the first man who attacked him, but the depth of that wound proved fatal. He’d dodged a sword swipe at his shoulder, but not fast enough. He injured two other militiamen before Ogtankaa, out hunting when the ambush began, returning to frighten off the remaining men.

Sha-Kutan looked at his fellow twinned being where she helped set camp for the night with the others. Though wary of her, the pilgrims accepted her more readily than himself. He assumed this had to do with his size and scarred face as much as the difference in their ephemeral natures.

“How did you learn this trick?” Lee-Nin tied the thread of the final stitch in a knot.

Sha-Kutan twitched as she bent to cut the thread with her teeth, her lips grazing his skin for a moment. He coughed and moved his shoulder to cover the sudden sense of ... something ... embarrassment?

“A friend taught me.” Sha-Kutan touched the stitches with the fingers of his free hand. “Well done.”

A lie.

But a lie worth telling.

“I learned a trick like that.” Lee-Nin stared off along the road to the west, seeming to see something there. “I learned to imagine myself someplace far away, far from this world and everything in it. So far away that nothing could hurt me.”

Sha-Kutan noted the subtle change in her scent. Whatever she remembered brought her pain and a hint of fear. He wondered what aches she needed to carry herself away from and whether she would ever share them with him.

“My friend taught me to be aware of my mind and body.” Sha-Kutan thought back to those first teachings of Nakupan and how he’d struggled with them, fighting against years of habit and inclination. “I learned to be mindful of my thoughts and not follow them unless I wished to. And the same with my body. To feel and yet decide what sensations to react to.”

“Does this work for your heart?” Lee-Nin turned her eyes from the road.

“It should, but it does not,” Sha-Kutan admitted. “It has been many years since my heart did more than beat in my chest.”

“She does that.” Lee-Nin looked to where Sao-Tauna sat by the road holding a tiny, sleeping, gray kitten in her hands. The girl marveled, motionless, at the kitten, oblivious to all around her.

“Yes.” Sha-Kutan swallowed back emotions and further words.

Very perceptive.

More than the girl moves our heart.

And what does that mean?

Better to ask — what do we want it to mean?

“Thank you.” Sha-Kutan felt Lee-Nin’s proximity acutely, sensing the distance of her body to his down to a fraction of a finger’s width.

“I am happy to stab you with a needle anytime you require.” Lee-Nin smiled.

Sha-Kutan returned her smile, knowing it to be awkward and ill-fitting on his face, unaccustomed as it was to displaying such a range of feeling. She laughed at his attempt to smile, and oddly, it made him want to smile even more, as she herself did. Something about her smile and the circumstances reminded him of another woman’s smile years ago. Long before he met Nakupan. In his youth. In the depths of his wickedness.

He and the bandits he ran with at the time were attacked by soldiers looking to collect a bounty. He and his cohorts fought wildly, driving the soldiers into retreat, but not before one of them landed a glancing blow off the side of Sha-Kutan’s head. As he lay on the matted leaves of their campsite, he watched his companions chasing after the soldiers, none even glancing back with a care as to his condition. Blood seeping into his eyes, he passed out.

When he woke, night veiled the surrounding woods, the light of a small fire casting slender shadows between the trees. A young woman with dark skin and short, black hair smiled down at him, her hand pressed gently against the side of his head. He grabbed her wrist, and she winced but did not cease smiling.

“You’ve been wounded,” the dark-eyed woman had said, patting the fingers gripping her wrist.

“Who is ya?” Sha-Kutan’s voice had grated with the pain in his head.

“I’ve live nearby,” the woman had said. “I’ve found ya on my way home through the woods. I’ve

reckon you been attacked by bandits.”

“Yes.” Sha-Kutan had scowled at the pain in his head. “I was attacked.”

“I’s made a poultice for ya from herbs I’s been collecting.” The woman had gestured to a small basket in the grass near the fire. “I’s made a fire to warm ya. You’s need to stitch that cut on yer head. I’s can do it fer ya. But I’s got no stitchin’ thread with me. You’s stay here an’ I’ll go fetch it.”

The woman had gently pulled Sha-Kutan’s fingers from her arm and placed them to hold the poultice on the side of his head. She had smiled at him once more before standing and hurrying into the woods. Sha-Kutan watched her go, her form fading to shadow, blackness eating her figure whole as his eyes fluttered and he sank away from the world of thought and meaning.

He woke with the dawn, head aching, blinking, memory returning slowly. He sat up to find his bandit companions returned, still sleeping around the ashes of the small fire. He remembered the fire. And the fight. And a woman. He saw her lying beside a nearby tree, her scraped, bare legs protruding from her ripped dress, a wadded gag in her mouth. Her dead eyes stared at him — pleading, accusing, questioning in eternal silence. Her rigid right hand still gripped a small cotton bag. A sewing bag no doubt, needle and thread tucked inside.

He looked away, toward the four men still sleeping nearby. He knew without needing to ask that the bandits had found the woman in the woods on her way back to stitch his wounded head. They did what they always did when they found a woman walking far from any help. They raped her there and carried her back to camp, intending to rape her again later. But she’d died. Likely from being strangled to silence her screams. Possibly, the men had even noticed before drinking themselves to sleep with a shared cask of wine. They might even have checked on Sha-Kutan’s wound, but he doubted it. They probably planned to take his share of their last attack and leave him when they woke.

Not certain why he acted as he did, Sha-Kutan stood, slipped his dagger from the belt at his waist, and slit the men’s throats while they slept. The last woke up to see him killing their companions, but he did not have time to cry out before Sha-Kutan sank his blade into the man’s heart. Then he’d pulled the woman’s dress down about her legs and gently tugged the gag of torn shirt cloth from her mouth. He then placed her arms across her chest, hands around the small sewing bag. Lastly, he’d closed her eyes and tilted her head toward the sky. Finished, he had stared down at the woman for a long time, wondering what inspired him to act as he had, and knowing all along the answer. The woman, a stranger whose name he did not even know, had been the first person since his mother’s death to show him any kindness. And because she’d stopped to help him, acted out of altruism, she’d ended up raped and murdered. He owed her a debt. A debt he’d repaid by killing those who took her life. Men he’d been with for nearly a year. Men with whom he had done the same things they had done to her. He had walked into the woods after that, deciding not to think of that woman ever again.

Instead, he thought of her many times over the years. And after meeting Nakupan and telling him of the incident, he thought of all the times he’d acted just as violently.

Regret.

He understood regret better than any emotion. It motivated him every day to make amends for the violence of his life.

“It seems you know the trick of going far away, after all.” Lee-Nin stared at him.

“I was reminded of something ... unpleasant.” Sha-Kutan took a deep breath to clear his mind.

“That is all too easy today.” Lee-Nin looked to the body of the militiaman at the roadside. “This could have been a much worse day without you.” Lee-Nin paused a moment. “That is true of many days.”

“And true for you as well.” Sha-Kutan found he wanted to reach out and take Lee-Nin’s hand, but did not. Could not. Did not know how. Instead, he stood and spoke words meant to distract — himself above all else. “There is much to do. Bodies to bury. Camp to settle. We should begin.” He offered her his hand to help her up.

“Yes.” Lee-Nin clasped his hand rose to her feet beside him. “There is much to do and far to go.”

THE PRESENT

TWO SLENDER fingers twitched. Sha-Kutan looked to Lee-Nin’s hand and took it in his own. Her fingers trembled again. Her eyes fluttered as she struggled to climb up from the purgatory of her illness-induced sleep.

“Sao-Tauna.” Lee-Nin’s voice crackled, indicating the dryness of her throat.

“She is alive.” Sha-Kutan scooped a clay cup into the bucket of clean water. He slipped a sliced lemon from beneath a folded blanket and squeezed it into the cup. Ogtankaa had found a crate of Juparti lemons the day before. Not enough for everyone ill, but enough for a handful of people. They shared them between Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna and the captain and several of his crew. And one small puppy. It seemed to help. Especially Sao-Tauna and the puppy.

“She is better. Better than you.” He placed one hand behind Lee-Nin’s head and pressed the cup to her lips with the other. “Drink.”

Lee-Nin sipped at the water, breathing deeply between each swallow.

“And you? Ogtankaa?” Lee-Nin stared up at him, her eyes struggling to stay open.

“We are well.” Sha-Kutan placed the cup beside the bucket. “Our natures offer us some protection.”

Lee-Nin nodded as though she understood.

“You must protect her if I die.” She rolled her head sideways to see Sao-Tauna. The girl slept fitfully, the puppy curled beside her. She reached out with her hand for the girl, but her arm had no strength and fell limp on the cargo deck.

“I will always protect her.” Sha-Kutan noticed Lee-Nin’s eyes sliding shut once more. “And you.”

He tenderly extended her arm and placed her hand upon Sao-Tauna’s, where it rested on the puppy’s back.

Can we keep that promise?

That is uncertain.

Then should we make it, even to ourselves?

Jandu Laanta wrote that "The power of a promise is in its making more than its fulfilling, for the promise changes our heart."

Let us hope he was right.

He watched them as he waited for Ogtankaa to approach. He sensed her movement across the deck behind him. She said nothing for a moment as she squatted next to him.

"The captain is dead."

Sha-Kutan nodded. The captain fell ill in the first wave of those struck by the tainted water.

"And the navigator?" Sha-Kutan feared how the illness progressed among the three sister vessels.

"Now made captain. He looks likely to survive." Ogtankaa stared at Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna. She sighed.

"Speak." Sha-Kutan knew the huntress did not hold her tongue easily.

"Nothing good can come of these affections." Ogtankaa turned to him.

Sha-Kutan nodded in acceptance of her words, holding silent for a moment.

"Your ways are not mine."

"Your ways lead us and them into great danger following the whims of a girl."

"Not whims. Dreams."

"There is little difference, when in the end, you must come with me." Ogtankaa frowned at him.

"I will come with you, once her vision is complete." Sha-Kutan turned from Ogtankaa to look at Sao-Tauna, her breathing now a little less ragged.

"Do you even know why you do this for her?" Ogtankaa asked. "What can they mean to you?"

Good questions.

Questions with silent answers.

Or answers we fear to voice.

We know what they mean to us, even if it is never spoken.

Ogtankaa said no more, rising after a time and returning to tending the other ill passengers. After a while, Sha-Kutan did the same. Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna would live. He would see them to the shores of the Forbidden Realm. He would help them face what awaited them there. And then he would fulfill his pledge to Ogtankaa.

Jandu Laanta was right.

In what way?

The promise does change the heart.

The Fugitives story arena continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*.

THE CARNIVAL



TARAK

CHARRED WOOD. Smoke from campfires. Pungent sweat and the fear of tired humans. Fresh hay and the dusty hides of horses. The earthy tang of root vegetables in a wagon bed. Decaying leaves on the damp soil between the trees of the nearby woods. And under all these aromas, the cloying scent of an unfamiliar animal. Animals. Tarak detected at least two distinct beasts.

He stood beside Yeth at the edge of a wagon in the light of the half-moons. She smelled of dried leather and hayflower, as she always did. He did not know if the scent dominated her people or remained particular to her alone. He'd never met another yutan. The odor of the animals that killed the people of the village they made camp in reminded him of the rock panthers in the mountains of his home realm. A sourer scent, but similar.

As usual, he and Yeth took the first watch together. They walked the inner parameter of the wagons aligned between the barns, keeping their eyes from the fires burning behind them and focused toward the shadows of the dirt-packed street and the nearby trees. The two human women, Palla and Ranna, did the same along the opposite row of wagons. Several human males lay curled asleep on blankets near the twin campfires, swords on the ground beside them. The rest of the people of the camp slept in the two barns, the castle folk and former militia with the animals in one and the carnival folk and pilgrims in the other. While they behaved better in company while working during the day, the groups still segregated with their own kind when bedding down for the night. He and Yeth stayed separate from the carnival humans. Even though they proved themselves repeatedly as valuable members of the carnival, their status as outlanders still rendered them suspicious in the eyes of many humans. Not Palla and Ranna, or Leotin, Tarak noted. They viewed him and Yeth as equals.

The third outlander, thought dead by all save Yeth and Tarak, complemented their night watch from a distance. He did not see Shifhuul but knew the wyrin sat in the crook of a tree in the woods across the field of wheat, watching them, no doubt, through Yeth's near-glass. Tarak and Yeth had tried to convince the wyrin it would be safer for him to sleep hidden in one of the wagons, but Shifhuul insisted they were better served to have eyes outside the improvised defense of the camp. He'd asked for ash from the fire to mask his scent and sat with his bow ready to give warning if he spotted anything dangerous approaching from beyond the ring of wagons between the two barns.

"Do you smell anything?" Yeth gripped her spear tightly as she walked beside him.

"No scent I have not smelled all day." Tarak held his bow pointed downward, an arrow nocked and held ready by the long digits of his right paw. A quiver sat strapped to his back, and his axes hung from the belt at his waist. "But the breeze is constant. If the creatures are smart, they will approach from downwind."

Yeth turned to put the mild wind at her back, facing off to the side of the barn.

“The barns are a weak spot.” Yeth squinted into the darkness. Yutans did not see as well at night as roaggs. “Too easy to sneak around them in the dark.”

“We could patrol the outside of the wagons and barns.” Tarak had suggested this earlier, but Yeth and the others considered it too great a risk, as it left them exposed and would force them to climb over the wagons to return to the safety of the camp.

“No. We have the advantage of our eyes in the woods.” Yeth looked to where they assumed Shifhuul huddled in the arms of a tree.

“We have other advantages as well.” Tarak shifted his eyes to Yeth. She understood his look.

“It is a risk to reveal my skill with The Sight.” Yeth sighed. “The danger must warrant that risk.”

“Most of the humans will accept you. Only the Shen from the castle and the former militiamen will complain. And what can they do?” Tarak had repeatedly tried to convince Yeth to reveal her powers with The Sight. It would let them to practice fighting together and would allow her to become stronger with her power.

“Humans can be unpredictable, but they are predictably violent.” Yeth stopped and looked back along the line of wagons on their side of the camp. “We should separate. It will give us a double vantage.”

“Yes. You are right.” Tarak nodded and walked back along the line of wagons, so they were spaced equidistant from the barns. Palla and Ranna noticed them and did the same.

Left with his own thoughts and staring down moonlit streets and across dimly illuminated fields, his mind turned, as it always did, toward his mate Reeshka. He wished he had a means of communicating with her as they did with Yeth’s elders in the Sky Realm through the metal discs and power of The Sight, even if only to tell her that he missed her. He assumed the roagg tribal leaders would inform her if he died. Presuming Yeth did not die as well. And that might be true come sunrise. He’d seen the pile of dead humans. Few creatures could accomplish that kind of carnage. He did not know what monsters slaughtered the village, but he hoped they hunted some other unsuspecting prey. He did not fear as much for himself, but the people of the carnival would stand only a slightly better chance against such a vicious enemy than the villagers now dead and stacked in the street.

He wondered what Reeshka would do if he did not return. How long would she wait? A year? Two? How long would this mission to determine the source and meaning of the human dreams last? When the dreams ceased temporarily a few weeks past, he’d hoped it signaled an end to it all. But when the dreams came back, showing the pilgrims in the Forbidden Realm and the temple there, he knew he could not escape the dark pull of the duty and destiny laid upon him. He still did not understand how he, a roagg, dreamed of the human goddess. Or why. Another question came to him as he considered his mate — did Reeshka still love him, knowing the sheetoo dreams infected his mind? Might she turn her affections toward a roagg who would not abandon her to follow sheetoo visions from his sleep? Did she not deserve more? Maybe it would be better for her if she believed him lost for good. Maybe she prospered in his absence and ...

An arrow struck the side of the barn nearest Tarak. Small and fletched with green feathers, the

arrow had only one possible source and meaning — Shifhuul warned of an attack. A now familiar, sour scent floated on the shifting breeze.

“They come!” Tarak raised his bow and roared as he turned from the barn to face the opposite direction. The placement of Shifhuul’s arrow indicated the direction of attack.

As the humans around the campfire shook the sleep from their heads and struggled to sit up, Yeth and the two human women turned to Tarak. They followed his gaze into the darkness beyond the wagons. A guttural, deafening roar stabbed through the night air as a massive, shadowed form leapt over the wagon beside the barn with the animals and those from the castle. The beast landed amongst the human males just getting to their feet beside one of the two fires.

Nearly the size of one of the wagons, its catlike body covered in thick spines, the creature lashed out at the men, the talons of its paws ripping through flesh, leaving gaping wounds and gushing blood. Its razor-filled maw clasped hold of a man and tossed him into the air. As the humans screamed, Tarak pulled the string of his great bow back and loosed an oversized arrow at the beast’s neck. The dense, bone-like spikes of the creature’s pelt blunted the arrow’s impact but drew its attention to Tarak.

Another roar cut through the screams of the humans as a wagon rolled into the middle of the camp. A second creature slammed it forward with a spike-covered shoulder. Tarak barely had time to note the second creature’s arrival before the first beast turned and rushed him, its mouth wide in a snarl, long teeth glinting in the firelight. He abandoned his bow, knowing he did not have time to nock and draw another arrow, instead grasping for the twin axes at his waist. He got the axes free of their straps, but the monster moved too fast. He made to roll away, knowing the teeth of the catlike beast lunging for him would sink into his flesh before he could swing his weapons. In the last instant, the beast swerved from its course in midair, tumbling to the side and into a wagon, wood buckling and wheels cracking with the impact.

Tarak saw Yeth, ten paces away, her arms outstretched toward the creature, one hand still holding her spear. Tarak did not wait but attacked, swinging his axes as the cat-beast recovered to its feet and made ready to pounce again. The creature roared in confusion and frustration as it tried to move but only wiggled in place. Its black eyes seethed with rage as it howled, a sound that fell to silence when Tarak’s twin great axes crashed through its skull and into its brain. The beast shuddered and fell to the ground dead.

Tarak yanked his axes from the creature’s shattered cranium with a wet, sucking sound and turned to Yeth, arms outstretched, holding the second monster in place while Palla and Ranna and three men stabbed at it with swords. The creature wailed and tried to thrash, its limbs immobilized. A new roar joined the monster’s cries as a nearby wagon crashed forward into Yeth, sending her sprawling to the ground.

Tarak ran toward the second, now wounded cat-beast, hoping to end its life before the third creature had time to attack. But both monsters were too fast. They spun and leapt through the opening provided by the overturned wagon, racing across the stubble-filled field and into the darkened woods.

Tarak assessed the destruction of the attack on the camp. At least two human men lay dead

near the fires. Several more clutched their torsos and limbs, blood seeping between their fingers. The door of the two barns opened slowly, humans rushing out to assist the wounded. Two women ran to the lifeless men, crying for the departed. Fortunately, the creatures had not breached the barns. It had been a mistake to station armed human males outside near the fires. They had been defenseless against the creatures. However, they had drawn the monsters' interest from the undefended humans in the barns. Sacrifices to the safety of the others. He noticed Palla and Ranna helping a man bandage his arm. Yeth still stood near the wagons. The wounded men looked at her with fear and awe, recounting in whispers what they had witnessed. Leotin looked toward her. Above it all, Tarak spotted the old man and the boy staring at the scene from the hayloft of the animal barn.

The moans of the men, the firelight, the tension between the humans, and the scent of their fear brought his mind to another night with similar sensations several weeks past.

26 DAYS AGO

“THEY’S THEIVIN’ food, I tell ya.”

“We’ve taken nothin’ ain’t ours.”

“Can’t trust the heretics.”

“The Goddess forbids theft.”

“Don’t forbid stabbin’ folks, does she?”

“He came at me with a knife. What could I do?”

“Enough!”

Tarak watched as Leotin raised his hands between a small contingent of villagers, militia, and pilgrims. He and Yeth and several carnival folks lingered nearby. Palla and Ranna stood close to Leotin, speaking in low tones to placate individual villagers. Tarak hoped the commotion did not once more erupt into violence. He did not enjoy pacifying the various groups when they attacked one another. He had assumed that the threat of a common enemy, the Tanshen army besieging the castle, might encourage the different collections of humans to work peacefully together. He considered his successful partnership with the yutan and wyrin as an example and inspiration. He realized that he wished for too much, but he did not know how to still his natural optimism.

“This must cease.” Leotin’s voice rose as he turned to take in the faces of all assembled around him. “You cannot continue to consider yourselves as villagers, castle folk, militia, carnival folk, and pilgrims. Until this siege ends, you must regard yourselves as one people. A small dominion within these fragile walls. We must work together as one to hold against those who wish to storm these barricades and slaughter us. You see what they will do to us beyond the gate. You hear what your fate will be if we fail to function as one.”

The humans lowered their mumbled responses, the sounds of the men being tortured outside the castle walls settling on the wind to faintly fill the courtyard. The Tanshen soldiers took turns tormenting the hapless humans tied to the wagon beyond the castle gate, moving from one to the next, throughout the day and night. The humans’ hardiness worked against them. Like the others,

Tarak wished for a swift end to their suffering. If nothing else, it would alleviate the tensions between the humans within the castle.

“Let us believe that the food in question was held in personal store all this time.” Leotin looked first at the pilgrim accused of theft and then the townsman holding a shallow cut on his arm. “But let us also agree that from this point forward, there will be no hoarding of personal food. We cannot afford to act as separate men and women. We must think and work as a single body. None of us prefers this, but it is what our fate mandates in order to survive. I rely upon Pi-Gento from the castle, who relies upon Palla from the carnival, who depends upon Jhanal from the pilgrims, who counts upon Ken-Ven from the town, who relies upon me.” Leotin entwined his fingers. “We are bound together here and now. If we break apart, we shatter both wholly and individually. And in that moment, we are lost.” Leotin let his hands fall to his sides as he turned toward the gate of the castle, the cries of a captive human climbing over the walls.

Tarak still found himself impressed with Leotin’s command of the castle and his ability to sway such a divergent crowd of humans. He assumed it came from years of giving orders to carnival folk as much as from pretending to be a ruler in the staged fictions the humans performed. They were blessed to have Leotin to lead them through the siege. He doubted any other among them could manage the task. He could not have done so, even if only needing to rally a small band of his own roagg tribe. When he one day returned to his mate and his people, he would carry these lessons from Leotin with him and use them for the benefit of his sometimes-querulous clan. In the meantime, he realized that he, too, had wisdom to offer the humans.

He remembered his first weeks of travel with Shifhuul and Yeth so many months ago. None of the three wished to be in each other’s company. None held any regard for the others’ realms and peoples. None knew what to expect or how to trust. But time in one another’s company, and work shared between their various paws and hands, helped them become more than conscripted companions. The humans called them outlanders and regarded them as separate, making them rely on each other more, their efforts together unifying them. They became a small troop within a troupe. They became friends.

Thinking this, Tarak wondered if Shifhuul watched them now from the shadows atop the castle wall or from a darkened window. He’d been relieved when Yeth informed him that she had saved the wyrin from his mortal wounds the night of their raid on the militia. By intent of their respective leaders, or simply by fate, the three of them complemented each other, strengths compensating for weaknesses, instinct accenting experience, making them stronger together than ever possible alone. He only wished Shifhuul would reveal his remarkable recovery, so they could openly work in unison once more.

“Work as the parts of one limb.” Tarak stepped forward toward Leotin and the crowd of humans. The townspeople and militia shied away, shuffling backward as he approached. Even the pilgrims seemed startled by his movement. Only the carnival folk, long used to his presence, did not budge from where they stood. He saw Yeth staring at him quizzically and nodded to her. He knew she would agree with his proposal.

“You have something to suggest, Tarak?” Leotin turned to face him, his tone curious, but also

commanding, implying the need for all to listen closely.

“Yes.” Tarak took a moment to look from Leotin to those gathered around the courtyard. “We outlanders came together to work as one. We are far more different than you humans are to one another. You are as deer to dogs. We are as trees to stones. But we act as one by acting together. You must act jointly as well. If you work in teams of three, town or militia with carnival and pilgrim, you will learn to be as one.”

“An excellent suggestion.” Leotin smiled at Tarak. “Palla, Pi-Gento, and Jhanal will choose people to work in teams of three.” A rumble of discontent rolled through the courtyard. “Silence. This is not a matter to bargain over. You will work in teams of three, one from each group in the castle. You won’t like it. You’ll moan about it at night and at mealtimes. You’ll grumble and balk at being near those you dislike, but you’ll do it. The alternative is waiting for each of us outside right now.”

As Leotin pointed to the gate, the cries of the men tortured there rose to a heartrending wail. Tarak’s nostrils twitched with a new scent on the wind — smoke and roasting flesh. Yeth noted the look on his face and leaned close to him.

“What is it?” Yeth asked.

“They burn one of the humans beyond the walls.” Tarak wondered how this new development affected the humans of the castle. Would it cause more conflict, fights over what to do in the face of the Tanshen army’s display of cruelty, or would it help to fuse them together to fight against the siege of the castle and their minds? Would they fracture — weakly forged steel against stone — or merge anew — separate blades melted into one within the furnace fires?

THE PRESENT

“THANK YOU.”

Tarak walked to stand beside Yeth. She stared out over the wagon into the darkness in the direction the creatures fled, the butt of her spear resting near her feet, its shaft held tight in her right hand.

“They are so large.” Yeth shivered. “What are they?”

“I have never seen or heard of such a creature.” Tarak looked back to see Leotin striding through the camp, checking on the fallen. He looked up and walked toward Tarak and Yeth. Tarak gazed at Yeth’s profile, her jaw tight, her eyes steady, body tense. He suspected her rigid stance had as much to do with the fear that the monsters might return as the revelation that she possessed The Sight.

“Leotin will protect you from those who might speak against you.” Tarak glanced now at the humans helping the wounded men toward the barns. Several looked his way, their gaze falling hard against Yeth’s back. “And after tonight, those who might think to harm you will fear you too greatly to raise a hand toward you.”

“I do not wish to be feared more than I already am.” Yeth sighed. “But there was no other way.”

“And now you can practice The Sight and how we can use it to fight together.” Tarak knew this to be a small comfort against the many uncertainties the revelation of her powers brought.

“You should have told me.” Leotin stepped to stand between Yeth and Tarak. Yeth turned to him and they stared at one another in silence a moment. “I understand why you didn’t, but you should have.” Leotin turned away, looked into the darkness, and raised a hand high to place it on Yeth’s shoulder. “At the least, we could have made my magic tricks more interesting.” He smiled at her. “I’ll make sure the Kam-Djen folk don’t bother you. Thank you.” Unable to reach Tarak’s shoulder, he placed a hand on the fur of his arm. Tarak realized Leotin had never touched either him or Yeth. “Thank you both. Keep watch. We have much to do yet before dawn.”

Leotin spun on his heels and walked back to the mass of people huddling around the fire between the wagons. As he strode away, Palla walked over to them.

“Did you see it?” Palla looked between Tarak’s and Yeth’s faces.

“Did we see what?” Tarak suspected what she referred to. Apparently, her night vision did not suffer as much as most humans’.

“The arrow. The arrow that struck the side of the barn.” Palla glanced toward the arrow still sunk in a wooden plank. “It’s small. Like a child’s arrow.”

“We did see it.” Yeth looked from the arrow to Tarak. “It warned us of the attack.”

“Exactly.” Palla’s voice rose in her excitement and she looked into the woods beyond the village. “Someone is out there. Someone was watching and warned us.”

“Who would do such a thing?” Tarak wondered if it would be necessary to reveal who. “Who would take such a risk?”

“I think it was the girl.” Palla peered across the slashed stalks of grain in the moonlit field.

“What girl?” Yeth now looked toward the woods.

“The old man and the boy said they saw a girl who survived the first attack and ran into the woods.” Palla raised herself up on her toes to better see over the wagon before her.

“I see no one.” Tarak’s night sight far exceeded that of humans, even if falling behind Shifhuul’s ancestrally superior nocturnal vision. He could just make out the wyrin’s shadowed shape in the branches of a tree at the edge of the woods.

“She must be out there.” Palla shook her head. “We have to find her before we leave.”

“Maybe with the sunrise, she will show herself,” Yeth suggested. Tarak wondered where the mysterious girl might be. Had she fled far from the village? Did she still hide in the woods? Had Shifhuul seen her? Or did the same gruesome fate that befell her friends and family already leave her dead body tossed as a trophy somewhere nearby?

“Again, the outlanders have saved us.” Leotin’s voice called Tarak’s attention to the fire closest to the barn with the animals. He saw the old man and the boy still sitting near the door of the hayloft. Leotin waited a moment more for everyone to quiet their voices. “We owe our lives and our gratitude. And thanks to their gifts, we can live and leave this place. Which we must do with all haste. Get the wounded and the dead into the barns. We will bury the bodies of our friends before we leave. We strike out at dawn. The creatures hunt at night and will not follow us during the day. They are kellitsara. Razor-cats created long ago for Juparti warlords. Drag the carcass of

this one outside the wagons. It'll spook the horses. Then tend the fires. I want the flames as high as possible. Those demon cats may strike again. There will be no sleep this night. We leave as soon as the sun cracks the horizon.”

Tarak wondered how Leotin could know the beasts' hunting patterns. Had he seen these creatures before? Where? He stared at the massive, dead carcass, blood from the gash in its skull soaking the ground. The people of the camp set to implementing Leotin's orders in groups of three. The castle and militia folk, carnival folk, and pilgrim were now so accustomed to the arrangement, they did so without thought. It made him think of Shifhuul in the trees nearby. He and Yeth needed the wyrin to complete their own triad. He needed Shifhuul closer. He'd find a way to sneak the wyrin into camp at dawn and hide him in a wagon. It'd be safer for the wyrin. And the three outlanders would be close at hand if Leotin's knowledge of the monsters proved incorrect and they attacked the carnival along the road.

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

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

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

IRON-SHOED horse hooves plodded against hard-packed earth, wheel axles squeaked their need for oil, the old wood of wagons creaked with every bump and jostle, boots and shoes slapped and shuffled in the dry dust, birds called from nearby branches, and the wind rustled dry leaves. Hashel listened to the noises of the carnival on the road. The train of people and wagons rolled along the narrow lane, through woods and between fields. He liked listening to the sounds the world made, and the people in it. Particularly their voices. The carnival people sounded cautious yet fearful. None appeared to believe Leotin's pronouncement that the razor-cats only hunted by night. Ondromead said the same, but Hashel agreed with the people of the carnival. It made sense to expect an attack during the day.

He and Ondromead walked in the middle of the carnival train between two wagons, one drawn by a horse and a smaller one pulled by the women Palla and Ranna. They had been walking for a few hours, but with the wind at their backs, he still smelled smoke and the strange scent it carried. He glanced back at the dark-gray spire rising up toward a thick sheet of ash-tinted clouds. Before leaving the village, the large roagg, Tarak, and several men from the carnival gathered wood from adjacent barns and homes to pile around the bodies of the dead people stacked in the street. They'd set it aflame just before departing for the road. Hashel considered himself lucky Ondromead felt no inclination to witness that event. The smoke disturbed him enough.

"I cannot make sense of it." Ondromead shook his head. The old man had voiced several variations of that sentiment during the hours of their walk. "Something pulls me with these people, but what? What more is there to see? And to awaken in the same place three days in a row? That has never happened. Never."

Hashel looked up at Ondromead and shrugged. He could not explain anything about Ondromead, but sometimes things happened differently than they usually did. You might wake every day on your own bed, and then one day, your parents might tell you the whole family would leave that afternoon, and the next day, you might wake in the grass of a hill beside a road you never knew existed. The world changed. That explained as much as he understood. He only hoped his travels with Ondromead did not alter. For all the horrible things they saw, they witnessed great beauty as well. And he would rather see the world with Ondromead than do anything else. He would even be happy staying in the carnival and walking from place to place every day as long as his feet followed Ondromead.

"Maybe it's something about the carnival." Ondromead glanced back and forth along the caravan. "This is the same carnival I have seen several times before, but not the same at all. There are pilgrims here. And from what I gathered listening to people, they were at a castle under siege recently. Probably, the one we saw not so long ago. And there are people from that town and castle here in the carnival. And at least a few men who were with a militia. It seems very strange. And

the roagg and the yutan are also an odd presence. How did they come to be in a carnival?"

Hashel wondered this, too. How did one join a carnival? His father often told of seeing a carnival as a boy. If he had not met Ondromead, he would have tried to join the carnival. They seemed like nice people. He sensed a thin veil of tension between the different groups, but he had a hard time telling who was who until they all settled down to sleep at night. And there were children in the carnival. Two boys, one a few years younger than him and another about his age. And three girls, two younger and one older than him. The older girl seemed new to the carnival, still shy around others. And there was the older boy who tended the animals. Donjeo. He had let Hashel help feed the horses. And then the two women, Palla and Ranna, sisters he thought, although they did not look much alike. They were nice to him. He sighed as he thought about the attack by the creatures the night before. He hoped the razor-cats did not follow them, that he would not need to see any more of the nice people of the carnival dead.

"I saw her again." Ondromead's voice sounded even quieter.

Hashel turned his eyes up to Ondromead, wondering who he meant, but the look on the old man's face made it clear to whom he referred.

"Last night. After the meal." Ondromead scratched his beard. "I didn't want to frighten you by mentioning it. I thought at first she might have something to do with us staying in the same place, but she knew nothing about it. She seemed as worried by it as me. Which is very unsettling. I do not know who she truly is, or what role she has in my fate, but in all the many years, I do not think she has ever lied to me. Spoke in confusing and misleading ways, yes, but never lied. Something is happening in the world, even beyond the coalescing of all the events we have witnessed of late. I am afraid to guess what it might be."

Hashel also feared predicting the source of the sudden change in the pattern of Ondromead's life. And he dreaded the appearance of the old woman. Her last arrival nearly resulted in their permanent separation. What did it mean that she now showed up when they remained in the same place three days in a row? She might not be responsible for the strange things that happened, but she might be like a bell flower — closing an hour before the rain — warning of events to come.

"Stay close to me today. Don't wander too far." Ondromead dropped a familiar hand to rest on Hashel's shoulder. "And whatever you do, don't walk through any doorways."

Hashel nodded vigorously. They weren't likely to encounter any doors on the road with the carnival, but he took it as wise advice just the same. The memory of the sensation of walking through a doorway in one place and exiting it somewhere entirely different made him shiver. He leaned a little close under Ondromead's protective arm.

A short while later, the caravan stopped for a noon day rest and meal at the edge of a field of wild grass dotted with small, blue flowers still blooming in the autumn sun. Hashel and Ondromead sat under the shade of a stand of apple trees beside the field with the rest of the carnival folk eating fruit plucked from the branches above them and a spiced, dried meat. The meat took quite a bit of effort to chew and Hashel could not figure out what animal it came from, but the spices hinted of clove and cumin and reminded him of a dish his mother used to make with chicken and pork.

"Is ya gonna stay with us, then?"

A thin girl of about fourteen with dark hair sat beside him, gnawing on a strip of dried meat. Hashel smiled at the girl and nodded.

“That’s good. They’s good folk here. I’s new, too. Joined a bit back. Palla and Ranna brought me after ... My name’s Pankee-Jao, but my mum calls me Pan. Or she did. She stayed behind.” Pankee-Jao grew quiet and looked away. She bit her lip and then breathed deep, seeming to push an invisible weight from her body and mind. “It’s hard work and lots of walkin’, but I’s used to hard work from the farm.” She frowned and then smiled. “Where’s you from?”

Hashel did not know how to answer that question without answering it and knew that even if he spoke, he could not speak the truth, for no one would believe the truth. Instead, he gestured with his hand to encompass the road.

“He does not speak,” Ondromead said from beside him. “We travel together. We are not from one place.”

“Must be nice to see the world.” The girl smiled again. “That’s what I like. Seein’ a new place each day. Wakin’ up somewhere and then heading to somewhere new. And the play. They put on a play when they get to a large enough village. *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*. I like it when they put on the play. That Palla is real good at playin’ the tahneff. I’d like to be in the play one day. Leotin says he’ll let me say a few words next time to see if I got what he calls *stage charm*.”

“You are very charming.” Ondromead sounded more comfortable than he had in speaking with most of the carnival people and Hashel knew the reason why. All of the carnival people asked Ondromead and Hashel question after question, none of which Hashel could answer and most which required Ondromead to be vague or to lie. The girl seemed desperate to speak, to talk about anything but the thing most on her mind, whatever it might be, the fading bruises on her arms speaking to something violent. Hashel understood this, for he held himself in silence, so he would not need to voice the things that plagued his mind. Better to be voiceless than risk those words being said. Pankee-Jao kept the dark words from the world by drowning them with many others. Ondromead appeared to understand this.

“I have seen that play many times.” Ondromead took a bite of an apple. “What is your favorite part of the play?”

“There’s so many good parts.” Pankee-Jao brightened considerably as she spoke about the play, her face coming alive and looking fuller in its sudden flush. “The part where the tahn rescues the tahneff from the bandits and then she rescues him right back when they gets lost in the wicked woods. And then there’s the part...”

Hashel stood and pointed to the woods as he caught Ondromead’s eye. The old man nodded, understanding Hashel’s need. He slipped away, the girl barely noticing his departure as she continued to excitedly describe her favorite parts of the realm’s most famous play. Hashel wished he had seen the play. Part of the reason he walked away was to avoid knowing what happened in the story before he ever got to see it. The other reason drove him behind a thick bush at the edge of the field.

Moments later, Hashel sighed from the relief of his contracting bladder. As he hitched up his britches again and tied the cotton belt that held them in place, he heard two sets of footsteps

approaching. Unsure whether to burst from the bushes and run back to Ondromead or announce his presence, he instead followed the path that seemed most natural after months of accompanying the old man — he quieted his breath and held himself stone-still.

“What do you wish to say that could not be said near the others?”

Hashel recognized that voice and accent as belonging to the yutan woman, Yeth.

“I wanted to ask your opinion about something before I propose it to Leotin.”

The second voice belonged to Palla. Hashel leaned forward toward the bush, looking up and peeking through the dense leaves until he saw portions of the faces of the woman and the yutan.

“What do you wish to propose?” Yeth asked.

“I think we should have scouts ahead of the carnival,” Palla said. “This way, we’d have a warning in case the creatures are up ahead. Or if there are bandits or militia or another army.”

“And who do you propose for this scouting mission?” Yeth asked.

“Myself and Ranna. And you. You have experience with tracking and...” Palla paused a moment. “And you have The Sight, so our odds will be improved if we have to fight.”

“It is an interesting proposition.” Yeth looked back at the carnival beside the road.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Palla leaned closer, her voice strained. “You could have done so much against the militia and the army at the castle. I understand the Shen hate The Sight, but we could have found a way to hide it. Even make it look like the answered prayers of the goddess.”

Yeth sighed and looked down. “I am not strong with The Sight. I never have been, but I also have had little time to practice. My ability would have made little difference against so many and might have created only greater conflict. Sight Master Lamna always told me that I acted before I fully considered the consequences. I spent weeks contemplating my possible actions and the potential outcomes. I had to keep my ability secret.”

The mention of the yutan’s sight master, whatever such a position might entail, reminded Hashel of a day not too many days in the past when he and Ondromead witnessed people using that name.

THREE WEEKS AGO

CLOVE, CINNAMON, jatpur, and nutmeg. The smells permeated the air. Strong aromas to quell the other scent buried beneath them — flesh fallen from life and turned to decay. Hashel stood beside Ondromead at the edge of a tree line surrounding a small, grassy glade. In the center, stood a circle of yutan men, women, and children, all dressed in similar long jade-colored cotton robes. They wore wreaths of bright-green leaves in their hair. They hummed a tune Hashel had never heard, melodic yet without true tone, shifting pitch randomly, the men and women alternating between two simple counterpoints.

The yutans stood around a freshly dug grave. A body wrapped in a red, oil-soaked, cotton sheet lay on the ground beside the earthen hole. As the mourners continued to hum, one of the yutan males began to sing, expressing his grief not in words, but in harmonic wails. As he continued, a female joined him, her voice a discordant complement to his own, both repeating

similar sounds but at different times. Soon others joined, until everyone in the circle, even the children, added their unique cry to the cacophony of sorrow coalescing in the air above the grave. Eventually, two males disengaged from the group to lift the body and lower it into the ground. As they took shovels and filled in the earth, the circle of yutans around them started to sway and shuffle in a rightward circular fashion, continuing to hum and sing.

“They are a strange and beautiful people.” Ondromead’s low voice rumbled beside him.

Hashel nodded in agreement. This funeral marked only the second time they had woken in the Sky Realm among the yutan people since Hashel joined Ondromead on his nightly journeys. They had also spent days in the other realms of the roagg, wyrin, and rakthor peoples. Not many, but some. Each time, Hashel worried they would be noticed and accosted, or worse, but Ondromead’s presence, and hence his own, seemed even more difficult for people of the other realms to notice. No matter who they were — yutan, wyrin, roagg, rakthor — they all walked past the old man without a glance. He could stand in a room of them and they never looked at him, never spoke to him. He could speak to them, to purchase food for instance, with special coins and even pieces of paper from his miraculous satchel. But even when he spoke to them in their own language, they never appeared surprised to see an old, human male in their lands. Ondromead explained that he suspected the peoples of other realms did not perceive as human, but rather one of their own kind.

Hashel did not know how the people of the other realms saw him, whether in the Sky Realm they saw a young, yutan boy, but he decided to stay especially close to Ondromead when in the other realms. Whatever the power that altered people’s perceptions of them, it likely had its source in Ondromead, and stepping too far from him might eliminate it. He did not want to think what might happen to him if he got separated from Ondromead in a foreign land.

As the last shovelful of dirt landed on the gravesite, the yutan mourners ceased their song and motion, standing still, heads raised to the sky, eyes open. One spoke and then the next.

“Sight Master Lamna — my friend and comrade.”

“Sight Master Lamna — my mentor.”

“Lamna Jurna — my mother.”

“Lamna Jurna — my sister.”

The mourners continued like this around the circle, each naming their relationship with the deceased. Once finished, they began another round of words, repeated every third person.

“Destroyer Kiv, carry the essence of our Lamna beyond this world.”

“Creator Onn, bring her back to this world and give her life once more.”

“Sustainer Tam, bless and hold her safe after her return to this world.”

The mourners repeated the lines of what Hashel assumed to be [prayers to their gods](#) until each spoke once. They continued to stare up at the pale-blue sky for a while longer. Eventually, one by one, each in their own time, they looked down, released their hands, and walked away.

A mature, yutan male and boy walked toward him and Ondromead. The yutan boy might have been a few years older or many years. He had no gauge of how yutans aged. They all seemed similar to him. Tall. Pale-skinned, with narrow faces and blondish-white hair and blue eyes. They looked like humans, but not quite. No one would mistake a yutan for human, even if they were not

so tall.

“Your mother should have been here.” The yutan male sounded angry.

“She has not been here for important things for years. Why would she be here for this?” The yutan boy looked angry as well.

“She will be sad when she learns of her mentor’s passing.” The male’s tone became a little more forgiving. “She may not hear of it until she returns.”

“I hope she never returns.” The boy’s voice sounded tight with his growing anger.

“You should not wish for this.” The male shook his head.

The yutan boy said nothing, looking down as he and the male, who might be his father, walked into the woods beyond the glade. Hashel watched them go. He wondered what kept the mother away. Why did she not attend the funeral of her mentor? What kept her from her family for so long?

“We can go now.” Ondromead pulled at Hashel’s hand. “It was not the first yutan funeral I have seen, but it was moving. The rituals seem to have changed little in a thousand years.”

Hashel followed Ondromead into the woods, wondering, as he always did, why they needed to witness this particular event, and whether he would ever learn more about the people who participated in it.

THE PRESENT

“YOU WILL use it now? The Sight?” Palla asked. “Now that you’ve revealed what you can do.”

“I will use my power to help the carnival whenever and however I can,” Yeth said.

Hashel tried to focus his mind on witnessing the present while still thinking about the past. It seemed he and Ondromead had observed the funeral of Yeth’s mentor and sight master as well as a brief conversation between her mate and her son. He wondered if he should try to tell her of her mentor’s death, but he could not figure out a way to do so. He also remembered Ondromead’s constant admonishment not to interfere in the events and lives of the people they witnessed. Instead, he concentrated on Palla and Yeth as they spoke.

“So, you’ll help Ranna and me scout ahead?” Palla asked.

“Yes, but not now,” Yeth said.

“Why not?” Palla asked. “Those creatures might be waiting for us around the next bend in the road.”

“Exactly.” Yeth took a deep breath. “There are two of them and I can barely restrain one with The Sight. If they both attack or I lose my concentration, they would kill us all. It is better to stay strong as a large party for now, until we know we are clear of the creatures.”

“Yes. I see. You are right. That makes sense. With you and Ranna, we might be able to kill one, but not two.” Palla looked down the road. “But once we are clear of them, you’ll help me talk to Leotin about scouting ahead?”

“Yes. I will.”

“Good.” Palla laughed. “I’m tired of pulling that damn wagon.”

“I, too, am weary of pretending to be a horse,” Yeth said.

The two women exchanged other words as they walked away, but Hashel could not hear them well enough to know what they said. He waited and then stepped from behind the bushes. As he walked back, he spotted the large, roagg male putting what looked like a lump of dried meat into a box at the back of a wagon. Hashel saw a small, furred paw reach out to take the meat. He blinked and shook his head as the roagg closed the box. Did the roagg have a secret pet? A raccoon, maybe? He had always wanted a pet raccoon. Why did the roagg keep the animal in a box? Probably to protect it from the creatures should they attack. Very smart. Hashel still felt sorry for the little animal trapped in the box all day.

When he returned, Ondromead and the rest of the camp stood ready to begin again along the road.

“You took quite some time.” Ondromead frowned at him. “I nearly began to worry.”

Hashel shrugged, both shoulders heaving. Ondromead seemed to take this for an apology and resumed walking with the rest of the carnival train. Hashel followed him, thinking about how many kinds of shrugs there were and what they conveyed. For never speaking a word, Ondromead always understood what he wished to communicate.

Wind still at their backs, pushing them gently along, they walked in the early afternoon sun for nearly two hours before word carried back, voice by voice, that a village lay up ahead. As the line of carnival folk and wagons came to a halt, Ondromead took his hand and guided him up the narrow gap of the road between the wagon wheels and the embankment beside the fields outside the village. Hashel steadied himself and tried to breathe evenly. He understood the look on Ondromead’s face. Some silent signal called him to the village to witness something. Hashel suspected what it would be and did not wish to see it.

When they reached the head of the caravan, they saw the village clearly, a couple of dozen small houses and barns clustered around a widening portion of the road that functioned like a village square. In the black-stained dirt of that space lay a pile of dead bodies. Men. Women. Children. Animals. All torn and shattered by teeth and claws.

He’d seen the teeth and claws that did this work. Were they nearby? Had they attacked the village in the night after striking the carnival? Or had they assaulted it more recently? Did they wait in the woods beyond the village to raid it again? Hashel stepped closer to Ondromead, holding his hand tightly and wishing he had some lamp oil with which to douse himself.

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

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

THE CARNIVAL



SHIFHUUL

THE BOX. Dark. Musty. Cramped. Safe.

Shifhuul despised the box. He lay curled in a wooded chest with a blanket padding the bottom boards beneath him, his bow and quiver resting beside him, the hilt of his sword poking into his back. The chest ostensibly belonged to Tarak, which ensured none of the humans of the carnival dared to open it. While he preferred riding in a wagon to walking, Shifhuul enjoyed the open air to the confines of a trunk. For this reason, he usually walked behind the carnival through the woods and fields. A wyrin could only be packed in a crate like harvest of melons for so long before going mad. He agreed to hide in the box on days it rained. And on days when there might be a pack of massive, razor-spined creatures hunting the carnival.

He'd begun to reconsider that decision. Would he be safer in the box if the creatures attacked? Or could he find himself in the middle of their hunt rather than observing it? And might he not be more useful stalking the carnival, looking for signs of the beasts and warning his companions of an approach? He chewed a hunk of dried meat as he pondered this question. If he were pacing ahead of the carnival, he might warn them of signs of the creatures. It might be riskier, might make him a target, but at least he had a chance of seeing, hearing, and smelling them coming. In a box, bouncing at the end of a wagon, the wheels squeaking with every rotation, he could only wait for someone to tell him what happened in the world beyond.

What was happening?

The wagon stopped abruptly, the motion slamming Shifhuul's snout into the side of the box. He shook his head but kept from exclaiming his annoyance aloud. While no one in the carnival would normally risk aggravating Tarak by opening his chest, their curiosity might overcome their better judgment if they heard loud, wyrin curses coming from within it. He listened with his ear to the side of the box but made out only muffled voices. Why had they stopped? A fork in the road? Some other travelers needing passage around their caravan of wagons? Surely, screams would accompany creatures attacking the caravan.

The situation required patience. Generally, Shifhuul found that for him, patience arose from indifference. He had spent day after day patiently watching the humans in the castle bicker and fight because he had no overwhelming interest in the outcome. Humans from the castle yelling at human pilgrims did not affect the fact that a human army sat beyond the barricaded gate. On the other hand, deadly creatures lurking in the woods around the road the carnival wagons traversed were an immediate threat to which he could not be indifferent. He could resist the urge no longer and raised the lid of the box just a sliver, placing his eyes to the open crack.

He needed to wait a moment for his vision to adjust from the darkness of the box to the brightness of the midday sun. As he did, his ears absorbed the sounds and voices nearby. His nose also caught the scent in the air. By the time his eyes acclimated to the light outside the box, he had

a good idea of why the wagon stopped. The humans called back to each other what those at the front saw.

A village. Bodies stacked. The same prints in the dust of the road. The village huts empty. All dead.

Any residual indifference he possessed evaporated. He refused to remain in the box — a delicate morsel to be discovered by the creatures after they slaughtered the carnival. He needed to be out, to fight or flee. Besides which, the box gave him too much time to think. To remember. Memories of his wife and daughter came easier in the dark confines of the wooden chest. And that darkness pulled at him, calling him toward them, rekindling his desire to join them in their eternal lives in Thanis, the forest of golden light reserved for those who were heart-pure in their lives. Of course, that did not likely include him. He would be lucky to find himself in Kuriss, the endless plain of grass for those of middling hearts, if not Mannis, the unending desert reserved for those with wicked hearts. But one might redeem one's heart through action. Fighting the creatures to save the humans offered the opportunity to purify his heart and gain him ascendance upon his death to the realm of Thanis, to be reunited once more with his beloved wife and daughter. The darkness of the box, and the memories it fostered, also rekindled the desire for the mind-numbing smoke of loat seed oil, a craving best forgotten. All the more reason to get out of the damnable box.

Shifhuul raised the lid of the chest a little more, checking around to see if any humans stood nearby. A few did, but the front of the carnival train held their attention completely. He lifted the lid and slid out of the box, kneeling on the bed of the wagon to reach in and retrieve his sword, bow, and quiver. With these in hand, he crawled to the rear side of the wagon, slipped between the wide gap of the railing boards, and lowered himself to the ground. He checked once more to make certain no humans looked in his direction, and then dashed into the field of amber, autumn wheat beside the lane. He paused, looking back at the wagons, ensuring no one's eyes followed him. None did, so he walked quietly through the wheat toward the village. He stayed low, keeping his head beneath the tassels of grain, an act made easier for the fact that he stood only marginally taller than the shafts of wheat. As the stalks brushed against the fur of his arms, he felt relief he had not died back at the castle, condemned to forever walk the deserts of Mannis, unable to see his loved ones again in the forests of Thanis.

Thoughts of the afterlife faded as the wind shifted and the stench of rotting flesh from the village reached him again. He stopped at the edge of the field and parted the wheat to see the yard of a small house, and beyond it, the center of the village. Corpses lay in a heap between small huts. Eyes stared into nothing. Limbs pulled from torsos. Bodies slashed and chewed. Blood-caked hands and faces and clothes. Dark stains soaked the soil, radiating away from the pile of corpses — bulbous tendrils of a formless sea creature washed up on dry land and putrefying in the sun.

Leotin stood beside Palla, Ranna, Yeth, and Tarak. The five spoke in tones too low for Shifhuul to discern. After a moment, they nodded and headed toward the carnival wagons. Shifhuul stepped back into the wheat. The edge of the field sat close enough to hear Leotin as he stood upon the lead wagon and shouted to the humans assembled behind it.

“The creatures have been here.” Leotin waited for the exclamations of fear and distress to die down. “They have been here since their attack in the last village. They head this way. Therefore, we must head back or risk encountering them once more. Turn the wagons. We march back the way we came. We will stay the night in the last village and then head back to the Old Border Road. And once there, we will again start eastward toward Punderra and Juparti. Quickly now. We need to make haste. I want to set camp well before nightfall.”

Leotin leapt down and the humans turned the wagons in the narrow lane. It took them several minutes to accomplish the task, and Shifhuul used this time to consider the options before him. They numbered two — climb once more inside Tarak’s chest for the ride back to the village of the night before or return to following the carnival at a distance. He refused to retreat to the safety of the box and scouting the way beside the carnival might tell him if any of the creatures remained in the vicinity.

His decision made, Shifhuul walked in a slow, erratic line through the wind-wavering wheat. He doubted he attracted the attention of the humans, for they noticed little not set right before their tiny noses, but he felt no desire to take risks. They would not think him an animal if they spotted the leather quiver on his back. As he passed from the field and into the surrounding woods, he paused and looked back at the village. So many dead. For what purpose? Few of the bodies showed any signs of feeding. What animal hunted to kill rather than eat? None he’d ever known. Why kill so many all at once when the killing came easy? Why not leave more prey for a later day?

As he looked at the small houses of the village across the field, he realized no one would harvest this grain. None would reap the rewards of their efforts. It would dry in the autumn sun, covered by the winter snows, smacked by spring rains, the kernels of wheat falling to sprout and grow wild. If only the same held true for the dead humans clustered in the village, clasping one another for the last time. He did not remember what the humans of this part of the Iron Realm believed about death. Did they hope to find an eternal forest or glade? Did they believe they returned like the wheat of the fields around their last resting place? Did they reunite with their gods? [Wyrins did not worship gods](#) in the way of humans. He knew humans often cremated the bodies of their dead. Thinking of this, he noted that Leotin had not ordered the bodies in the village burned the way he had in the last village. Wise. No need to announce their location to the beasts with a column of smoke.

Shifhuul left thoughts of the village behind as he ran into the woods, loping between the trees and bushes, following the road back to the first village, pacing ahead of the slower carnival. As he ran, he wondered if he should have given a signal to Yeth and Tarak of his actions. They were likely to check the chest at some point and find him missing. They would, no doubt, assume the truth — that a wyrin could not remain in a box for any significant length of time.

He alternated running and walking back to the first village. Along the way, he looked and smelled for signs of the creatures but found none. Halfway to his destination, this changed, and he came across large, cat-like tracks in the leaves between the trees. The scent of the creatures turned strong in the air. He noted that the tracks went deeper into the woods as they headed in the direction of the second dead village. He saw no indication of tracks returning to the first village and so

pressed forward. As he drew closer, the acrid aroma of smoke grew to overwhelm the odor of the creatures. He arrived well before the carnival. Knowing the humans to be an hour or more away, he took the time to investigate the village, something he'd had no opportunity to do the previous night.

He poked into a few houses, looking for something to eat, finding most already stripped of food by the carnival humans. He followed the stink of charred flesh and greasy smoke to the street where the mound of bodies still smoldered. He covered his snout against the stench and held his stomach tight to ward off the urge to vomit. The smell reminded him of roasted boar, but tinged with the flavor of decay. The pile of human carcasses would smolder for days, being stacked too high to burn completely. No doubt the human corpses in the center at the bottom would never be touched by the flames and continue to rot in the sun and rain. He did not worry much about this. Once the heat of the fire died, the animals and insects would feast on the remains of the humans until only bones remained, then with time, the spirit of the soil, Lashlu, would eventually reclaim their bones and draw them down into her bosom beneath the ground.

The sight brought to mind a recent memory of other charred human flesh.

25 DAYS AGO

CLOUDED MOONLIGHT crept down gray castle walls, running across the inner courtyard, leaping over the sleeping forms of humans divided into three groups, sprawling in a glimmering puddle of still water resting between a clutch of shattered cobblestones. Shifhuul stood near the puddle of moonlit water, beneath a wagon, beside the slumbering carnival folk and pilgrims. He'd slipped from his subterranean hiding place in the castle cellars hoping to find a morsel to still the stabbing hunger pangs of his stomach. So far, he'd discovered only the brown paper-thin outer rind of an onion discarded near a barrel. He'd eaten it, the flaky skin sticking to the palate of his mouth and between his teeth. It offered little nourishment, but the taste made him think of the soups his father often cooked as a child on cool, autumn nights.

His father would have admonished him for attempting to steal from the humans. His mother would ... what would his mother say if she knew of his predicament? Always practical, he suspected she would approve of any actions he took in hopes of surviving the siege of the castle. She would, no doubt, approve with a whisker-twitching sneer, a silent criticism for getting caught between human factions. He offered a sneer of recrimination to himself beneath the light of the clouded moons. He could not seem to place himself ahead of events, to drive their action, rather than being herded by them. Forced to pretend to be dead and hide in the castle shadows, he subsisted on what little food Yeth and Tarak saved from their own rations, and what he scrounged from the castle supplies unnoticed. As the stores of foodstuffs grew scarcer with each passing day, it became more and more difficult to mask his theft. He might have hunted the small animals found in the castle but had no means to cook them. A raw bird or cat or rat did not sound appealing. He refused to devour uncooked flesh like a wild human or beastly roagg. Wyrins held themselves and their culture to a more sophisticated standard than the people of the other realms, insisting on all

meat being well-cooked. He preferred an even more sophisticated standard, one that included someone else to cook his meals for him.

Unable to steal more from the castle stores without notice, he'd been forced to thieve from the humans. Unfortunately, this had unforeseen consequences. Namely, one group of humans blaming another for the theft and threatening violence as retribution. While he would not normally give much consideration to the thought of two humans fighting for food he'd stolen, the situation in the castle demanded he contemplate the outcomes. If his theft of food caused too great a hostility between the groups of humans, particularly the local townspeople and the pilgrims, it might lead to the castle being overrun by the army outside the gates, and then he would find it even harder to hide and secure food. And if Yeth and Tarak were killed, he might never return home from this senseless mission. And if he died in that conflict, it might occur before he collected enough merit to gain admittance to Thanis and rejoin his family.

This thought had not fully possessed his mind when he wished for death in the past. Only with his actual demise, reversed by Yeth's healing skill with The Sight, had he considered the notion of seeing them again — moreover, that he might fashion himself into a wyrin worthy of such a reunion. It worried him some that he did not remember anything of his death, but not enough to question his faith. Who knew how long it took the dead to reach the realms of the afterlife? Only those who stayed dead, he suspected.

A motion in the darkness caught his eyes. He turned to see a human sneaking low through the shadowed side of the castle wall toward the wagons beside the circle of carnival folk. Shifhuul's keen night sight easily spotted the human male as he slid between two wagons and reached his hand under a tarp. After digging beneath the canvas for a moment, he withdrew a burlap bag twice the size of his head. What did the bag hold? Apples? Nuts? Parsnips? His mouth watered as he contemplated the possible contents of the sack. Leotin had ordered everyone to pool their stores of food, but Shifhuul knew from his nocturnal observations that a few held back and clung to their own personal stock of vegetables and fruits, things that could be eaten quickly when no one observed.

The human male retreated to the shadows with his stolen bounty. Shifhuul checked to ensure that the human guards atop the castle walls still looked outward for enemies, and then followed the man, keeping a patient distance, waiting to see where he bedded down. The man made his way back into the castle through an open doorway. Shifhuul pursued him along a darkened corridor and up a flight of stairs. The man stopped at the top of the stairs, hiding the burlap bag at the bottom of a large decorative vase near the upper landing. Gilded serpentine patterns painted on the ceramic shell glowed in the faint light from the window above the stairwell. Satisfied no one would find his stash, the man stole back down the stairs. Shifhuul backed into a shadowed nook, confident he remained invisible to the human's poor night vision. After the man fled outside the castle, Shifhuul ran to the vase.

He needed to tilt the vase at an angle and launch half his body inside its wide mouth before he reached the bag at the bottom. He pulled it free and sat the vase back upright. His mouth watering in anticipation, he pulled at the strings holding the bag tight. The small sack did not feel

like it held apples. Seeds, maybe? He tugged the neck of the bag open and peered at a pool of white in the hazy moon light.

Rice.

Shifhuul grunted as the hunger pangs stabbed at him once more. He could not eat rice raw. Corn, possibly, but not rice. He needed a fire and water and a pot. Simply not possible in the current circumstances. So, what could he do with a bag of rice?

He heard twin voices in his mind. His father admonishing him to return the rice out of simple fairness. His mother insisting on returning it out of pragmatism and the need to avoid conflict between the humans. As always, a wyrin torn by two powerful influences, he chose a third path.

He dashed down the stairs and out of the castle. Sticking to the shadows, he discovered what he needed among the carnival wagons. A few minutes later, he placed three large bowls of rice at the edges of the three camps of sleeping humans. Stepping back into the shadows, he admired the elegance of the gesture. The three groups of humans would wake and each find a gift of rice, but none would know who made such a gesture. Hopefully, it would be a mystery they discussed openly and that reduced their fear of one another. Maybe they would take the gift and cook and eat it together. Most likely, a fight would start over who should get the rice and someone would be punched or stabbed or worse. Shifhuul looked up and shook his head. *Humans.*

On the wall above the gate, he saw two tall, shadowed forms standing close by. Yeth and Tarak. His sharp eyes spotted something else. Bows in their hands.

Fools!

Shifhuul darted deeper into the shadows and raced around the castle courtyard. He moved as fast and as silently as possible, reaching the wooden stairs to the upper wall half a minute later. He hoped he would be in time. Cursing, he leapt up the stairs, forced to take them one at a time, his legs too short for anything more. At the top of the stairwell, he saw Yeth and Tarak each nocking an arrow and making ready to draw.

“Stop,” Shifhuul hissed and kept his head low to remain unseen by either the human guards atop the side towers of the castle, or someone who might randomly wake and look up from the camps in the courtyard.

“Shifhuul?” Yeth eased her grip on the bowstring and lowered the weapon to her side. “What are you doing here?”

“Stop you.” Shifhuul stepped closer to his fellow outlanders.

“You should stay hidden.” Tarak also lowered his bow as he faced Shifhuul.

“You must stop.” Shifhuul pointed to the bows.

“The human they burned is still alive.” Yeth looked over the edge of the wall. “And their guards sleep.”

“We can kill the guards first then the humans.” Tarak raised his bow again. “Even sheetoo should not suffer this way.”

Shifhuul stood on his toes to look between the crenellations of the wall. In the pale light of the double moons hidden behind the clouds, he saw four humans still tied to the wagon. One of the men moaned constantly. Burns covered the entirety of the human male’s flesh. How did the

human still live after such torment? They were not wise, but they proved a hearty people.

“You must no.” Shifhuul stepped even closer to the Yeth and Tarak. “Long shot. Hard shot. Not light. If miss, all bad. If one guard not dead, all bad. If one human not dead, all bad. Bad thinking. No do.” He inwardly cursed his ineptitude with the human Shen language. He needed to convey the dangerousness of their thinking, and he sounded like a child arguing with its parents.

“Tarak can make the shot at this range, and I can use The Sight to make sure my arrows strike true.” Yeth sounded less certain than her words implied.

“We cannot continue to do nothing, even if Leotin orders it.” The lips of Tarak’s long muzzle twisted downward.

“If wrong, humans throw stones may.” Shifhuul suspected the only reason the human army outside the castle gates refrained from using the stone-casting machines they built was because they hoped to retain the walls intact for their future occupation of it. If Yeth and Tarak killed the hostages being tortured, eliminating the only leverage the army commander had to persuade Leotin and the humans to surrender, casting rocks and burning bales of hay would seem the best course of action. Leotin apparently grasped this danger, but he had not conveyed it sufficiently to Yeth and Tarak. He had himself once suggested killing the army commander, but that had been in a moment of hasty emotion not even-headed thoughtfulness.

However, the yutan and the roagg were correct about the need to end the suffering of the humans strapped to the wagon in the road outside the castle. When one saw an animal of any kind in pain, the inclination arose to help the creature, be it a dog or a pig or a rabbit or a human. He looked again beyond the castle walls. A quick mind might be able to conceive of a means to both free the humans from their suffering and keep the army from breaking down the castle walls.

“Plan.” Shifhuul spun to face Yeth and Tarak. “Plan have I. Must lure humans close.”

THE PRESENT

BLACK BEAKS and seared skin. The crows picked at the soft, still warm meat of the corpses at the top of the pile. Shifhuul resisted the urge to shoo them away. The birds needed to fill their bellies and the dead humans did not need their flesh. The crows did not intend cruelty or insult, only blind animal survival.

He looked away from the bodies, turning, too, from the memories they spurred. His plan had not worked as he’d hoped. But the castle did not fall, so it had not failed, either. He returned his focus to the immediate need for food and checked several of the small wood and clay-walled houses near the pile of dead. He found several hunks of dried meat, a slender wedge of hard cheese, a sack of nuts, a few apples, an onion, a red pepper, and a yellow, oblong squash he could not name. He dropped everything into the sack and headed into the woods to await the carnival.

Before settling into his preferred tree with his evening meal of rescued food, he scouted the woods around the village. He’d done the same the day before while the carnival set up, but it would be good to repeat the task, maybe with a little more distance to get a better gauge of where the creatures might lurk if they returned. He moved through woods as soundlessly as he always had.

Wyrin children learned to play in the woods of their home realm by tracking and hunting small game. A wyrin unable to pass undetected in the forest must be sick or inebriated. While he did find more tracks and the scent of the creatures in the woods, he did not find their former lair. As he headed back to what he thought of as his guard post, he widened the arc of his path around the village once more. Doing so brought him to a clearing with a small, wooden shack, its slanted roof covered with pale-green moss.

Shifhuul stopped at the edge of the clearing and raised his snout to sniff the air. The smell of several pungent herbs emanated from the shack. He walked toward it. Possibly a human hid within. A human in the woods alone stood little chance against those creatures should they return. However, the overpowering aroma of herbs concealed the human's scent and might confuse the beast. He should warn the human. Let it know there were other humans coming to the village. It might be safer there. As he neared the shack, he heard a dog bark. This did not surprise him, as he did not approach with stealth. No need to surprise the human and risk facing an axe or worse.

As he came to the front of the small wooden hovel, the ramshackle door burst open, and a slender girl of middling age jumped into the open, thrusting a sharpened tree branch in his face. Shifhuul stopped. The girl stood silent, the makeshift spear trembling in her hands, a wreath of herbs seated on her head. The dog, a small, thin creature with matted fur and a tiny herb-wreath around its neck, continued to bark.

"Get!" The girl shook the stick at him again.

"I harm you not." Shifhuul raised his paws in the air. No need to startle the human girl more than he already had.

The girl shrieked and jumped back. The dog stopped barking and cocked its head at him.

"You a talkin' racoon?" The girl lowered her handmade spear but kept it pointed between them.

"I wyrin." Shifhuul noted the lack of comprehension on the girl's dirt-smudged face. "From Wood Realm."

The girl's eyes went wide with understanding.

"Like in the stories?" the girl asked.

"Yes." Shifhuul did not know what stories she referred to but did not wish to discuss the fact of his talking more than necessary. "You not safe here. Bad animals come. You safe be in village. People come to village. You go now."

"Ain't nobody ever taught ya how to talk proper?" The girl squinted at Shifhuul.

"I talk fine. You go village. Be safe." Shifhuul's displeasure in speaking the human language raged. To be lessoned by a human girl stood as even more annoying than being corrected by Tarak and Yeth.

"I ain't goin' nowheres near that village again." The girl's face contorted in obvious fear as her lower lip trembled. "Them monsters kill't everybody. Ma an' Pa an' sis an' everybody. Theys comin' back. They come back last night. They'll come back tonight, too."

"You not safe here." Shifhuul considered the girl's words. Maybe the creatures hunted in a pattern near their lair. Maybe they would return to the village again that night.

“I been safer here than I was in my house when those razor-backed demons cut everybody down.” The girl stood a little straighter, clearly proud of her survival when older, more experienced humans perished.

Shifhuul studied the girl in silence as he considered her words. She might be safer there, away from the juicy target of the carnival presented to the creatures, should they return. It might make more sense for him to leave her. And, as he thought again about the humans tortured on that wagon back at the castle, it might make sense to do as they had done before and lure the beasts closer.

Shifhuul lowered his canvas sack of food to the leaf-encrusted ground and pulled forth one of two chunks of dried meat, an apple, and the wedge of cheese and handed them to the girl.

“You eat. You stay. We come with sun for you.” Shifhuul held the food in his paws.

“Thank ya.” The girl cautiously accepted the gifts.

“Make no fire. Stay quiet.” Shifhuul closed the canvas sack.

“I ain’t stupid.” The girl frowned at him, then after a moment, her face softened. “Good luck, talkin’ raccoon.”

“Wyrin.” Shifhuul shook his head and walked back into the forest and toward the village. He needed to speak with Yeth and Tarak as soon as they arrived. They had little time to convince Leotin of his plan and implement its measures before the night came, and the creatures likely came with it. Assuming the girl proved right in her belief that the beasts would hunt the town again. He suspected she spoke wisely. A girl who survived the slaughter of her village must be cunning in ways others were not. Fortunately, so was he.

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THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

SHOVELS DUG into packed earth. Axes felled narrow branches. Hands broke staffs of hay and scattered them. Ondromead watched the carnival folk making preparations for the night, setting camp as before, but with particular defensive alterations to the plan. He sat on a rickety stool in the barn housing the animals. Hashel stood nearby, helping the boy Donjeo herd two pigs into a stall meant for cows.

The men and women of the carnival worked under the direction of the yutan and the roagg, the purpose of their actions gradually becoming clear, revealing the plan to keep them safe. It seemed a well-executed strategy in the staging, if somewhat optimistic in the intended outcome. He hoped the preparations proved unnecessary. That the kellitsara would not return to the village to hunt the carnival. That they had moved on to more unsuspecting prey. A cruel hope. He also hoped that if they returned, their arrival came after his nightly departure. Assuming he and Hashel did depart in the night once more. Odd that he longed for his nocturnal transportation after so many years of wishing to remain in one place.

Ondromead noted Hashel's demeanor over the last two days in the company of the carnival. The boy stayed close to him at all times, but genuinely seemed to enjoy the companionship of the carnival folk. Maybe he should contrive to leave the boy behind, presuming the creatures did not strike again in the night. Hashel might be happier here with men and women and children for company. Would the boy be safe? Safer than with himself? Who could know such a thing?

"The boy seems happy with more than an old man for company."

Ondromead did not turn to the voice. Meraeu's voice.

"It is good for him to be with others, yes." Ondromead hated admitting this aloud.

"You should leave him here with them." She walked around to stand in front of him. "You know you should."

"He'll be safer with me when we leave this place than he will be as prey for those monsters if they return." Ondromead stood up. He refused to sit while the old woman towered over him.

"No one is safe in this world." Meraeu looked again at Hashel and then the activities of the people working to set the wagons once more in half circles between the two barns.

"Even me?" Ondromead wondered if his question might reveal something he'd never been able to learn.

"You know better than to ask such things by now." Meraeu smiled at him. "I need to show you something."

Ondromead hesitated as he turned toward where Hashel helped the boy Donjeo in the back of the barn.

"You need not worry." Meraeu's smile widened. "He will be safe until you return."

He still hesitated. He did not trust her words. Words could be deceptive.

“I will return soon?” Ondromead asked. Best to clarify the circumstance.

“This will take only minutes.”

Ondromead looked again at Hashel, a stab of an unfamiliar emotion leaving a pain in his chest.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

“Not far.”

Meraeu led him out the wide door, along the side of the barn, and through the narrow gap between the wooden wall and the back of a nearby wagon. He followed her through the street behind the barn and then down another lane, across a narrow yard, and then around the back of yet another barn. The utter emptiness of the village still unsettled him. All these houses, barns, huts, shacks, and no people, no livestock, no pets. Only the birds remained, feasting on the bodies of the dead.

They walked around the corner of a barn and Ondromead stopped, standing still as he saw a karnis tree in the yard behind the structure. The tree somehow managed to be in bloom one moment, then fully covered in vibrant green leaves the next. Then the narrow leaves turned red and orange and the next moment were gone, the branches starkly bare. The tree wavered in and out of existence with each transformation. A moment later, the leaves returned, glistening an oily black, before shifting once more to glow with a shimmering golden light. Then that light faded and the leaves melted into blood that ran down the branches and the trunk, the bark turning first white then black then gray, before the entire tree erupted in flame and fell to ash only to be once more whole and covered in bright-yellow blossoms.

Sweat trickled down Ondromead’s brow. He stifled a shiver. An unfamiliar emotion gripped him. One he’d experienced in a palace recently, running lost, trying to find Hashel.

Fear. He felt fear.

“Why are you doing this?” Ondromead’s dry throat ached in expressing the question.

“I do nothing.” Meraeu shook her head. “Things such as this happen now.”

“How is that possible?” Ondromead blinked as he observed the tree shifting once more, its branches seemingly made of obsidian before suddenly being covered in an orange, mossy fur.

“You would know if you wished to know.” Meraeu stared at him, her eyes saying things she did not speak aloud, things he did not understand with her silence.

“What does it mean?” Ondromead turned toward Meraeu.

“Strange events always lead to one conclusion in this world.” She sounded sad as she spoke, glancing back to the tree.

“War.” Ondromead’s sadness held him firm as the tree changed again, his single word ringing in his own ears.

“And of a kind never seen.” Meraeu’s voice sounded far away.

When he looked, Meraeu no longer stood beside him. The tree still shifted between various states of existence, becoming blurry each time, as though falling through a clouded space before landing into the world and dropping out again. He stared at the tree for a time, knowing Meraeu would not return now she’d shown him this fissure in reality. What did it mean? Why did she show him? He could do nothing about it. Did she attempt to warn him? She said such things happened

now. Did they happen elsewhere? And why did this inexplicable event happen in this village?

Abruptly, the tree ceased to be anything more than a normal tree, its leaves tinged in the autumn colors of sunset. He noticed then that the sun actually did set, its glow coloring the western horizon through the trunks of the woods across the surrounding fields. He waited a while longer, to see if the tree changed again, and then returned to the barns and the carnival camp. Only one wagon remained to be put in place, in the middle along one side. He walked through the gap and saw the full intent of the work the carnival folk labored at for the last two hours. A deadly trap for a deadly beast. He wondered if it would work. He'd seen a similar trap set for a creature, no doubt related to the ones that stalked the carnival and the village. As usual with the events he witnessed, he could not have predicted how it led to the current series of circumstances he beheld.

THIRTY-ONE YEARS AGO

SLENDER ICICLES clung to pine needles, the added frozen weight bending the branches of the conifers encircling the tiny, snowbound glade. Pale, afternoon sunlight reflected from the snow in an ethereal shimmer. The plaintive bleats of a young fawn tied to a stake in the center of the clearing hung in the chill air. Ondromead stood among the trees, unseen by the fawn or the hunters concealed behind a blind of branches and fresh snow. He pulled his cloak close about him and rubbed his fingers together for warmth. His cloak held far more layers than usual. It happened when he awoke in a cold climate. Just as when waking in a desert, he found himself dressed in white cotton robes, or in thin silks when in a jungle. Still, the fur-lined cloak felt three layers too thin. He breathed on his cupped hands, wishing for gloves. He knew he could not die from the cold. He had tried once.

He watched the fawn sniffing the chill air and wiped his nose on the sleeve of his cloak. What did he need to witness in a place so frigid? The young deer obviously stood tethered and staked as bait, but for what? He'd stood in place long enough to know who baited the glade, but the why of it eluded him. Squinting, he saw a lock of crimson hair covered in snow behind a hunting blind. The leader of the hunt, the daughter of the Atheton Tey, sat with four men, waiting. He smelled the pine resin they'd used to cloak their scent even from thirty paces away. He liked the odor. It reminded him of a pleasant day in the wooded mountains of the Stone Realm several thousand years ago when he'd witnessed the first roagg settlers arrive in their new homeland after being freed by the urris from their enslavement at the hands of the Punderra warlords who had created them.

The silence of the glade made him wish for the bustling conversations of a tavern. Thoughts of taverns led him to wishing for a bowl of hot soup or meaty stew to warm his hands and stomach. His belly rumbled in response to his ruminations. He took a small bread roll and nuts he kept in his satchel for such occasions and snacked on them. He sighed and waited. And waited. Shadows grew long, bending across the white powder between the black tree trunks. The fawn lay down, curling up to tuck its head between belly and hind legs. Ondromead wished he could do the same as the light seeped from the glade, darkness slowly filling it to near blackness. The light of the

slivered moons above the clouds provided a thin illumination reflected by the powered snow covering the glade. More flakes drifted down in the darkness — alabaster motes of ice fluttering through onyx shadows.

Ondromead struggled against hunger and the chill to remain alert and attentive to the events he hoped transpired soon. A familiar humming filled his head and brought his eyes wide open. The sound of something moving through the forest nearby caught his ears. The fawn heard it as well, raising its snout. Ondromead turned his head to the sound of movement nearby, seeing a massive, shadow-cloaked creature padding between the trees. A large cat-like beast, razor-sharp spines protruding from its back and sides. He recognized the monster, having been present at the creation of its first ancestors by Juparti seers more than a millennia ago. It passed within arm's reach, but did not pause to inspect him, oblivious of his existence. He let out a long, slow breath he had not realized he'd been holding. All manner of animals ignored him, but that did not keep his mind from picturing what damage the creature's long talons might do to soft flesh.

Nor did he need to imagine, as the creature leapt from the shadows into the clearing and showed him, a motion so swift and violent, he barely saw the blade-like claws slice across the fawn's neck, severing it from the body that shook and twitched where it lay. The razor-cat did not wait before feeding, sinking its maw of pointed teeth into the body of the fawn, tearing it open to gorge on the warm meat and innards.

As the creature fed, the clearing erupted in a cloud of snow. The animal roared and flew upwards, its feet lifted from the ground and thrown skyward. It took Ondromead a moment to realize that the creature now hung in a tight net of woven rope five paces above the forest floor, suspended between the branches of three trees still swaying with the release of the trap they must have held throughout the day.

Tsentet Tijaro Havarez and her four men plunged from behind their blind of tree branches into the clearing. The creature roared above them, its eyes locked on its captors, the ropes holding tight.

“Lower it down.” The tsentet stared at the creature as she shouted to her men.

The men gazed up at the net, seeming as mesmerized by the monster as by the success of the plan.

“Quickly,” the tsentet said. She, too, appeared overwhelmed by her accomplishment.

Before the men moved to enact their tsentet's orders, the razor-cat roared again, flexing its muscles and extending its talons, the blade-sharp appendages slicing through the ropes of the net that bound it. The creature twisted as it fell, landing on its feet with a growl. It did not pause, pouncing to attack the men surrounding it. Ondromead wondered if the beast had waited until the men stood beneath it before freeing itself. Did it possess such cunning? He had no time to contemplate the question. The razor-cat swiped at the first man with a clawed paw, striking him as it had the fawn with much the same effect. The man's head bounced off the chest of his nearest companion, who barely had time to cry out before the creature's teeth crushed his torso and burst it open. The razor-cat tossed the corpse at the remaining two men, both stumbling backward as it charged them. Only one of the men managed to draw his sword before the creature struck them. The blade's edge had little impact on the steel-like spines of the creature's pelt. The man with the

sword died, impaled on a blade-like spine, while the other man expired after being smacked and flung neck first into the trunk of a nearby tree.

The razor-cat turned to face the huntress. Tsentet Tijaro did not reach for the sword at her waist or cry out or even look in the direction of her dead hunters. She stared at the creature and raised her hands, never taking her eyes from the beast. Ondromead gasped as it roared and lunged at the tsentet, teeth and claws charging toward her. The creature skidded to a stop, repelled by an invisible force. It roared again and pushed forward, digging its claws through the snow and into the hard, frozen ground to pull itself forward, snarling with each step.

The humming in Ondromead's head pitched higher and his curiosity expanded as the tsentet tried to keep the creature from reaching her. He had not known she possessed The Sight. He'd seen her less than a handful of times since her birth and never in a situation such as this. As the roaring razor-cat dragged itself ever closer to the tsentet, overwhelming her use of The Sight through sheer muscular force, her arms and legs shook with the strain of concentration, if not fear, her breath coming in sharp, short bursts. Ondromead wondered at her bravery and determination. She surely knew that if she attempted to turn and flee, the creature would strike her down as it had done her companions. Her only hope lay in keeping the monster from her until it lost interest and returned to the forest. Or could she kill it with The Sight? Did she possess that level of skill and power? It did not seem so. The creature stood closer than ever, its neck strained outward, the spiked teeth of its open mouth reaching for her, the growl of its anger echoing through the trees around the glade. The tsentet leaned toward the creature as it tilted its eyes toward her. Ondromead feared what he needed to witness in the next few moments.

"You. Will. Sleep." Tsentet Tijaro's voice shook, barely heard above the creature's incessant growling. "You. Will. Sleep." The tsentet repeated her command, her voice gaining in volume and confidence as the creature's forward motion ceased. "Sleep."

The creature's eyelids fluttered, and it shook its head.

"Sleep."

The creature slowly slid to the ground, its massive form rolling sideways in the bloodstained snow, head lolling backward as its eyes fell shut.

Tsentet Tijaro wavered on her feet for a moment and then staggered toward the fallen razor-cat. As she neared the beast, she fell to her knees, panting. She stared at the creature that had nearly ended her life for a moment and then reached out to rest a gloved hand on its enormous snout.

Ondromead's fingers twitched with the desire to transcribe the events he'd witnessed in the glade. The tsentet's display with The Sight had been more surprising than expected. He'd wondered whether she held the power to kill the beast but had not suspected she might possess the skill to render it unconscious. What would she do with it now? In fact, what had her plan been in trying to capture a kellitsara? Did she hope to make a pet of it? An amusement for court? He wondered if he would ever see the fruition of the plan she put in motion that day.

Cold, tired, and hungry, Ondromead slid silently backward, deeper into the forest to look for a place where he might write in the black book what he'd seen. Then he could find a tree to curl beneath and fall swiftly asleep. He hoped he woke somewhere warm with plentiful food on hand.

The bed of an inn preferably.

THE PRESENT

SUNSET SHADOWS gathered along the two barns and the wagons arrayed in a ring between them. Ondromead sighed as he let the memory of the young Atheton tsentet fade into the churning pool of past events he'd witnessed through the millennia. Tsentet Tijaro Havarez, now Teyett of Atheton, named Kimpadess by her people for her intent to rule the whole of the Iron Realm, had obviously found a second razor-cat to mate with the one he'd seen her capture. And now he understood why she'd risked her life in that snowy forest. So that the people of this village could die decades later.

He had not woken in a bed in an inn the morning after seeing the capture of the razor-cat. He'd opened his eyes to find himself in the middle of a morning battle — a pitched fight between two tribes in the Kytain Dominion. That engagement ended very badly for the initiating tribe. He feared the coming confrontation with the razor-cats would have a similarly one-sided result. Best to find Hashel and stuff him away in a corner and douse him with oil again. He'd found a small bottle of scented oil in a house in the village they'd fled from earlier that day.

Ondromead walked along the edge of the wagons to where the people of the carnival began to jam themselves into the animal barn, the other reserved for their hastily arranged trap. He found Hashel sitting alone near the door of the barn, munching on a cold meat dumpling, likely leftover from a previous meal. As he squatted down beside the boy, he noted that most of the people in the barn ate a similar dinner where they stood or worked. Hashel opened a cloth on his lap and offered Ondromead a fist-sized dumpling. Ondromead accepted, taking a bite of the salty corn-flour crust and savoring the sweet and spicy flavors added to the venison.

“Sitting alone, I see.” Ondromead took another bite of the dumpling.

Hashel nodded and shrugged his shoulders.

“Understandable.” Ondromead looked around the barn at the people of the carnival. So many faces he recognized from the past two days and days far past. “We do not normally come to know people so well in our travels. Me especially. Yet, we both know what is coming. Some of these people, maybe all of them, will die this night. And we will go away to some other place, possibly never to see the survivors again. How can one share a meal with them knowing this?”

Hashel nodded and wiped at his nose with the back of his free hand. He looked up to Ondromead, eyes filled with a sadness not expressible in words, even if he spoke.

Ondromead stared back into the boy's eyes, a question coming again to his mind he'd spent the past two days ignoring. Before he noticed, the query slid past his tongue.

“Would you like to stay with these people, those that survive?” Ondromead swallowed, his stomach queasy. From the spiced meat or the emotion, he could not tell. “They are good people. And accustomed to taking others in. After tonight, you would be safe with them. You would make friends here. People to care for and be cared by. You might have something like a normal existence again. Not what you had before, but something more similar than you can ever hope to find at the

side of an old man, waking each day in strange places and forced to witness events both brutal and beautiful. I would not blame you if you choose...”

Ondromead found no further words. The thought of being without the boy left him nauseous and dizzy. Hashel looked at him, blinking back tears, face drawn tight, lower lip quivering. The boy shook his head and reached out to take Ondromead’s hand in his own. A clear enough response. Ondromead’s throat tightened against the unfamiliar emotions building in his chest. He blinked his own eyes.

“Good, then. We’ll say no more about it.”

Hashel nodded and leaned over to wrap his arms around him, the crumbs from his hands smearing across the old man’s cloak. Ondromead found himself unable to breathe properly. His heart seemed suspended between beats. He blinked his eyes again and wiped at them, the salt from the dumpling crust stinging his eyes. Or did they sting from another salt?

“Let us find a quiet spot in a corner of the hayloft again.” Proper breath returned to Ondromead’s lungs with the statement of purpose after the unstated agreement between himself and Hashel. “I have a small vial of scented oil in my satchel. You will smell like flowers and cinnamon rather than a fried dumpling.”

Hashel nodded his head with a smile and stood, taking Ondromead’s hand and helping him to his feet. Ondromead followed Hashel to the ladder and up to the loft. They found a spot near the hayloft door again, providing them a good view of the wagon-ringed carnival encampment in the street below. Ondromead uncorked the bottle of scented oil and applied it thoroughly to Hashel’s head, clothes, and hands, the bees buzzing once more in his mind. He ignored them and their import. Afterward, they sat by the hayloft door, watching the fires below. He noted the women, Palla and Ranna, standing near the entrance to the second barn. He did not see the yutan female or the roagg male. He wondered how the trap would proceed.

“Let us see how this snare unfolds. I fear it will be sprung sooner than we might expect.”

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THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

PALE STARS and lambent firelight. Deep shadows and still, night air. A silence where even crickets feared to intrude. Palla stood before the open door of the empty barn, both hands gripping a spear raised before her. Ranna, close beside her, mimicked her stance and the angle of her own weapon. They kept their eyes turned from each other and away from the single small fire in the circle of wagons between the barns, searching the darkness beyond the encampment for any signs of motion.

“Who’s in the woods, ya think?” Ranna spoke in a low tone.

“Yeth did not say.” Palla wondered this as well. Yeth had said she put a watch guard in the woods beyond the town to warn of the approach of the creatures, but she did not mention who. When Palla had asked, Yeth excused herself to attend to the details of completing her trap before the sun retreated behind the trees. Palla still had no idea who had fired the warning arrow the night before. Maybe the girl who ran into the woods. Maybe someone else. She had no time for hunting down that mystery. “One of the townsmen from the castle, I’d guess.”

“Ya think the outlanders’ trap will close up proper?” Ranna shifted her stance, moving closer to Palla.

“I would not have volunteered to be the bait if I thought the trap likely to fail.” Palla glanced at Ranna, seeing the fear contorting the lovely features of her face. “I wish you had not insisted on joining me.”

“Can’t let you be foolish alone.” Ranna straightened up, standing taller.

“But I have experience being bait.” Palla swallowed on a dry throat at the memory of that previous experience.

“More foolishness.” Ranna shook her head.

“Foolishness that worked.” Palla could not keep the mild tone of defensiveness out of her voice.

“Not the way you’d hoped.” Ranna frowned at her.

“True.” Palla sighed. Her last attempt to bait a trap had not gone as planned. But she had lived. Despite the plan or because of it, she still did not know. This plan, however, required much less on her part: merely standing motionless until the proper time and then running swiftly. She could do both well. Although standing in the open, waiting for those vicious creatures to pounce, left her desiring to begin the running well before they arrived.

She felt grateful to have Ranna at her side. She always wanted Ranna at her side, and to be at hers. She found the pull of Ranna irresistible and in some ways inexplicable. She had no familiarity with the feelings that clamored in her heart. Moods that only grew more insistent since that kiss the day they’d saved Pankee-Jao and her mother. A kiss that blossomed into further kisses and then caresses over the following days. And nights.

Palla blushed in the darkness and glanced at Ranna, noting the nervous motion of the woman's right leg. They made a curious pair. Two women dressed like men, acting like men, to stand bait for the benefit and safety of the carnival. And acting like men to each other's womanliness. She bit her lip against the thoughts and inner recriminations that came to her unbidden — judgmental voices from her past, of her mother and father and the local priests. The holy texts of Tot Gioth forbade her and Ranna's actions. Forbade their — her mind halted with the word that arose within. Whatever word she used, the faith of her childhood proscribed it. But what of her new faith? Did the Goddess prohibit such? Would the Goddess have saved them both in the pool that day if she did not approve of what they might become?

Palla realized it did not matter. If the Goddess condemned her and Ranna for their — *that word again* — she would defy the Goddess as she had spurned her old gods, as she had abandoned her family. She pursued the path her heart forged. That path of — *yet again that word*. Why did she struggle with that word? Especially now, standing as sacrificial lures to the monsters that hunted the night. Surely, in such a moment, that word — that terrifying word — should be spoken aloud.

“I...” Palla's voice came as a whisper too low for any but her own ears.

“Finally found a job I'd rather let menfolk tend to.” Ranna shifted her stance as she reframed her grip on the spear in her hands.

Palla swallowed again, her throat still dry. She did not know how to say the word she'd intended to speak. Not now. She tried other words.

“The men have jobs.” Palla risked a look over her shoulder and into the shadows of the open barn behind her. “Ours is easier.”

“I feel like the rabbit tied out to catch the wolf.” Ranna brushed a strand of long, dark hair from her eyes. The lock of hair fell across her face, and Palla resisted the urge to step closer, to reach her hand out and push it back behind Ranna's ear.

“At least this time, I have no rope around my waist, and I am glad of it.” Palla tried to concentrate on the moment they stood in, instead of considering the past. Her mind shifted from Ranna to the mention of the rope once tied around her midriff. She could still remember the dangle of her feet, the tug of the cordage under her arms. She hoped the plan they now stood as allurement for unfolded more propitiously than the one that filled her memory.

24 DAYS AGO

“HERETIC SLUT!”

“False goddess whore!”

“Hope they burn ya with the others!”

“Heretic harlot!”

“False goddess bitch!”

Caustic chants clamored down the stone walls of the castle to ring in Palla's ears where she dangled from a rope tied around her waist. The billowing cloth of her skirt wrapped around her

legs as she descended toward the slope of grass and rock at the base of the castle wall.

She glanced up at the carnival folk arrayed along the ramparts. Two men lowered the rope while women and men shouted curses at her. She had coached them on the phrases to use. The epitaphs to hurl. The insults needed to imply a loose virtue to have the proper effect.

When she'd heard the outlanders' plan to save the three remaining townspeople being tortured to death on the wagon outside the castle walls, she'd known what the situation required, even if they did not. As Leotin agreed to lowering a man over the side of the wall, she'd argued against it. The soldiers stationed outside the castle were more likely to cast arrows at a man lowered over the wall than approach to claim him for torment on their wagon. But a woman, especially one named by her own people as debauched, presented an enticement difficult to ignore. A man they might only want to torture, but a woman, helpless at the end of the rope, conjured visions of other forms of violence. Naturally, Palla insisted on volunteering to be that woman. To be the lure that set the trap.

In an effort to make herself a more appealing enticement, she wailed and cried, shaking her fists at the people above, tossing her long, red hair as she did so — a flag to call the bulls to the corral. She spun herself at the end of the rope around her waist and looked out toward the wagon and the soldiers she hoped to entrap. Four men stood in front of the wagon, the commander and three soldiers. The commander's horse lingered not far back; its reins tied to a stake in the ground. The horse did not like the smell, nor the moans of the men strapped to the wagon. It would rear and whinny if too close and bolt if left untethered.

Palla cried aloud again as she looked at the commander, trying to gauge his thoughts as he watched her lowered to the ground. She twisted on the rope, so the open neck of her blouse could catch the breeze, exposing the pale flesh of her breasts. The commander did not look away, but he said something as he gestured to his men. In response, the soldiers gave a salute, fists thumping against their chests, and started jogging the hundred paces across the low grass toward the castle. Toward Palla.

The rope jerked as her descent abruptly halted. Her feet swung several feet above the rocky ground. She looked toward the fast-approaching soldiers, seeing the leering looks on their faces even at such a distance. She swallowed hard.

“The Goddess will protect me!”

She shouted the words both as inducement to the soldiers headed toward her and as an entreaty to Moaratana, her protectress. The Goddess had sheltered her in the past, and Palla relied upon her to do so again. She trusted in other things as well. Her friends atop the castle wall, her own wit, and the dagger strapped to her thigh. Until the soldiers came close enough, she could only wait. Wait and pray. And be the best bait ever.

She stared at the soldiers running for her and wailed for the Goddess's protection. She did not need to summon an inner fiction, as she often did on stage, or feign the fear in her voice.

THE PRESENT

BEING BAIT required altogether too much waiting, Palla decided. She also considered that she had altogether too much experience being bait.

“May the Goddess protect us and guide our spears.”

Palla turned to Ranna’s voice.

“May the Goddess hurry these creatures along, so we can have this done with.” Palla raised her hand to wipe the sweat from her brow, knowing it did not arise from the nearby fire. Fear could soak one’s clothes as easily as the sun of a hot day.

“Yer sumpin’ special.” Ranna gave a snort. “Got a patient streak for everythin’ but danger.”

“I prefer my danger in efficiently managed doses.” Palla lowered her hand from her forehead and used it to shield her eyes from the fire as she turned toward the open doors of the barn behind them.

“You know yer lyin’ ta yerself and not me.” Ranna smiled in the flickering firelight.

“I’m lying to whoever will believe me.” Palla frowned. She might wish to pass through life-threatening danger quickly, but other less-profound adversity, she actually enjoyed. Quite possibly too much. In fact, she feared she might begin to enjoy the current danger if it did not progress soon. It occurred to her that Ranna possessed much the same trait, although tempered by a greater sense of self-preservation.

“You’re no better than I am, and you know it.” Palla turned back to Ranna and the open space between the wagons.

“Not better, true, but different.” Ranna once more reset her grip of the spear. “I volunteer myself fer danger, but you dream up dangerous things to volunteer fer.”

“Then we are made for one another.” Palla could not hide the grin that came with her statement and wondered at the strangeness of it and the conflicting, yet beautiful, feelings it caused to roil in her stomach, heart, and head. *That word* arose again as a whisper in her mind.

“True that, as well.” Ranna winked at Palla and opened her mouth as though to speak. Whatever she might have said suffocated in her throat and emerged a gurgled cry as an arrow landed in the middle of the space between the wagons not three paces away.

The signal from the watch guard in the woods. Palla and Ranna raised their spears.

Palla spun to follow the metal tip of Ranna’s spear as it flashed in the firelight. Her eyes caught a massive, shadowed shape descending through the darkness over a nearby wagon. One of the creatures landed not twenty paces away, its haunches flexing to sustain the impact of its considerable weight. The ground shook beneath Palla’s feet. The creature had not used the opening between the wagons prepared especially for its entrance. What manner of monster could be so cunning? She shook herself from the frozen moment of shock at the beast’s appearance.

“Run!”

Palla pivoted and ran, Ranna right beside her, knowing they had only moments to complete their mission as bait. Any hesitation could lead to death by the steel-sharp claws she’d seen digging into the ground by the light of the fire. They ran, the ground rumbling below them as the air behind filled with a roar that threatened to loosen her bowels. Palla and Ranna did not look back but dashed straight through the open barn door, into the near-blind darkness. They split in opposite

directions as they entered, Palla running to the left and Ranna to the right, staying clear of the hay-strewn floor in the middle. Palla turned to see the creature bound through the wide entrance, one clawed paw reaching out to her as it landed in the center of the space. A rush of air struck her face, and her hands shook as razor-talons sliced through the top of the spear shaft.

The creature did not land as expected. Its wide, padded feet found no solid purchase, the floor not being a floor. The monster's hind legs crashed through the thin and sparsely placed planks of wood, the camouflaging hay flying upward as the monster plunged into the deep pit in the center of the barn. As it fell, its weight and momentum impaled it on the spikes driven into the ground at the bottom of the hole.

Palla ignored the piercing wail of the monster in the pit as she slid to a stop near a pile of earth. She wrenched herself around, catching sight of Ranna on the opposite side of the hole where the beast writhed, its angered, guttural roar deafening in its intensity. She and Ranna ran back toward the open barn door. Several people stepped from the shadows to pull at ropes. As the lines drew taut, hay from the loft at the back of the barn showered the creature trapped in the pit. Palla knew even more hay lay piled at the bottom. As she and Ranna passed through the barn door, she saw a man pull at another rope, this one tipping a large sack of corn flour into the pit from the hayloft.

Palla stumbled away from the entrance and into Ranna's arms. Three men stepped forward to toss thin branches alight with flame into the cloud of corn dust. As the air exploded in flame, two more men thrust their shoulders against the barn doors. Clinging to Ranna, Palla watched the fire engulf the creature, its cries of pain becoming wails of agony. Then the barn doors closed, smoke roiling out underneath them.

"That went better than I expected." Palla tried to sound confident between panted breaths.

"Could have been yer neck." Ranna pointed with wide eyes to the shorn staff that had once been Palla's spear.

"As I said, better than expected." Palla looked up as a clangorous roar from beyond the circled wagons called in response to the thrashing cries within the burning barn. She turned from the flames eating through the seams between the wooden planks of the barn walls to the opening between the wagons, the gap intended to lure the creatures into their ambush. One more trap to spring.

"Come." Palla took Ranna's hand, a grin escaping to her face. "We need to be bait once more."

"You're enjoying this." Ranna shook her head as she followed Palla to the breach between the wagons.

"Don't be ridiculous." Palla tried to stifle the grin, but it only grew. "Only a fool would be excited by this."

"Just what I said." Ranna sighed in resignation.

Palla wanted to believe Ranna wrong, but knew she spoke the truth. She did enjoy this. And she knew she enjoyed it a little too much. Just as she'd enjoyed being bait back at the castle. At least until things went so badly wrong.

24 DAYS AGO

THREE PAIRS of worn leather boots bound across dry grass. Cries of feminine fear bounced from stone castle walls. A hawk drifted lazily in the sky, tilting to catch the currents of the air.

Palla marveled at the hawk in the sky as she screamed. How did it stay aloft so long on a single beating of its wings? In turn, she imagined it wondering how she could scream for so long on a single breath. Time seemed elastic — stretched thin into a warped version of reality — as she waited for the three soldiers to reach her. Not to reach her, she knew, but to cross the invisible mark of the field beyond the castle that put them in the proper range.

The hungry-eyed men looked close enough to her, and for a panicked moment, she feared the plan would fail and she'd taken captive by the openly lecherous soldiers. She patted the hilt of the dagger strapped to her thigh to reassure herself. She took a deep breath with which to fill her lungs for the next ear-numbing scream, but it fell still in her throat. Had she been screaming, she would not have heard the sound — that distinctive cutting of the wind. The slicing sound fletching made as a flock of arrows passed through the air.

The men rushing toward her stumbled to a stop, eyes blinking, trying to comprehend the arrow shafts suddenly sprouting from their chests — thistle briars tumbling backward and rolling to the ground. Palla looked from the soldiers to their commander near the wagon. His death mattered most. To the plan and to Palla's sense of justice. She watched as the man limped toward his horse. He stumbled and fell to the ground, an arrow piercing his neck from left to right at the spine. He collapsed, twitching. Palla looked up to the castle, seeing several men and women with bows along the castle wall. She glanced to the nearest tower and saw Yeth lower her own bow. The yutan nodded to Palla.

She had little time to admire the impressive accuracy of Yeth's archery. The rope holding her shook, and she dropped the remaining distance to the ground from where she'd hung. She landed firm on her feet, cushioning the impact by bending at her knees. She reached back and unclipped the rope dangling down the castle wall from the much smaller one wrapped around her waist. The carnival troupe used a similar harness to fly her from the rafters of barns and the balconies of castles when playing the Angel of Light in the *Saga of the Fallen Lands*. She continued to unwrap her deception by pulling at the skirt around her waist. The thin stitches holding it in place ripped, and she cast it aside, revealing a pair of cotton britches. She pulled the dagger from the sheath at her thigh and ran up the side what used to be the castle's siege pit, which now sloped gently away from the stone walls. A part of her mind noted that her father would never let such a vital defensive measure fall into disrepair. She felt thankful the now dead castle tahn had not been so diligent as she crested the top of the incline and dashed for the wagon across the field, her boots digging into the brittle grass.

She passed the three soldiers who had intended to take her captive. They did not moan and did not move, and she did not feel sorrow for them. She might have once. But not after what she'd seen them do to the townsmen tied to the wagon. Time warped around her again as she ran, each footfall seeming to take minutes, each breath an hour. She needed to reach the wagon and

accomplish her task before the soldiers encamped at the nearby village noticed something wrong at the castle. She did not have long.

When she finally made it to the wagon, she paused, bending over and breathing deep to catch her wind. Bent down, she saw the commander of the army staring at her, his eyes still blinking, his mouth trying to move. He lived. The arrow driven through his spine held him from movement, but he lived. She wondered how long he could survive in that miserable state and found herself hoping it proved be a very long and painful time.

She looked up at the wagon to see the three townsmen, their eyes watching her, their tongues silent. Thick ropes bound them each to posts nailed into the bed of the wagon. Two more posts stood beside them, bodies rotting at their wooden bases, one burned, one with a gash in its abdomen. One of the men moaned and Palla woke from the momentary horror-induced stupor that held her mind.

She stood up, sheathed the dagger, and dashed over to the commander's horse, unleashing it from the metal stake in the ground and leading it to the wagon. The horse did not like the smell of the bound men, and she needed to tug at the reins with all her strength to lead it into place between the wooden harness shafts. The horse reared up as she made to grab the harness collar. A commander's steed, it likely never pulled a wagon, much less one reeking of blood, urine, feces, and charred flesh. Palla glanced back at the army encampment near the town and then edged toward the horse once more with the harness. Again, it reared back and neighed loudly at her. Without thinking, she lowered the harness in her left hand and reached up to swing her right arm in a wide arc, smacking the horse in the side of the head. The horse fell still, shocked by the sudden violence. It blinked and eyed Palla cautiously.

"That's enough of that." Palla shook her hand, hoping she hadn't broken anything on the horse's bony head. "We have much to do and little time." She placed the harness collar over the motionless horse's head.

She patted the beast's neck briefly before climbing into the driver's seat of the wagon. She flicked the reins, urging the horse into motion, steering the wagon back toward the castle. She looked toward the army camp again. A man stood staring at her, a hand raised to shield his eyes from the sun. He lowered his arm and turned to shout at his comrades.

"Yah." Palla slapped the reins against the horse's back. The wagon rocked unsteadily as it rolled over the rocky field of grass before the castle. She looked back to the men tied to the posts nailed into the wagon bed. The posts wavered, and the men groaned. She could not risk racing the wagon to the castle for fear the posts would break free and tumble to the ground with the men still attached.

"Quickly, horse, but not too quickly."

Along the castle wall, she saw three additional ropes with harness knots already lowered to the ground. Atop the ramparts, Yeth and Tarak stood with several of the militia, townspeople, pilgrims, and carnival folk, each holding a bow with a nocked arrow.

The wagon rocked wildly as it rolled over the uneven field, the wheels seeming to find every gopher hole and divot in the soil. It took an interminably long time to reach the castle — longer

even than her run to the wagon minutes earlier. She looked over her shoulder, past the terrified men lashed to the wagon posts, spotting Tanshen soldiers mounting horses.

She pulled back on the reins to slow the horse as the wagon neared the castle wall. The ground sloped upward near the castle and she pulled the wagon as close as she dared, fearing it might tip over at any second. She spared a glance to the soldiers approaching on horseback. Hopefully, they rushed to their wounded commander and no further.

Slipping the dagger from the sheath at her thigh, she climbed from the driving bench into the bed of the wagon where she sliced the bonds of the closest man.

“The ropes!” Palla shouted to the man. “Get to the ropes.”

“Thank ya, miss! Thank ya, miss!”

The first man she freed rolled from the wagon bed and fell to the ground, stumbling toward the wall and one of the ropes.

“Hurry, mith!” The second man spoke through a largely toothless and bloody mouth as he stared wide-eyed at the approaching soldiers.

“I am well aware of the need for alacrity.” Palla cut through the last rope binding the man and helped him off the wagon, fearing he might not be able to stand. “Run now. The ropes.”

She turned to the third man and noticed for the first time how still he remained while lashed to the post. How his eyes, though open, did not move, did not blink. She did not know when he’d died, but she knew his body held no more life in it than the other two corpses still bound to the posts of the wagon. She sighed. One dead. Two alive. Better than none. She heard the cries of the soldiers and saw them standing beside their fallen commander. It would be four dead in the wagon if she did not hasten back up the wall.

Palla jumped from the wagon to the grass and slapped the horse’s flank.

“Run now. Run.”

The horse needed little more encouragement and dashed ahead, across the field at the side of the castle, the wagon wobbling and wavering over irregular ground. She ran for the wall, ignoring the horse and thoughts of what would happen to the bodies of the dead townsmen on the wagon.

The sound of horse hooves pounding the ground in number pulled Palla’s attention as she reached the rope still waiting for her. At least ten soldiers raced toward the castle. She did not pause to count them accurately.

“Hurry!”

As Palla clipped the metal hook at the end of the rope she’d used to descend along the castle wall to the harness still around her waist, she looked up to see that Tarak had abandoned his bow to pull her skyward. She gave a tug to the rope to signal her readiness. A moment later, the rope around her middle dug into stomach as her feet lifted from the ground. A wave of arrows flew overhead toward the approaching men. None of the arrows struck more than open ground, but they slowed the soldiers.

“Help!”

Beside and above her, one of the two men she’d rescued dangled from his rope. Somehow, the harness had slipped up too far, and he’d been too weak to keep his arms from going over his

head, which allowed his torso to slide from the noose. Now he clung to the loop of the rope with just his forearms.

“Tarak! Pull him!” Palla shouted as she pointed to the man flailing at the end of the rope.

Her ascent halted as Tarak passed Palla’s rope to three castle men and went to help haul the endangered man to safety. The first man clambered to the parapet atop the wall, helpful hands tugging him through the crenellations. Tarak took over pulling the second man up, raising him swiftly.

“Quick. I can’t hold...”

The second man’s words became a scream as he fell, bumping against the wall as he tumbled to the ground. He struck the earth with a stomach-churning crunch. Palla looked up to those holding her rope motionless in surprise.

“Lower me down!” Palla called.

She saw the man lying broken in the rocky ground, a leg twisted at an unnatural angle, blood seeping into the grass near his head. His eyes stared back at her. The second pair of sightless eyes she’d seen in just minutes. She noticed the soldiers on horseback edging closer to the castle as the rope tugged against her midriff once more. She continued to stare at the dead and broken man beneath her as her friends and companions pulled her to safety.

One.

They had saved only one. One dead from torture. One burned to death. One dead from exhaustion. One dead from ill luck and poor chance. And one alive. It reminded her of Yang-Nega, the tahneff of the castle, brother to the new tahn, who Palla had saved from taking her own life. The poor girl had been killed by a stray arrow a few days into the siege of the castle by the Tanshen Army. Another senseless death she’d tried to stop. There were so many in her life now.

As Ranna grabbed her and yanked her to safety over the top of the wall, Palla saw the man she’d rescued huddled between two women offering him water and a bite of dinbao. The man sobbed as he thanked them. His tear-filled eyes found hers and he smiled.

“Thank ya. Thank ya, miss. I owes ya my life.”

One life. Not what they’d planned. Not what she’d hoped for. But worth the risk all the same.

THE PRESENT

THE ROAR of flames filled the night air, smoke wafting upward and outward from the blazing barn. Palla stood near Ranna and three men, one a former militia man turned pilgrim, sword in hand; one the carnival’s flame eater, a wood axe clutched tight; and the former townsman she’d saved from torture outside the castle walls, his hands outstretched as he brandished a spear. Palla had discarded her severed spear for a new one that weighed heavy in her hands. She preferred the heft and balance of a sword, but as Yeth had pointed out, a spear kept your enemy at a greater distance. Palla had to admit to the thrill of being in danger for her life, but she had no desire to have one of those creatures any closer than necessary.

Killing the last of the monsters fell to Yeth and Tarak. Hopefully. The two outlanders hid

beneath the canvas covers of two nearby wagons, one on either side of the vehicles stationed in a ring between the two barns. Palla remembered Yeth's display of her power with The Sight the prior day. She understood why the yutan had kept her power a secret — the townspeople and castle folk might have cast her out or attacked her. But her powers would have been extremely helpful in repelling first the militia and then the army that set siege to the castle. Yeth claimed not to possess great power in The Sight. Palla hoped what power she held proved strong enough to the task.

An arrow sank into the dirt a few paces from where she stood. The watch guard's signal again.

"The beast is close." Palla spun around, trying to see between the wagons, hoping to locate the creature.

To her right, near the gap opened to entice the monsters, a wagon suddenly skidded away into the darkness, its wheels creaking loudly as it moved sideways. It stopped a moment later, small clouds of dust rising around the axles.

"Didn't expect that." Ranna thrust her spear before her as she approached the place where the wagon had been.

"The creature is widening the circle. Leaving more room to attack." Palla followed Ranna, the three men close behind them.

The wooden frame of another wagon groaned as the creature pulled it sideways away from the others. Palla caught a glimpse of razored spines in the light of the burning barn as the wagon came to a halt. She and Ranna edged closer to the next wagon in the line. Heart banging in her chest, blood thudding in her ears, Palla found she could not remember in which wagons Yeth and Tarak hid. As the next wagon in the circle started to recede with a groan of wheels pulled sideways, a roar arose as the canvas covering the rear cargo bed flipped into the air and Tarak leapt through the darkness, both axes raised above his head.

Palla rushed around the wagon to see a massive, razor-ribbed cat-creature batting away Tarak's axes with its taloned paws. She did not wait for Ranna or the men to access a plan of attack. She ran forward and thrust her spear into the creature's side, pushing past the sharp spines to press into its thick hide. The creature swung a paw in her direction. Ranna shoved her own spear at the monster's paw, diverting it slightly as Palla threw herself to the ground.

She rolled to her feet and quickly stood, now weaponless, her spear still sticking from the creature's side like another of its bony quills. The monster roared and reared, gathering itself on its haunches to pounce at Tarak. But it did not pounce. It did not move. It roared in rage, held immobile.

Palla saw Yeth standing beside her, hands held at arm's length, her face a mask of concentration that seemed oddly calm given the circumstances.

"Quickly, Tarak! I cannot hold it long." Yeth stepped closer, clenching her open hands into fists as the creature shook to break her hold.

Tarak's roar matched the creature's as he brought both axes down at once upon its wide skull. Even the razored monster could not withstand the force of the roagg's powerful arms wielding twin axes. The blades sank into its skull, and it fell silent. For a moment longer, it held its position.

Then Yeth lowered her arms, and the monster collapsed to the ground, its quills clattering — bone wind chimes in a night breeze.

The thundering of the fire still consuming the barn dominated the silence that followed the creature's death. Palla looked to Ranna, who gave her a grim smile, to Yeth, who seemed quietly amazed by her use of The Sight, and to Tarak, who stood, head bowed before the creature, his lips moving in what might have been a voiceless prayer.

A cheer broke the silence. The men beside Palla raised their fists and yelled in triumph. A part of her found it annoying, as none of the three men had contributed to the creature's death. Although ineffectual, at least she had stabbed the monster with her spear.

The cheers of the men brought more vocal celebrations. The doors of the second barn opened, and people flooded into the space between the wagons and out beyond them into the street. Leotin approached her from the head of the crowd. He'd been in the barn with the others. He had tried to join them, but Palla convinced him that only one person could lead the carnival to safety in Punderra, and as much as she found it annoying, that person wasn't her.

"It's over," Palla said. "We're safe."

"We're never safe for long." Leotin stared at the dead monster, his face sad. "They were made to kill, but they are beautiful in a way."

"Beautiful things don't try to rip yer innards from yer belly." Ranna shook her head and stood closer to Palla.

Palla started to say something to bridge the gap between Leotin and Ranna's sentiments, but an arrow landed hard in the ground not two paces away, stilling her mind. The arrow. The watch guard in the woods. It could only mean one thing. They had missed one. A fourth monster hunted the carnival.

"We must..."

The cries of people near the open barn drowned her words in her own ears. She saw a blur of motion by the light of the campfire and the burning barn. A shape plowed through the crowd of people still bunched together, bodies tossed in the air and crumpled beneath the legs of the final monster.

Palla followed the path of the creature with her eyes as it disappeared into the shadows. Why had it not shown itself? How had they missed it? It attacked again in the same manner, coursing through the scattering crowd of humans — a spiked boulder crushing helpless flowers before its path.

She got a good look at it and realized why it only attacked now. Twice the size of the other three creatures, this one moved with a greater cunning and experience. The other three had been juveniles. This was their mother, intent on avenging her dead cubs.

The Carnival story arena continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*.

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

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

SCREAMS OF pain. Wails of terror. Howls for help. Cries for loved ones.

“You should not witness this.”

Hashel ignored the old man’s voice and did not look away.

He stood at the edge of the hayloft door of the barn. Ondromead stood beside him as they stared out at the carnage. People rushed in retreat to the safety of the barn beneath them. A few clambered up the ladder to the supposed security of the hayloft. In the street below, in the space between the wagons and the barn that raged in flames, people scattered in panic. Many lay wounded. Others tried to pull the injured into the barn. A few crawled beneath wagons. Several ran into the darkness. Others gathered in clumps, armed with weapons, ready to fight.

Hashel recognized two such women. Palla and Ranna. They waved people into the barn as they brandished their spears, scanning the shadows beyond the flames of the other burning barn and the campfires. He hoped they survived until morning. That this night did not end like the first night. Maybe Ondromead was right. Maybe he should not witness this. Seeing people he knew felled by that vicious creature, that kellitsara, would be more painful than he could bear. He liked Palla. She had been kind to him. He did not want to see her die.

As Hashel turned away, one of the nearby wagons lifted into the air and crashed to the ground in a cloud of splintered wood. The kellitsara raced forward from where the wagon once stood, charging for Palla, Ranna, and the open door of the barn.

Hashel reached out and grasped Ondromead’s hand as Palla and Ranna leapt to opposite sides and thrust their spears forward.

“Yeth! Tarak!” Palla called out.

The spears sank into either side of the creature’s quill-ribbed neck as men below pulled the doors of the barn shut. The kellitsara lashed out at Palla and she dove to the ground, the tips of its claws raking across her arm. She screamed, and the creature made to pounce but then reared back, twisting behind to bite the air near its rear foot.

Hashel blinked in surprise as a small, furred creature pulled a slender sword from the kellitsara’s rear paw and rolled away from its massive jaws. Hashel had seen wyrins once with Ondromead in the Wood Realm and wondered how one appeared now in a small town the middle of the Tanshen Dominion to help Palla at just that moment.

The kellitsara whirled and leapt back into the darkness around the side of the barn as Yeth and Tarak raced past a wagon and into the open space.

“You are alive.” Palla stood to her feet with Ranna’s assistance. She stared at the wyrin.

“Yes, yes. For now.” The wyrin dusted itself off as Tarak — the roagg — and Yeth — the yutan — ran up to them.

“How can that be?” Ranna examined Palla’s bleeding arm and shook her head at the wyrin.

“Yeth,” the wyrin said.

“The Sight!” Palla said.

“There is no time to explain,” the yutan said.

“The creature must be stopped before it can kill more.” The roagg stared into the darkness.

“It is too large for me to hold it with The Sight,” the yutan said. “We will need another plan.”

Hashel wondered if they could kill the kellitsara. They needed an advantage. He wished he could coat them all in oil to hide their scent from the creature and then they could...

The oil.

An advantage.

Yes. He could do that.

Ondromead would not like it, but he could do that.

But he needed to be swift.

He disengaged his fingers from Ondromead’s hand. The old man still stared out at the massacre. Hashel backed away and climbed down the ladder. Ondromead turned, a surprised look on his face.

“Hashel!” Ondromead called out.

Hashel shrugged his shoulders at the old man and hurried down the ladder. He had little time. He heard screams rising again outside the barn and the roar of the kellitsara attacking. Four men braced the barn doors, holding them closed. He needed to get outside.

“Hashel?”

He looked up to see Ondromead standing at the edge of the hayloft. He wished he could explain. He felt guilty knowing he defied Ondromead’s wishes and the rules that governed him. But Hashel didn’t need to live by those rules. At least not all of them. He could intervene. But to do so, he needed to get out of the barn.

People cowered in clumps around the interior of the barn, their faces illuminated by a single lamp hung from a support post. Hashel spotted what he needed along the back wall — a break in the wooden slats at the ground. A gap opened by weather and time. Big enough for a small boy to squeeze through. Hashel threaded his way between the people in the barn and pressed his head through the hole in the wall, twisting his shoulders to follow. He pulled himself out into the star-filled night. Shouts came from the front of the barn near the wagons. As he ran toward the voices, a great cracking sound filled the air, followed by screams, and the sudden splintered explosion of the boards along the side of the barn behind him — right where he’d stood.

The kellitsara bounded out of the shattered wall of the barn and into the shadows between the houses across the street. From the wails within the barn, Hashel assumed several people were wounded or worse by the creature’s violent attack. With its size and razored quills, it did not need to bite or slash to cause life-threatening damage. It could run through the huddled people of the carnival until they all died from being crushed or sliced by its spines.

Hashel shook his body to still the fear gripping his chest and forced his feet back into motion. He found himself glad he no longer screamed. He felt the urge but knew silence protected him better. Silence and swiftness. He reached the front of the barn as Palla, Ranna, and the small wyrin

ran around the corner.

“Hashel!” Surprise and fear filled Palla’s voice. “What are you doing out here? It’s not safe!”

“Not safe nowheres.” Ranna looked at the side of the barn.

Hashel had little time to convey without words the thinking that might give them the advantage they needed to defeat the creature. He stepped forward and pointed along the street toward where a wagon sat in the shadows of a tree outside a small brick house.

“What?” Palla stepped beside Hashel and stared down the street.

The wyrin sniffed the air in the direction of the wagon.

“Good little human,” the wyrin said as it dashed off toward the wagon.

“Shifhuul!” Palla called after the wyrin.

“Come, come. Boy right.” The wyrin ran for the wagon, and Hashel sprinted after him.

“Madness!” Ranna’s voice reached Hashel’s ears, but he ignored it as he hurried toward the wagon, listening for any approach of the creature.

The wyrin arrived at the wagon first and pulled back the tarp covering the cargo bed. As Hashel skidded to a stop, the wyrin smiled at him.

“Good boy.” The wyrin, Shifhuul, reached into the wagon bed as Palla and Ranna ran to join them.

“What is it?” Palla asked

“Oil.” Shifhuul held a clay jar aloft.

“Tamak-seed oil by the smell.” Ranna reached up to take the jar from the wyrin with a grin. “Best lamp oil there is.”

“That is a very good idea.” Palla smiled. “Thank you, Hashel. This may win us our lives.”

They unloaded the jars of tamak-seed oil from the wagon and hurried back toward the barns, flames still rising from the one, screams emanating from the other. Hashel and the wyrin each carried two jars, and the women four apiece. Hashel hoped it proved enough for the task.

“Yeth!” Shifhuul called out to the yutan and the roagg as they stepped into the street near the barns.

Yeth raised her hands toward them as Tarak yelled.

“Behind you!”

Hashel spun in unison with the women and the wyrin to see the kellitsara fifteen paces behind them making ready to pounce. He had only a moment to note that the beast did not attack the same way every time. A cunning monster. Fear over-flooded all other thoughts as the kellitsara launched itself through the air. He wanted to move, wanted to throw the clay jar of reeking oil to the ground and dive away, but his legs and arms remained immobilized by the terror. The creature’s roar reverberated in his chest. Its glistening teeth held his eyes. He did not blink, did not look away, and so saw with amazed clarity the oddity of the creature twisting in midair and tumbling to the side, far from himself and his companions.

It took him a moment to understand what he’d witnessed. The yutan. The Sight. She’d pushed the creature away from its intended victims at the last moment. Now the kellitsara rolled to its feet once more, shaking its enormous head in confusion, staring right at Hashel, its eyes filled with

rage and the lust for blood and death.

“Yeth! The jars! Oil!” Shifhuul yelled at the yutan as he cast one of the clay jars toward the kellitsara.

The creature batted at the jar, intending to deflect it away, but the clay shattered with the impact, oil soaking the monster’s taloned paw. Palla and Ranna followed the wyrin’s example, each tossing a clay jar at the creature. It dodged one, but the other struck and shattered on its head. Hashel did not possess the strength to hit the creature with one of the two clay jars he held. As he tried to think of what to do with them, how to get their contents to cover the kellitsara, the jars lifted from his hands and flew with surprising speed to smash along the creature’s haunches. The jars in the hands of the women and the wyrin did the same. Yeth and The Sight again.

The creature roared and lunged at them. As its paws left the ground, flames arose to encompass its girth, fire ringing its head and chest and legs. The kellitsara tumbled once more to the side, rolling and roaring in confusion and pain. Tarak the roagg rushed past Hashel and the others to swing his twin axes at the creature’s skull. The kellitsara moved at the last moment, raising a foreleg to defend itself even as it turned and smashed the roagg with its shoulder. One of the axes sank into the creature’s right leg as the roagg bounced from the impact of the spine-covered shoulder and fell to the ground. The monster wailed again, pawing at the flames enshrouding it as it raced into the darkness between two houses, past a stand of trees, and across an open field of stubbled corn stalks. Hashel watched the kellitsara flee into the night, the pace of its departure marked by the flames still clinging to it, and those left behind in its passing as small ground fires spread across the dried stalks of the field.

“Are you injured?”

Hashel turned to the voice of the yutan, where she bent beside the roagg lying on the hard-packed dirt of the lane.

“Wounded but not deathly so.” Tarak poked at one of several lacerations oozing blood across his furred chest. “I will be fine. More than can be said for many of the others.”

“You will live.” Yeth stood. “There are many to tend to who may not.”

“Thank you for saving us,” Palla said as she and Yeth helped Tarak to his feet.

“I thought we were dead,” Ranna said. “Again.”

“Thank you for finding the lamp oil,” Yeth said.

“That was Hashel.” Palla gestured toward Hashel as they all headed back toward the barns.

“Well done, child.” Yeth smiled at him. She seemed impossibly tall until he noted the roagg towering above her.

“Smart man-child,” Shifhuul said. “Keep him with carnival.”

“He has earned a place in the carnival if he wants it,” Palla said.

“Leotin won’t argue that fact,” Ranna added.

Hashel said nothing because he never said anything, but he thought about the notion of staying with the carnival as they walked toward to the barn. Did their continued nights in the town mean that Ondromead and he might be able to remain with these people? He thought about his conversation with the old man earlier that night. He could be safe with these folks. And he would

have friends. And they would accept him for who he was without demanding to know more than he wished to tell if he one day spoke again. But none of that mattered. He never wished to leave Ondromead's side, regardless where he traveled to.

"Hashel!"

Thoughts of his destiny fled his mind with surprising swiftness as Ondromead stepped from behind one of the wagons still arrayed near the barns. The old man bent down and opened his arms. Hashel ran into the embrace, burying his face in the folds of the old man's robes.

"He saved us, your young Hashel."

Hashel pulled away from Ondromead at the sound of Ranna's voice.

"Did he now?" Leotin stood nearby, his face covered in soot, his hands covered in blood. He did not appear injured, but his eyes carried a weariness that spoke of seeing death. Hashel recognized that look for feeling it himself so many times. "There is much to do. We need to tend the wounded, bury the dead, and leave this place with first light. But you two are welcome to follow us as far and as long as you like."

"Thank you," Ondromead said. "We will consider it."

Hashel wondered if Ondromead said this to avoid discussion on the topic or if he meant it. He had no time to wonder at it longer.

"Yeth! Here! Yeth!"

Hashel followed the sound of Palla's voice to see her kneeling beside a man he barely recognized for all the blood of his many open wounds. The man lay lifeless, his inner flesh pulled out of his stomach to cover his legs. Hashel remembered the man's name as Jhanal, a friend of Palla and Ranna's.

Ranna and Yeth ran to the fallen man and the small crowd that huddled around him. Hashel took Ondromead's hand and walked toward them. The old man often spoke of the sensation he experienced when he needed to witness an event. Something stirred in Hashel — the vibrating hum of a thousand glow-flies held captive in a jar. He needed to be present for what happened next.

"Can you save him?" Palla pleaded as she wiped the blood from Jhanal's motionless face.

"He is dead." Yeth knelt beside the man and placed her hand on his chest. "Dead and damaged far beyond my ability with The Sight." The yutan shook her head. "Even my sight master could not have risen a man after these wounds. I am sorry."

Palla took Ranna in her arms and the two women wept beside their fallen friend. Hashel understood their pain. The sudden death of a loved one in violence could not be understood, could not be grasped. It broke the bonds of all that composed normal life, leaving only a black emptiness that sucked and gnawed until it seemed to drain the essence of life from the living.

"Why?" Palla sobbed and wiped at her nose with the sleeve of her blouse as she held Ranna's hand. "Why did the Goddess save us and not save Jhanal?"

"I don't know." Ranna fingered the tears from her cheeks. "What worth are we beside him what gave us so much?"

Hashel felt the humming thrill of the insects gather strength as Yeth raised her head and placed

her hands on the shoulders of Palla and Ranna. He did not know what event the women spoke of, but it held import for Yeth as well as themselves.

“I have created a debt to you both through my omission.” Yeth shook her head as she spoke. “I acted in haste and anger and held myself in secret when I should have spoken the truth.”

“What debt? What truth?” Palla blinked back more tears.

“Your goddess did not save you that day in the forest at the pond.” Yeth swallowed and took a deep breath before continuing. Palla and Ranna held silent and still. “I saved you that day. With The Sight. I should have told you. I should have trusted you. I should not have allowed you to believe your faith in your goddess to be fulfilled. I deceived you even as I meant to keep you safe. I speak now to correct my error. I do not ask your forgiveness. My people do not speak such words. I ask for the opportunity to make amends for my betrayal of our friendship. I will await your response as you see fit to give. For now, I must attend the wounded. My powers are not great, but there are many here I can save tonight.”

Yeth bowed to the stunned Palla and Ranna and walked to where a group of women attended several of the fallen carnival members. Palla and Ranna turned to one another but said nothing.

“Hmm.”

Hashel saw the wyrin shake his head and walk away.

“Come.” Ondromead tugged at his hand. “They must grieve and more.”

Hashel followed Ondromead away from the others. As they walked, he saw Tarak helping to lift the wounded into a wagon bed. Men pulled the other wagons away from the burning barn to safety. People ignored the flaming structure and made no attempt to save it. A wise course considering the nature of the flesh that cooked within it.

“You frighten me.” Ondromead placed his hand on the back of Hashel’s neck. Hashel sighed, releasing the anxiety he’d held for the past several days. The creatures were dead or run off, and he and Ondromead were still together. He could not leave the old man. No more than he could have left his mother and father to live with other family, no matter how pleasant they might be. He did not know how or when, but Ondromead had become his family at some point. Now they were bound, invisible ties clasping them together.

“You frighten me with your willingness to risk your life for others.” Ondromead’s voice became a near whisper. “You frighten me more that you know when to listen and what to witness almost as well as I do. I do not know what you will become if you stay with me. I do not know what I will become if we remain together. I know what I will feel if you leave. Are you certain you do not want to stay with these people instead?”

Hashel nodded his head.

“That is good.” Ondromead smiled. “I would rather be frightened than sad.”

Hashel agreed. He hadn’t been safe in a long time. The carnival could not truly keep him safe, and neither could Ondromead. His actions kept him safe. Thinking quick. Acting fast. Like the oil in the wagon. Like the people nearly set on fire in the town so long ago. Like pretending to be dead when the rock hit his head that night....

He ignored that thought and willed its companion memories back to where he kept them

buried. Some remembrances did not need to be considered. Some memories made their presence known at all times, filling in the spaces between words and sights and sounds — a chorus constantly singing beneath the action on the stage.

“Look.” Ondromead pointed to where the wyrin, Shifhuul, led the young girl and dog they’d seen two days before into the encampment. “I wonder what that will mean one day.”

Hashel wondered as well but blinked his eyes, wavering on his feet, pondering instead the hour.

“We should find a place to lie down.” Ondromead patted his shoulder. “We are both tired and we are both, I imagine, curious to know if we will wake again here in this place, or whether the world will return to the way it was for so very long.”

Hashel nodded his agreement. He did feel tired. Achingly so. The excitement of the preceding minutes drained him all out of proportion to the actual actions he’d taken — a molted husk of snakeskin left behind as the creature itself moved on. As Ondromead helped him into the back of the wagon and curled up beside him, he wondered what would become of the wounded creature. Would the kellitsara die from its flame-founded wounds? Or would it recover to stalk and kill some other terror-filled town? And what of Palla and Ranna and Yeth? Or the roagg Tarak and the wyrin Shifhuul? And Leotin, the leader of the carnival?

As slumber pulled his mind to dreams, he hoped he and Ondromead woke once more in the carnival camp, or at the very least that their paths one day crossed again.

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THE THRONE



DJU-TESHA

“WE MUST have more troops.”

“And troops must be paid wages.”

“Payment can be delayed to the conscripted until after the war.”

“Which is a savings regarding those who do not live that long.”

Morning light from three tall, slender windows slashed at an angle across the long, poda-wood table at the center of the High Council chamber. Dju-Tesha watched the ministers of the dominion arguing the proper path of governance in war. She listened as well, but she remembered her father’s words from long ago, that one could learn as much from watching a man while he spoke as from hearing him.

“Even without wages, there is the matter of paying for weapons and food and supplies and wagons and horses to pull the wagons.” Councilor and treasurer Tapan-Lu leaned forward in his chair, the gray-black hair of his beard dipping into the beam of light crossing the table. Dju-Tesha noted the placement of his hands on the table, the tension in his arms, and the twitching of his wide, ethnic, tollith nose.

“I am aware of the necessities required in mounting a war.” Tigan Von-Lan matched the posture of Councilor Tapan-Lu, his jaw tight as he spoke. Handsome, tall, and the youngest of the dominion tigans, the man radiated arrogance with every gesture of his bearing. Dju-Tesha’s husband, Rhog-Kan, had installed the tigan on the council at his departure to the south to ensure the representation of the army in all council discussions. While ostensibly a position of honor, she suspected her husband did not trust the young tigan on the battlefield. No doubt, the man understood this and considered his presence in the room an insult and embarrassment. He certainly acted as such.

“Of course, you are, tigan, but are you aware of the necessities involved in paying for one?” Treasurer Tapan-Lu tilted his head as though speaking to a small child. He did not like Tigan Von-Lan for personal reasons Dju-Tesha could only guess at.

“There must be new taxes to accommodate the costs.” Councilor Kuzee-Fan, a thin, balding man in his later years, shook his head. He represented the tahns of the north. Dju-Tesha saw how the fingers of the man’s right hand spasmed with the word “taxes.” Tahns never liked increases in taxes, especially those that might fall upon their personal estates.

“I do not care about taxes, or how you coin-counters pay for it; we must have more men!” Tigan Von-Lan slapped the table with an open palm.

“You may not care about the taxes, but I assure you the people of this dominion will.” Treasurer Tapan-Lu looked around the table for support from his fellow ministers.

“Especially those already taxed into destitution.” Councilor Kuzee-Fan nodded gravely to Treasurer Tapan-Lu.

“The taxes on your estates have hardly pushed you into poverty.” Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee spoke for the first time. Dju-Tesha made note of his relaxed demeanor as he sat with his hands clasped gently together on the edge of the table. He was the only man in the room she trusted. With the exception of the tigan, she had known these men for years, watching as they advised her father, then her brothers. They performed their duties well enough, but they always put their own interests before those of the dominion and the throne. Even the treasurer, Tapan-Lu, did not earn her trust. The size and number of his residences spoke of his love of coin taking precedence over his love of the dominion.

“The taxes have been felt, nonetheless.” Councilor Kuzee-Fan frowned. “It is unprecedented that estates be taxed in such severe measure. What about raising the merchant taxes? Or increasing the tax on imported goods?”

“Trade with Atheton has slowed to a near stop due to the outbreak of Living Death within their borders, and the blockade of our western ports by the so-called Alliance threatens our coffers as well as our sovereignty.” Councilor Yang-Vang sat up straight in his chair and widened his chest. Dju-Tesha suspected the gesture compensated for the rotund man’s limited height. His seat on the council supposedly spoke for the concerns of the dominion’s merchants and farmers. She knew his voice at the table actually represented the interests of those merchants and farmers wealthy enough to contribute to the maintenance of his lavish and expansive estate. She watched him place his palms on his over-round belly. “We cannot afford for that trade to come to a halt because of new taxes on the passage of goods.”

“Then taxes at the docks on goods from Juparti or Punderra or Naevao.” Tigan Von-Lan raised his hands in exasperation.

“And risk them turning our goods away or taxing them in return?” Treasurer Tapan-Lu shook his head in disapproval.

“Then it is the merchants or the farmers who must bear the cost.” Councilor Kuzee-Fan turned to Councilor Yang-Vang.

“Or the estates.” Councilor Yang-Vang glared at his fellow councilman, Kuzee-Fan.

“Why not both?” Tigan Von-Lan’s angered gaze flicked between the two councilors and the treasurer. The man looked ready to leap from his seat and violently accost the recalcitrant councilmen. She saw now her husband’s intentions in seating this particular tigan at the table. Although inexperienced in the politics of the council chamber, he possessed an imposing physical presence, and his temperament suggested a man used to getting what he desired. Left behind from the battlefield, he wanted to prove himself in hopes of returning to his preferred field of combat. Dju-Tesha smiled inwardly at her husband’s subtle cunning.

She continued to listen to the men at the table bicker over the best way to pay for a war they knew none of them could afford to lose. As she did so, she wished Rhog-Kan sat at her side. She needed his experience. His wisdom. She yearned for his hand on her protruding belly and his whispers of assurance that all would be well, that their child would be born without incident, a son, a legitimate heir to one day assume the throne. She longed for his warm, hairy chest against her back as she slept. She hungered for his...

She stifled that thought and the wild desires that arose with it. As her pregnancy progressed, her emotions and passions proved more difficult to wrangle into submission than usual. Overall, she found childbearing to be more an inconvenience than an inspiration. She had heard many women speak of it as a blessing and gift. While she appreciated the beauty of coaxing a living being into birth within her womb, the constant pain in her lower back, her swollen ankles, and the incessant need to run for the water chamber were a nuisance. She wished for Rhog-Kan, so she might have someone to bear the burden — and someone besides herself to blame for her condition. A companion to share the worries that the child might be a girl and not a boy. That it would be safe from those wishing to kill it and herself to make way for their own claim to the throne.

More than anything, she wished for someone in addition to Kao-Rhee whom she could trust to counsel her. No, that wasn't exactly what she needed. She desired someone who respected her enough to listen to her opinions. These men remembered her as the Ghost of the Library, an awkward girl, considered mentally inadequate. She knew from listening to the complaints of her father that the councilmen could be obstinate in their opinions, difficult to sway, and fickle in their loyalty to any decision. He said they only ever responded favorably to one thing — power — either the granting of it through favors and appointments or the display of it by intimidation and open threats. Her brother Tin-Tsu, newly from the temple, had experienced a similar frustration. He had even suggested making her a *shadow advocate*, someone to advise him with ideas not possessed by the men of the High Council.

She realized that she, too, needed a shadow advocate to offer unconventional wisdom to counter the council's staid and sclerotic thinking. It occurred to her, quite suddenly, that the person who might best fill that position already sat at the table. She dug her fingernails into the palm of her hand to still the anxiety that swelled within her. She disliked speaking before people, especially when her words would likely be disregarded or openly disdained. Her heart quickened its pace and she took a deep breath to calm herself. She could not be the Ghost of the Library. She needed to be the Regent Zhaneff. Not merely the mother of the future zhan, but for the time being, the mother of the dominion. And to do that, she needed to set herself above the men at this council table as a mother did with her children.

"Councilmen." Dju-Tesha found her voice had little volume when she spoke. The men around the table continued to talk as though she did not exist. She coughed. Then again. Then again, loudly. Finally, the councilmen quieted down and turned to her. She fashioned her face into an approximation of a smile, knowing it looked strained.

"My dear councilors," Dju-Tesha continued. "Forgive my interruption of your most informative discussion, but I believe the solution to our quandary lies in the distant past rather than the factions of this table."

"My Regent Zhaneff, forgive our winded exploration of the particulars of providing funds for the war your heroic husband so valiantly pursues against our enemies in the south." Councilor Kuzee-Fan smiled at her. "If the nuance of this discourse eludes and bores you, I assure you there is no need for your continued presence. I am certain the Prime Councilor can provide you a summary of our decision at a more appropriate time. You may tend to more womanly endeavors

in the meantime.”

“I am not bored, Councilor.” Dju-Tesha took a breath, annoyed with the sudden flush in her cheeks and the drumming of her heart in her ears. She, even more so than her brother Tin-Tsu before her, needed these men to see her as their leader, not a simple woman to be led. She noted Kao-Rhee studying her over the tips of his clasped fingers. She continued before one of the men could speak over her. “Nor does the discourse elude me. And my only womanly endeavor of the moment grows within my belly quite without need for my attention.”

“My esteemed fellow councilman did not mean to offend, my Regent Zhaneff.” Councilor Yang-Vang gestured across the table at his companion. “I believe he only meant to relieve you of the burden of bearing witness to this tedious dialog, as such matters are not what a woman’s constitution are naturally inclined for, especially when in such a fragile condition.” He waved his hand in the direction of her protruding stomach.

“I take no offense. If I reacted with pique every time someone belittled my capacity or disparaged my understanding on the basis of my sex, I would have time for little else but convulsive ravings and impassioned rages.” Dju-Tesha did sense a rage approaching, an anger she’d harbored many times in her life at being ignored, patronized, and disregarded by men for the matter of her sex. She found that anger harder to control. Possibly, it had to do with the child she carried and the way it affected the range of her emotions. It did not matter. She decided she liked the way the anger filled her with a sense of purpose, the way it bolstered her confidence, the way it erased any misgivings of her own capacity. Yes, she enjoyed the anger very much and decided to let it show. It reminded her of another woman who once sat on the throne.

“I finally understand, in full, the words of Zhaneff Jangu-Durzee of the Third Great Dominion.” Dju-Tesha let her voice rise as she looked around the table. “She said ‘The men of my first council brayed and bickered as though their words were giants stomping the land of this realm, crushing my quiet suggestions and demure observations beneath their boots at the excuse that the feminine constitution could not assail the mental heights necessary to governance. It was only when I realized that my words held finality as the ruler of the realm, while theirs were mundane as befitting mere ministers, that I found the true tenor of my own voice, and the courage to make it heard by replacing them to a one.’”

“I am uncertain what the Regent Zhaneff implies or intends to imply, but I assure you...” Councilor Kuzee-Fan began to speak, but Dju-Tesha cut him off.

“I know how I am seen,” Dju-Tesha said. “How I have been perceived. I must be viewed not as a bookish, spectral daughter of the zhan, but as the Regent Zhaneff, and that must begin here in this room if that visage is to spread successfully throughout the dominion. Now as to...”

“My Regent Zhaneff...” Councilor Yang-Vang smiled broadly as he interrupted.

“I believe,” Dju-Tesha said, raising her voice again, “that we might best begin with the remaking of how people view me, if you were to wait until I have finished speaking before doing so yourself.”

“My apologies, my Regent Zhaneff.” Councilor Yang-Vang bowed his head, blinking his eyes in confusion. He did not seem accustomed to women telling him to be silent.

“Our circumstance today is not without precedent in history.” Dju-Tesha held on to the anger in her breast as she tried to calm any quavering of her voice. She needed to be angry and strong, not mad and petulant. She tried to remember that she did not need to convince these men of any decision she made; rather, she required them to respect that decision, even if they disagreed with it. She needed to be a zhaneff. She had read the lives of many. She needed to let those readings inspire her. Let the ghosts of those dead rulers inhabit her speech. She thought of one of her favorite zhans, of his wisdom and the respect of his command. She had often pretended as a girl to be an adventuress lost in the ruins of a great city while playing in the library. She realized she must pretend again — this time to be the Regent Zhaneff.

“In the three hundred and forty-fourth year of the First Great Dominion, Zhan Pai-Kon sought the funds to expand the Great Eastern Wall to once and for all curtail the raids of the tribes of the Kytain Dominion into the Punderra Dominion,” Dju-Tesha said. “With his advisers proclaiming the realm taxed to the limit of what the poor and the wealthy could bear without revolt, the zhan struck upon a simple notion. He created a small tax on the wealth of all people, low and high, and called it the Great Wall Tax. With a few tahns and rhagas publicly praising the plan, people began paying it as a show of their pride in the realm and their support for the restoration and completion of the Great Eastern Wall. Likewise, in our own time, with a few public endorsements from the wealthier estates and merchants, we shall institute a minor tax on all citizens of the Daeshen Dominion, calling upon their national pride to help in what we will call the Final War. And as an inducement, we will imply that the tax monies might be returned by forcing the estates of the defeated Tanshen Dominion to repay them. In this way, the people will see it as a loan of monies to finally end the war. In the same manner...”

“That is a very interesting notion, my Regent Zhaneff.” Councilor Yang-Vang interrupted her, looking at her as though he had just witnessed a child make suggestions for the menu of a state dinner. “We will take it under advisement and consider the implications...”

“I am afraid you have not been paying attention, Councilor.” Dju-Tesha spoke over the man until he fell silent. The anger burned in her — a fire blazing in the furnace of her heart. She thought of all the times men like Yang-Vang had ignored her, belittled her, and spoken to her dismissively. She’d suffered those indignities as a daughter of the zhan, but she could not afford to let such affronts stand while she sat on the throne as Regent Zhaneff. To do so risked not merely her own personal sense of worth, but the stability of the dominion in the midst of war. “This is not a suggestion, nor was it phrased as such. You will have plenty of time to discuss it, but not within this chamber, as you are no longer a member of this council. You may leave now.”

Councilor Yang-Vang blinked and sputtered as he looked around the room. “This is a desecration of the customs of the High Council. I demand...”

“This council serves at the pleasure of the zhan, or the regent zhaneff in this case.” Dju-Tesha glared at Yang-Vang as she pressed her palms against the table. She forced herself to speak. To voice the words she needed to say. She relied upon her anger to fortify her courage as she spoke to Yang-Vang. “You will leave this room in silence, or I will have you removed.”

“My Regent Zhaneff ...” Councilor Yang-Vang stood but did not move from the table.

Dju-Tesha said nothing, turning away from the man as she lifted her hand to point toward the door.

Yang-Vang bowed slightly, much less than customary, and hurried from the room.

The men around the table stared at her in silence. She noticed the slight grin on the lips of Tigan Von-Lan.

“Is there anyone else who wishes to leave?” Dju-Tesha cast her gaze across the men. None moved and none spoke. “That is good. To replace one councilor is vexing. To replace more than one would be an extreme annoyance.”

The table sat in silence a moment longer. Dju-Tesha decided she liked pretending to be a Regent Zhaneff. She suspected that if she pretended often enough and well enough, she might become an excellent Regent Zhaneff herself. Kao-Rhee coughed lightly and nodded toward her.

“With this matter settled,” Kao-Rhee said, “I believe we can proceed to discuss the issue of the repairs to the Grand Hall.”

They did discuss the rebuilding of the Grand Hall. As all moneys were needed for new troops, it was suggested to leave the rebuilding until after the war. However, they could afford to continue removing rubble from the room where her brother, Tin-Tsu, nearly died in an attempt on his life. The discussion moved on to other matters, but a clear change of tone reverberated through the chamber. The men might not respect her yet, but they were learning to fear her. None wanted to see their power, influence, or wealth reduced.

After the meeting ended, Kao-Rhee asked to meet in her private library. They walked there together, but he did not speak until the door closed to leave them alone, both standing by the open balcony above the main gardens.

“My Regent Zhaneff.” Kao-Rhee looked at her as though appraising her for the first time. “You do know that Zhan Lin-Wao tried a similar tax to fund the war against the Juparti rebellion in the Second Great Dominion and it failed miserably.”

“Of course.” Dju-Tesha smiled. She should have expected Kao-Rhee to know the history of the realm as well as she did. “However, that was an unjust war, caused by the zhan’s repression of their faith, and no one takes pride in an unjust war. Thank you for not mentioning that particular counter example.”

“I suspect, my Regent Zhaneff, that we were the only ones in the room aware of it.” Kao-Rhee smiled, a hint of mischievousness at the edges of his lips. That smile faded with his next words. “There is another matter we must discuss.”

“Our spies in Atheton?” Dju-Tesha sighed.

“How did you know?” Kao-Rhee examined her more closely.

“It is the one issue you did not raise in the council meeting.” Dju-Tesha girded herself for what Kao-Rhee might say. If he held favorable news, he would have mentioned it more readily.

“We have lost all contact with our spies in Atheton, my Regent Zhaneff.” Kao-Rhee inclined his head to show he accepted responsibility for this failure. “When they first went silent, I assumed it had to do with the outbreak of the Living Death. Now I suspect something more sinister and calculated. I am not certain how she rooted them out, but I believe Teyett Havarez has removed

them from the field.”

“To what end?” Dju-Tesha’s imagination spurred multiple possible scenarios in her mind. “What does she plan that requires such a move?”

“I do not know, my Regent Zhaneff.” Kao-Rhee frowned as he looked out the balcony doors. “I suspect the outbreak of the Living Death is a ruse of some manner.”

“Can we reciprocate and remove her spies in our court?” Dju-Tesha scanned her memory of the history of the realm for similar circumstances from which to gain guidance.

“That is what I wished to discuss, my Regent Zhaneff.” Kao-Rhee turned back to her. “I seek your permission to arrest those we know of and root out the rest.”

“Please proceed with all haste.” Dju-Tesha felt a kick of the baby within her womb and placed a hand on her stomach to calm the child and herself. “What of our spies in the Nevaeo Dominion? Can they provide any information?”

“Their reports are unremarkable, my Regent Zhaneff.” Kao-Rhee lowered his voice. “Your father always held great pride in you. I confess, I did not fathom why and thought it a misplaced fatherly affection, but I see now I misjudged you as others do. Today, I see that your father’s pride was well-placed. You showed great foresight, leadership, and ruthlessness in the council chamber. And, more importantly, we can use the tendency to underestimate your true abilities to your advantage.”

“Thank you.” Dju-Tesha found a flush rising in her face and neck. In a strange way, it felt as though Kao-Rhee’s words came not from his own lips, but from her father himself. She blinked as a surprise swell of emotion caught in her throat.

A knock came at the door.

“Enter.” Dju-Tesha turned toward the door to hide the fluster that beheld her.

Kao-Rhee’s private clerk stepped into the room bearing a wax-sealed letter and a small wooden tube. “These just arrived, Councilor.” He handed both to Kao-Rhee with a bow.

“Thank you. You may leave.” Kao-Rhee nodded to his clerk, and the man departed. Kao-Rhee opened the letter, squinting as he held it far from his eyes. She had seen him wearing reading glasses, but it seemed he did not carry them in the pockets of his robes. After a moment, he placed the letter on the desk and opened the small wooden tube, removing a tiny strip of rolled paper. He unfurled the miniature parchment, squinting again. He raised his gaze, his face taut.

“We have word from the north by army messenger that troops have been spotted east of here, marching from the Rantu-Ting Mountains. And there is word by night jay that a formidable force marches west along the Old Border Road.”

“How can this be?” Dju-Tesha frowned in confusion. “How could the Tanshen forces get so far north without our knowledge? And how could they muster a second army in the south along the Old Border Road?”

“It is not the Tanshen army that marches toward us, my Regent Zhaneff.” Kao-Rhee’s voice faltered. She saw anger in his eyes. And something else. Fear. “It is the Atheton army which invades us, even as they do the Tanshen Dominion.”

A chill spread throughout Dju-Tesha as she clutched at her rounded belly. Her first thoughts

went to the safety of her baby and her husband. What would happen to Rhog-Kan? And what of her child?

Her mind then turned to practical matters. Atheton invading? Now? With the Daeshen armies in the south, fatigued from battle with the Tanshen, she saw immediately the brilliance of the strategy. Let the two Shen armies fight to exhaustion and then invade to conquer them both when they are at their weakest. But why? What did Teyett Havarez hope to gain? Only one answer presented itself, and Dju-Tesha gasped with the realization. The Teyett of Atheton sought to establish a Fourth Great Dominion to rule the entire Iron Realm. What was the Easad word? Yes. She remembered it.

“She wants to be Kimpadess of the Iron Realm.”

She saw from the look in Kao-Rhee’s eyes that he had come to the same frightening conclusion. They needed to fight her. Somehow. Together.

The Throne story arena continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*.

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

SONGS OF chickwas and starlings echoed across slow rolling water — twin tunes competing with the multiplying sounds of morning. Sunlight gradually dissipated a thin mist clinging to the river. Hashel’s eyes fluttered as he sniffed the cool air. He knew, even before looking around, that he awoke on or near a river. The smell of a river could not be mistaken for a landlocked town. He rubbed the sleep and the sadness of leaving the carnival from his eyes. Ondromead lay next him, still dozing on the open deck of a barge moored to a pier beside a small town.

Hashel took a deep breath of the misty air and marveled at how oddly comforting it was to awaken someplace other than where he fell asleep. Strange that something so miraculous felt so normal. Awakening in the town with the carnival day after day left him anxious for the uniqueness of the event and curious what Ondromead and he would witness.

He missed the people of the carnival, especially Palla and her friend Ranna. He hoped to see them again and wondered how many years might pass before that happened. Ondromead often spoke of seeing people again after decades or witnessing the descendants of people he’d seen hundreds of years prior.

He looked at Ondromead’s sleeping face. Slumber seemed the only time the old man ever relaxed. An idea arose in Hashel’s mind. The past days with the carnival in the town and the horror of the kellitsaras weighed on them both. They needed something to lift their spirits. Something simple. He sniffed the air and looked toward the small town hugging the riverbank. A scent came to him on the morning breeze and spurred him into motion.

Hashel stood up. The sailors of the river barge went about their morning work oblivious to his and Ondromead’s presence. He opened Ondromead’s satchel and removed the leather coin purse. He tugged at the drawstring and removed a silver coin. After closing the satchel, he ran along the side of the deck to the narrow gangplank connecting the barge with the pier.

On the docks, Hashel followed his nose, letting the familiar aroma lead him onward. That scent, more than the few words he heard from people shuffling into the streets with the morning, or the language of the signs above the shop doors, told him where he’d awoken. In all his travels with Ondromead, he’d only ever found that fragrance in his home dominion of Atheton. A blend of rosemary and basil with a hint of clove. The aroma brought back memories of his mother baking in the kitchen in the thin hours of the day just before dawn, the smell pulling him from bed, his mouth watering, stomach rumbling, ready to meet the morning.

Hashel’s nose guided him to a narrow bakery wedged between a tallow shop and a rope maker. With the earliness of the hour, he did not need to wait in line. The baker, a ruddy-skinned man in his late years with large eyes and white-yellow hair, smiled at him in greeting.

“You look hungry this morn’n,” the baker said. “River rat, are ya?”

Hashel nodded, more to being hungry than being a river rat, as he wasn’t sure what being one

entailed. He pointed at a stack of golden buns still steaming hot on the counter and raised two fingers with one hand to indicate how many as he offered the coin with the other hand.

“Two it is.” The baker took the silver coin and handed Hashel back three even smaller coins of copper.

Hashel held the coins in the fist of one hand and used his other to take the buns from the baker.

“Careful now. They’s hot.” The baker grinned as Hashel blew on the buns and adjusted them in his hands to make sure he didn’t drop them. “Luck to ya,” the baker said. Hashel nodded, smiled, and ran back out into the street.

He ran all the way back to the docks, slowing and increasing his speed to compensate for the unevenness of the rutted, dirt-packed street and the need to keep the hot buns from flying from his hands. He came to the docks and ran back the way he’d come, slowing to a stop as he reached the empty berth where the river barge should have been.

His stomach tightened as a dizziness settled upon his head. He looked up and down along the docks. He did not see the barge or anything like it tied to the pier posts. He leaned out and scanned both ways along the river. He saw no vessel that looked like a river barge. The small town sat at the steepest point in a wide bend of the river. Had the barge gone upstream or downstream? More importantly, had Ondromead still been asleep on the barge when it left? Hope stirred in his breast. Maybe Ondromead woke and got off the barge in search of him.

Hashel ran back along the river docks. Finding no sign of Ondromead, he turned to the town, racing down every street he found, peeking through shop doors and windows. His searching led him back to the docks by the time the sun rose over the trees along the river. He sat on one of the smaller, older piers at the end of the docks, his legs dangling above the water.

Sadness overwhelmed him, but he would not let himself cry. He did not find Ondromead in the town, which meant the old man sailed along the river on the barge. And worse, he’d awaken to find no sign of Hashel. The old man would think him still with the carnival. He had no idea Hashel sat on a pier along the river weeping for the loss of him.

Hashel wiped at his eyes with the back of one hand. He had not meant to cry. He had no one to blame but himself. He should have woken Ondromead to get breakfast together. But he’d wanted to surprise the old man. His friend. His companion. His only family.

With a sigh, Hashel resigned himself to a future he once lived in the past. A future alone. He took a bite of the larger of the two buns, unable to enjoy the taste of the now cool pork, apple, and honey that filled his mouth. He ate the whole bun as he cried again. Then, when his tears stopped, he ate the second bun. He’d learned to eat food while he held it, because nothing guaranteed more meals to come. He had only three copper coins and no idea which way to go, but he vowed to find Ondromead, no matter how long it took.

The Witness story arena continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*.

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

“IT IS a rational supposition.”

“Yet another supposition among many.”

Motes of dust hovered on subtle currents of air in the shafts of sunlight stabbing through wide, arched windows. Sketkee stood beside a long oaken table in the small library of the rakthor ambassadorial compound in Tanjii. Across the table, Viktik stared at her, the cast of his eyes suggesting a deep-rooted mistrust. She did not fault him for that wariness. She had earned it through her multiple violations of his confidence. She realized she could not rely upon him to trust her judgment, so she must convince him to trust his own.

“You do agree that the artifact is likely of urris origin.” Sketkee phrased this as a statement rather than a question, an old trick from her days as an ambassador to lead a conversation in the desired direction. Viktik would notice and likely do the same.

“It is one of many possibilities.” Viktik placed the eight digits of his hands together before his chest. She recognized the gesture from their time as copulation partners octads ago.

“Given the inscrutable nature of the device, an urris source is the most probable of all possibilities.” Sketkee continued to stare at Viktik, holding his eyes, ignoring the shelves of books lining the room. A human exchange would have required a great deal of looking at things other than the person being spoken to, to avoid intimidating the human. Rakthors preferred to remain in locked visual contact. She suspected the custom came from their ancient violent history when one interlocutor might have been tempted to attack if their opponent looked away. She found that hostile impulse present in the nether reaches of her mind and wondered what she might do if Viktik altered the direction of his gaze. She needed to keep focused on the matter of the moment. “If the device is of the urris, then it is equally probable it has been manufactured or altered in some way, through use of The Sight.”

“I will concede this point.” Viktik nodded toward her. “I assume from the path of your reasoning that you wish to have the device examined by someone possessed of The Sight.”

“You are as preceptive as ever, and I am reassured that you have come to the same conclusion.” Sketkee returned the customary nod of approval.

“You are unsubtle in your attempts to manipulate my thinking through conversation.” Viktik frowned at her.

“It has been many years since I used my conversational skills against another rakthor.” Sketkee’s conversational skills had not actually atrophied over the years, but she understood she could not use them against Viktik in the normal manner. He did not trust her and would not do so. She needed him to see her as a weaker opponent in the argument, so she appeared to agree with him.

“I have already considered this course of action and found the risk to be too great.” Viktik

raised his chin.

“The risk can be mitigated.” Sketkee showed no surprise that Viktik had considered what she suggested, nor that he had rejected the idea. He might risk damaging the artifact, but not losing it.

“A human with the ability of The Sight may attempt to steal the device, and there would be no way for me to stop them,” Viktik said.

Rakthors distrusted those who possessed The Sight, largely, Sketkee believed, because rakthors were nearly universally incapable of using it themselves. Her time among humans and her interactions with seers had taught her their usefulness.

“As I said, those risks can be allayed.” Sketkee lowered the register of her voice to project assuredness.

Viktik squinted at her.

“I would protest that it is too difficult to find a human seer we can trust, but I suspect you have already done so,” he said.

“Your deductive skills are as commanding as ever.” Sketkee turned to the door. “I have encountered a seer I believe we can trust. She is waiting outside.”

“You should not have brought a human seer here.” Viktik’s displeasure showed in the minor twitching of his fingers.

“She does not know what she has come to examine nor anything of its possible provenance.” Sketkee looked back to Viktik. “If you hold a projectile weapon hidden in the folds of your robes, you can assure that she cannot leave the room alive with the device.” She noted the rapid blink at the mention of a weapon. A confirmation that, as she suspected, he already possessed such an armament concealed in his robes.

Viktik stared at her in silence. She made no movement and spoke no words. She did not need to continue her argument. He weighed the risks in his mind. Any further attempts to sway him only increased his distrust of her. He would rationally distrust a seer she chose. But he would have difficulty locating another seer in the city of Tanjii, where the clergy proscribed The Sight on penalty of death. Sketkee presented him with few options. Hopefully, he chose the one she wanted.

“I will retrieve the device.” Viktik turned from the table. “Bring your seer.”

“Thank you.” Sketkee nodded toward him in acknowledgment of his concession.

Viktik opened a side door and closed it behind himself. Sketkee opened the main door to the library. The human seer, Kellatra, stood in the hall, a rakthor guard stationed not far behind her. She seemed oddly calm for a human in such close proximity to a rakthor. Most humans found their presence disconcerting. She wondered if the human female had spent time among rakthors in the past. Possibly, Kellatra felt no threat because, as Sketkee had witnessed, she could kill them both with a thought of her mind. She wondered, given the danger the woman posed, why she trusted her. Perhaps it had to do with Kadmallin’s favorable reaction to the woman and her family.

“Please come in.” Sketkee gestured as she held the door open.

“Thank you.” Kellatra smiled as she passed into the library and Sketkee closed the door. The human looked at the chairs around the library table but did not sit. “Are you certain you cannot tell me the purpose of all this?”

“We do not want to prejudice your opinion with too much prior information.” Sketkee took up a position opposite Kellatra across the table.

“We?” Kellatra asked.

With the human’s words, the side door of the library opened and Viktik entered carrying a small, black lacquered wooden box.

“My colleague, Viktik, ambassador of the Sun Realm.” Sketkee gestured toward Viktik as he placed the box on the table before Kellatra. “This is Kellatra, from Punderra. I met her in the pilgrim village.”

“It is best if we say as little as possible.” Viktik looked at Kellatra and then stepped away from her and the box, placing both hands in the folds of his robes. Sketkee wondered which hand grasped the projectile weapon. It occurred to her, from the look of the robes, that both hands potentially gripped a weapon.

Kellatra looked at the box and then Viktik and Sketkee in turn. Again, Sketkee noted the calmness the woman possessed. She appeared curious, but unconcerned.

“You may open the box.” Viktik nodded toward the table, keeping his hands beneath his robes.

Kellatra extended a hand and lifted the lid of the box, revealing a round crystal sphere the size of a large fist. She leaned closer to look at the artifact.

“Please examine it and tell us what you can discern from it.” Sketkee found her heart rate increasing and chided herself for succumbing to such an instinctual response.

“May I touch it?” Kellatra spoke but did not look away from the sphere in the box.

“You may.” Viktik stared at Kellatra with an increased intensity.

Kellatra reached out with her right hand and ran her index finger along the smooth surface of the artifact. She frowned and shook her head.

“I’m not sure what you expected to find, but this is just what it looks like,” Kellatra said. “A ball of glass. A very pretty ball of glass, but a ball of glass.”

“That is surprising.” Sketkee frowned, a wave of annoyance suffusing her mind. She stepped closer to Kellatra. “Are you certain?”

“Whatever this is, it has nothing to The Sight.” Kellatra leaned back from the box and the sphere. “I assume that is why you wanted me to examine it.” She turned toward Viktik. “And I assume you will be discreet as to my ability with The Sight. Indiscretion in such matters is dangerous in Tanjii.”

“How do we know you actually possess The Sight?” Viktik did not move, staring at Kellatra.

Kellatra smiled and held Viktik’s stare. The box with the crystal sphere rose three hand widths above the table.

“You have my discretion,” Viktik said.

“Then maybe you should show me what you really brought me here to see.” Kellatra’s smile faded as the box gently lowered to the table.

Viktik blinked at Kellatra in obvious surprise. Sketkee also blinked in wonderment. First, that Viktik had replaced the artifact with a decoy to test Kellatra, and second, that the human had perceived the deception before she herself did. While it confirmed her opinion of Viktik’s cunning,

it also caused her to reappraise Kellatra's intellect and powers of observation.

"You are correct." Viktik looked toward the box. "This is not what we wanted you to examine. This is." He removed his left hand from his robes and held up the true artifact, light from the window catching the swirling vortices of color within the glass. "You may hold it."

Kellatra accepted the artifact into the palms of her cupped hands. Ignoring Sketkee and Viktik, she stared into its depths.

Sketkee held her breath, intrigued at her response of anxiety about the nature of the artifact. What if her supposition proved wrong? What if the device had nothing to do with The Sight? In some ways that suggested a more miraculous result, as it meant its manufacture took place with purely mechanical means. Which implied that someday, [rakthor philosophers](#) and artisans might replicate such a level of intricate fabrication. She knew Viktik hoped for this result, as he planned to use the knowledge acquired from the artifact to gain prominence and influence with the Central Governing Committee. His interest lay in the accumulation of power from knowledge. Sketkee's curiosity lay in the accrual of knowledge in and of itself — especially insight regarding the urris.

Kellatra held the artifact up in the light, examining it closely. Sketkee watched the woman intently, wondering what the seer saw that she herself could not observe. What would she find? Would it lead back to the urris? Did she fathom its function? Sketkee waited, realizing again that she held her breath but refusing to release it.

The Philosopher story arena continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*.

THE SEER



KELLATRA

SUNLIGHT ILLUMINATED a miniature constellation of star-like eddies swirling in an intricate dance of cohesion. Kellatra held the strange, spherical artifact before her eyes. She sensed its connection with The Sight clearly. She'd perceived it even when concealed in the robes of the rakthor male, allowing her to recognize the crystal in the box as a deception.

She had held The Sight since stepping from the carriage outside the rakthor embassy, where Rankarus and Sketkee's human companion, Kadmallin, awaited their return. She held The Sight because, while she found herself possessed of an odd fondness for Sketkee, she had no reason to trust any of the rakthors of the embassy. She and her family held a course toward the Forbidden Realm and, while this rakthor woman excited her curiosity, she would not be distracted from her plans.

As she looked at the device, Kellatra let her embrace of The Sight deepen — her breath became one with the air of the room — her body inseparable from the motes of dust in the sunlight, the table beside her, the books lining the walls, the two rakthors standing nearby — her mind awash with an ever-present awareness that tapped the subtle unseen nature of all manifestation. With this frame of mind, she closed her eyes and extended her perception of consciousness into the device in her hands.

In the span of a heartbeat, she understood what she held. Not how it had been made. Not its purpose. Not how it functioned. Her perception confirmed her earlier apprehension and added to her evaluation — the device was made with The Sight, but it also used The Sight, was in fact, somehow, using The Sight even now. And then she perceived something else, something that left her certain no human seer, nor any seer of any other peoples of the five realms, could have created such a device.

She crushed the excitement that threatened to upend her grasp of The Sight and opened her eyes.

Kellatra looked to Sketkee and then, with a nod, handed the device back to Viktik. The rakthor held it in his open hand as he watched her.

"It was made using The Sight in some manner." Kellatra sighed and folded her arms. Best to be as honest as possible when one needed to lie.

"Can you tell what it does? What its purpose is?" Sketkee stepped around the table.

"Nothing, from what I can tell." Kellatra shrugged. And best to appear nonchalant when on the verge of screaming in confusion and elation. She needed to stay calm. She took a breath and clung to the inner stillness of The Sight.

"What do you mean?" Viktik stepped closer, looking at the device.

Kellatra did not step back away from Viktik the way most humans would have in the presence of a rakthor that towered over them. She'd been around several rakthors during her studies at the

Academy. For all their apparent cool and rational disposition, they could be aggressively intimidating creatures.

“Just what I said.” Kellatra looked between the two rakthors, weaving lies with facts in a manner she hoped appeared as a tapestry of truthfulness. “It was fashioned with The Sight, and it might use The Sight to function in some way, but I can’t tell you how. It seems something simple. Maybe a source of light. Maybe a device to detect something. I will say I’ve never seen anything like it. Where did you get it? From the Academy in Kahara Nattaa? If you really want to know what it does, that’s the place to take it.”

Kellatra hoped the distance to Juparti proved a discouragement to that last notion.

“Could it be a weapon?” Viktik looked at the sphere in his hand.

“I don’t see how.” Kellatra noticed that he had not answered her question about the origin of the device. She stared at it to make sure her eyes were not visible as she lied. “It’s probably something mundane. I’ve seen globes of this size that light up when a person walks into a darkened room.”

“The inner structures of it have changed several times.” Viktik held up the device. “Can you explain such an occurrence?”

“Not really.” Kellatra shook her head, trying to conceal her surprise at the revelation of the device’s mutability. “Maybe it’s broken. Or it is simply too old to function anymore.” She hoped neither of these statements held even a splinter of truth. She followed the device with her eyes as Viktik walked to the table. He removed the decoy from the box, placed the device upon a cradle of red cloth, and closed the lid.

“Thank you for your assistance.” Viktik gave her a formal nod and turned to Sketkee as he picked up the box. “My belief that we should pursue a more traditional examination has been vindicated.” He did not wait for a reply from his fellow rakthor and swiftly left the room through the side door.

“I must concur,” Sketkee said, her voice slow and grave. “Thank you for your efforts.”

“I’m sorry I could not deliver more interesting news.” Kellatra wondered if she should share the truth with the rakthor. What did Sketkee involve her in? How would it affect her plans to reach the Forbidden Realm? A more problematic question stabbed at her mind — how could she get her hands on that device again?

“It is dispiriting news but not unexpected.” Sketkee led the way to the door, no evidence of her thoughts visible on her features.

As Sketkee led Kellatra along the hall, down three flights of stairs, and out to the carriage where Rankarus and Kadmallin waited, she considered the female rakthor. Could she trust her? They knew nothing of one another. And she knew very little about rakthors. Did they really possess no feelings or affections? Could they be loyal? They could be dangerous, but how dangerous? Would it increase the peril her family already faced due to her irrepressibly inquisitive nature? Would this device and this rakthor bring threats equal to or greater than those she had encountered due to possessing *The Unseen Codex*? Another thought occurred to her — might the rakthor be able to help her in deciphering the codex? A more profound question came quickly behind the first

— how might the artifact be connected to the Forbidden Realm?

“How did you meet Viktik?” Kellatra asked as they exited the thick wooden doors of the embassy.

“We knew each other many years ago when I was myself an ambassador.” Sketkee flicked the hood of her cloak up to shield the reptilian features of her face.

“What are you now that you are no longer an ambassador?” Kellatra had always heard raktors choose a single profession for life.

“I became a natural philosopher. I study the functioning of the world and the cosmos.” Sketkee led the way across the street toward the carriage. “And what path brings a member of the Academy of Sight here to Tanjii to join the pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm?”

“The dream.” Kellatra wasn’t certain how much she should tell Sketkee. She felt a strange affinity for the raktor woman. They were alike in some ways. Seekers of knowledge and truth.

Kadmallin opened the door of the carriage and stepped out to hold it while she and Sketkee climbed inside. She took a seat beside Rankarus. He looked anxious as he grabbed her hand.

“How did it go?” Rankarus squeezed her fingers. They had prearranged a signal if they were in danger. She squeezed back once to signal no threat.

Kadmallin called to the driver of the carriage and closed the door as he took a place beside Sketkee, across from Rankarus.

“Were you right?” Kadmallin asked Sketkee.

“Unfortunately, not.” Sketkee looked upward at the geometric pattern in the upholstery cloth covering the ceiling of the carriage. “I am uncertain how to proceed.”

Kellatra remained silent, still ambiguous herself how to continue. Should she tell Sketkee the truth? What would happen to the artifact if she didn’t? She knew one thing with certainty — she had to examine it again. It could not be allowed to stay in the hands of a raktor like Viktik, who might break it apart to study its components in hopes of learning its secrets. Only a seer could truly hope to understand the device. The possibility of working to comprehend the artifact left her dizzy with curiosity. However, another even more important fact demanded that she somehow obtain unhindered access to the artifact again — while examining it, the device noticed her. She could not explain that sensation, she did not think the artifact to be alive in any way, but when she probed into its depths with her consciousness, it had reached back. It had been aware of her. She did not know what manner of creation could do such a thing, but she understood that the mastery of The Sight necessary to accomplish such a task had only ever been held by the urris.

To continue reading the Seer story arena turn the page.

THE SEER



RANKARUS

SEA FOAM and seagulls. The smell of ocean salt, mist, and damp seaweed on sand filled the morning air. The early sun lent an amber tint to the gentle waves clawing at the shore. Rankarus walked beside Kellatra along the beach, a cloth-bound bundle held tight in her hands.

“Are you certain this is a good idea?” Rankarus found he needed to walk briskly to keep up with Kellatra’s pace.

“No.” Kellatra’s brow furrowed in the early golden light. “But I could not sleep for thinking of it all night.”

“Neither of us got much sleep.” Rankarus felt an unease in his chest. A queasiness in his stomach. Their time in the pilgrim town, while eventful and marked by occasional danger, had also been one of relative stability. The journey to the Forbidden Realm posed unknown dangers, but he had accustomed himself to having a certain level of peril in their lives. Kellatra’s new notion threatened to multiply that jeopardy in unforeseeable ways. The problem, he realized, was that he could not tell if the unsettled nature of his stomach arose because he feared that risk or because it excited him.

“You think we can trust them?” Rankarus worried about this, mostly as it related to the safety of their children and Abananthus and Jadaloo. They had spent the last several months being friendly with many of the pilgrims, but never trusting them.

“I don’t know.” Kellatra’s frown grew from her forehead to her mouth. “We will have to eventually trust someone. And there is something about it all that feels like ... like the dreams.”

“That is not remotely reassuring.” Rankarus wondered if his wife attracted danger and mystery to herself through some silent agency or whether it sought her out intentionally. She did not seem to look for it, but once exposed to an enigma, she could not pull herself from it regardless of the threat it presented. It frightened him about her. It alarmed him more that he found that trait so attractive in her. “It feels that we are being hasty.”

“Of course, we’re being hasty.” Kellatra quickened her pace. “I told you what happened. We need to be hasty.”

“I agree that someone needs to be hasty, but I’m not certain it needs to be us.” Rankarus hated trying to play the role of the cautious husband. It drove against his true nature and felt unnatural. But they had children to consider in every decision. He tried to remind himself of that.

“What does Abananthus always say? *‘Seize the snake before the snake seizes you.’*” Kellatra’s frown broke into a sly smile as she turned to him.

“You should stop trying to be reassuring. You’re no good at it.” Rankarus could not resist the impulse to return her smile. She vexed him, but in a way that left him glad for it. Which only irritated him more.

“There it is.” He pointed to a tent set back from the shoreline among the high grass.

“It is probably best that I explain things.” Kellatra led the way up a sandy embankment toward the tent.

“I am merely here to...” Rankarus paused with a sigh. “I don’t really know why I’m here. I know nothing that can be useful, and you can protect yourself better than I ever could.” The sigh spread out to fill his body and weigh him down until his feet slowed.

“You’re here because I need you.” Kellatra looked to him. “You’re the only person I trust to tell me when I’ve gone too far. And you’re an excellent judge of people. I need you to watch them while I talk.”

“I like hearing you say you need me.” Rankarus took her hand.

“We don’t have time for...” Kellatra fell silent as he kissed her.

“There’s always time for a kiss.” Rankarus grinned.

“We must be serious.” Kellatra walked toward the tent again, but he caught the smile on her lips.

“It hasn’t helped us so far, so I don’t see why we should start now.” Rankarus’s mood lightened. Kissing Kellatra always had that effect.

“What do you think of them?” she asked, ignoring him.

“I’ve never met a raktbor, so I can’t really say.” Rankarus considered the question. “She seems straightforward. I don’t know if we can trust her, but if we can’t, we’ll never know until it’s too late. As for him, I like him. Hopefully, he likes me. He’s the sort of man you want to like you, because if he doesn’t, it could end badly for you. She is probably more dangerous than him. Honestly, if I wasn’t with you, I’d be terrified.”

She said nothing but squeezed his hand as they neared the tent. Kadmallin sat outside in the sand, making tea in a pot over a small fire. Sketkee rested nearby, reading a book. They both stood as Rankarus and Kellatra approached.

“Manasto.” Kadmallin greeted them in Mumtiba, the language they shared.

“Morning.” Rankarus returned the greeting, noting how subtly Kadmallin inspected the parcel under Kellatra’s arm without appearing to notice it. The man had the eyes of a thief. Rankarus nearly smiled in appreciation. He might enjoy getting to know Kadmallin.

“What brings you to our camp so early in the day?” Sketkee looked between them.

“We need to speak of important things.” Kellatra squeezed Rankarus’s hand once more, firmly, more to steady her nerves than convey any meaning, he assumed.

“Please sit. Join us for tea. We have some fruit we can share as well.” Sketkee sank to the sand, cross-legged, and pulled several apples from a small burlap sack.

“Luckily, I bought extra cups. Normally, we have only two.” Kadmallin sat and began pouring tea into four small, clay cups.

Rankarus considered whether it was luck or foresight. He and Kellatra sat and accepted the cups. He sipped the tea. Mint and chamomile. Pleasant. It seemed strangely casual, this meeting with tea and fruit on the beach to discuss matters of such potentially grave importance.

“What do you wish to speak of?” Sketkee asked once they all held a cup of tea and a plate of sliced apples sat between them.

“I lied.” Kellatra took a sip of the tea, holding the bundle tight on her lap.

Rankarus speculated there might be a better way to start the conversation but kept silent. He wondered how long he’d last at that.

“I lied about the device.” Kellatra held the cup in in both hands.

“I did not detect any deception in your tone or features.” Sketkee leaned forward with obvious curiosity. “There are few humans who can mislead me so easily.”

“When I embrace The Sight, it gives me fuller awareness of myself,” Kellatra said. “It makes it easier to lie.”

“That explains a few things.” Rankarus felt Kellatra’s elbow dig into his side. Knowing the rakthor could unveil lies posed a complication he’d need to consider with care.

“In what way did you lie?” Sketkee’s curiosity appeared to double.

“First, we must speak of something else.” Kellatra sat the cup in the sand. “I met a rakthor ambassador once at a dinner my father hosted in Kahara Nattaa. I spent some time speaking with him. One of the things that impressed me was how long and how thoroughly rakthors train to become ambassadors. And how many languages they are required to learn.”

“As a former rakthorian ambassador, I am fluent in all of the languages of the various realms.” Sketkee glanced at the bundle on Kellatra’s legs.

“Written as well as spoken?” Kellatra asked.

“Of course,” Sketkee replied.

“And dead languages?” Kellatra picked up the cup of tea again. Rankarus noticed her increased anxiety. He did not blame her. It surprised him she did not reach for The Sight to find a calmer frame of mind.

“We make a study of dead languages to understand the roots of the living tongues.” If Sketkee held any great interest in the direction of Kellatra’s questions, it did not show in the tone of her voice or the posture of her body.

“What about ciphers?” Kellatra took a sip of the tea again.

“An ambassador must be familiar with all the methods of creating and unraveling ciphers.” Sketkee looked at the bundle again, her eyes lingering longer than before.

“I wish to show you something I need assistance with.” Kellatra unwrapped the folds of blue cloth and removed the codex — or the partially fashioned replica Rankarus made before they lost the original to Kellatra’s father. It still bothered him that the forgery did not capture all of the illustrations, even if he’d managed to duplicate the text.

Kellatra handed the codex to Sketkee. The rakthor accepted the parchment leaves, loosely bound between two sheaves of leather. She opened it and examined the pages. Kadmallin leaned toward his companion, eyeing the papers.

“What is this?” Sketkee asked without looking up.

“It is called *The Unseen Codex*,” Kellatra said.

“Where did you get it?” Sketkee continued to flip through the pages of the book.

“It was in the vaults of the Academy of Sight in Kahara Nattaa.” Kellatra sipped unnecessarily long at her tea.

“How did you acquire it?” Sketkee asked.

“It came into our possession unexpectedly,” Kellatra replied. “This is a copy of the original.”

“I see.” Sketkee raised her eyes to Kellatra. “Why are you showing me this?”

“Do you recognize the symbols?” Kellatra stared back at Sketkee.

Rankarus sipped at the tea he’d been ignoring. These next moments would prove decisive for their lives. He wished he held a cup of wine instead. It might calm his nerves more.

“They appear similar to the letters of one of the ancient languages of the Kytain people.” Sketkee traced a leathery green finger along the text. Rankarus had been trying not to notice the fact that she had only three fingers and a thumb. Raktors were like humans, but not really.

“I thought the Kytain people had no written language.” Kellatra’s voice rose in obvious interest.

“They do not, and they have not for thousands of years,” Sketkee said. “But they once did. This could be a variation of one of them, but the way the letters run together is odd. It suggests a cipher.”

“I propose an exchange of services.” Kellatra sounded both excited and anxious to Rankarus.

“What manner of exchange?” Sketkee closed the codex but did not return it.

“To answer that, let me ask another question.” Kellatra’s countenance took on a more relaxed and commanding presence.

Rankarus took this to mean she had assumed the inner vision of The Sight. He wondered if she did this to calm herself or because she feared the response to her question.

“If the device you showed me were a weapon, what would you do?” Kellatra leaned forward.

“Is it a weapon?” Sketkee also leaned forward.

“Possibly,” Kellatra said.

“What manner of weapon?” Sketkee asked.

“A weapon more dangerous than any created by humans or raktors,” Kellatra said.

“I would ensure that it did not fall into the hands of those who might be tempted to use it.” Sketkee glanced at Kadmallin, who gave her a nearly imperceptible nod. “I believe it will be beneficial if our conversation did not continue to be so obtuse.”

Rankarus nearly laughed. He’d been thinking exactly the same thing. He might like the company of this raktor, after all.

“You are right. Allow me to be clear and honest.” Kellatra straightened where she sat. “We and our family were nearly killed several times for possessing that book, and the only reason we are alive is because the people who wanted the original do not know we made a copy. I suspect it is somehow connected to the dreams of a new goddess and the pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm. I want you to help me decipher it. I have tried, but it exceeds my abilities. In return, I will help you understand the true nature of the device you showed me. It was definitely created by the urris. Items created using The Sight are limited in their capabilities by the depth with which their creator holds The Sight. I do not know what that device does, but I assure you, its power is nearly beyond imagining. And, I do not understand how it is possible, but the device was aware of me when I examined it.”

The cries of seagulls and the gentle, rhythmic lapping of waves against the nearby shore filled in the silence that settled around the small fire and empty teacups. Rankarus wondered what Sketkee would say. Would she agree to Kellatra's bargain? Would she concur with Kellatra's conclusion? It occurred to him that he and Kadmallin had not spoken at all during this exchange, letting the two women, human and rakthor, determine the fates of their male companions. How unlike most such situations in the world. Of course, this particular circumstance did not resemble any other in any meaningful way. What Kellatra had told him of the device, and what he knew of the codex, and the events connected to the dreams of the goddess and the pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm, led him to one ineludible conclusion — if anyone one could handle what needed doing, it would be these two women, and if they could not manage it, likely no one could.

"I agree to your exchange, but we will need your assistance before we can proceed to examine the artifact." Sketkee handed the book back to Kellatra.

"What assistance?" Kellatra asked.

Rankarus noticed a shift in the silent side of the conversation — that portion conveyed not in spoken words or physical gestures, but in the moments between them and the unexpressed thoughts that colored all mutual congress. Their alliance verged on becoming even more dangerous. It worried him again that this prospect elicited an untamed thrill deep in his heart.

"The artifact is wholly in the possession of Viktik." Sketkee's face took on a defeated cast. "He is not a willing collaborator, and he does not trust me, even though he values my expertise. If he learns that it may be a weapon, there will be no containing his attempts to unlock its power and use it to his own ends."

"What are you suggesting?" Kellatra glanced at Rankarus, her face showing her confusion.

Sketkee did not speak but looked toward Kadmallin. The man shrugged with a sigh of resignation.

"We're going to steal it." Rankarus tried but could not repress the smile that broke out across his face. He knew he should not be thrilled by the words he'd just spoken and all they implied, but he found restraint impossible.

"You're excited, aren't you?" Kellatra shook her head at him.

"We're going to steal an impossibly dangerous urris device from a fortified rakthor embassy." Rankarus nearly laughed. "Of course, I'm excited."

"Then you agree we must possess the artifact wholly without interference?" Sketkee's voice sounded both surprised and deadly serious.

"We do." Kellatra frowned at Rankarus.

"Hopefully, it will go better than the last time we stole it." Kadmallin poured himself more tea, hiding a smile. Sketkee glanced at him, the browless ridge of one eye raised.

Steal it again! Rankarus laughed, ignoring any concerns for how it looked or what Kellatra might say. Yes, he was definitely going to enjoy getting to know Sketkee and Kadmallin.

CODA



SUNBAKED SAILS flutter to stillness as the wind withers and disappears.

A long yet slender wooden vessel sits motionless upon the placid waters of the Zha Ocean.

A yutan captain looks to the limp sails, the waveless waters, and then toward the sun in the west.

The yutan thinks of her purpose and the plan entrusted to her.

This is not of nature or this world. The wind must rise again. My mandate must not fail. The humans who follow this new goddess cannot not be allowed to fulfill the actions of the dreams.

A thin mist floats up from the flat waters to slowly enshroud the ship. A mist that spreads and becomes a fog. A fog that thickens to hide the sun and sky.

As the yutan crew cries out, the captain stares into the impenetrable haze.

The human goddess reaches out to the world again and seeks to touch us directly. Will she crush my ship and my crew? Dash us to splinters to drown in the depths? Does she know of my quest to kill her prophet and keep her bound in her realm?

The ship lurches. The crew wails in fear. The yutan captain's stomach churns.

A shoreline appears as the mist disperses.

I know those rocks. I recognize the docks of that town. We are off the coast of my homeland, far from the Forbidden Realm. It will take months to reach it now.

The yutan captain's hands tremble as they grip the railing.

I have failed. What now will keep the goddess and her followers from breaking our world?

The Dragon Star Saga is a continuous novel spread over several books. The Seer story arena and the rest of *The Dragon Star Saga* continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*. 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 former Tanjii soldier who is devoted to Junari.

THE SEER

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

Rankarus — Kellatra's husband.

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

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

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

Jadalo — A young serving woman and family friend at Kellatra and Rankarus's inn.

THE PHILOSOPHER

Sketkee — A rakthor former ambassador who has chosen against custom to become a natural philosopher.

Kadmallin — Sketkee's personal guard and oldest friend.

Viktik — A rakthor ambassador and former colleague of Sketkee.

THE CARNIVAL

Leotin — The master of a traveling carnival that traverses the Iron Realm.

Palla — A member of Leotin's carnival and lead actress in the plays they perform.

Tarak — A roagg scout sent by his people to learn about the human pilgrims and the dreams of the new goddess.

Yeth — A yutan scout sent by her people to learn about the human pilgrims and the dreams of the new goddess.

Shifhuul — A wyrin scout sent by his people to learn about the human pilgrims and the dreams of the new goddess.

Donjeo — A teenage boy who cares for the animals of the carnival.

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.

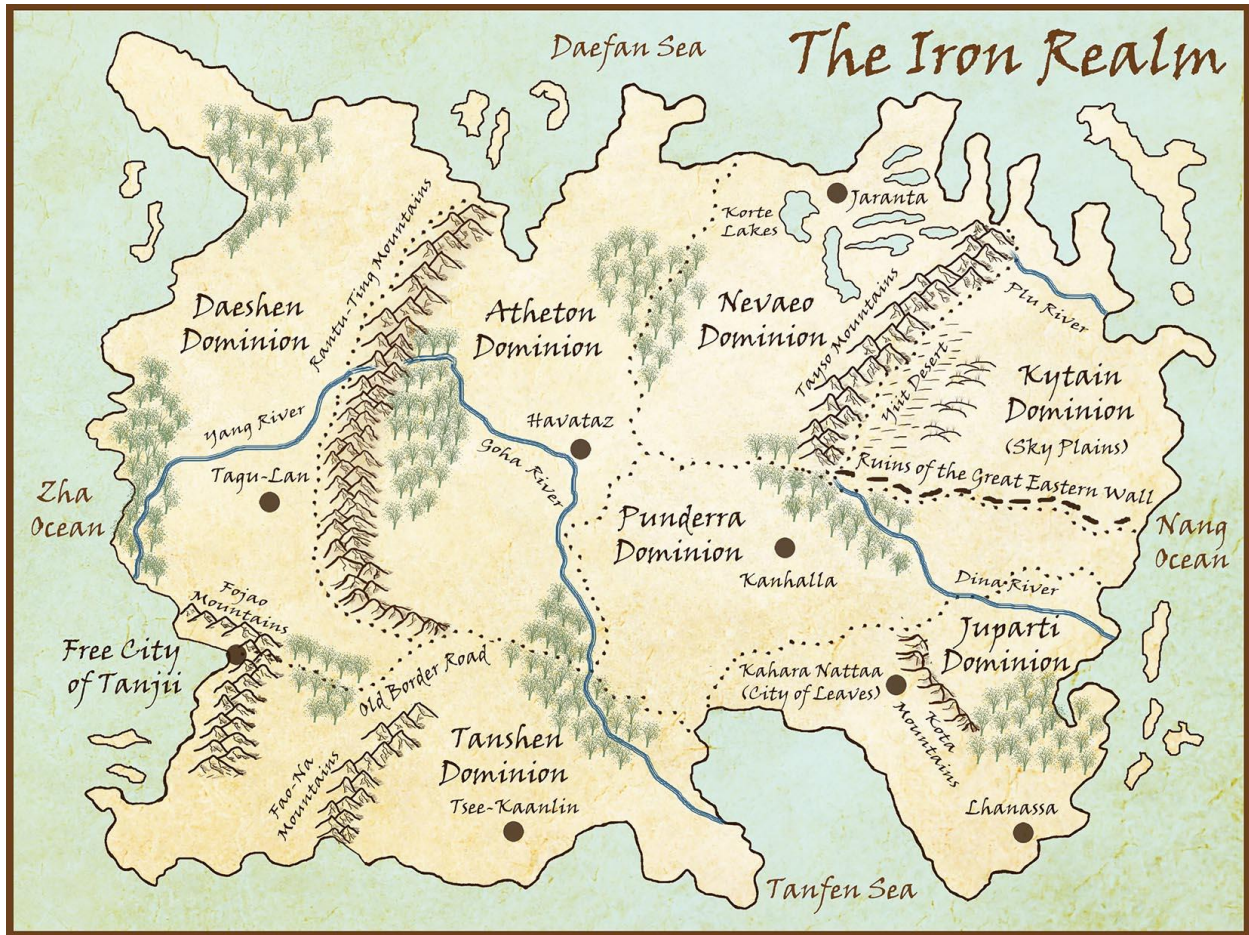
Meraeu — A mysterious old woman who occasionally appears to Ondromead.

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MAPS



THE IRON REALM



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ONAIA



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A MISCELLANY OF FRAGMENTS AND ARTEFACTS



NI-KAM-DJEN — THE 21 LINE PRAYER OF TURNING

...in words of contrition and petition.

We pray that the sun climbs daily from beyond the horizon to stride across the sky.

That the sun will sink past the edge of sight and immerse the world in darkness.

That the night finds you, The True God, our Protector, embracing us in our dreams.

That the moons forever show their shining faces.

That the stars eternally burn through the black cloak of night and never dim.

That the sun once more ascends to the heavens and banishes the night.

We pray that the oceans continue to offer up the bounty of their deep waters.

That the clouds gather to weep and moisten the fertile land.

That the wind always carries our supplications to your ears.

That the fields of grain always ripen for the scythe.

That the storms which shatter the sky spare the crops.

That our harvests are bountiful and never wither on the vine.

That the trees bear their fruits to nourish all and seed future orchards.

That the beasts born for burden and hunt and slaughter flourish and multiply.

We pray that our men are born righteous and worthy of your blessings.

That our women are virtuous and deserving of your grace.

That our children are dutiful and obedient to your scriptures.

That our rulers and priests are pure examples of your will in the world.

That our homes and towns and cities and temples never fall to ruin.

We pray that you hear our voices rising...

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KYLUNA: THE FOREST SPIRIT OF THE WYRINS

“Long before the wyrins ran, the forest stood. Long after the wyrins cease to run, the forest will still stand. The forest, spirit-mother, Kyluna, births us from her burrows, shelters us in the leaves of her arms, feeds us from the bounty of her body. All we have comes from Mother Kyluna. The trees where we make our homes. The roots and fruits and animals to sustain us. The wood to make tools and trade.

In the time before the advent of the wyrins, Forest Spirit Kyluna and Sky Spirit Panjuul brought forth many creatures, but none who could turn their voices to the heavens or kneel in prayer upon the ground. They were happy when the wyrins came, not caring from whence they arrived nor why. The forest now had caretakers. Protectors to guard against fire, cultivators to encourage new growth. Spirit Kyluna spoke with the other spirits, the spirits of the trees and rocks and birds, the spirits of sun and moons and stars and wind and rain and lightning, and she forged a covenant between the spirits and the wyrins.

For so long as we might roam the great forests of Orne Klaad [The Wood Realm], the spirits would protect and provide for us in exchange for the worship and care of them through the forest whole. We wyrins keep this covenant even above all others made with mortal creatures. As we shall until the exodus time, when we finally leave our forest home for good.”

— Fragment from *Essential Knowing — A Primer for Wyrin Children*, Thaluufa Juula, mistress of learning, sometime after the Twenty-Seventh Great Cycle.

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THE NI-KAM-DJEN SECTARIAN SCHISM

“The Zatolin sacrilege must not be tolerated.”

“To travel the old way of the Ketolin is to follow the path of corruption and degeneration.”

“The place of the priest within the hierarchy of Ni-Kam-Djen’s divine order is made clear in the second book of the Fourth Prophet, Tepig-Tao, when he writes: ‘Take your prayers to the holy man for he shall purify them and present them to The True God.’”

“It is written by the great Seventh Prophet, Kengtee-Wiku, in his lone work that we should ‘cast our prayers up to the heavens that they may be heard and considered by he who knows all and judges all in his great wisdom.’ What need have the people to pray through priests such as ourselves when they might petition Ni-Kam-Djen in their own sincere voices?”

“The common man is not fit to speak to Ni-Kam-Djen beyond the nine prescribed prayers, much less a woman of any station, who should more appropriately be limited to only the first three traditional supplications.”

“The words of the nine prayers are a sacred cage holding the non-ordained in a prison proscribing non-canonical petition without first making payment to a priest. What concern nor need does Ni-Kam-Djen have for coin when the only currency of matter is the sincerity of one’s devotion?”

“The Zatolin heretics must be cleansed from the realm, their blood an offering to Ni-Kam-Djen!”

“If the corrupt Ketolins will not heed rational heartfelt pleas for justice before Ni-Kam-Djen, let them come to heel at the tip of a sword!”

— Fragments from a transcribed debate between Ketolin Priest Dang Von-Lan and Zatolin Priest Taing Ki-Lee at the beginning of The Great Schism, fifth year of the Second Great Dominion.

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THE RAKTHOR PRINCIPLES OF MIND

“My traveling companion is a rakthor; Jivik, he calls himself. He is agreeable company. Far more so than the human traders of the caravan we ride with. Unfortunately, this region the humans call the Daeshen Dominion is not safe for foreigners to traverse. War seems evermore possible with the southern Tanshen Dominion as the two nations continue to argue about how to worship their human god. Humans like to make war. By which I mean, they seem to enjoy it. They are so unlike we yutan. Even though his skin reminds me of the pet snake I kept in my pocket as a child, I feel more kinship with Jivik than my fellow mammals.

We both make for the Daeshen capital. He as an ambassador of his people. Me, as you know, for a similar position. At the campfire last night, he spoke to me of what the rakthors refer to as The Principles of Mind. They are a set of guidelines for living created for his people by their most revered rakthor philosopher, Rantak. I have read of them before, possibly you have as well, but I had never heard them so clearly enunciated.

Clarity of thought arises from discerning the truth of what is and what is not.

Seek the indifferent truth both within and without.

Gather facts not interpretations to reveal the truth.

Know the variance between need and desire.

Understand the harmony of balance in all things.

That which sustains the individual sustains the whole.

That which sustains the whole sustains the individual.

Let clarity of thought guide all actions.

I find them strangely comforting, much as I find Jivik’s company, a balm for the sore heart at leaving all of you behind while on this pointless mission among a lesser people. I hope, dear sister, this missive finds you well. Give my best to our mother and to that restless niece of mine. Does

she still seek to train as a Sight Scout when she is older? May sustainer Tam hold you close until destroyer Kiv unwinds us all for creator Onn to rebirth us once again.”

— From the personal letters of Wen Dan Yoth, Elder Ambassador of the Yutan Great Pod.

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YUTAN PRAYER FOR THE LIVING AND THE DEAD AND THE LIVING

in creator Onn
all things begin
the sunrise at morning
the seed of the tree
the bud of the flower
the spark of the flame
the chick from its shell
the babe from the womb

in sustainer Tam
all things endure
the cloud smeared sky at midday
the sapling bent by the wind
the flower blooming in the rain
the fire blazing in a tempest
the bird flying through the storm
the child running to maturity

in destroyer Kiv
all things end
the sun fleeing at dusk
the tree felled by rot
the flower shriveled in drought
the flame sputtering to smoke
the bird falling from the sky
the elderly body rotting into the soil

yet the cycle of all things
continues to turn
the stars birthed at nightfall

the forest feasting on the fallen branch
the wind-borne seeds taking root
the ember coals wafted to new light
the eternal essence emanated in a new life

may Tam sustain you
until Kiv destroys you
and Onn births you again

— Yutan prayer for the dead of the Aasho sect. Traditionally spoken at the moment of death or just afterward.

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THE KETH DICTUM OF ACCEPTANCE

“There is one god or two gods or many gods, or there are none. There are spirits and ghosts and demons, or there are none. There is a soul or a sliver of eternal essence in each person, or there is none. There is a life after death, or there is rebirth into further life, or there is nothing after this life except eternal darkness.

We must accept what we can know with conviction while admitting that there is little we can know with certainty, and that what we cannot know absolutely, we can only believe with faith.

While we can choose what we have faith in, we must accept that faith is not knowledge and that when faiths disagree, they must do so in humility and respect.

There are countless paths and innumerable destinations. Importance lies in choosing a path, walking it with dedication, and respecting all those whose paths one crosses.”

— First Dictum from the Keth *Book of The Unknowables*.

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TOT GIOTH RITUAL OF CLEANSING

“I completed my first ritual of cleansing on assumption of my twenty-fifth year. It is a rite of passage for all truly devout parishioners. With the setting of the sun, I was taken to the inner temple. Stripping off my clothes, I entered the first pool of scalding water. I winced in pain as two attendants scrubbed me with lavender scented soaps and thick cloths. The attendants led me, dripping with suds, to the rinsing pool of chilled water. From there, they dried me and covered me in oils scented with cinnamon and clove and clariss.

They dressed me in a simple white gown of linen and took me to another chamber, where I was given a large clay cup of cool water to drink. The water tasted like mint. After I drained the cup, they ushered me into a small room of stifling steam. Five other supplicants sat in the room on

stone benches while an aged attendant continuously poured water over a brazier of coals. Admonished not to speak, we sat in silence all through the night. When we started to feel the heat of the steam lull us to slumber, the attendant rang a gong and roused us to alertness.

The doors finally opened and sucked in the cool air of the outer hall as the attendants led us to another pool of cool water where two priests, a man and a woman, immersed us one at a time, speaking ancient prayers over our submerged heads.

Dripping from the blessing pool, we were led outside to witness the great fiery orb of the sun cresting the horizon to begin a new day. As we watched the sunrise, the priests led us in a song of surrender to the Great Mother and Great Father, handing us each a cup of nectarous liquid to drink as the song concluded. The priests said a final blessing over our bowed heads, and thus we were proclaimed cleansed and reborn in the light of the Mother Creator and Father Destroyer.”

— Excerpt from the journal of Tsentey Laharn Palhan of the Atheton Dominion, final year of the Third Great Dominion.

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PASHIST TEACHINGS OF THE TEN PURITIES

In a field at the edge of the plains beneath the shadow of the Red Bone Mountains in the third year of the third turning, Tivone Mata Kargteka sat beneath a tree, speaking with the farmers and villagers of a nearby town.

“How does one become as you, a Tivone Mata, oh glorious one?” asked a farmer.

“One must embody the Ten Purities and follow their path,” Tivone Kargteka said.

“What are the Ten Purities, and how does one follow their path, oh radiant one?” a village woman asked.

“To attain the state of a Tivone Mata, one must practice Pure Being. To attain Pure Being, one must cultivate Pure Awareness. To apprehend Pure Awareness, one must cultivate Pure Concentration. To understand the importance of Pure Concentration, one must develop Pure Compassion. To achieve a mind of Pure Compassion, one must nurture Pure Love. To truly experience Pure Love, one must commit to Pure Forgiveness. To fully fathom Pure Forgiveness, one must engage with Pure Generosity. To grasp Pure Generosity, one must perform with Pure Action. In order to perform with Pure Action, one must first communicate with Pure Speech. To acquire Pure Speech, one must realize Pure Thought. These are the Ten Purities and how one follows their path.”

“Oh great Tivone Mata, bless you for your instruction,” a village man said. “If one wishes to embark upon the path of the Ten Purities, how does one achieve Pure Thought?”

“To attain Pure Thought, one must train the mind,” Tivone Mata Kargteka said.

“How does one train the mind?” a farmer woman asked.

“One trains the mind through the application of the Eight Golden principles,” Tivone Mata Kargteka replied.

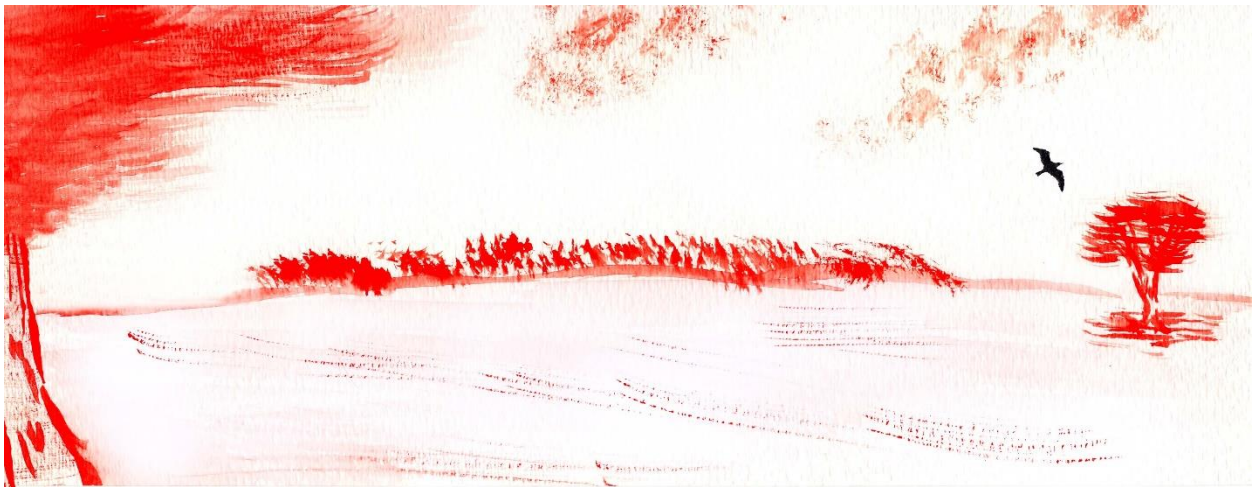
“What are the Eight Golden Principles of training the mind?” a young village girl asked.

“Sit with me and I will teach you.” Tivone Mata Kargteka smiled.

— From the Teachings of Tivone Mata Kargteka in The Golden Book of Great Fortune, Chapter 6.

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DAESHEN LANDSCAPE PAINTING



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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.

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THE FIRST CHAPTER OF
THE CRIMSON GODDESS
(*THE DRAGON STAR SAGA – BOOK 4*)

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

WAGON WHEELS rumbled and horse hooves clattered as men, women, and children hurried, shuffled, and wandered through the stone-lined streets of a narrow, flagstone plaza near the center of the free city of Tanjii. The evening light of the setting sun bathed the square in a copper-golden hue. At the southern corner of the plaza, sat a wide granite edifice, slender windows spaced equidistantly along two of its three floors, its red-tiled roof seeming aflame in the golden sunlight. Across the plaza from the building stood a shabby wooden cart with a man selling spiced meat pies. Two other men stood eating meat pies and watching the unassuming building across the plaza.

“They’re late.” Abananthus took a bite of his pie, appreciating the spicy flavor and trying to ignore his inability to identify the source of the meat. Goat, maybe? Possibly lamb. Squirrel? He’d heard the Shen people ate dogs. He did notice fewer dogs in the city than expected. He tried not to think of his childhood dog and took another bite.

“They will arrive soon. The plan will work just as intended.” Rankarus wiped his mouth on the back of his shirtsleeve and sniffed at the pie in his hand. “What meat is this?”

“I think it best not to inquire. Or to imagine.” Abananthus took another bite of the pie, trying to pay more attention to the secret rakthor embassy across the plaza. No flag flew from its roof. No sign marked its nature. People of the city knew, but they ignored it. The way he ignored the texture of the food in his mouth.

“I hear they eat cats here. Hope it’s not cat.” Rankarus took another bite as he scanned the plaza. “Tastes good, though.”

A phrase came to Abananthus’s mind as he chewed and waited for their grand plot to begin. “*In life as in food, too much spice often signals a rot hidden beneath the flavor.*” He reflected that, much like the meat pie getting smaller in his hand, his life contained a great deal of spice these days. Stealing what might be an ancient urris artifact fashioned to use The Sight from a well-guarded rakthor embassy — spice indeed! He nearly felt nostalgic for being chased across the countryside of Punderra and Juparti by Soul Catchers and Dark Seers. He had once thought Kellatra and Rankarus to be a tediously unremarkable couple with a pleasantly monotonous life, an exceptionally poor assessment of their nature. But still, he’d rather be helping them with their

various schemes and quests than sitting in his old trinket shop back in Nahan Kana.

“There don’t seem enough people here in the plaza for this plan to work.” Abananthus made a quick mental count of the men and women walking through the plaza on the way to their various destinations.

“Don’t worry, my friend.” Rankarus reached up to pat Abananthus’s wide shoulder. “I have prepared for every contingency this time.”

“This time?” Abananthus frowned. “How often have you done this manner of thing?”

“Once.” Rankarus took another bite of his meat pie, licking his lips. “These are very good. I may get another.”

“And did the ruse work this other time?” Abananthus sensed prevarication in Rankarus’s posture.

“Look. Their carriage approaches. Now it begins.” Rankarus stepped into the plaza, heading for the carriage pulling to a stop near the front of the unmarked embassy.

Abananthus followed his friend, worried now as their strategy leapt into motion. “*Planning a deed and succeeding in a deed require vastly different talents.*” For once, he wished the phrases acquired on his many travels remained silent in his head.

Kellatra climbed out of the black lacquered carriage with Kadmallin and Sketkee. The rakthor woman wore a cloak with the hood pulled up over her head. After spending time with her over the last several days, he found her different from the few other rakthors he’d met. She seemed more ... approachable. Her reptilian features still unsettled him, but he found her clear, dispassionate way of thinking reassuring, given the nature of their conjoined endeavor. Her companion, Kadmallin, struck him as dangerous and dependable. Good qualities to have in a partner.

As the trio approached the entrance of the embassy building, four men who had been loitering nearby stepped forward as a group. Abananthus did not remember their names, but he recognized them by sight. He and Rankarus had met them in the ale room of a Tanjii inn the prior day. They’d talked with the men, buying them drinks, telling them stories, giving them the information required to follow the suggestions they made. Actually, Rankarus had done all those things while Abananthus sat largely mute, speaking only occasionally to reiterate and reinforce an essential point. Now these four men stood to be the spark amid the kindling of their plan.

“Rakthor demon!”

“Blockade our city, will ya!”

“Should burn all you snakes in a pit!”

“Lizard lovers!”

The men shouted curses at Sketkee as she, Kellatra, and Kadmallin hurried into the unmarked door of the embassy. People in the plaza stopped and gawked at the shouting men. Some drew closer.

“Prolly gots a whole nest’a rakthor snakes in there!”

“Can’t block our ships ’cause’a the hertics!”

More people stopped to join the men in their shouting and cursing. Sketkee ushered Kellatra and Kadmallin through the door first, turning in a way that allowed the cloak of her hood to slip

from her head. A gasp rose from the growing crowd followed by even louder profanities as she stepped inside and slammed the door closed behind her.

“See.” Rankarus smiled and licked the last crumbs of the meat pie from his fingers. “It’s working exactly as I planned.”

“It does seem to follow the order of your construction.” Abananthus looked to the half-eaten meat pie in his hand, his hunger dissipated by his worry and no longer able to overcome his suspicion of the pastry’s ingredients. “Precisely how did it work the last time you did this?”

Rankarus glanced at him, a moment of worry evident in his eyes before a grin spread across his face. “Let us focus on the present rather than the past. Come, we need to be ready to perform the next element of the plan.”

Abananthus shook his head and followed his friend across the plaza. Rankarus liked to complain that Kellatra took too many risks, but Abananthus found them hewn from a similar wood. Both were extremely capable, but both tended to overestimate those capabilities. He hoped this did not prove to be one of those times.

The Dragon Star Saga is a continuous novel spread over several books. The Seer story arena and the rest of *The Dragon Star Saga* continues in *The Crimson Goddess (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 4)*.

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The Lost Temple (The Dragon Star Saga – Book 3)

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