

THE CRIMSON GODDESS

THE DRAGON STAR SAGA — BOOK FOUR
(EPISODES 11-14)

G.L. BREEDON



OVERTURE



WIND FLUTTERS the hemp rigging and flaccid canvas of lowered sails along the row of slender wooden ships. The wyrin merchant walks down the docks thinking of the note received from the roagg seer. A note that made no sense yet speaks to plain truth.

I ignored the stories as sailor tales. I should have listened.

The wyrin comes to the end of a narrow pier where several males gather and point to something floating in the water. He presses his way between them until he stands on the last plank of sea-weathered wood.

In a small rowboat tied to the pier-post, flops a fish that cannot be.

So large. Impossibly large. It happens here as well.

Red kinetts roam the waves around the southern coast of Orne Klaad, the Wood Realm, in schools of thousands. An easy fisherman's catch. A small fish, they never grow larger than a wyrin's paw. The floundering creature in the rowboat amasses the size of three grown wyrin males, its crimson scales mottled with tumorous growths.

The wyrin merchant turns and walks back along the pier.

I must contact the Juparti human. He may have heard of these events as well. What will it mean for trade upon the seas? What will it mean for the realms?

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 ELEVEN



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.

To continue reading the Seer story arena or the crossover between the Seer and the Philosopher story arenas turn the page.

THE SEER



KELLATRA

THE SCENT of cinnamon and wood smoke mingled in the air. The smoke came from a fire roaring in twin hearths on either side of the open, three-story atrium of the rakthor embassy entryway. Kellatra wondered where the smell of cinnamon originated. Maybe the two large rakthor guards, one male and one female, standing on opposite sides of the main door? The male guard held up a four-digit hand to halt her, Sketkee, and Kadmallin. They did not appear to be the same guards from her last visit, and she wondered how many rakthors the embassy housed.

“You are unexpected.” The first guard seemed displeased, but in all honesty, Kellatra could not readily discern rakthor moods, even after several days in one’s company.

“We must see Ambassador Viktik.” Sketkee made no movement as she spoke to the guard. Kellatra assumed it best if she followed that example.

“I will fetch the head clerk.” The first guard nodded curtly and walked away, moving with a disquieting grace across the marble-tiled floor to an adjacent room. He returned a moment later with a smaller rakthor, the same one she had met on her previous appointment. A female, the rakthor clerk stood about the same height as herself.

“Your arrival is unscheduled,” the clerk said.

“It is unscheduled because the need for it was unforeseen.” Sketkee bowed her head to the clerk. “We must gain an audience with Ambassador Viktik on a matter of great urgency.”

“I will see if he is available.” The clerk seemed annoyed but hurried off to find Viktik.

Kellatra looked toward Sketkee and Kadmallin but said nothing. They held their silence as well. They’d discussed the need to call as little attention to themselves as possible by avoiding any unnecessary conversation. They’d said all they needed to say regarding the events of the coming minutes over the course of the last five days.

Presently, the rakthor clerk returned. “Follow me. I will lead you to his study.”

“Thank you.” Sketkee led the way, with Kadmallin bringing up the rear. The three followed the clerk across the atrium and up a wide marble staircase to the third floor.

As on her first visit, Kellatra admired the interior architecture of the structure. From the outside, it looked like any other merchant house of management, but inside, it revealed an austere opulence. She’d heard the building once belonged to a wealthy member of the Circle of Elders. She noted a number of places where the rakthors had removed structural ornamentation to create a more astringent aesthetic. Sounds from outside reverberated through the windows. She could not make out the shouted words but knew their general import. Rankarus had been correct in boasting of his ability to create a diversionary crisis outside the embassy.

As Kellatra walked, she embraced The Sight. She sensed the cool air of the stairwell, saw more deeply the interplay of stone and wood in the construction of the building, perceived the pulsing life of Kadmallin, Sketkee, and the rakthor clerk, felt herself at one with everything — at

peace within her mind. The Sight offered them protection if their plan did not go as hoped, and it gave her an advantage in lying to the rakthor ambassador.

The clerk walked past the library where Kellatra had examined the artifact and opened an adjacent door. Viktik sat behind a wide table in the small, windowless room. The chamber seemed little more than a large closet.

“This is unusual behavior even for you.” Viktik stood to greet Sketkee, ignoring Kellatra and Kadmallin. She’d been warned to expect this, even though they had met. Rakthors generally held little regard for humans, or indeed any other peoples, unless necessity demanded it.

“I apologize for this unexpected meeting.” Sketkee stepped closer to the table. “I wish to have Kellatra examine the artifact again.”

“To what end?” Viktik frowned. “She has already examined it.”

Kellatra didn’t know whether the rakthor’s frown indicated annoyance or curiosity. She realized she needed to pay close attention to Sketkee to correctly interpret her facial gestures.

“I wish her to make a more thorough examination to determine conclusively whether the artifact is of urris origin or not.” Sketkee placed her hands on the table’s edge. “If the artifact is not of urris origin, then there is no need to take it to the Forbidden Realm. You may return with it to the Sun Realm, and I will proceed with Kadmallin to the Forbidden Realm to continue my research into the phenomenon of the dreams.”

“I am pleased you are here then, as I have reached a similar conclusion myself.” Viktik did not elaborate. “Why at this late hour? Why today? Several days have passed since you were last here.”

“I did not immediately accept Kellatra’s findings,” Sketkee said. “It required several conversations to convince me that my judgment may be in error. And we must examine it today because she boards a pilgrim vessel in the next day or two.”

“I see.” Viktik glanced at Kellatra. She stared back at him, her face open and calm, her embrace of The Sight complete. “How do you propose to get past the Alliance blockade?”

“The captain I spoke with mentioned bribes, but said no more,” Kellatra lied. In truth, they still had no ship to board, and she did not know if or when they might find a vessel and a way past the blockade.

“Very typical.” Viktik shook his head. “Probably wyrins. They have an unseemly mercantile manner. Always willing to place commerce ahead of communal security.”

“Then you agree with the blockade?” Sketkee sounded surprised.

“Not at all. I think it a waste of resources based on a misjudgment of statecraft.” Viktik’s voice rose. “There is little reason to assume that the sinking of our joint ambassadorial ship with the wyrins, yutans, and roaggs was intentional. A blockade is as likely to lead to a war as to compensation.”

“At least we still agree on matters of state,” Sketkee said. “Now, will you allow Kellatra to examine the artifact, so we may determine whether you are also correct about matters of natural philosophy?”

“I will.” Viktik nodded. “It will be satisfying to resolve the issue definitively. If you will wait

in the adjoining library, I will go and retrieve the artifact from the vault.”

Viktik led them into the library and left by the door to his small study. As he closed the door, Sketkee turned to Kellatra.

“He should not be long. The vault is in the basement,” Sketkee said. She spoke these words for those they assumed listened to the room.

She’d told Kellatra that Viktik did not trust the embassy staff to leave something as valuable as the artifact in the vault. He probably had not even mentioned its presence to anyone in the embassy. He would instead keep it someplace close to him but safe.

Kellatra said nothing. Neither did Kadmallin. She checked her breathing and awareness, ensuring her grasp on The Sight. She felt glad for holding it. Waiting normally left her anxious and prone to impetuous action. It would be easy for her to take the artifact from Viktik and the embassy. She sensed it even now, vaguely, like the buzzing of an insect in another room. Not in his study but nearby. Down the hall. Close. Neither Viktik nor the embassy guards could stop her from taking it. But then they would know she had it, and she and her family would be hunted again. Best to follow Rankarus’s plan, however convoluted it might be. She had an unpleasant history of acting without a plan.

For the last several days, her presence among the rakhors, and especially Sketkee, brought to mind the night she met one for the first time. The same night she acted impulsively with no heed to the consequences. An act that altered her life and nearly ended it.

TEN YEARS AGO

DEEP FRIED pastries of apple and raspberry, tinted with cinnamon and glazed with honey. Spiced wine chilled in double-walled, clay jars filled with ice. Baked dumplings stuffed with pork and cardamom. A pungent sauce of baked goat’s cheese, garlic, and tomato for dipping the thick slices of cornmeal bread. A feast of small morsels to feed the guests of Kellatra’s father’s annual dinner party. Kellatra took another sip of spiced wine as she spoke with a rakhorian ambassador.

“Your Mumtiba accent is exceptionally good,” Kellatra said as she looked around the room at the other invitees.

“As part of our training, rakhor ambassadors study all of the languages of Onaia.” The rakhor towered over her, and she felt obliged to keep a good distance between them lest the wine and staring up at him make her dizzy.

“Then you speak yutan, wyrin, and roagg as well?” Kellatra had never had a great knack for languages. She spoke and read Shen and Easad, but not with any real proficiency. She’d always admired those who mastered other languages with ease, and the notion of speaking the languages of the other realms fascinated her.

“I am also familiar with the dialects and variations of each language,” the rakhor ambassador said. He’d mentioned his name, but it escaped her. Too many consonants to make sense of and remember. And she only spoke to him because he stood at the table with the food, the placement of which offered the best view of the great gathering hall of her father’s estate house. A station

where she could observe everyone who entered. Her eyes surreptitiously tracked one individual in particular. She saw the man who consumed her interest speaking with another one of the councilmen near the door to the back garden.

How could her father invite the man? Did he not know? Did he not at least suspect? Had he been oblivious all that time? It escaped her attention for longer than she wished to admit, but still. He should have known if she did not. And she should have suspected if he did not. But how could her father stage such a festivity so soon after her mother's death? An event her mother planned. Surely, it should have been canceled or postponed in deference to her memory.

"What is the nature of your studies?" The rakthor ambassador's question brought her attention away from the man across the room. She wondered if the rakthor might ask her about The Sight. She assumed that to be the reason he attended the party. Rakthors could not use The Sight, and it made them curious regarding it. Especially if one was an ambassador to Juparti living in the City of Leaves.

"My studies are esoteric." Kellatra normally took any opportunity to speak of her studies, but she found her enthusiasm diminished in the face of another more concerning matter. "Study of the history of The Sight, how its uses changed over time and in different lands. And the difference between The Sight in different realms. I have heard there are a few rakthors who have been able to attain the use of The Sight in the Sun Realm."

"This is true. There are a few rare deviants who have managed a limited use of The Sight. Our natural philosophers have dissected their brains and other major organs but have found no conclusive cause for their abnormality." The ambassador continued to talk, but Kellatra found she'd lost interest in the conversation and the pastries with the mention of dissected brains. How odd the rakthors were to consider something like The Sight as a deformity.

She looked across the room and saw the man who held her attention walk through two large glass-lined doors out to the back garden. She excused herself, with a graceless lack of tact, in the middle of the ambassador's impromptu lecture on rakthor anatomy and headed for the garden through the nearest door.

As she passed into the cool, night air, she took a deep breath, smelling the jasmine still in bloom. Lanterns aglow with the soft light of burning oil sat at tables around the patio near the house. She scanned the shadows and saw the man she sought walking alone through the beds of manicured flowers beneath the trees in the center of the garden. She stepped into the shadows to follow him. It suited her to be alone, unlikely to be disturbed. When she neared him, she quietly called his name.

"Bandakaya."

He stopped and turned to face her, his thin lips curled, hinting at a sneer, his black eyes reflecting the lantern light from the patio.

"Kellatra. I had hoped you might follow me here. You have been staring at me long enough this evening. I began to wonder if you wished an assignation." Bandakaya smiled. "Although normally, I am referred to as Councilman Bandakaya, I suppose, since it is an informal evening, Bandakaya will do."

Kellatra found herself bound in sudden silence, her throat tight and unable to work, her stomach roiling with imaginary eels, her legs weak, and her head dizzy. Maybe she should have rehearsed words to speak rather than re-stoking the flames of her anger. That fury rose within her, giving her strength, clearing her thoughts, setting her tongue free — a wave of fire leaping from branch to branch through the tree of her body and mind.

“I know it was you.” Kellatra took a step closer, her anger overwhelming her revulsion.

“I am uncertain what you speak of.” Bandakaya smiled, his voice silken and soft. “Possibly, you have had too much to drink.”

“I know you killed my mother.” Kellatra’s voice became ragged as she spoke the words that had been sitting in her heart for weeks.

“You are not well.” Bandakaya’s charming tone crumbled, replaced by a threatening, low growl. He looked around to see if anyone might be near enough to hear. “The physicians were very clear that your mother died of a heart malady.”

“Nothing ailed my mother’s heart, other than the disease of its relation to you.” Kellatra clenched her fists, thumbnails biting into the flesh of her fingers in an effort to control her anger. “I know of the affair between you.”

“Yes, the wine has addled you.” Bandakaya stepped closer to her.

“I know she spurned you.” Kellatra struggled to keep from shouting. “Is that why you killed her?”

“These malicious accusations are unfounded and dangerous.” Bandakaya closed the gap to stand three hands apart, his eyes conveying the threats hinted at by his words.

“You think no one will believe me, but I can prove my mother broke faith with my father in your bed.” Kellatra spat the repugnant words at him. “When others learn of this, they will see your hand in her death. They will know you used The Sight to stop the heart you could no longer possess.”

“You will speak nothing of this mad, imaginary tale.” Bandakaya leaned forward, his voice filled with menace. “You hold no proof that can point to anything but a natural death.”

“I have her journals.” Kellatra raised her chin. “It is enough to suggest doubt and demand The Sight be used to probe you for truthfulness.” A seer with the gift of touching minds could perceive deception in another. Only another seer similarly gifted might succeed with duplicity. “They will kill you for breaking the oath.”

“No one will believe you, no matter what falsely conjured documents you proffer, for you are a feckless girl known for her embarrassments, and I am a well-placed, much loved, and very powerful member of the Academy.”

“You admit it.” Kellatra blinked, surprised by Bandakaya’s words.

“I have said nothing that forms an admission.” Bandakaya bent close to her, his mouth near her ear. “But if I had, there would be nothing you could do. Unless you wished to meet a similar fate, falling asleep one night and never waking.”

Kellatra sensed Bandakaya embrace The Sight, using it to hold her firmly in an invisible hand, pressing a wave of unclarity into her mind. Obviously intended as a silent admission and a threat

to frighten her into submission, his assault with The Sight elicited a contrary effect, the anger in her breast igniting to consume all fear and thoughts of restraint. Most seers could not grasp The Sight while possessed of a mind of anger. It clouded the calm needed to attune oneself with the true nature of reality. Kellatra had always found that anger — justified, righteous anger — sharpened her mind and produced a clarity that allowed her to embrace The Sight with ease. She breathed deeply, becoming the grass beneath her sandaled feet, the leaves undulating on the branches of the nearby trees, the stone of the wall around the garden, and the flesh of the man before her.

Had there been two seers confronting her, one assailing her mind alone, she might not have so easily broken the hold Bandakaya held on her mind and body. He blinked in surprise as she stepped forward and slammed her palm against his chest. He flew backward into the air several paces. He halted his motion before striking a tree, lowering himself to the ground. She sensed him altering the nature of reality around her, trying to change the formation of her body. She knew what he attempted. And now she understood what her mother must have felt when he stopped her heart. But her mother had been in bed, wrapped in slumber the last time he'd tried this alteration. He now faced a seer fully awake and possessed of an anger beyond fathoming. Moreover, he confronted a seer who had studied not merely the history of The Sight, as she had told the rakthor ambassador, but more importantly, the history of how The Sight had been used in battle.

Her heart paused a beat before she restored the function of reality within her chest. Then she returned the assault, altering the reality of Bandakaya's body in a way unexpected and cruel. A poetic woman might have crushed his heart, to repay the debt he'd incurred in stilling her mother's breast. But Kellatra had never liked poetry. She held his body tight with invisible forces and crushed his brain within his skull instead.

Bandakaya went limp and collapsed to the grass as she released him. Blood oozed from his eyes and ears. She stared at him, her anger slowly burning off — fuel expended and transformed to smoke. She experienced her body go still once more, then a blackness pulled at her mind and she ceased to think of anything at all.

THE PRESENT

THE SQUEAL of poorly oiled hinges brought Kellatra's mind back from the past to the current moment. The main door of the library swung open and Viktik entered. He carried the black-lacquered box that contained the artifact. He placed the box on the table near Kellatra. She sensed the artifact within. She resisted the irrational urge to snatch it and run. She had a tendency toward impulsive action. Had she taken the time to plan a revenge against Bandakaya, she might not have been banished. A counter thought occurred to her — that if she had not been banished, she would not have met Rankarus and never given birth to Lantili and Luntadus. Impulse might have its unforeseeable advantages, but near-term costs often weighed heavily. She had Rankarus, and he had a plan, and they needed to follow it to its conclusion to avoid unfavorable outcomes.

“You should proceed with haste,” Viktik said as he opened the box. “A crowd of humans has

gathered outside the building.”

“Four men accosted us upon our entry.” Sketkee went to the window. “Their numbers are multiplying considerably.”

Kadmallin joined Sketkee at the window. The man still had not spoken, obviously well practiced at being silent when in the company of rakhthors.

“There have been incidents since the blockade.” Viktik unwrapped the artifact and handed it to Kellatra. “The location of the embassy is not common knowledge, but it is not a secret.”

“I will take no longer than necessary.” Kellatra accepted the artifact into her hands, its surface cool against her palms. She wondered what material composed the shell. Crystal? Simple glass? Something more exotic and unknown?

Kellatra let her hold on The Sight deepen, extending her awareness into the artifact in her hands. She stared into the tiny constellations of brilliant-colored matter that comprised its interior. A web of tinted specks that gave the impression of order in the midst of chaos. What could their function be? As she studied the strange crystal, she sensed something touch her mind, as it had when she’d held it previously. This time, she did not shy from the presence or release her inspection, but rather held her mind still, awaiting whatever the artifact might do.

An image appeared unbidden in her inner eye — a snow-shrouded field in winter, a lone, ice-cloaked tree standing in defiance of the cold, its bright-red bark seeming aflame from within, a blue-tinted sun above, peeking through a cloak of coal-black clouds.

Kellatra held her breath, knowing the vision emanated from the artifact, uncertain how to respond and chilled a bit by the frost mirage, but more by the certainty that it resembled an illustration she’d see in the pages of *The Unseen Codex*. How could that be? Did her memory leave her mind mistaken? Unfortunately, Rankarus’s copy of the original codex only included sketches of a few of the illustrations. She would need to rely on her memory, and his, regarding the page in question.

Her mind filled with thoughts in response to the vision from the artifact. What did it mean? How could it be possible? Was the artifact communicating with her? How could she reply? Should she reply? What did the connection to *The Unseen Codex* mean if true? And how could that be possible? What odds stood against her and Sketkee meeting, her with the codex, and Sketkee with the artifact? Had those odds been adjusted by the hand of an unseen player? How did this urris artifact relate to the codex, and how did both connect to the dreams of the new goddess and the pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm?

“You seem surprised by what you see.” Viktik’s voice sounded close in Kellatra’s ear.

She sighed and handed the artifact back into his open fingers.

“Not surprised,” Kellatra lied the lie she’d prepared with Rankarus and Sketkee the day before. “More confused. I believe I recognize now the craftsmanship of this device’s manufacture. I think I know the man who made it. Or rather, I know of him. He has been dead for more than two hundred years. But he was famed in the courts of Juparti for creating decorative works of art to sit in the homes of wealthy patrons. He made devices in all manner of size and appearance, but I remember that he made small crystals like this that were used to mark the passage of the seasons.

He managed to attune them to the motion of the moons and the sun. It explains why you say the device changed its interior at times. It's simply too old to function as it should anymore."

"That is an unfortunate but welcome revelation." Viktik stared at the artifact in his hands. He appeared uncertain what to do with it.

"Better to learn of its nature now than risk further embarrassment with the Central Governing Committee." Sketkee stepped from the window.

"I said it might be a piece of art." Kadmallin laughed and shook his head near the window. The two rakhors glared at him in open annoyance.

"You should still take the device back to Ranikttak if you return," Sketkee said. "The mechanical and natural philosophers there may wish to examine it to learn more about The Sight."

"You do not wish to have it?" Viktik sounded surprised.

"My interest is in the urris and the Forbidden Realm, not rare Juparti works of art." Sketkee bowed to Viktik. "I regret that my assumptions about its nature led me to breach the trust between us."

"We were both mistaken." Viktik returned her bow. "Perhaps..."

The window beside Kadmallin shattered, a brick creating a hole and a cloud of flying shards. Kadmallin raised his arms to shield his face and cursed. As the glass scattered across the floor, he leaned to look out the window.

"The crowd has multiplied again and become a mob." Kadmallin turned from the window, blood trickling along his cheek where a sliver of glass had sliced him. "Is there a rear door to the embassy?"

"Yes. Allow me to escort you." Viktik slid the artifact into an inner pocket between the folds of his robes.

Kellatra took a slow breath to keep herself calm and her grasp of The Sight firm. Now began the series of deceptions essential to their plan, each one necessary to the next. She hoped the riot Rankarus riled outside the embassy doors worked as he'd devised, or the rest of the plan might not.

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

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

INK-BLACK SHADOWS lay in rigid alternation with golden-orange light as the last illuminations of sunset passed between the dowels of the ship's railing to splay across the weathered boards of the upper foredeck. Lee-Nin sat with her back to the rail guard, enjoying the warmth on her shoulders and the cool salt-laden air on her face. She had not breathed fresh air in many days. Sao-Tauna sat across from her, playing with the puppy, the runt she called Kuru. Lee-Nin did not understand how a girl who disliked being touched or held found such enjoyment in petting and hugging a puppy. She considered it part of the ever-unfolding mystery of Sao-Tauna.

The other puppies had died of the same contagion that swept through the passengers and crew. Forty-three dead in all. It would have been more had Ogtankaa not discovered the contaminated water supply. Husbands left without wives, wives grieving for lost husbands, and everyone weeping for the children. Twelve tiny bundles of cloth heaved over the side of the ship with only prayers to protect them as they sank into the depths of the Zha Ocean.

She watched Sao-Tauna with the puppy. They had all three been fortunate to have Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa to tend to them. Neither seemed to require sleep, and both had taken shifts caring directly for her and Sao-Tauna when not helping the other ill passengers. She could not bear to consider the thought of needing to wrap Sao-Tauna in cloth and cast her into the sea. She had never allowed herself to think of Sao-Tauna as more than a pupil, a child in her charge, while she tutored her and her brothers in the palace. But now the story she'd told Sha-Kutan the first night they met felt more real to her than the truth. She did consider Sao-Tauna as her daughter. Though not of her blood, a bond existed with the child, and she could not envision life without Sao-Tauna's kind face and curious ways. No hazard, no matter how great, might drive her to consider ending that wonderful child's life. Her father did not deserve her, nor her true mother. They saw her gift as a threat. Maybe it was. It was certainly dangerous. But that did not make Sao-Tauna a menace.

"She looks much recovered."

Lee-Nin raised her eyes to see Ogtankaa standing beside her. She had not heard the woman approach. Odd that she should appear to mirror the thoughts in Lee-Nin's mind. She knew the woman considered Sao-Tauna a danger. While she understood the fear, for this reason, she did not wholly trust her.

"We are both much improved thanks to you and Sha-Kutan," Lee-Nin said.

"I am glad to see you both above decks." Ogtankaa sat down, her movement, as ever, graceful yet powerful. "I feared for a time we would lose one or both of you."

"Did you really fear this?" Lee-Nin did not understand where the impetus for the anger she experienced arose, but she decided to embrace it. Her exhaustion from the illness eased in the face of the emotions rising within her. "It would have solved your dilemma if Sao-Tauna or both of us had not survived."

“That is true.” Ogtankaa turned to stare at Sao-Tauna and the puppy. “My vow would be voided with her passing. But that does not mean I wish her ill or that I will not protect her. She does frighten me. I feel she may bring ruination to this world. But Sha-Kutan is correct. She is but a child. And innocent for being a child. And even beyond her dark gift, there is something special about her.”

“I am glad to hear these words from you. They ease my mind.” Lee-Nin did not expect such openness from Ogtankaa. The woman usually matched Sha-Kutan for reticence.

“I am not your enemy. Nor hers.” Ogtankaa looked up to the clouds lit afire by the setting sun. “And while I am his adversary, I am not truly Sha-Kutan’s enemy, either.”

“Why do you wish to take that other part of him away from here? To what end?” Lee-Nin decided that with the anger toward Ogtankaa ebbing from her breast, she could use this rare moment of rapport to seek answers she should have looked for long ago.

“Part of him does not belong in this world.” Ogtankaa squinted at the clouds. “It is dangerous in this realm and must be banished.”

“Maybe it was dangerous, but is that aspect of him, that shadow part, now more dangerous than that similar part in you?” Lee-Nin thought she knew the answer to this question.

“It possesses the potential for danger.” Ogtankaa looked down from the clouds.

“You both possess that potential. I have seen it.” Lee-Nin ignored the flashes of memory that came to mind of a clearing at night, a creature of light and a creature of shadow battling above a campfire.

“The shadow-aspect is the creature of violence and destruction. It is the nature of their realm and the essence of their being.” Ogtankaa sounded frustrated for the need to explain herself.

“And what of your nature?” Lee-Nin wondered aloud. “How is it different?”

“Mine is a nature and realm of light, the coalescing of order out of chaos.” Ogtankaa frowned.

“But you can be violent and dangerous as well, yes,” Lee-Nin said.

“When the need is present,” Ogtankaa agreed.

“Then could not this shadow facet of Sha-Kutan manifest the opposite of its original nature as well?” Lee-Nin asked.

“Yes. Clearly. You have seen this. I have seen this.” Ogtankaa sighed.

“He did not need to protect Sao-Tauna and me. He risked exposing himself to you in order to guard us.” Lee-Nin wondered if Ogtankaa would ever see Sha-Kutan the way she did. Which made her wonder how she did view him.

“This may be the human part gaining influence over it. Controlling it.” Ogtankaa’s voice wavered with silent skepticism.

“Does the part of you that is human control that part you that is of light?” Lee-Nin had wondered about the natures of the two beings she traveled with and now wished to learn as much as possible from Ogtankaa.

“No. It is a ... communion of minds.” Ogtankaa frowned again. “I understand your concern for him, for both parts of him, but I must do as I am tasked. It is my purpose in this realm.”

“He found a new purpose. So could you.” Lee-Nin realized that she, too, had discovered a

new aspiration. She liked it rather more than her old one, even for all the danger.

“Do you believe in punishment for those who are wicked?” Ogtankaa turned to stare at her.

“I do.” Lee-Nin wished to visit retribution on a long list of people.

“Then you should ask him how many people he has killed. How many innocents.” Ogtankaa’s eyes burned with passion. “Then you judge if that shadow-being you defend deserves to be cast back to its own realm, or perhaps deserves some more final form of punishment.”

Ogtankaa stood in a single swift motion and walked away, climbing down the steep steps to the main deck. Lee-Nin watched her go. The woman’s statement brought back other words spoken at sunset weeks ago.

TWENTY-FIVE DAYS AGO

SPLINTERS OF flame crackled along the bark of a dry branch, brilliant embers floating into the air around it. Lee-Nin added a second branch to the first, coaxing the coals beneath them to ignite the new wood. With the flames rising upward, she hung a small cast-iron kettle on the metal tripod set around the campfire, boiling water for tea. The tea kit came from Ogtankaa’s pack. The woman projected the fierceness of a lioness, but she insisted on a hot cup of tea with dinner. She hunted that meal in the woods, the setting sun dappling the forest leaves in gold and black. Sao-Tauna dozed by the fire after a long day of walking. Sha-Kutan sat beside her, chopping roots into a small pot that would, hopefully, soon hold a rabbit.

They worked in silence as usual. She’d grown accustomed to his reticence over their many weeks together. And now, when they spoke, she wondered if she spoke with the man or the shadow creature inhabiting his body, or somehow, impossibly, both at the same time. The oddness of it grew no easier with the presence of Ogtankaa, a woman with a similar split of minds and wills. She wondered how they did not go mad to hear another’s voice always in their heads. Or possibly it did drive them mad. She decided, as usual, not to ponder the notion for too long. It did no good. She needed to protect Sao-Tauna, and she could imagine no better protection than Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa. The truce between them gave her pause, but she saw no other way forward. The situation raised many questions that held no clear answer.

“Why did she hunt you?” Lee-Nin spoke aloud before she realized she’d formed the question.

Sha-Kutan stared at the wild carrot and the knife in his hands. He frowned at them, as though thinking, debating. Maybe man and shadow-man argued about how to reply.

“It is her nature. Her purpose.” Sha-Kutan returned to the carrot.

“The woman as well?” Lee-Nin wondered how a human came to willingly pair with such creatures.

“I do not know. I did not ask.” Sha-Kutan started chopping the carrot again.

“If that is her nature, her purpose, what is yours?” Lee-Nin wasn’t even certain which part of Sha-Kutan she questioned.

“My nature was violent, and I had no purpose.” Sha-Kutan did not look up, but his hands stilled once more.

“Who answers that question? Which part of you?” Lee-Nin stared at him, annoyed that he continued to look at the stub of a carrot in his hand.

“It is hard to say who speaks sometimes.” Sha-Kutan looked up, his face sagging with sadness. “Regardless, the answer is true for both.”

Lee-Nin considered this. Part of her wanted to pursue the answer with more questions. But would those questions be turned back toward her? Could she ask this man to share his past, both of their pasts, without being expected to reveal more of her own?

“Why did you hide?” Lee-Nin offered one more query.

“I did not wish to leave this realm.” Sha-Kutan turned his gaze to the fire.

“Why?” Lee-Nin found the desire for the reply to this question greater than expected.

“At first, the shadow part of me reveled in the delights of this world.” Sha-Kutan continued to stare into the flames. “The violence. The taste of food and wine. The sex. The pleasure and passions unrestrained. The sensation of being in and having mastery over another being. Humans are weak. Or so I thought.” He paused and blinked several times. “When we became two and the shadow portion learned to be human rather than wear a human, we did not wish to part.”

“Will you not change your mind about going with her?” Lee-Nin wondered what it would be like on that day. She’d never imagined her life entangled with a man or creature such as Sha-Kutan, and now she struggled to conceive what it would be like without him.

“Mine is not the will that must be altered.” Sha-Kutan looked up from the fire, the lips of his misshapen face curled, his eyes sad. “I will miss you. You and Sao-Tauna.”

Lee-Nin wondered at the phrasing of that statement for a moment before it became clear to her.

“You both intend to go with her?” Lee-Nin took a quick breath in surprise.

“We are one now. It took time to accept this, but we are inseparable.” Sha-Kutan nodded as though one part of him responded silently to another.

“Who will protect us when you are gone?” The question came without thought from Lee-Nin’s lips. She disliked the notion of relying on anyone for her safety, especially a man. She preferred to be the sole sovereign of her destiny, bound to no one person or place. Now that mode of living sat upended, her heart and deeds entwined with the needs and safety of Sao-Tauna. She did not like to admit that being with Sha-Kutan provided greater safety for Sao-Tauna, but the fact could not be ignored. That sense of security doubled with the presence of Ogtankaa. Without them, she would need to rely once more on her cunning and wits. But she had enough of both.

“I do not know.” Sha-Kutan sighed and picked up another carrot to chop into the pot.

Lee-Nin, having moved past any possible answer for her question, ignored Sha-Kutan’s useless reply. She would keep Sao-Tauna safe no matter who accompanied them. With help if she found it, or she alone if necessary. But she would do so no matter what.

THE PRESENT

“OGTANKAA SAID you wished to speak with me.”

Lee-Nin opened her eyes. She had not dozed, but her mind had drifted. The sun still hung near the horizon. Sao-Tauna still sat stroking the puppy. Only minutes had passed since Ogtankaa departed. She had not expected the woman to send Sha-Kutan to her side. She should have. Ogtankaa possessed a very literal mind. If she said she would do something, she did it with haste. If she suggested that another should do a thing, she expected it done as quickly as she would herself.

“Sit.” Lee-Nin gestured and Sha-Kutan lowered his massive frame to rest beside her, his back leaning into the railing behind them.

“You look much better today,” Sha-Kutan said. “Have you eaten? Sao-Tauna ate some soup. It might bring the color back to your cheeks.”

“I had some broth.” Lee-Nin felt disarmed by his interest in her welfare. She still did not understand why he cared, but she owed him her life all the same. “Thank you again for nursing us.” She needed to do more than thank him to repay the debt she owed.

“You would have done the same.” Sha-Kutan’s tone of voice made her realize the truth of his statement. She would have nursed him if needed. That knowledge made the question she intended to ask oddly more difficult.

“How many people have you killed?” Lee-Nin asked.

“Ah.” Sha-Kutan nodded as though to himself. “This is why she sent me to you. You were speaking of the pact I made with her. Of returning to that realm.”

“Yes.” Lee-Nin did not ask her question again. She let her eyes repeat it silently as she stared at him.

“Once, I would have said too many to count, but that is no longer true.” Sha-Kutan sighed. He looked at Sao-Tauna across the forecastle deck and lowered his voice. “I told you that when I was only a man, I was a bandit. A wicked man. As that man, I killed many people. And brought harm to many more. When I met the monk who help me tame my heart and mind, he tasked me with accounting for all the suffering I had caused. He sat with me as I recounted every life I had taken, every instance of abuse and theft and destruction. It required days. Long days. When I became a monk myself and united with the shadow part of me, we engaged in the same ritual, describing all the harm it had done and all the hurt it had wrought. This, too, required days.”

Sha-Kutan sat silent for a long time, staring past the railing into the darkening sky. Lee-Nin suspected he would remain so, that she needed to prompt him if she wished to have a more detailed answer to her question. He finally spoke in a strained whisper.

“As a man, I killed fifty-five men and eight women. As a shadow-creature, I killed one hundred and twelve men, twenty-two women, and eight children. Until the day I met you, I, we, had not killed or acted in violence since we were conjoined.” Sha-Kutan’s hand trembled.

Lee-Nin’s limbs tingled with unseen currents, her head clouded with conflicting thoughts, her chest tightened with mismatched emotions. She did not know what number she expected, but she had not expected one so large. What manner of monster sat beside her? Her own hands shook as she looked to them. She did not understand the welter of thoughts and feelings assaulting her. She should despise this man, but she did not. She should fear him, but his revelation brought more pity

than terror. She saw the look in his eyes as she looked up, the tears on his cheeks. He did not simply regret the lives he'd taken; he suffered for the loss of them. She understood now why he so readily agreed to go with Ogtankaa. He wished to be punished.

She found her hand holding his before she realized her arm had moved, but the words she spoke came with great effort.

"I killed a man." Lee-Nin had to breathe deeply before continuing. "He was violent. Cruel. A murderer. And I killed him. I believe he deserved it, but I didn't do it to seek justice. I did it to be free. I killed a man to free myself of him." She squeezed Sha-Kutan's hand. "I can't know what you think or feel when you remember all the lives you have ended, but I understand what it is to end a life, the weight of it that somehow seems lighter in the moment and gains mass as time passes. I don't regret killing that man, but I regret taking his life. Do you understand?"

"I do." Sha-Kutan nodded his head as he wiped the tears from his cheeks with his free hand.

"I do not want you to go with her, even if I believe you may deserve to." Lee-Nin could not assess and sort all the many feelings pummeling her heart in the moment, but this she knew for certain.

"I do not wish to go, and yet I do." Sha-Kutan shrugged his wide shoulders.

"I asked you once who would protect us when you are gone." Lee-Nin saw a vision in her mind of something that clutched her heart.

"I still do not know." Sadness returned to Sha-Kutan's voice.

"I do." Lee-Nin raised her chin. "You will. Once my health recovers, you will find me a sword, and you will teach me to use it. In this way, even when you are gone, you will continue to protect us."

Sha-Kutan smiled, the grin giving his scarred face a lopsided appearance.

"Yes," he said and squeezed her hand. "This I will do."

Lee-Nin smiled and took a deep breath of the cool, evening air. She felt cleansed and yet more greatly burdened than ever. She wondered at such conflicting emotions. How could they exist without dissolving one another?

She looked away from Sha-Kutan to find Sao-Tauna standing before them holding her puppy.

"Kuru is tired." Sao-Tauna sat beside Lee-Nin, cradling the dozing puppy in her small lap.

Lee-Nin sensed the gentle pressure of Sao-Tauna's arm barely touching her own and resisted the urge to embrace her. The girl would only squirm away. She also fought the impulse to release Sha-Kutan's hand. She sat there between her two strange creatures feeling curiously content. They watched the stars come out and said nothing. After a time, they got up and went down to the main deck and ate fish stew with Ogtankaa. Still, no one spoke. She fell asleep without speaking, the sense of contentedness following her into her dreams. She did not speak until the next morning, and only then to curse as Sha-Kutan woke her to reveal that the bilge pump had broken, and the ship slowly filled with water.

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

THE SEER



RANKARUS

DOG BARKS and baby cries rose with angry shouts and resentment-filled curses to bounce from brick walls out across the paving stones of the plaza. Rankarus moved through the crowd, making comments to people in passing, shouting epithets and insults — playing shepherd to the flock of humans massing into a mob outside the embassy doors. He needed to stoke the fires of animosity toward the raktors without allowing that antagonism to erupt into physical fury. The crowd he'd turned to a horde needed to create the impression of being a threat to those inside the embassy without actually presenting one. A balance of his intention and the crowd's indignation.

It had not been difficult spreading the seeds of this moment across the city in the preceding days. The right words to the right people in the right places. All of them local to the plaza and the embassy. Each predisposed to vexation at the raktors in the best of times and turned sour toward hatred with the Alliance's imposition of the blockade. It had been easier to create the mob than to control it. A mob possessed a collative mind and will not readily apparent in its constituent members. Alone or in small groups, the people shouting around him in the plaza would never have amassed to loudly confront the raktors with their long-held grievances. For one, they feared the reprisals of the city guards.

While the mob might yet face the hard steel of the city guards, it would be some time before it happened. Only a hint of smoke yet filled the air, and only a thin wisp of soot rose from the guard garrison six blocks away. Setting a garrison aflame presented great risks but could be accomplished by verbal persuasion. It had taken Rankarus three days of drinking in the most disreputable inns to find four men lowly and desperate enough to attempt the task. It had also cost him the last of their gold. He'd paid the men half before the task and promised the rest when the flames began. Only their greed and the sight of the gold allowed them to ignore the prospect that they were more likely to be thrown in jail by the city guards than to see another gold coin from Attuka, as he'd been known while setting his plans in motion. He'd done his best to alter his looks through dress and deception. The clean-shaven face he presented now looked nothing like the man who spoke to so many people in the previous days.

He wished he had someone to help provoke and restrain the crowd. Abananthus dealt with the second part of the plan, making sure the wagon they'd hired sat in the correct alley. Jadaloo remained in their small hut back in the pilgrim town up the coast. Kadmallin might have been helpful, but his role necessitated being near Sketkee as the plan unfolded. He wondered if the plan did not hold too many complications, too many deceptions. Whether their goal could be more easily accomplished in another manner. No. Sketkee needed to be seen to abandon the artifact, and the raktor ambassador needed to appear to lose it in just the right way.

An acrid scent of smoke on the evening breeze caught his nose. Someone had started a fire from broken crates, hay, and horse dung. Men tore pieces of wooden siding from a nearby wagon

to make torches. Rankarus considered whether he had timed the whole event wrong. The sun now sat behind the city walls, and the evening light faded into the darkness of night, so naturally, someone built a fire. But fires spread quickly. And actions one might never consider in the bright glare of day became all the more reasonable with darkness to help aid in anonymity. The sound of glass shattering swung his eyes forward. A hole sat in a window atop the upper floor. He remembered the location from the drawings of the interior which Sketkee and Kadmallin had made. Kellatra likely stood in that room.

His throat went dry. He sensed a change in the crowd, from anger and frustration to fury and violence. A rock flew through the firelight to shatter a window on the second floor. It reminded him of a similar night many years ago.

TWELVE YEARS AGO

“IT IS a lovely mansion your father has built. I particularly admire the northern style of the molding, and the tapestries are remarkably beautiful. Especially the two flanking the fire hearth. They are in an ancient style from [Kanhalla](#), I believe.”

“Thank you, Kinsa Faraggus. This is kind of you to say. Do you have an especial interest in tapestries and the artifice of buildings?” Kinsett Semalee said.

Rankarus, pretending to be a young kinsa named Faraggus, stood in the grand ballroom on the main floor of the Taleetoz family mansion in the midst of a monthly dance ball, the location of which rotated among the homes of the extravagantly wealthy attendees. Rhaga Taleetoz, a local Kahara Nattaa nobleman, a man of great wealth and influence in the city, had only one daughter, a girl of nineteen years called Semalee, named for the flowered bushes that grew so prominently in the gardens on either side of the family mansion. The father so loved his beautiful daughter that upon her eighteenth name day, nearly a year ago, he gifted her with a most expensive and extraordinary necklace.

Rankarus tried not to look at the exquisitely constructed string of jewels and gold hanging around the young woman’s neck, nor the chestnut-tinted flesh of the exposed bosom it rested upon. He also attempted to ignore the way her dress clung to the rest of her womanly features. A prospective buyer did not impress the seller by gawking at the wares.

“My own father considers expanding our estate house.” Rankarus took a sip of wine from the goblet in his hand. “While my mother is charged with the decorative considerations, it has left me with a greater interest in the constructive arts.”

“I see. Is your estate very far away?”

“On the far side of the Kota Mountains, nearly all the way to the Nang Ocean.” While Rankarus did impersonate an actual kinsa from a small eastern district, he possessed a limited knowledge of the man’s life. It would not do to be caught in a lie. He needed to steer the conversation to more neutral territory. “Would you like a refresher for your drink?”

“No. Thank you. I find this wine a little much for my head.” Semalee smiled, suddenly seeming shy. “My father does not approve of women drinking wine.”

“My mother feels the same about me, but I rather fear it has more to do with the quantity I consume than the beverage itself.” Rankarus smiled broadly and Semalee laughed. She had a pleasant laugh. More like a child than a wealthy, young woman. It sounded unencumbered by social training. Genuine. Rankarus liked it. And he knew he’d do well to keep her laughing. A laughing woman looked kindlier on a man. Not that he could not strike a handsome pose, or that he did not look dashing in his cobalt-blue-silk shirt and embroidered jacket, but laughter helped put people at ease, and comfortable people tended to be more trusting.

“What brings you to our great city, Kinsa Faraggus?” Semalee asked.

Her dark-brown eyes held his own as she spoke and Rankarus found he quite liked the girl. Only a few years younger than himself, over-protected and sheltered by her parents, she nonetheless radiated a sharp intelligence. She also emitted a palpable sense of insecurity, the result, no doubt, of her parents’ over-protectiveness. He felt sorry for her. Not sorry enough to forget robbing her, but sorry all the same.

“It is not an interesting tale, I’m afraid, Kinsett Semalee.” Rankarus began to walk around the edge of the great room, gesturing Semalee to follow him. If they stayed in one place too long, a local kinsa, a real kinsa, might arrive to pull her away. A walking couple provided a more difficult target for interruption.

“My mother insisted I visit the City of Leaves to broaden my education.” Rankarus spoke in a low tone, intimating mild embarrassment, but in truth to create a perceptible bubble of privacy around them. As though he were sharing a secret. Sharing secrets established trust, which she might then reciprocate with secrets of her own — such as the location of where she kept her glittering necklace at night. He knew from subtle conversations with the servants that she locked it in her room, but none knew where or how.

“She felt I had become a boorish conversationalist,” Rankarus continued, “and hoped to make me better company for herself and the bride she hopes to marry me to.” Implying a sense of competition could not hurt.

“You are engaged?” Semalee sounded surprised but as interested as he’d hoped.

“Not to anyone in particular,” Rankarus said. “There are several young women she considers foolish enough for the task and hopes to bribe one of them into the position.”

Semalee laughed again and he once more noted how much he liked the sound of it. A shame he would never hear it directed to his real name. Then again, not so much a shame. They walked in different realms, after all.

“And what of your father?” Semalee asked.

“Oh, he had always been a boring conversationalist, with no hope of reform, so my mother kept him home,” Rankarus added a small wink to his words and Semalee smiled.

“You are quite amusing, Kinsa Faraggus.” Semalee inclined her head toward him with a slight smile.

“It is my only redeeming quality, I assure you.” Rankarus returned the smile and tried to keep it as a young woman stepped from the crowd to join them. He stopped and politely bowed to the interloper. Possessed of an angular beauty that conveyed a conspicuous confidence, she returned

the bow with a nod and a dazzling smile.

“Kinsett Takula, allow me to introduce Kinsa Faraggus.” Semalee gestured with her long fingers toward Rankarus. “He is from the eastern provinces.”

“You are clearly very wise, as you have managed to snare the most interesting and beautiful woman in the room for your conversation.” Takula winked at Rankarus and smiled toward Semalee.

“Takula, don’t be absurd.” Semalee frowned, her motions suddenly flustered. “You exaggerate as usual.”

“I might exaggerate about my own qualities, dear Semalee, but never about yours.” Takula’s voice took on such a silken seriousness that Rankarus found himself believing the woman completely in her statement.

“You will make me blush with your compliments, dear friend,” Semalee said.

“How fitting, as I wished to speak with you about a blush-worthy matter.” Takula turned to Rankarus, tilted her head to the side, and smiled. “You would mind very much if I stole your conversation companion for a time? I really must speak with her alone. Feminine conversation, you know. Too delicate for the rough ears of men.”

“Of course. Certainly.” Rankarus bowed to both women in turn, knowing he had just been outmaneuvered by a far superior sculpture of conversations. He did not doubt that she held sway in every interaction she had with everyone she met. He nearly found himself feeling thankful merely for the pleasure of meeting her.

“You must find me later, Kinsa Faraggus.” Semalee gave him a parting smile. “Or at the very least, you must join us next week for my name-day celebration. All of the best people will be here. We might find you a bride to satisfy your mother.”

Semalee giggled at her joke as Takula took her hand and led her away. Rankarus smiled after them until they were out of sight. He needed a new plan. He could accept Semalee’s invitation to the next party but knew it would be of little use. For his plan to work, he needed to woo Semalee, to seduce her, if not in body then certainly in heart and mind. But he had seen the way she looked at Takula. The way Takula had looked at her. The subtle play of their eyes and the way they clasped hands as they walked away. A less worldly man might not have noticed. In fact, he admitted, the two young women might honestly be oblivious themselves. But doubt rested in his mind. Semalee and Takula were smitten with one another. He might be able to dislodge that affection, or he might be able to play the role of charming friend from beyond the mountains and still find his way into her graces and her sleeping chamber, but it would take far longer than he’d hoped. Another plan sprang to mind as he spied Semalee’s infamous brother standing across the room, boasting loudly of some insignificant accomplishment to a circle of young women. It would be complicated, daring, and would require the investment of all his reserves of coin, but it would also stand as a significant achievement that would enshrine his reputation with Kinorus and the band of thieves around him. Rankarus glimpsed Semalee once more as he left the party a few minutes later. She stood enraptured in some animated conversation with Takula. He laughed as he walked away from the mansion. He liked her, but not enough to refrain from robbing her.

THE PRESENT

SHATTERED GLASS and ear-cracking cries. The scent of smoke drifted through the mob as it shouted and undulated in anger and frustration. Men pounded against the entry door of the embassy. Others hauled the axle of a broken wagon to use as a ram. Wooden fragments from the wagon's smashed frame became torches held high.

Rankarus spun where he stood, taking the measure of the fevered people around him. He had lost control of them. He'd set them on one course and now they chose a similar, more violent path. One that would not end well for anyone. He'd intended to create the threat of a crowd attacking the embassy to convince the rakhthor, Viktik, to flee with the artifact. Now he saw the mob he'd manufactured actually assaulting the embassy. The men carrying the broken axle reached the door. It could not hold for long. When it collapsed, the mob would breach the embassy. And the rakhthor guards would defend it. And many people of the mob would be killed. Which would only drive the mob to greater frenzy. No, this did not go at all to plan. He knew if he tried to thwart them, tried to voice caution or convince the people to hold back, they would see him as a rakhthor collaborator. He knew, because he'd used those words himself to form the mob.

It reminded him again of that terrible night in the City of Leaves. Rankarus brushed that thought aside and pushed his way through the crowd as the men began battering the door of the embassy. When he reached a clearer space in the street, he began to run. He blamed the smoke as he wiped at his eyes. He'd tried to be clever again and failed. Failed people he did not even know. People who would be likely be dead by morning. Failed families whose fathers and mothers would not come home with the sunrise. Failed Kellatra. While he worried for her safety, the attack of the mob would force the rakhthors within to flee, taking Kellatra with them. But what would she think of him when she learned how wrong he'd been? He'd sworn he knew what to do. That no one would be hurt. That the Tanjii city guards would arrive in time to stop any real violence. He still had not sighted more than a handful of guards. They would come, but his diversionary fire at their garrison kept them away too long. A catastrophe of hubris and over-confidence.

He turned along another street and then down an alley, coming into the yard at the rear of an inn. A barn sat behind the inn, horses shuffling in the light of a single lantern. Abananthus stood holding the reins of a horse hitched to a small wagon.

"Did it work?" Abananthus squinted at Rankarus in the dim light. "What happened?"

"It worked too well." Rankarus placed his hands on his knees to catch his breath. "They're attacking the embassy. They could breach the doors at any moment."

"Oh." Abananthus frowned as he stared into Rankarus's eyes. He reached out a hand and placed it on his friend's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

Rankarus said nothing. He had no words to describe the feelings in his heart. *Sorrow* and *guilt* did not seem strong enough. *Remorse* alone did not suffice. He stood in silence, waiting for the next part of his plan to fall into motion and hoping it unfolded better than it had so far.

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

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

FOREIGN BIRDS with unfamiliar songs and multicolored feathers flitted through the air, hopping from tree branches to cracked tile rooftops and into the sky, calling out the arrival of the humans below on the street. Junari shielded her eyes as she followed the flight of a flock of colorful birds soaring low in the late afternoon sun. She walked beside Bon-Tao, the heels of the workman-like boots beneath the hem of her crimson priestly robes clacking against the stone-paved street. She looked to him, noting that his gaze flicked from the birds to the streets to the opened doors and windows of the buildings and back again — a pattern of vigilance. She appreciated his diligence, but wondered at the need for it here, on a side street several blocks from the central temple, recently cleared of the strange and dangerous fire-plants that plagued the city's ruins. He had refused to divulge their destination.

“It is a lovely day for a walk through a dead city,” Junari said in Shen.

“Every day is a lovely day at your side.” Bon-Tao kept his right hand on the hilt of the sword at his waist, but he slid the fingers of his left hand down to entwine with Junari's. He paused the constant searching of his gaze to smile at her.

“You have become a flatterer.” Junari smiled back. “It makes me suspicious.”

“Kantula and Jupterus would not allow me to lead you astray.” Bon-Tao returned to observing the surroundings as they walked.

“Maybe I wish to be led astray.” Junari looked at his profile, noting the angle of his nose, the line of his jaw, the strong muscles of his neck, and the definition along his arms. She sensed warmth where his hand held hers and considered that her statement held more truth than she intended.

“Hmmm.” Bon-Tao appeared uncertain how to reply.

“Where are Kantula and Jupterus?” Junari decided to avoid the awkwardness of the moment with practicality.

“Nearby.” Bon-Tao glanced behind him.

“Are they following us?” Junari looked behind as well. Customarily, her personal guards followed her everywhere. She had hoped they would relax the distance of their protective presence upon reaching the Forbidden Realm, but the discovery of the combustible, killing plants made that unlikely. She realized that her walk with Bon-Tao might be the first time she had been out of doors without them in months. It conveyed a great deal in favor of Bon-Tao that they trusted him alone with her in such a potentially dangerous place.

“Jupterus follows at a distance to ensure no one pursues us, while Kantula is ahead, ensuring we find no one there when we arrive.” Bon-Tao tugged her hand slightly and led her down a wide, curving side street.

“Arrive where?” Junari noted the smell of newly cut plant fiber in the air. A sign of recently

removed fire-plants.

“Arrive here.” Bon-Tao turned to her as the sharp curve of the street deposited them into a small open plaza cleared of all vegetation. A sunken stone pool sat in the center of the space with several thick-trunked trees growing around it, their leaves creating a canopy of shade over the still water. In between the branches hung a wide banner of red cloth, creating a kind of tent, open on either side. Beneath the improvised shelter lay a Juparti rug, its abstract blue patterns a pleasing contrast to the accompanying crimson-colored silk pillows. A low table sat on the rug, set with various fruits, a small wheel of cheese, nuts, olives, dinbao flat bread, and a clay jug of wine with matching cups.

“It’s lovely.” Junari raised her free hand to her mouth, tightening the fingers of her other hand around Bon-Tao’s. “This is for me?”

“There are too few moments to be alone to . . . talk.” Bon-Tao led her across the ancient stones of the circular plaza to the rug beneath the tree-suspended canopy. “This seemed a pleasant way to sequester ourselves from our responsibilities for a short time.”

“A wonderful idea.” Junari allowed Bon-Tao to help her sit on the pillows opposite the low table. She looked around, at the canopy, the food, the plaza. The thoughtfulness and planning of the gesture impressed her nearly as much as the subtlety of reasoning she knew must have been applied to Kantula and Jupiterus for them to allow this little excursion.

She noted with curiosity and interest that Bon-Tao seated himself beside her rather than across the table from her as she’d expected. *An intimate meal out of doors, then.* Her face flushed as her mind lingered on the many possible meanings of the word *intimate*.

“Would you like some wine?” Bon-Tao picked up the clay jug.

“I did not think any wine remained in our stores?” Junari nodded at the empty cup nearest her and he filled it.

“I managed to find one unattended.” Bon-Tao filled the second cup.

Junari realized then that none of what she saw could have been accomplished without the guidance and approval of one person — Taksati. The vision of her old friend and confidant helping to arrange a romantic meal in a secluded plaza of the city made her smile. Taksati made no secret of her fondness for Bon-Tao, and she showed little restraint in her hints that the man’s duties toward Junari’s person should extend far beyond protection. She flushed again, raising her wine cup to temporarily shield her face.

“You are pleased?” Bon-Tao licked his lips after a sip of wine.

“Very much so.” Junari lowered her wine to the table, raised both hands to cup his strong jaw, and pulled him into a deep kiss, showing him the extent of her pleasure by sharing it with him.

They ignored the food and wine as they devoured each other in kisses, gentle caresses becoming hungry grasps, continued touch and taste manifesting ever more longing. Junari experienced her craving for Bon-Tao as a woman facing a feast after suffering a famine. Too much time had passed since she’d had her hands on a man’s chest, his hands upon her waist, their bodies pressed close together. She wanted to pull her priestly robes from her shoulders and tear his shirt from his back to smash his naked flesh against her own, but she restrained herself, even as she

sensed Bon-Tao desiring the same, yet doing the same.

In the Pashist temples, priests could marry, and many did. A few did not, taking illicit lovers instead. While ancient Pashist texts proscribed sexual union outside the confines of a binding marriage, an equally ancient custom made allowances for priests to take lovers — providing they were also priests. Monks and nuns, of course, forswore sexual congress, but priests of the Tamal sect viewed priestly sex, combined with intensive meditations, as a means of transforming desire into pure bliss and attaining union with Nahan Tagana, the God Energy manifesting as the universe. Of course, women priests who found themselves expecting a child were in turn expected to marry, with banishment from the temple hanging above them as potential punishment. This required female priests to be very selective in their lovers and scrupulous in their use of protective measures to prevent conception.

Junari had taken a handful of lovers in her decades at the temple, always thankful she had the opportunity to follow the wide Pashist path rather than being forced to pursue one of the narrower faiths that would burn her alive for the audacity of proclaiming herself a priest, much less taking a lover beyond the bonds of marriage. But now, she led a new faith, the lone temporal representative of Moaratana's will in the world. Unfortunately, while instructions conveyed to her in trance and assembled by Raedalus as the *Red Book of Revelations* encouraged marriage between the faithful, and intimated the means of becoming a priest, it gave no clear guidance on whether priests could marry, much less whether they might take lovers, either sacerdotal or secular. This presented no concern for Junari until she began to think of Bon-Tao as more of a suitor than an adviser and protector.

These thoughts passed and pulsed through Junari's mind as she kissed and embraced Bon-Tao, twinned with the knowledge that her desire for the man in her arms extended far beyond his flesh. She held for him a passion she had never seriously possessed for any man — and it frightened her. When the palm of his hand brushed the side of her breast, she gasped at the electric thrill it sent through her and pulled back from him.

“My apologies.” Bon-Tao leaned away and lowered his head “I did not mean...”

“Do not apologize for doing less than I have been wishing you to do for weeks.” Junari smiled and took his hands.

“Our circumstance bears too many obstacles.” Bon-Tao raised his eyes and smiled as he sighed.

“Indeed.” Junari picked a bloodberry from a wooden bowl on the table and slipped it past her lips, the juice of the fruit both sweet and bitter against her tongue. From the way Bon-Tao's eyes followed her motions, she realized the gesture held a more seductive quality than she'd intended. She smiled inwardly at this as she addressed their shared plight. “Can we see our way around those obstacles?”

“You are the Mother Shepherd.” Bon-Tao plucked an olive from a bowl, pausing before eating it. “There is no away around that.”

“I am the Mother Shepherd, but I am also a woman.” Junari frowned at a memory. “I believe Taksati said those very words to me.”

“She is wise,” Bon-Tao said. “I must admit heeding her advice in regard to you.”

“If all the pilgrims were of the same mind as Taksati, we would find no impediment between us,” Junari said.

“For my part, there is no impediment.” Bon-Tao took her hand once more and looked into her eyes. “You have my loyalty as the Mother Shepherd, the Goddess’s voice, but this is a mere sliver of what my heart holds for you, Junari. You are more than merely a prophet and priest. You rule the temple of my heart as surely as you rule the temple of the Goddess.”

Junari swallowed. These words came the closest either had spoken aloud of the nature and depth of their affection for one another. She had avoided acknowledging the true tenor of her heart regarding Bon-Tao for fear it would reveal a fierceness of passion that might prompt her to impetuous action. By speaking first, his words made easier passage for her own feelings to find expression. As she let those words settle into her inner depths, she wondered how a soldier of Tanjii came to speak so eloquently of his heart. It made her long for him all the more.

“It is because I am the Mother Shepherd that I fear to speak of the passions of my heart.” Junari reached out to place her hand upon his chin once more. “I was so filled with love for the Goddess, I did not believe it possible for more love to be found there. But you have revealed rooms in the temple of *my* heart I did not know existed, and you have filled them with your presence, your kindness, your attentiveness, and your integrity. I wish I could cease to be the Mother Shepherd for a time so that our hearts might explore their inner reaches together.”

“It is impetuous to ask and reveals too much my inclination, but I must ask, can the Mother Shepherd wed?” Bon-Tao held her eyes with his words.

Junari blinked in surprise. Wed? She had been considering a lover not a husband. But now that the thought existed in her mind, it seemed to take hold — a tenacious ivy covering the innermost walls of her mind.

“I...” Junari struggled to begin her words, but soon found them pouring forth. “I don’t know if the Mother Shepherd can wed, or what it would mean for the temple or the flock, both here and in the [Iron Realm](#). I have not prayed on this, on you, to the Goddess, and I see now that I have not for fear of receiving an answer I do not wish to hear. I am not a queen to take a consort, I am a priest, and in truth, I cannot guess what the Goddess holds in her plans for me or for the faithful once the temple here is restored. I worry at following my heart toward you for fear it leads me away from the Goddess, and I fear that my devotion to her glory may lead me from a pure and true desire for you.”

They sat holding hands in silence for a while, Junari’s words settling around them — a chill air dampening the heated passions of the previous moments. After a time, Bon-Tao smiled and kissed her, tenderly, passionately, but briefly.

“Our path seems clear.” Bon-Tao grinned at her.

“How possibly so?” Junari found a smile coming to her lips in response to his own.

“We must do as we have been doing.” Bon-Tao brushed a lock of hair from her face, resting the backs of his fingers against her chin. “Finding moments alone in the day to speak in openness of ourselves and not the business of the temple. Catching kisses where we may in rooms

unattended. Discovering an hour or so each week where we might retreat like this to forget the constraints that hold us from one another.”

Junari kissed him as a sense of relief relaxed her body. She cocked her head as she parted her lips from his.

“You are not at all the rigid soldier I took you for when you first came to expel me from Tanjii.”

“And you are not the dangerous charlatan I took you to be. You are...” Bon-Tao glanced to the side as he paused. “Do not move and do not be alarmed.”

“When will you learn that telling me not to be alarmed only causes me to be so.” Junari felt the pace of her heart quicken as her mind imagined all manner of possible creatures or flame-inducing plants stalking them.

“Something is moving in the shadows across the plaza.” Bon-Tao leaned forward in a casual manner, picking up the knife blade to cut a small slice from a wedge of cheese, dropping the blade to let it clatter on the table.

“Who are you signaling?” Junari recognized the relaxed tenseness of his body and understood he had no hunger for a snack.

“Kantula is closest to the building. Jupiterus is on the other side.” Bon-Tao continued to look at her with his face, his eyes flicking left and right.

“They have been watching us this entire time?” Junari restrained the impulse to spin her head around and search for her protectors.

“Observing the plaza more than us. They insisted.” Bon-Tao slid the slice of cheese between his teeth.

“I don’t think I would have been so ... expressive of my affection had I known we had an audience.” Junari forced herself to focus on the importance of the present moment rather than her possible embarrassment. “Can you see what is in the shadows?”

“No.” Bon-Tao frowned and nodded toward the building in question. “Maybe I was mistaken.”

Junari turned to see Kantula, sword drawn, emerging from the wide, circular doorway of a building across the square. She shook her head and walked toward them. Junari recognized the determined look on the woman’s face even from such a distance.

“It appears our romantic respite is at an end.” Junari turned back to Bon-Tao. “But at least we found a few moments of freedom to speak of what has been so painfully held in silence.”

“Now you return to being the Mother Shepherd and I become once more one of her advisers.” Bon-Tao stood and helped her to her feet.

“But now we both see what else we are and what more we might be.” She took his hand briefly and then released it. She could not bring herself to kiss him with Kantula watching, and she ignored the thoughts of what the woman might have witnessed. She could trust Kantula and Jupiterus to remain silent about the nature of her relationship with Bon-Tao, but rumors would inevitably swirl around them if they did not already. And at some point, she needed to make a decision about him. About them. Could the Mother Shepherd marry? Did she wish to? Looking at her suitor, her near-

lover, as they walked out of the plaza, she realized that she found the notion of binding herself to the man altogether appealing. So much so that she thought of nothing else as they walked. Once reaching the curved main street that led back to the temple, her mind returned to more accustomed thoughts, one in particular holding her attention firmly — who or what had spied upon them in the plaza, and what manner of threat did it pose for the future of the faith?

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

WOOD CRASHED against wood. Doors shuddered under the impact of shoulders and feet. Muffled grunts and curses rang against stone walls. Kadmallin stood at the rear door of the embassy along a narrow hallway. Two large rakthor guards waited near the door, their swords drawn. Sketkee, the seer Kellatra, and Viktik stood behind him.

“We won’t be walking through that door.” Kadmallin tried to make his voice sound surprised and saddened. It came out angry. Angry still sounded right.

“Superfluous human speech to state the glaringly evident continues to surprise me.” Viktik stepped away from the door and the guards.

“Is there still an escape passage?” Sketkee walked beside Viktik. “There was when I was in this embassy several octads ago.”

“There is, but I’m sure that won’t be necessary.” Viktik sounded angered. “I’m certain this disturbance will be disbanded by the local authorities shortly.”

Kellatra followed beside Kadmallin. She kept her face neutral. Unreadable. He wondered if she felt as calm as she looked. It had something to do with The Sight, she’d said. He didn’t feel calm and did not want to. The riot outside the embassy walls did not look likely to subside. It appeared to him it might get worse. Kellatra’s husband had surprised him with the suggestion of creating a mob to assault the embassy, and Kadmallin had questioned whether he could accomplish it. Now he doubted Rankarus could control it. From the banging at the main door, it sounded as though giants attacked the building.

They walked up a flight of stairs and stepped into the main atrium of the embassy as the front doors buckled and the head of a wagon axle poked between them. Four rakthor guards closed ranks around the entrance as the doors burst open and a wave of men with axes, knives, short swords, and butcher blades clambered through the entryway.

“We might want to find that secret passage sooner than later.” Kadmallin drew one of the two swords at his waist. He handed the other to Sketkee.

“Yes. I agree. This way. Across the entry hall and near the kitchens.” Viktik ran, leading the way toward a hallway on the other side of the wide, high-ceilinged atrium.

While the rakthor guards held their ground, there were too few to push back the onslaught of people flooding through the shattered doors. Three armed men raced across the floor ahead of them, intending to cut off Kadmallin and his friends from escaping. He leapt ahead to run beside Sketkee, intending to meet the men in combat. The three men cried out curses as they suddenly tumbled through the air and crashed to a side wall. Kellatra held her hand raised in the direction of the men where they lay sprawled on the floor. Her face appeared as peaceful as ever. They reached the hallway to the kitchens, and he smelled roasted beef in the air.

“Go.” Kellatra motioned to Sketkee and Viktik. “I’ll do what I can to slow them.”

“She is right.” Sketkee ran along the hallway. Viktik followed her.

Kadmallin stayed behind. He watched as Kellatra held up both hands, tilting her head toward the humans and rakthors fighting in the atrium. The rakthors would not last long, outnumbered as they were. Abruptly, the humans began to fall to the floor, a ripple of collapsing bodies, first one then two, then five, then ten, then all the humans lay unconscious on the marble floor of the atrium. Those at the forefront of the mob pressing to climb through the smashed entry fell back upon their companions with cries of fear and curses about *Dark Sight*. The rakthor guards rushed the men in the entrance as stones fell from the side walls to fill the gap. Kadmallin saw no more as the stones around the mouth of the corridor he stood in also crumbled, creating a pile of debris, clouds of dust billowing up into the air.

Kadmallin coughed and held his hand to his nose as Kellatra stepped back into the hallway.

“That was impressive.” Kadmallin turned to see Sketkee and Viktik at the end of the corridor, entering the kitchens. “You’ve turned a bad day to something endurable.”

“Best we let Viktik think the worst, though.” Kellatra picked up the hem of her skirt and ran along the hall.

“Good idea to block the entrance to the corridor.” Kadmallin matched Kellatra’s pace. “No way out but forward now.”

“Thank you,” Kellatra whispered as they entered the kitchens.

Ovens and fire chimneys lined one side of the room with long preparation tables in the middle. He noticed no evidence of cooks, but Sketkee stood holding the door open to a storeroom.

“Quickly.” Sketkee motioned toward the shadows behind the door.

Inside, Viktik pulled on a wooden shelving cabinet filled with sacks of grain. It slid aside to reveal a dark corridor with a ceiling of arched stone.

“I have no lantern, and the tunnel splits, so stay close.” Viktik ushered them to follow.

“I can provide light.” Kellatra cupped her hand before her and a small orb of bluish-white light appeared, floating above her palm.

“I see.” Viktik stared at the ball of light a moment.

Kadmallin recognized the rakthorian look of surprise. He understood the response. Even in the Punderra Dominion, such open and frequent displays of *The Sight* were uncommon. Sketkee did not seem surprised, merely curious.

Viktik pulled the wooden cabinet closed to cover the entrance of the tunnel and turned to lead the way into its darkened recesses. “Follow me.”

They followed Viktik into the tunnel, Kellatra at his heels, arm held high to afford light, Sketkee close behind, and Kadmallin at the rear, sword still gripped in his hand. The corridor split twice, and Viktik choose the right-hand passage both times. Presently, they arrived at a terminus marked by the back of another wooden cabinet. Viktik leaned his shoulder to the hard wood and pushed. The cabinet slid inward several feet, and he slipped past into the chamber beyond it.

Kellatra followed, the light from the glowing orb above her hand revealing another storeroom. As Kadmallin entered and helped Sketkee shove the cabinet back into place, he noted the contents of the room. Sacks of flour, casks of ale, jars of wine, root vegetables.

“The keeper of this inn knows of the tunnel.” Viktik headed toward a steep staircase leading up to a narrow door. “He will help us.”

“I think I should go.” Kadmallin walked to the staircase. “This inn keep might help on a normal day, but who knows what will happen on a day when a mob attacks the rakthor embassy.”

“Kadmallin is right.” Sketkee nodded toward him. “A human face will find egress easier to obtain.”

“Yes. I see validity of your reasoning,” Viktik said to Sketkee.

Kadmallin hadn’t expected the rakthor to acknowledge him, but he found it annoying all the same. He unhooked the clasp of his cloak and tossed it to Viktik. “Put this on. Best to keep your faces hidden.”

“I’ll wait here,” Kellatra said. “To provide the light.”

Kadmallin nodded to her and headed up the stairs. Following the plan, Kellatra remained behind not to offer light but to ensure that nothing happened to the artifact. He doubted she’d ever let it out of her reach now. He pushed the cellar door open a crack and peeked into an empty kitchen. It seemed odd, but then he remembered the riot at the embassy. Likely, everyone in the entire neighborhood either participated in or gawked at the mob in the street. He slipped through the cellar door, pressed it closed behind him, and walked quietly to the back entrance. He checked that door as well, opening it a finger width and confirming what he hoped to see before swinging it wide and stepping into the backyard behind the inn.

Rankarus stood beside a small wagon filled with loose hay and a few sacks of apples. His large friend, Abananthus, held the reins of the horse.

“Is Kellatra safe?” Rankarus stepped closer to Kadmallin.

“No thanks to your riot.” Kadmallin saw in Rankarus’s eyes that he knew his plan had unspooled — a fallen spinner’s bobbin spewing thread across the floor.

“The crowd got more violent than I’d hoped,” Rankarus said. “She’s fine, though? And the others?”

“There are few threats I can imagine that might concern your wife.” Kadmallin reflected briefly on the truth of that statement. He’d witnessed seers in battle while commanding the palace targas in Punderra, but Kellatra possessed a greater felicity with the martial implications of The Sight than the seers he’d known. “She halted the worst of the assault on the embassy.”

“We should hurry before the inn fills up again or the stable boy returns.” Abananthus wrapped the reins of the horse around a nearby hitching post.

“Hide down the alley,” Kadmallin turned back to the inn.

He headed to the cellar and opened the door. Viktik and Sketkee stood with the hoods of their cloaks pulled up around their heads. Kellatra waited silently beside them. She let the glowing orb wink out of existence. The light from the open cellar door sufficed.

“I’ve paid the stable boy for a wagon,” Kadmallin lied. “Officially, we’re borrowing it. Kellatra can ride with me and you two can stay out of sight in the wagon bed. We should be safe. The question is where to go?”

“I know of another inn that will hide us while we assess the situation,” Viktik said.

“Good enough. Follow me.” Kadmallin led the way up the narrow staircase, through the empty kitchen, and out to the stable yard. He took the reins from the hitching post as Kellatra stepped up to the wagon seat. Sketkee and Viktik climbed into the bed of the wagon. They froze as they kneeled in the scattered hay. Kellatra, too, appeared motionless, one arm still gripping the rail of the driver’s seat. A voice rang out, and Kadmallin pretended not to move.

“At last, we find you, Kellatra of the City of Leaves.”

Two men with wide hats and black cloths pulled to mask their faces emerged from the shadows of the alley and into the light of the lantern hanging in the stable. In the momentary silence that followed, Kadmallin tried not to think about the next part of the plan. He hoped it went more smoothly than the plan to create a mild disturbance at the embassy. His life might depend on it.

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THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

CRACKLING CINDERS and luminous embers emitted thin wisps of smoke, radiant warmth, and undulating light. Tin-Tsu sat in a rickety, wooden chair facing the fire in the small cooking hearth, watching the flames dance over the old coals and dry wood, smoke swirling up the slender brick chimney. He took a sip of strong, fruity wine from the clay cup in his hands. It possessed a smoky aftertaste that made him think of charred-oak wine barrels. He liked it. As a priest, he'd abandoned wine, and as a zhan, he'd found no time for it. They'd discovered the jar of wine over a week ago but wanted to save it to mark a special moment. This day seemed significant. After nearly three weeks — twenty-seven long days — he'd recovered enough from his injuries to stalk the nearby woods with Tiang-Rhu. They'd killed and eaten their first rabbit, the bones of which lay in a pile on a plate on the wobbly table behind them.

“You are much recovered.” Tiang-Rhu broke the long silence with suggestive words.

“All thanks to you and your ministrations.” Tin-Tsu should have known Tiang-Rhu would raise the subject he least desired to discuss. He had introduced it before, and he would do so again. Eventually, Tin-Tsu needed to address it. He suspected his friend felt it his duty to broach it. An answer must be found, and only Tin-Tsu could uncover it.

“The day grows near.” Tiang-Rhu took a sip of his wine.

“But this is not that day.” Tin-Tsu lifted a cup to his lips as well, more to cover the emotion he feared his face displayed than any real thirst.

“As you say.” Tiang-Rhu leaned forward from his chair, grabbed a metal poker from the slate hearth, and stoked the fire. A brilliant cascade of incandescent ash ascended up the chimney hole.

Tin-Tsu wished to avoid the thoughts that demanded his attention and relish the day they had spent together. The preceding weeks had been difficult, more for Tiang-Rhu than himself. His primary occupation consisted of lying in bed and trying to heal or sitting nearby as Tiang-Rhu worked. Fortunately, Tiang-Rhu apprenticed under his temple's physician as a novice and so understood how to treat and bandage Tin-Tsu's wounds. However, their childhoods in the palace and hours praying in their temples did not prepare them to live the lives of poor farmers.

The small farm they now occupied held plenty of chickens for eggs, a cow for milk, a goat, two sows, and a garden plot of vegetables. Tiang-Rhu's first attempt at slaughtering a chicken left them eating eggs for days afterward. The axe did not completely sever the animal's head, and it made an unholy sound. And, when finally headless, neither expected the chicken's body to attempt escape by running around the yard. Still, it tasted good. As a boy, Tin-Tsu had frequently haunted the palace kitchens in search of a snack, so he remembered the general instructions for how to roast a bird and make soup from the remains.

As he grew stronger, Tin-Tsu had taught Tiang-Rhu how to use the bow that hung on the wall of the small farm hut, with the intention of learning to hunt and expanding their meal options.

Tiang-Rhu quickly learned the rudimentary skill of the weapon, but he had no tutor for hunting and tracking. His frequent forays into the woods saw him leave with optimism and return empty-handed and dejected. This day, with Tin-Tsu feeling significantly improved, they both stalked the woods for prey. After only two hours Tin-Tsu caught sight of a rabbit, and Tiang-Rhu managed to pin it in place with a well-aimed arrow.

He had cheered his friend's newfound prowess, and Tiang-Rhu laughed bashfully. Skinning and gutting the rabbit required both their efforts, as neither had ever done so. Tin-Tsu seasoned and roasted the rabbit with root vegetables in a pot, and they had a fine meal. The best they'd eaten so far in their time together.

Tin-Tsu came to see his convalescences under Tiang-Rhu's care as a sabbatical — a retreat where he might recover spiritually as well as physically. Tiang-Rhu maintained his ritual of daily prayers between his chores and tending to Tin-Tsu's wounds. And once he'd recovered enough to remain conscious throughout the day, Tin-Tsu did much the same. They prayed with the dawn, twice during the day, again with the sunset, and once more before retiring to bed. Tin-Tsu found his spirit reinvigorated. He felt no closer to answering the central question his life now posed, but he did feel more himself than he had in many months. It helped to have his old friend beside him, even though that brought complications of a different nature.

The emotions he'd long buried and tried to imagine as childish and ephemeral misjudgments unearthed themselves to seek consideration in the light. It occurred to him several times that his recovery, spiritual even more so than physical, owed more to Tiang-Rhu's presence than any prayers. His heart seemed fuller in the other man's company. He knew the feelings he held to be blasphemous, but he found the more time they spent together, the less he cared.

As he stared in silence at the blaze of the hearth, the vision from the fire ritual came back to him. It often did when he looked into flames. He let the memory of that reverie settle over him. He still did not understand its meaning. Could not fathom its import. But he understood it to be a true inner apprehension of the man he should aspire to become, even if he had no idea who that man was or what he might be tasked to accomplish. The more he thought of the dream, and the more he considered his feelings for Tiang-Rhu, the more he believed his future lay outside the temple or the palace. Somehow, he needed to chart a wholly different life for himself, one that both acknowledged the responsibilities of his past, yet also held true to the deepest nature of his inner essence.

“I will not go back.”

Tin-Tsu's sudden words broke the silence between them.

“Back to the temple or back to the throne?” Tiang-Rhu knew the divisions in Tin-Tsu's heart as well as he did himself.

“Neither.” Tin-Tsu took a deep breath, the tension he'd held for weeks and months evaporating from his muscles and bones as he exhaled. “I cannot return to the temple. My sister will rule better than I upon the throne. I must find a new path.”

“You will stay here?” Tiang-Rhu held his cup of wine very still as he turned to Tin-Tsu.

“Yes. For now.” Only with the answer to that question did it occur to Tin-Tsu that Tiang-Rhu

might not remain with him. The man did have responsibilities. He, too, had ties binding him to a temple. He could not ask him to stay with him. Could he?

“Do you wish to remain alone?” Tiang-Rhu nearly whispered his query.

“I wish you to remain with me. If you will.” Tin-Tsu swallowed. “If you desire it.”

“It is my greatest desire.” The smile on Tiang-Rhu’s face brought one of equal intensity to Tin-Tsu’s lips.

“Good, then. It is settled. We will be farmers.” Tin-Tsu’s smile broadened as Tiang-Rhu groaned. “Until I understand what this vision means me to do.”

They fell asleep sometime later, huddled in the small bed as the flames of the fire gradually faded. Tiang-Rhu previously slept on the floor while Tin-Tsu recovered. With his improved health, Tin-Tsu insisted they share the narrow mattress. As he dozed into slumber, his friend’s shoulder pressed close to his own, the soft sound of slumbering breath filling his ears, Tin-Tsu felt a tear roll down his cheek. He let it fall from his face to his pillow, smiling, chiding himself for sentimentality, but accepting it as a recognition of what a lovely day it had been.

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



VIKTIK

“DID YOU think your theft would go unnoticed? That you could hide from the Academy of Sight in the Forbidden Realm? I told you we could find you anywhere.”

“This is not the time, Kandua.”

“There is no time left for you, Kellatra.”

Viktik tried to move but found his muscles immobilized, legs and arms locked where he kneeled beside Sketkee, who seemed similarly frozen in place. He noted that the humans, Kellatra and Kadmallin, did not move, either. He found his mouth functioned normally.

“What is this? Who are these men?” Viktik demanded. They did not have time to waste with petty human conflicts. Although the fact of at least one of the men being seers and both present to capture the human female did attract his interest, she had served her function, and if she were captured for some previous crime, it mattered not to him.

“They are old acquaintances,” Kellatra said.

“Working with the raktors now, are you?” the man called Kandua said. “Are you trying to sell it to them?”

“We can come to an arrangement, Kandua,” Kellatra said. “I promise you a fair share.”

“There are things more important than coin,” Kandua said. “Like honor. You’ll come with us now.”

Kellatra lowered her arms with seemingly great effort, palms open toward the masked men.

“She fights back,” the larger, unnamed man said. “I cannot hold them all.”

Viktik felt the invisible bonds holding him begin to weaken. As they did, he calculated his possible courses of action. Did he attempt to assist this human woman against her adversaries? What might he gain from such an alliance and would it be worth the risk? He had no need to put himself or the raktor embassy at odds with the Juparti Academy of Sight. Did he aid this Kandua in the woman’s capture and thus put the Academy in his debt? Such an arrangement could be useful with his presumed return to the ambassadorial forces and a posting to the Juparti Dominion.

“We should not interfere,” Sketkee whispered beside him. “Human affairs are complicated, and we have no allegiances here.”

“Hold her, fool!” Kandua shouted and stepped forward.

“I’m trying.” The larger man raised both hands.

Near the horse hitched to the wagon, Kadmallin drew a dagger from the belt at his waist and dashed forward. Viktik frowned. An impetuous action for the human. Apparently, Sketkee had not trained him well. Kadmallin got two steps toward Kandua before the masked man waved his arm, and an unseen hand cast the armed human through the air and into the wall of the stable, the dagger slamming into his own chest. Kadmallin moaned and collapsed to the ground, clutching at the blade in his breast.

“Kadmallin!” Sketkee’s voice sounded excited to Viktik. Her continued interest in the human eluded his understanding. She would be better off without the distraction.

Sketkee made to move but her motion stilled. Viktik found himself once more incapacitated. He could only watch.

Kellatra stood in the wagon, her right arm extended toward Kandua. A bolt of lightning-like blue-white light erupted from her palm and flashed toward the man. The crackling, wavering bolt of light reached the man’s hand and rebounded toward Kellatra, striking her in the chest, flinging her from the wagon and smashing her to the ground not far from Kadmallin. The horse brayed but remained still. The seer apparently impaired its movement as well. Viktik could not turn his head but saw the human female lying motionless on the ground, the cloth of her dress singed black.

“Did you kill her?” the larger man shouted. The human sounded angry.

The other human male, Kandua, went to Kellatra and placed a hand on her chest. He shook his head.

“Dead.”

“We don’t get paid for bringing a body back,” the larger male said. “Months wasted.”

“I had no choice.” Kandua pointed at the dead woman. “She was too strong.”

“A mess. All a mess. Her dead. Another dead. What do we do with the lizards? Kill them, too?”

Viktik realized that it might have been better if he had tried to help Kadmallin overpower the two men.

“We can pay you. I have coin.” Viktik held a weak bargaining position, but he might be able to negotiate his life if not Sketkee’s.

“We’ll take whatever you’ve got.” Kandua walked toward the wagon.

“I have...” Viktik started to speak, but his mind went slack.

“You don’t need to tell us where your coin is. We’ll find it ourselves. Best we can hope for now.”

Viktik’s mind darkened as his eyes closed of their own accord, his thoughts fading into an interior darkness.

When his eyes fluttered open with the return to consciousness, Viktik sat up, trying to access how much time had elapsed since the seers forced his slumber. The absence of a stable boy and the echoed shouts and cries of humans still massing several blocks away at the embassy told him only a few minutes had passed. Sketkee lay on the wagon bed near him, unconscious. He tried to rouse her, but she did not waken. He pulled back her left eye flap and checked her pupil in the dim light from the lantern in the stable. She did not respond.

He inspected the folds and pockets of his robes and found them empty, his coin pouch gone along with the device. This vexed him, but not to the extent he expected. The device did not present the opportunity he’d once assumed, and so its loss caused no great concern. He was, he realized, in a better position without it. And the stolen coin made little difference.

He climbed out of the back of the wagon and walked around to where the two humans lay. Blood covered Kadmallin’s chest and stained the stones and hay beneath him. Kellatra lay in a

crumpled heap nearby. He glanced back at Sketkee, still asleep in the cargo bed. He wondered how she would react to the death of the humans, especially Kadmallin. She possessed, he realized, a poor level of judgment where humans were concerned. Kadmallin would be alive were he not so impulsive and unrestrained. And they would not have been accosted at all had she procured the services of a more reputable seer rather than one hunted by her own Academy. He also wondered if she would waken still committed to the irrational plan to travel to the Forbidden Realm in search of explanations to the human dreams and their deluded pilgrimage. Possibly, she would consider returning to Ranikttak with Kadmallin's death and the loss of his destabilizing influence.

As he took the reins from the hitching post, the horse skittered, eyes wide as it looked at him. Horses did not like rakhors, a sentiment he returned. He considered the beasts a barely tolerable necessity in the human lands. He much preferred the mechanical modes of transport available in his home realm. He climbed into the driving seat, pulled his hood down tight about his face, flicked the reins, and drove the wagon down the alley and out into the streets. He knew where he needed to go, but he could not risk heading straight there. They required a waystation to reduce the risk of the journey, however short it might be. He remembered exactly the place.

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

To continue reading the crossover between the Seer and the Philosopher story arenas turn the page.

THE SEER



RANKARUS

HORSE HOOVES clotted against stone, and steel-banded wooden wheels rattled along uneven ruts. Rankarus sat in the driving seat of a wagon, the hood of a cloak pulled up over his head, the hat and black mask discarded. The rear of the wagon contained unusual cargo — Kellatra, Kadmallin, and Abananthus wedged side-by-side beneath a canvas tarp.

“That went even better than we rehearsed.” Rankarus tried to keep his sense of pride from leeching into his voice.

“Better than the diversion at the embassy, that’s for certain.” Kellatra’s muffled voice rose from the back of the wagon.

Rankarus’s pride evaporated to once more to reveal guilt. A shame that again brought an older remorse to mind. “Was anyone injured?” He couldn’t bring himself to ask about deaths. He didn’t want to think of deaths.

“Dozens at least,” Kadmallin said from beneath the tarp.

“Did anyone die?”

He should have known Abananthus would ask the question he feared to ask himself.

“Hard to tell,” Kadmallin said. “Not from what we could see inside the embassy.”

“A little more emphasis on creating an indignant crowd rather than a blood-thirsty mob next time,” Kellatra said.

“Oh, I won’t be doing that again!” Rankarus didn’t even want to consider repeating this particular diversion. He’d told the others he managed the trick once before, but he didn’t tell them the result. Not even Kellatra. He didn’t like having secrets between them, but some truths, some pains, were better kept secluded in one’s own heart rather than shared. He did not know what Kellatra might think of his previous failure and had no desire to find out. He only wished he’d known her at the time, so she might have set right his mistakes the way she did at the embassy. Had she not acted to thwart the mob, there would have been many deaths that night. It pained him to be such a failure in front of his wife, and a part of him rankled at the knowledge that it required her to correct his blunders.

“Can you still see the wagon?” Kadmallin asked.

“Yes. I see it. He’s not moving fast. Doesn’t want to attract attention.” Rankarus trailed three blocks behind the wagon Viktik drove with Sketkee, presumably still asleep in the cargo bed. He’d been following the raktors since shortly after they’d left the inn. Abananthus had paid a boy several coins to watch a second wagon on the street while they were in the stable yard behind the inn. By the time Viktik emerged from his brief slumber to drive the first wagon away, Rankarus already stood by the second wagon in a cloak and Abananthus hid in the wagon bed. Kadmallin and Kellatra emerged from the alley a few moments later to join Abananthus. Rankarus had kissed Kellatra, jumped on the driver’s bench, and urged the horse forward, following Viktik and Sketkee.

Kellatra had performed all the actions of their ruse in the stable yard utilizing The Sight, from holding Viktik motionless, to casting Kadmallin against the stable wall and appearing to stab him with his own dagger, to blasting herself in the chest with what looked like a bolt of lightning. They'd rehearsed the scene three times the prior day, until they all agreed it would fool Viktik. Rankarus's plan hinged on the rakthor not only thinking the artifact worthless, but also believing it lost to him. To allay any suspicion of subterfuge, to sell the story, they needed Viktik to accept the theft. What better way to convince him of its veracity than to leave Kadmallin and Kellatra "dead"? As Sketkee could not fake sleep to Viktik, she needed to remain unconscious, so that the rakthor thought she had no part in the preceding robbery. With the riot still engulfing the embassy, the artifact lost, and Sketkee unconscious, they assumed Viktik would seek shelter elsewhere. Sketkee suspected he had an inn somewhere in the city with an innkeeper paid in advance to provide protection in emergencies. She'd possessed the same arrangement in several human cities as an ambassador.

Now they followed Viktik, hoping to find his sanctuary and keep it under observation until Sketkee extracted herself and made her way back to the pilgrim town. She'd assured them she would meet them there after their feint to get the artifact. Kadmallin had insisted on keeping her under direct surveillance to ensure she remained safe, and Rankarus had agreed. It'd be foolish to risk everything to steal the artifact and lose Sketkee in the gamble.

"Whoa!"

Rankarus pulled on the reins to bring the wagon to a halt. A phalanx of soldiers marched around a corner and through the cross street just ahead. Reinforcements headed toward the rakthor embassy, Rankarus assumed.

"Why have we stopped?" Kadmallin asked from behind.

"Soldiers blocking the road." Rankarus watched the line of soldiers. At least two hundred marching in rows of four. "It won't be long."

"Can you see them?" Kellatra asked.

"Yes. I see them." Rankarus stood to get a better look over helmets of the passing soldiers. He saw Viktik turn his wagon left down a side street. "They just turned a few blocks ahead."

"We can't lose them." Kadmallin pulled back the tarp to reveal his anxious face.

"I know. We won't." Rankarus's heart pulsed in his chest. He hadn't made accommodations in his plan for something like this. It started to feel like the mob at the embassy, events tumbling beyond his foresight and out of his control. And he could not ignore the sense of dread accompanying that worry. A concern that multiplied as he thought once more of the girl so much in his mind that night.

TWELVE YEARS AGO

SMOKE ROSE with shouts and cries, climbing over the low set parapet of the roof top and rolling across the angled tiles. Rankarus lay along the roof tiles, low enough to avoid being seen from the upper floors of any neighboring homes. He'd assailed the side of the Semalee's mansion

with hook and rope the night before and lay in the rooftop shadows through the day, eating stale chicken dumplings, drinking from a small canteen, and relieving himself in a nearby rain gutter when necessary. Now, with the sun well hidden behind the horizon, and an angry crowd of people gathering in the streets below, his waiting neared an end.

He slipped his head up to the top of the parapet and scanned the sight below on the street. More than a hundred people already stood chanting and shouting. He smiled, feeling a great sense of satisfaction knowing that his efforts put those people in the street shaking their fists and howling — and each one thought the idea his or her own. It left him blinking with a strange dizziness to know such power. He slid back down behind the parapet before anyone noticed him. Another few minutes and the crowd would grow, pushing yet more people to act upon his will and designs — puppets unaware they even possessed strings.

Rankarus had hoped to do what he had done before in comparable circumstances — pretend to be a kinsa from a far-off district, forge an invitation to a party, meet the lovely Semalee, seduce her over time, and eventually, relieve her of the burden of her wealth. Unfortunately, due to an unforeseen obstacle — Semalee's absence of interest in men — the plan had failed. Now he enacted a new strategy, one devised over the preceding week. Ten days of preparation for a few hours of fulfillment. Surprisingly, Rhaga Taleetoz's son helped in making the plan possible.

Semalee's brother, Nahangoda, liked to drink and gamble his father's fortune. Mostly, he liked to drink. One evening a month prior, on the way home from losing his father's money at dice, the drunken Nahangoda guided his horse into a crowd with his usual regard for the life of the poor. His passage along the street left a small boy crushed beneath the horse's hooves. When the father of the dead boy accosted Nahangoda and demanded restitution, the drunken kinsa ran him through with a sword blade. The man died moments later, but by then, the city guards made an appearance. While the wealthy experienced great leniency in the city — running over poor children with their horses for instance — even the well-bribed city guard would not look aside when an unarmed man lay dead from a sword wound with dozens of witnesses pointing to the killer.

There had been an infamously and highly discussed trial with justice swiftly dispensed. Kinsa Nahangoda made restitution to the widowed mother of the dead child and was acquitted of murdering the father on the grounds that he feared for his life and had no recourse but to strike down the deranged and violent man. Unsurprisingly, the poorer citizens of the city did not find this verdict to resemble justice. It left them believing, more than ever, that the wealthy and the nobles of the city were never held to account for their transgressions.

Rankarus had accepted this truth years ago while living on the street as a child after his parents' deaths. However, it occurred to him to use that resentment to his advantage. He'd spent nights and days disguised as a day laborer in seedy inns, rough alleys, and open markets instilling in the local people of poorer neighborhoods the notion that there should be justice for the dead father and boy. A few handfuls of coins spent with the right men, men he knew to be of morally flexible fiber, helped create the mob that now shouted below in the street. A few more minutes and his plan would fall fully into effect.

With the mansion surrounded by a throng of angry, poor citizens, and the city guards on the

outside of that circle of people trying to gain control of it, Rankarus assumed Rhaga Taleetoz would pursue the wisest possible response. He would place himself and his family in the cellars beneath the mansion. Down with the wine, root vegetables, and iced fish. Of course, this plan entailed a risk. The rhaga might attempt to take the valuables of the house to the cellars as well. Rankarus doubted this. His time surreptitiously speaking to the servants left him well informed as to the location of the family's valuables. The father kept a lock box in his study and the daughter retained her jewelry in a smaller, more ornate box in her sleeping chamber. People revealed all sorts of inappropriate knowledge when asked the correct question in the proper manner.

Although he could gain access to the house and the room he needed, he also assumed it likely occupied. Semalee's father did not often allow her out of the mansion, and while she spent most of her days in the gardens or the library, she enjoyed evenings in her room, a nurse just outside all night in case she required assistance. To gain clean access to her sleeping chamber, he needed to do so during the day, an unlikely event given the house guards posted around the gardens. Alternatively, he needed to clear the room to have it to himself.

Rankarus took the sound of breaking glass below as his sign for action. With the mobs massing at the front and rear of the mansion, the high-fenced gardens on either side were relatively safe from view. He looped a doubled rope over a thick nail he'd spent an hour slowly and silently hammering into a crack between the stones of the outer wall and slid over the side of the roof, lowering himself to an upper balcony. He crouched behind the railing of the balcony, peeking through the stone pickets to see the mob below pressing against the garden gates. A too-small contingent of city guards tried to push through the crowd to reach the front near the mansion.

Ignoring the shouts of the fury-filled mob, he turned to the balcony door, its thin, glass panes seeping a yellow light. A small lantern burned on a table near a wide bed with a white-silk cover. The occupant of the room had obviously departed in a rush. Dark-wood panels lined the walls. A mirror hung near a wooden dummy with an emerald-green dress draped over its false form. He recognized the dress. He'd seen it on Semalee the previous week. It confirmed what he knew from spying on the house from nearby rooftops. He tugged at the handle and smiled as the door moved toward him. The wealthy rarely thought to lock the doors of the balconies on their upper floors. He slipped inside and pulled the door closed as he looked around the room. Where did she hide the jewelry box? He rummaged through drawers of a dresser and opened the doors of a clothing cabinet. He looked under the bed and through the compartments of a thin-legged wooden table. After a few minutes, he began to worry he'd made a mistake. Maybe she did not keep the jewelry box in her room. Possibly, the staff had lied or been misinformed. He'd borrowed money from Kinorus against the profit of the theft. He'd need to repay that. Kinorus liked to have thieves in his debt. Rankarus did not appreciate being one of those indebted thieves. It had taken him a year to escape the bond of his previous debt to the captain of criminals in the southern side of the city. The thought of once more being bound to Kinorus made his stomach tight with anxiety.

The sounds of the mob outside grew louder. Rankarus stood in the middle of the room and slowly spun around, rechecking each item as a possible hiding spot. He noticed that one of the square panes of wood on the wall showed slightly more wear than the one adjacent to it. As though

the stain of the wood had been worn away by the frequent friction of human flesh. He pressed his palm against the panel where the wood looked lighter in tone. The panel popped open with a click, revealing a small stone chamber with an ornate box in the center. A single jasmine flower etched in gold-leaf decorated the blood-tinted lacquer of the wooden box. A clasp lock held the box closed.

Rankarus smiled as he pulled his lock tool from a pouch at his waist. A tingle rose along his fingers and he took a breath to calm himself. It required only a few seconds before the lock popped open. He lifted the lid of the jewelry box. The necklace sat at the top of several inner trays covered with felt. He held up the necklace and stared at it, the light of the lantern reflected in the many blue and red gemstones along the golden chains of its circumference. His heart beat fast, his head dizzy with the thrill of success. A daring plan brought to fruition.

A loud banging sound from levels in the house below brought him from his self-congratulatory reverie. He stuffed the necklace in his waist pouch and grabbed for the rest of the contents of the jewelry box. The banging grew louder, accompanied by shouts. He snatched up bracelets, earrings, rings, and lesser necklaces. As he locked the empty box and closed the panel to the secret nook, the banging below became a thunderous crash, followed by screams and shouts and curses.

The elation in Rankarus's chest collapsed into his bowels and turned to dread. He ran to the door of the room, out into the hall, and leaned over the railing of the central staircase. Three levels below, he saw people with torches racing through the lower halls and running up the stairs. The mob had forced its way into the mansion. He watched people shouting and trying to grab anything that might be valuable while others used their torches to light tapestries and furniture aflame.

The meticulous plan he'd fashioned over days now exploded into a fiery catastrophe. The mob would loot the mansion and burn it to the ground. He thought of Semalee in the cellar with her family. How could he save them? How could he halt the torrent of hatred, anger, and violence he'd unleashed? If he tried to stop the looters, they would take him for a servant and kill him. He could pretend to be a looter and try to reach the cellars, but how could he enter without the real members of the mob attacking? And how could he get Semalee and her family out to safety?

"There's another. Get 'im!"

A man on the stairs one level below pointed and shouted to his companions. Rankarus shook himself from his contemplations and ran back to the sleeping chamber, pushing the door closed behind him. He did not waste time looking for a key to lock the door or shoving furniture in front of it. He raced across the room and through the balcony door to where he'd coiled the rope. He looped the rope through the pickets of the railing, tied one end off, and swung himself over into the air. He descended as quickly as possible, the line burning and scraping the skin of his palms. As he rappelled, he noticed people climbing over the iron spikes atop the brick wall surrounding the garden. Others threw flaming pieces of wood into the branches of trees. Rankarus halted hard against the tiles of the lower roof.

He ignored the cries of the mob on the street as he dashed along the rooftop tiles toward the rear of the mansion. He followed the path he'd used to gain access, leaping across four paces of open air above the alley to the rooftop of an adjacent house. He glanced at the people in the alley,

torches held high, shouting as they tried to force their way into the rhaga's mansion. He ran along the adjoining rooftops for the length of the block and then descended a drainpipe to a narrow alleyway. There he pulled a cloak from beneath an old crate where he'd stashed it, swung it around his shoulders, lifted the hood, and walked into the main street.

A minute later, he stood on the thoroughfare outside the burning mansion. Flames leapt from the windows and crawled over the walls of the house — a home become a funeral pyre. City guards rushed past him, helping their comrades attack the rear of the mob with the flats of their swords. Rankarus watched the fire consume the mansion as the city guards finally pushed the mob away. Fire wagons with cisterns and water pumps arrived, but far too late to make a difference. The water from their hoses created plenty of steam but did little to impede the inferno.

He watched all through the night with the gradually calming crowd as fire engulfed the mansion. He observed as it burned through the day. He stood vigil as it smoldered and glowed the following night. He waited while city guards picked through the rubble. He loitered as they carried bodies from the cellar. He witnessed as they placed the charred remains of a nineteen-year-old girl on a wagon and drove it away.

Then he wiped his eyes, wondering if he would ever feel cleansed of the guilt that now encrusted his heart.

THE PRESENT

“IS IT clear yet?”

“Almost.”

Rankarus flicked the reins to goad the horse forward as the final soldiers passed from in front of the wagon. The urgency in Kadmallin's question matched the sense of anxiety perched on Rankarus's shoulders. He flicked the reins again, spurring the horse into a fast trot.

He attempted to will his memories into submission as he guided the horse and wagon. Semalee, a wonderful young woman with a whole life yet to live, suffocated by smoke, crushed by rubble, and seared by flames. He never felt much remorse for the father, and especially not the son, but the deaths of the daughter and mother left him tainted. His attempt to be clever proved as foolishness. He'd wanted to cast the necklace and jewels into the river beside the city, but pragmatism forced him to take them to Kinorus. The man had demanded double his fee and double the debt, claiming that the fire and the resulting crackdown by the city guards would make his business less profitable for weeks to come. Rankarus had not even complained. He did not want the coin he earned from the theft. It reeked of death to him. He kept enough to pay for his food and lodging for a time but gave the rest to a local temple that cared for the city's street children. The same temple that had ministered to him as a child sleeping in alleys. But giving the coin away did not lighten his heart. That never really happened.

He shook his head to clear his mind as they reached the street where he'd seen Viktik turn. A man sat on a horse and a handful of people walked nearby, but he saw no sign of Viktik and the wagon. The rakthor must have turned down one of the side streets. But which one? How far did

he get before making the turn? The horse pulled the wagon forward as Rankarus considered what to do. They could not abandon Sketkee, but maybe they should abandon the plan. Wait for her in the pilgrim village. He thought about the last time he'd abandoned a plan and the results of that decision. No. He'd stick with this strategy. He simply needed to find the wagon. And quickly. For that, they did need a new tactic.

"Well? Do you see them?" Kadmallin rose behind Rankarus.

"He's turned off along a side street," Rankarus said. "But they cannot have gone far. We'll have to split up."

"Yes. A good idea." Kellatra sat up as well.

Rankarus steered the wagon to the side of the road. "I'll take the wagon and head straight down the street. See if I can spot anything. You three each take a street and follow it. Look for fresh droppings. The horse had been fed not long ago."

"Good thought," Abananthus said as he helped Kellatra from the wagon.

"We meet back here in ten minutes." Rankarus looked at the three — his wife, who he had let down, his friend, who he owed too much, and Kadmallin, whose hard stare made him dearly hope they found Sketkee quickly. "Whoever finds them leads the rest of us back to their trail."

"And if we don't find her?" Kadmallin asked.

"Then we keep looking until we do." Rankarus added an edge to his voice. He knew he held responsibility for Sketkee's safety, and he wanted Kadmallin to understand that he knew.

"Good. Let's waste no more time." Kadmallin headed down the first street to the right.

"Careful all." Abananthus walked toward the street on the left.

"I think I should carry it. For safety." Kellatra held her hand out.

Rankarus unbelted the pouch at his waist and handed it to her. He felt relieved to have the artifact finally in her hands. Kellatra grabbed his hand and pulled him lower to briefly kiss him.

"Good luck, my love," Kellatra said as she parted the kiss. Then she ran along the block and turned down the second street on the right.

"Luck to you all." Rankarus cracked the reins, and the horse jumped forward. He rode the wagon up the street scanning every building and intersection for any sign of the wagon or the rakthors. They needed to find Sketkee soon. While the rakthor ambassador might hide nearby for a short time, there was no telling where he would go now that he could not return to the embassy. And while they hoped the deceptions of their theft left Viktik inclined to release Sketkee, the rakthor might just as easily demand that she return with him to the Sun Realm or to some other destination. And Rankarus held another reason for his desire to find her — he did not want the guilt of another death tainting the fire of his inner essence.

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THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

STEAM COILED up from the bowl of broth, spiced chicken, and over-cooked vegetables. Ondromead blew on a spoonful of the watery soup to cool its contents. He took the spoon into his mouth, chewing the meat and swallowing the liquid, insensible to the flavor of cinnamon, clove, and garlic. The warmth of the soup flowed down to his belly and radiated throughout his limbs. It would have felt comforting if he perceived it at all. He found little registered in his senses since losing Hashel five days prior.

He assumed the boy must have remained with the carnival when he resumed his usual nightly transportation. At least Hashel was safe and well cared for. The woman, Palla, would look after him. And Leotin, the carnival leader, would find a place for him among the performers. He assumed that Hashel wished to stay behind and that this desire influenced whatever power determined Ondromead's destination each night. Another possibility occurred to him, and he tried to ignore it. Maybe the boy wished to remain with him, but Meraeu interfered somehow. He had not seen the woman since that night in the village. Nor had he witnessed another disturbance in the fabric of reality like the one she'd shown him. She had been insistent that he abandon the boy. Maybe she removed Hashel from him. Regardless, he was protected. Safer than Ondromead could manage. He took another bite of soup and tried to think of other things.

He sat by a dusty window in the common room of an inn in a small town on the narrow Punderra coast along the Tanfen Sea. The talk in the inn all throughout the day and into the night focused on the news that the so-called Alliance of Nations expanded its blockade of ships from Tanjii to the whole western half of the Iron Realm. All ships leaving ports on the Tanfen Sea, whether from Tanshen, Punderra, or Juparti, were now stopped, boarded, and searched. Those with pilgrims were turned away. The men of the town loudly decried the insult to their nation and their merchants and took bets on how soon it would be before the dominions of the Iron Realm went to war with the Alliance. The women shook their heads and wondered at men's love for going to war.

Ondromead pondered at this as well. He also considered whether the urris might intervene in such a war as they had in the past. Or would they remain as silent as they seemed to have become regarding the pilgrims and their journey to the Forbidden Realm? What became of all the pilgrims he'd met along the roads of the previous months? Had they reached the Forbidden Realm? If so, why did he not wake there to witness them? He knew the answer — he could not witness everything important that happened in a day. There were too many people with too many significant events happening in too many realms for him to see them all in a single day. Someone, or something, selected what he needed to see. How it understood where to toss him each night as he slept, he could not imagine. He simply accepted it as his fate.

He considered what this fate had in store for him that night. He'd spent the whole of the day wandering through the town hoping to witness something but feeling called to no particular place

until sundown brought him to the window seat of this inn. The waiting made him long for Hashel's company. The boy would have sung for the locals. He had such a beautiful voice, one Ondromead heard only in song. Where did those songs come from? Likely, he would never know now. If luck favored him, he might encounter Hashel again many years from now. He wiped a tear from his eye as the sadness choked his throat. He pushed the nearly full bowl of soup away, his appetite destroyed by his sorrow.

His thoughts of Hashel faded as a familiar tingling arose in his mind. Finally. Something to take his thoughts from his grief. He looked out the window and spotted a man in a dark-blue cloak walking briskly past the inn. A few moments later, three rough-looking men stalked the same path. Ondromead sighed and stood up. He could guess where these men would lead him and what he'd witness. Sometimes, he wished humanity were not so predictable.

Ondromead left the inn and headed in the direction he'd seen the men walking, but the tingling in his mind pulled him elsewhere, down a side street, through an alley, up a lane, and into yet another alley. He did not question this silent command that tugged at his feet. He'd given up such resistance long ago. He recognized whatever force urged him into the alley did so to place him where he needed to be. He leaned into the shadows created by the dim light from the street, pressing his back against a brick wall, and waited. A moment later, he heard footsteps. The man in the blue cloak ran along the alley. He stopped several paces from where Ondromead hid, bending at the waist, appearing winded. The three men who pursued him ran up behind him, doubling over as they stopped. The larger of the three men stepped forward, thrusting his chest out with each heaving breath.

"Ya shouldn't oughta made us run." The large man pulled a long dagger from a sheath at his belt. The two men behind him did the same. "I hates chasin' folk. Yas give us that pouch of coins now and maybe we won't kill ya fer it."

"That's the thing, you see." The man stood up and lowered the hood of his cloak as he turned around. The dark-brown skin of his face contrasted with his bright-blue eyes while the gray in his short-cropped beard suggested he'd reached his middle years. He spoke with a strong and commanding voice that matched the build of his body. "Did you chase me into this alley, or was I leading you far away from the main streets, so no one could hear you scream?"

The man in the cloak raised his right hand and the three robbers levitated from the ground and smashed against the nearby wall. The man in the cloak, obviously a seer, walked toward the men as they struggled and wriggled, suspended three feet above the paving stones.

"Help!" the larger man shouted as he tried to throw his dagger. The motion of his arm and body ceased along with his cries.

"You do not know me." The seer stepped up to the men, looking into their eyes. "I am Kafkedaya Taranon. You may recognize that family name. It was shared by a young woman. A girl of fifteen. Possibly, you did not know her name when you raped and killed her and threw her body in the ocean. Perhaps you thought the body would sink to be forgotten rather than wash up on the shore. Maybe you thought no one would ever know what you had done. This might have been true had you raped and killed the niece of some other man. But you did not. You raped and

killed *my* niece. My sister charged me with finding the men who killed her daughter and bringing them to justice. My sister believes in justice. She wants to see you hanged in the town square. Her husband held the same beliefs before he died at sea. I do not agree with this philosophy. I prefer a more direct form of restitution.”

The man, Kafkedaya, flicked his hand and the three daggers from the thugs snapped from their fingers to hover in the air before their chests. The blades paused only a moment as Kafkedaya looked into each of their eyes once more. Then the slender, steel shafts plunged into the men’s hearts. Their eyes blinked for a few seconds, the large man’s the longest, then closed with death. Kafkedaya lowered his hand and the three limp bodies fell to the ground. He looked at them a moment, then raised the hood of his cloak and strode from the alley.

Ondromead watched the seer walk into the street, wondering at what he’d witnessed. Seers were not supposed to use their powers to kill people. In Juparti, the Academy of Sight forced each seer to swear a strict vow on pain of death, and in Punderra, the Keth councils that controlled the use of The Sight held similar laws in place. This man, Kafkedaya, risked his own life to punish these men by taking theirs. Had he done this before? Was this the first time? Would he do it again?

Ondromead’s fingers itched to transcribe the events into the black book. He walked out of the alley and back to the inn. He did not find it at all strange that his bowl of soup still awaited him at the empty table by the window, even though people crowded the common room. Nor did it surprise him that the soup remained steaming hot. As he inked the words of what he’d witnessed into the pages of the black book, he considered how the seer’s actions would ripple out into the future and whether he would ever encounter the man again. The routine of the writing and contemplations of the future pulled his mind from thoughts of Hashel for a time, but his sadness at the loss of the boy returned all too swiftly. He remembered reciting each day’s events from the book, teaching him to read, talking about what they saw and how it often related to things he’d witness decades and centuries ago. He closed the witnessing book and stared at the soup, leaving it untouched. Eventually, he paid for a room and retired to await his next destination with the dawning of the following day. As he had each of the past five nights, he dreamed of waking to find Hashel beside him.

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

COHERENT THOUGHTS coalesced out of random images, and thick, leathery lids flickered against pale-yellow lamplight. Sketkee blinked, opened her eyes fully, sat up, and assessed her surroundings. She found herself still in the wagon, in a stable yard behind what she took to be an inn, but not the same stable yard as where she'd been made unconscious by Kellatra. She could not determine how long she'd been asleep, and so could not gauge how far from that original inn she might be. Viktik's absence led her to believe he bargained with the innkeeper to arrange other transportation. Likely, he had a previous arrangement with the human. She had maintained such preparations herself as an ambassador. But where did Viktik wish to go? A number of destinations occurred to her, none of which she wished to accompany him to.

She turned her head and stared along the alley behind the inn. No sign of Kadmallin or Kellatra and the other humans. Did they await far out of sight? Had they somehow lost track of the wagon? Did they know how to find her? Should she flee now, before Viktik returned? Would that raise his suspicions? Would he ignore those suspicions and go his own way, or would they induce him to track her down in the pilgrim town? If he did so, the chances of him seeing Kadmallin and Kellatra alive increased precipitously and endangered their possession of the artifact.

“Good. You are awake.”

Sketkee abandoned any notion of escape as she turned to Viktik. She needed to continue to play the role Rankarus and she had devised over the preceding days.

“Where are we?” Sketkee asked as she dismounted from the wagon bed to stand near Viktik.

“An inn the embassy has relations with,” Viktik said. “We are safe here temporarily. The innkeeper is fetching a carriage for us. It is unwise to continue about the city in an open wagon. These cloaks can hide us only so well.”

“And Kadmallin?” Sketkee added a hint of concern to her voice.

“He is dead from the attack you witnessed.” Viktik watched her closely. She knew he disapproved of her continued relationship with Kadmallin. He, as many raktors, saw no purpose in it and felt it dulled the natural raktor rationality.

“That is ... unfortunate.” Sketkee looked away from Viktik, as though considering something. “He will be difficult to replace. And the human woman?”

“Also dead.” Viktik continued to examine her closely. She assumed that even now he looked for any sign of possible betrayal. His ambassadorial schooling did not allow otherwise. Fortunately, she possessed the same training.

“Also unfortunate,” Sketkee said. “And the artifact?”

“Stolen. Along with all my currency,” Viktik said.

“And mine as well,” Sketkee patted the pockets of her leather pants. “What is your intention?”

“For now, the ambassadorial ship at the city docks.” Viktik looked down the alley, obviously

awaiting the arrival of the carriage. “We will be safe there while the disturbance among the humans dissipates.”

“A good plan for the time being.” Sketkee stepped to the side as she, too, looked into the alley. The position placed her right arm out of Viktik’s view. She dug the claw of her thumb into the wood at the edge of the wagon bed. “What of your plans afterward? Will you hunt the thieves who stole the artifact?”

“That would be pointless now, as it is of little value, and none to me.” Annoyance laced Viktik’s voice. “I will return to Taknaht in our home realm and seek another ambassadorial assignment. Considering the ultimate folly of our pursuit of the device, I suggest we both maintain that it is, as everyone else assumes, still in the Central Committee vaults.”

“Yes. I agree. Full knowledge of this unfortunate enterprise would negatively brand both of our standings in the eyes of the committee.” Sketkee continued to carve into the wagon with her thumb claw.

“And will you return to Taknaht with me?” Viktik turned back to her. She stepped toward him to distract from any suspicion at her proximity to the wagon. She had finished her task but did not wish her work revealed.

“I think not.” Sketkee held Viktik’s stare. “While the error of my reasoning regarding the artifact is disappointing, there is still the anomaly of the human pilgrimage to the Forbidden Realm to examine. I believe my future standing before the committee to be best served by gaining solid, verifiable knowledge of the phenomenon and the Forbidden Realm. I will proceed to rejoin the pilgrims.”

“And the blockade? How will the pilgrims escape such an armada?” Viktik asked. She recognized the tone of his questioning. Not suspicious, merely dismissive. He did not see value in her interest in humans or the Forbidden Realm.

“That depends on how long the blockade lasts.” Sketkee had a notion how to circumvent the Alliance blockade, but she needed to give it more consideration. “The human dominions will push back against it. It is unlikely the Alliance will wish to risk a war with the nations of the Iron Realm.”

“I am not convinced of that.” Viktik said. “From what I have been able to assemble from various conversations with the ambassadorial staff and a reasoned interpretation of the facts, the rakthor Central Committee entered into the alliance with the roaggs, wyrins, and yutans, and created the blockade for the express purpose of ensuring that no more pilgrims reach the Forbidden Realm.”

“Then the sunken joint ambassadorial ship is a ruse.” Sketkee considered the implications of this. “Why would the [Central Governing Committee](#), or the rulers of the other realms, form an alliance to stop the pilgrims at the risk of war?”

“I was unable to uncover the cause for the blockade, only its true intent.” Viktik blinked. “You do realize that in attempting to reach the Forbidden Realm, you will be acting directly against the wishes of the Central Governing Committee.”

“I see that clearly now.” Sketkee wondered how this knowledge affected Viktik’s attitude

toward her. “However, as it is not a public position, I cannot be cautioned or constrained because of it. Nor can I be reprimanded for continuing with my plans.”

“Your reasoning is as slippery as ever.” Viktik nodded toward her. “If you do reach the Forbidden Realm, possibly you will learn the reasons for the committee’s actions. If you are fortunate, what you discover will not kill you.”

Sketkee doubted Viktik would interfere with her plans or pursue any further relation with her after they parted. He saw his connection with her, as he had for many years, as a liability to his advancement within the hierarchy of the Central Governing Committee.

The sound of horse hooves drew their eyes to the end of the alley.

“Come. The carriage arrives.” Viktik walked briskly into the shadows of the alley toward the carriage rolling into view.

Sketkee followed him silently. He had given her much to consider. Her thoughts fell to her previous ruminations of how a pilgrim ship might evade the Alliance blockade. She realized that following Viktik to the rakthor ambassadorial ship might help those potential plans more than she’d suspected possible. Of course, she’d need to extricate herself from his company and reunite with Kadmallin and Kellatra and the others first.

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To continue reading the crossover between the Seer and the Philosopher story arenas turn the page.

THE SEER



KELLATRA

“I FOUND their wagon,” Rankarus said. “It’s abandoned. Climb up.”

Kellatra accepted Rankarus’s hand and the strength of his arm as he helped her up to sit beside him on the driver’s bench. She put a hand on his thigh. It felt good to be beside him again.

“Where did you find it?” Kadmallin asked as he hopped into the wagon bed where Abananthus already sat.

“Not far. But they’ve been gone a while by the looks of it.” Rankarus snapped the reins and the horse lumbered forward. “A boy was putting the horse to hay in the stable.”

“Any idea where they’ve gone?” Kellatra asked. There were only so many places two rakthors could hide in Tanjii, but there were still too many for them to check quickly.

“The stable boy knew nothing,” Rankarus said. “He’d seen no one.”

“If they are not at the inn, the innkeeper may have arranged a carriage for them.” Kadmallin leaned forward in the wagon bed, his features anxious.

“Do you know where they might go?” Abananthus asked.

“Too many places,” Kadmallin replied. “If Sketkee was awake, she would have left a sign of some sort.”

“Then let’s hope the slumber I placed her in did not last long.” Kellatra worried that she might have caused the rakthor woman to oversleep. She did not know rakthor anatomy well and could not as easily gauge how to render one unconscious. She’d been judicious with Viktik, because he needed to awaken first and see Sketkee asleep, but it had been harder to know how to apply the same effect to her.

She worried, too, about Rankarus. She sensed the tension in his body and voice. She knew he felt responsible for anything that might befall the rakthor woman. He’d provided the bulk of their plan and he would see a failure in any part as resting largely with him, and his lack of foresight in evaluating potential problems. Like a mob turning violent or losing a wagon in the streets of Tanjii. Or Kellatra causing Sketkee to sleep for too long.

“Up here.” Rankarus pulled the reins and brought the horse and wagon to a halt near the entrance of an alley. “The inn is down there.” He turned back to Abananthus. “Can you watch the wagon?”

“Certainly.” Abananthus hefted his bulky frame over the rear rail of the wagon and onto the driver’s bench as Kellatra and Rankarus climbed down to the street.

“We’ll be back soon,” Rankarus said as he led the way down the darkened alley, a light near the end guiding them.

The illumination came from a lantern at the back of the inn. The wagon they’d followed sat empty near the stable. The horse that had pulled it stood in a stall beside several others. Kellatra saw no sign of the stable boy.

“Look around for anything that seems odd or out of place.” Kadmallin began to closely examine the ground in the middle of the alley. “Could be a few lines in the dirt, a few straws of hay aligned.”

They searched the area for several minutes without finding anything.

“You’re certain she would leave a sign of some sort?” Kellatra knelt in the bed of the wagon, attempting to discern if any of the stalks of hay seemed out of place.

“It’s part of her training. Part of mine. We’ve done this for decades.” Kadmallin frowned. “Must be here somewhere.”

The revelation that Kadmallin and Sketkee had traveled and worked together for decades surprised Kellatra. Why would a human stay with a rakthor for so long? Was he her servant? He did not act like any servant she’d ever known. What bound them together? What explained Kadmallin’s obvious concern for Sketkee? The professional responsibility of a hired guard? That seemed unlikely.

“I think I found something,” Rankarus said from the rear of the wagon. He bent to examine the wooden side panel. “A marking of some sort.”

Kadmallin rushed to Rankarus’s side and knelt to get a better look. As Kellatra leapt down from the wagon, Kadmallin stood.

“I know where she is.” Kadmallin started walking back down the alley. “She carved the mark of the rakthor ambassadorial flag. They’re headed for the docks. There’s a rakthor embassy ship moored there. I see it every time we pass through the city gates at the port.”

“Why would she go there?” Kellatra asked. The plan had been for her to leave Viktik as soon as possible.

“Probably to ensure Viktik doesn’t suspect subterfuge,” Kadmallin said.

“After all that, the mob and the attack on the embassy and the robbery at the inn, how could he still suspect her of trying to get the artifact?” Rankarus sounded incredulous.

“Rakthors are cunning and suspicious by nature.” Kadmallin laughed. “And this one is used to dealing with humans who are even worse. He probably thinks the ship a safe place to settle in while the city calms down. She’ll leave him as soon as she can. If he lets her.”

“Let’s hope we don’t have to steal her as well.” Kellatra pondered the costs of this endeavor. The artifact might be worth it, but only barely.

“Any luck?” Abananthus asked as they exited the alley and approached the wagon.

“They headed for the docks.” Kadmallin climbed up on to the driver’s bench beside Abananthus and pulled the reins from the large man’s hands. He barely waited for Kellatra and Rankarus to clamber into the cargo bed before urging the horse forward.

Kadmallin spurred the animal down the street as fast as the jostling wagon would manage, and Kellatra clung to Rankarus, hoping they did not find themselves bounced out the open back and onto the road.

“Hate to be on the wrong side of him,” Rankarus whispered in her ear.

“You’d feel the same if it were me,” Kellatra replied.

“But you’re my wife.” Rankarus folded his brow in confusion.

“Just so. Not the same, but similar somehow.” Kellatra felt as though she intuited the nature of the relationship between Sketkee and Kadmallin on a deeper, unspoken level. Much the way she imagined they themselves did. “What I’d really rather not witness is her in pursuit of someone who endangered him.”

That thought left Rankarus blinking in surprise. She smiled slightly, amused that her husband could so readily grasp the nature of people and their motivations, yet that this particular one escaped him so easily. Kadmallin, she now understood, loved Sketkee. She did not know if he admitted this to himself, or whether it hid beneath the surface of his mind guiding his actions, but she considered it a certainty. As for Sketkee, she could not assess the rakthor woman’s concern for Kadmallin. From all she knew of rakthors, they were constitutionally incapable of emotions like love. But that did not mean that she did not hold for Kadmallin some form of deep attachment. She wondered if Sketkee suspected Kadmallin’s feelings and whether he in turn had any hint of her consideration for him. Or whatever it was she held for him in that cool, reptilian mind of hers that equaled concern.

As Kadmallin turned down the street that would take them to the western gate and the docks, they passed two women walking arm in arm, one in her fifties and another much younger. She knew them immediately as mother and daughter. The way they walked with steps in sync, the way they nodded as they spoke to one another. It seemed familiar and sent a longing spike of pain throbbing through her heart. Her earlier memories came to the fore, again taking her back — fateful actions and words creeping up to be relived.

TEN YEARS AGO

“I SAW you, Mother.”

“You saw me where? Why did you not greet me?”

Mouth dry, intestines churning, heartbeat clanging in her ears, Kellatra sat with her mother at a small, wooden table in the back garden. Twin cups of jasmine tea steamed between them. She knew more than flower-infused water would soon fill that gap.

“I saw you with Bandakaya.” Kellatra found it hard to form the words, made doubly difficult in that they were not the words she had rehearsed so many times the day before. She’d prepared to be subtle and elusive, but now she blundered ahead, brusque and over-direct.

“In the park by the Academy?” Kellatra’s mother’s eyes narrowed. She feigned ignorance, but she knew what Kellatra spoke of.

“No. In the halls near your study beside the corridor.” Kellatra tried to ignore the image in her mind that came with the explanation. Why could her mother not make this easy? Why did she pretend to be obtuse?

Her mother paused, not saying anything for a moment. She took a sip of her tea. “I am not certain I grasp your meaning.”

“Mother!” Kellatra’s exasperation overwhelmed her unease. “I saw you embracing him. Kissing him. And it looked like he would do much else if you had not stopped him.”

“I can explain.” Her mother smiled, but Kellatra recognized the falseness in it, the lie forming behind the eyes. “Councilman Bandakaya acted improperly. I chided him for it, and that was that. You well know, as a woman in an Academy filled with men who see themselves as more interesting and fascinating than a mere female, there are instances where we must deal with men’s more aggressive nature in a direct manner. He apologized and it will not happen again.”

Kellatra sighed. She’d hoped to avoid this. The layers of deceit and the need to peel them away to reveal truth. She should not need to play this part. It should be her mother confronting her for an indiscretion.

“I thought as much as well,” Kellatra said. “Then my suspicious mind and my curious nature vanquished my reticence. I followed you to the rooms of a flat above a baker in the south quarter. And I waited. And Bandakaya arrived and went to the very same room.”

“This is not as it seems.” The teacup trembled in her mother’s hands.

“I must stop you.” Kellatra lowered her head, embarrassment glowing hot in her face. This did not at all resemble the time her mother caught her half naked with a servant boy during her sixteenth year. “Before you say more in an attempt at denials, I stole into the bakery through the back and found the room. Your room. The door is not thick, nor are the walls. I am not much experienced, but I know the source of the sounds I heard. And the door held a keyhole. With a very clear view of the bed.”

Her mother blinked, sat the teacup down, and folded her hands in her lap, and stared up into the narrow leaves of the shishiwa tree under which they sat. Kellatra pushed past the discomfort of the situation to look at her mother’s face. She saw not her own embarrassment reflected back, as she’d assumed, but guilt, sadness, and remorse. In that moment, her mother looked older than her years demanded. And for the first time, Kellatra considered the hidden needs and long thwarted desires that might push her mother to pursue such a liaison. She knew her father could be cold. As chilled of heart as the rakthor ambassadors visiting the Academy. What must it be like for a woman as full of life and passions as her mother to be bound to such a rigid and uncompromising man as her father? They did not even share the same intellectual passions and had rarely displayed any open appetite of a more romantic nature. Her mother taught the finer aspects of The Sight as related to healing, while her father buried himself in bureaucracy. How had the two of them come together at the first? How had they even produced their single offspring?

She felt suddenly ashamed for desiring to humiliate her mother. But she knew any open revelation of the illicit entanglement with Bandakaya would damage her mother more than her father. She would be disgraced in the public space. The Juparti laws and the Pashist customs allowed for a couple to dissolve a marriage, but there were harsh social penalties for adultery. She would lose her position. Bandakaya, as a bachelor, might suffer censure, but would no doubt recover to see his prospects soar.

“You must end it, Mother.” Kellatra voiced aloud her inner conclusions.

“I will not.” Her mother lowered her gaze, eyes defiant. Her hazelnut-tinted skin seemed luminous, pulled tight and flush with anger. “I will not.”

“You must.” Kellatra shook her head. Her mother’s response had been nothing like this in her

imagined rehearsal the night prior. “It will bring condemnation from all corners. You will be cast out of the Academy. You will be cast out of this house. You will bring shame upon all of us.”

“Your father will weather any embarrassment, and you are quite used to it.” Her mother reached for her tea and took a sip to camouflage her biting words.

“And do you think Bandakaya will stand by you? That he will endanger his standing in the city and his position in the Academy to marry a fallen woman?”

“He loves me.” The tone of her mother’s voice filled with equal notes of doubt and desire. “I love him.”

“If this is how you both truly feel, then you must break it off now and approach Father to request a dissolution.” Kellatra leaned across the table, nearly knocking aside her teacup. “If you dissolve the marriage, wait the prescribed two years, then you may marry freely.”

“It is more complicated than that.” Her mother shook her head, tears brimming in her eyes. “Your father will never agree to a dissolution. He has spoken against it too many times in public against others. He calls it the sweet seed of decay at the heart of our great dominion. He will not. And Bandakaya will not...”

“Will not what?” Kellatra knew the answer to her question. “Will not wait? If he says he loves you, he will wait.”

Her mother said nothing for a few moments, and when she spoke, she did not rebut Kellatra’s statement.

“What will you do?” Her mother looked at her, tears on her cheeks, hands clasped tight against the tremors that shook them.

Kellatra felt bile in the back of her throat and thought she might vomit. Her stomach clenched tight and a dizzying buzz echoed in her head. What could she do? What should she do? What did justice demand? Or fairness? Or love?

“You must break it off.” Kellatra’s words felt heavy in her mouth. “If I discovered you with such ease, someone else will. Eventually. Being careful will only prolong the eventual agony. Better to sever things swiftly. Cleanly. Before the whole of your life unravels around you.”

“My life has already unraveled.” Her mother spat the words in a whisper. “I have lived my life for my parents, for the man they wished me to marry, for the child everyone insisted would warm his heart, for the Academy that rewards men with less skill or knowledge and impedes my advancement at the excuse of my sex. I have lived this life, bound tight by its cords, and now I’m cut free of them and have finally fashioned a life-tapestry of my own making from their threads. You cannot ask me to discard that.”

Her mother’s words ate at Kellatra’s heart. She had never sensed in any way her mother’s dissatisfaction with her life, with the Academy, with her husband, or with being a parent. The sudden knowledge filled in the colors of an unfinished mental painting she held of her mother. The woman sitting before her possessed far more complexities than that pale, inner representation Kellatra had carried with her from her childhood. She wanted to stand and embrace her mother. To comfort her. To shield her. To protect her from the world as she had been sheltered as a child. Instead, she spoke words not born of compassion, but of inner pain, of betrayal and confusion and

petulant immaturity. Words she had not rehearsed and did not even know she could say until they exploded from her lips.

“I will tell Father if you do not break it off.”

Her mother stared at her in silence, her face falling from defiance and anger to sorrow and resignation. She wiped her eyes with the backs of her hands and stood. She stared down at Kellatra a moment and then nodded and walked back into the house.

Kellatra sat, stunned and immobile. She wanted to get up and go to her mother and repent her words. But she remained motionless. Silent. Her mother had gone when she returned to the house. She did not see her mother again that day. The next time Kellatra saw her mother, the woman who raised her lay on a funeral pyre. The last words she spoke to her mother were whispers of regret to a woman beyond hearing, beyond forgiveness, beyond life.

THE PRESENT

OIL LAMPS cast hazy light in shades of yellow and orange through the windows of homes along the street, illuminating the strangely still busy city and its citizens. People walked the street in pairs and congregated at corners or near the doors of inns and ale houses. Kellatra watched the people as the wagon rumbled along, seeing their agitated faces, the worry, the anger. Word of the riot at the rakthor embassy had spread and citizens seemed primed to take action of their own, if only they knew where to do so.

While she saw the people on the streets, she did not give them much of her attention, which rested mainly still with thoughts of the past. Regret. Remorse. Guilt. She found they all felt different but somehow saddened her equally. Guilt, she knew from the Pashist teachings of her childhood, focused too much on the person who had done wrong rather than the person wronged. A selfish and self-pitying response. The first stage of repentance, to be abandoned with haste. Regret and remorse, while sounding to be the same thing, were taught as separate stages following guilt. Regret focused on the act of wrongness itself, whatever it might be, while remorse was taught to be a focus on the person wronged. Through regret, one cultivated the wish to avoid repeating the offensive act, while through remorse, one cultivated compassion for the person wronged. Forgiveness, the Pashist priests taught, needed to come not only from the one wronged, but from within the person who had committed the offense.

Kellatra could not seek forgiveness from her mother and could not bring herself to offer compassion to herself. Had she not spoken as she did, had she been patient rather than impetuous, her mother might still live. Bandakaya might still live. Again, came the realization that such an alternate life might never have taken her to Punderra and the town of Nahan Kana. She might never have met Rankarus, and never been blessed by bearing Lantili and Luntadus. How could she weigh those inestimable gifts against the loss of her mother and banishment? But did she deserve the bountiful rewards of her husband and children after all she had done? Had she been patient that day, she might...

“Are you well?”

Rankarus's voice sounded both loud, to carry over the clanging of the wagon wheels over uneven stone, and softly directed for her ear alone.

"Trapped in thoughts of the past." Kellatra turned to him where he sat beside her in the wagon bed.

"You seem sad." Rankarus squeezed her hand.

"They are not pleasant memories." Kellatra noted the downward cast of her husband's eyes. "You look sad yourself."

"I, too, feel the pull of the past marking my mind." Rankarus sighed. "We should speak of these things, I think." He did not sound certain. "When time allows."

"Yes. It may do us good to share the past more fully." Kellatra did not sound certain of her statement, either.

"The gate." Rankarus pointed beyond the front of the wagon as they approached the western gate of the city.

Unlike the eastern gate, which allowed access from the outer city, the western gate offering access to the city port did not close at sunset. It remained open all through the night to allow traffic from the docks into the city as well as the reverse. Normally. Now, however, the main gate doors sat closed.

"Gate's closed." The larger of the two guards raised a hand.

"We're pilgrims returning from selling our wares." Kadmallin handed the guard the forged permit he and Sketkee said they used to travel into and out of the city frequently.

"Gate's closed," the guard said again, waving the paper away.

"Don't wanna keep the pilgrims in," the smaller of the two guards said. "Let'm use the portcullis gate." He pointed to a smaller gate barely the width of the wagon tunneling through the wall. Twin latticed iron grates sat closed at either end.

"Fine then. Raise the grates." The first guard looked to Kadmallin. "Ya don't stray to the docks, you head right back up the coast road."

"What's happened?" Kadmallin's voice sounded only vaguely interested. Kellatra wondered the same. A hint of something acrid made her nose twitch as a breeze came through the smaller gate and the iron grate began to rise with a clanging of chains.

"Never ya mind. Just go through and up the road. Now get, 'fer I change my mind." The large guard slapped the rump of the horse and the wagon lurched forward.

As they passed through the small side gate, the pungent scent flowered into the smell of smoke. Kadmallin drove the wagon along the city wall toward the coastal road, and they saw the cause of the closed gates, hearing it as they came closer. Along the pier, a crowd of people shouted in the firelight of a burning ship, masts and decks consumed with flame. Kadmallin reined the horse to a stop. Kellatra did not need to be told which ship burned. She saw the flag atop the main mast and recognized it from the symbol Sketkee had carved into the side of the wagon. She also saw what she assumed to be two rakthors, in cloaks of some kind, running across the deck and diving into the water. Angry humans along the dock hurled rubbish and refuse at them. A handful of city guards tried to keep the crowd back but were badly outnumbered.

“Fire brings light and madness in equal measure,” Abananthus quoted from the driving seat.

“I see the carriage they took.” Kadmallin pointed. “We need to find out when the mob arrived and started the fire. Maybe they aren’t on board.”

“Can you do anything about the fire, Kell?” Rankarus knelt beside her as they stared at the inferno engulfing the ship.

“I can try, but it will be slow. It can’t be seen to be unnatural. It can’t smell of The Sight, or worse yet, the Goddess, or it will only anger the crowd more.” Kellatra took a deep breath and slowly exhaled, holding her hands cupped and open, gradually calming her mind, seeking the way of seeing that embraced the ultimate nature of reality. As The Sight came to her, she focused the whole of her awareness on the flames lapping at the rakthor ship, coaxing them to slowly flutter in various places.

“It’s working,” Rankarus said.

“Not fast enough.” Kadmallin climbed down from the wagon.

“It will take time to do properly.” Kellatra continued to tame the fire eating the ship. “You must be patient.”

Kellatra did not know if she could control her own impatience. She could easily quash the flames of the ship in seconds. She felt the fire and knew it as she knew her own inner essence. She was the fire, and the fire was Kellatra. To make it cease took only a thought. But to do so would create even more problems. An angry and frightened crowd that would spread to ignite a different fire in the city, one also of anger and fear. And she’d heard the stories of the Mother Shepherd setting the city aflame with her prayers before extinguishing them with a sacrifice of her own life. It could not seem that the Goddess favored the rakthors in any way. The turmoil from such a perception would be disastrous.

As Kellatra watched the fire, she became the wind, and the water along the docks, and the clouds in the sky. She could put the fire out, but it would take time. Time to make a small storm. All she needed was patience.

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THE CARNIVAL



DONJEO

NIGHT FLIES churned the air in a black cloud. The dust of the Old Border Road rose in plumes with the horse's hooves. Donjeo swatted at the flies and twitched his nose at the dust. His stomach grumbled at him, but he ignored it. He'd not eaten since dawn. Now, hours after sunset, his limbs felt weary. He needed to spend what little coin he had left on feed for the horse. Gapo had served him well and deserved the greater portion of what his dwindling coins might provide. He'd chosen wisely when stealing the horse. Soon, they'd both have fully bellies. It could not be far now. Soon, he'd be home. Home among his people. Home with his father. Not really his father, but the closest he'd ever known to one. It had to be soon. They had to be on the Old Border Road. If they held to the same route as always. If the war in the Shen dominions had not altered their traditional path.

He tried to ignore that worry, instead focusing on how surprised they would all be to see him after so long. Too long. He found focusing on his planned reunion kept him from thinking about what would happen to him if he were caught. Did they pursue him? The army surely followed his path, but they had no idea he headed before them unless they'd sent men to track him down. Would they have done that? Did they think him dead? If they considered him a deserter, surely they expected him to run in the opposite direction, not race ahead of them west down the Old Border Road. He wondered how far he outpaced the marching troops. Days? A week? Probably days. A boy alone on a horse could make greater distance than a lumbering army of thousands, but only so much.

As his head nodded, he acknowledged that he needed to rest for the night. A lone tree near a roadside field caught his eye in the dim light. A place to hitch Gapo. A spot to lay out his blanket in the grass. It would have to do. As he poured water into his hand from a canteen for Gapo to lick from, he thought about all the distance he'd come over the years to reach this point, so close to his people.

TWO YEARS AGO

DAMP HAY and horse droppings. A familiar scent. Comforting. Donjeo brushed down the horse before him and looked along the line of the other horses in the stable awaiting their turn. A great deal of work to be done before the carnival actors completed their performance for Teyett Havarez, but work he enjoyed. He'd always loved animals and anything to do with them. It'd been one of his happiest days when Leotin assigned him to apprentice with the old animal master. A year later, Von-Raa passed away from tumor disease. A sad day. He'd always liked the old man. He treated Donjeo well, like a grandson. Patient with him when his mind wandered and stern about seeing to the animals. One of the reasons Donjeo liked brushing down the horses was the time it

gave him to daydream — thoughts of being on stage with the actors, or being a tsentey riding a horse into battle, or rescuing the tsentet from the wicked tey. Sometimes, he just dreamed of the tsentet. She usually looked like whatever pretty girl he'd seen in the last town or village where the carnival stopped. The serving girl he'd spied as they entered the castle had been particularly lovely. He wondered what her name might be. How could he talk to her? Maybe when the performance ended, and the castle emptied out? But what should he say?

"You the animal boy for the carnival?"

Donjeo spun around, brush still in motion, stroking empty air, eyes blinking for having been brought so roughly back to reality. "That's me." He 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."

Two large men filled the frame of the stable entrance. They looked like soldiers. Smelled like soldiers as well, reeking of sweat, ale, and something that made his nose wrinkle. Behind them stood what he took to be a woman in a cloak with the hood pulled up. The figure appeared too slender to be a man. Maybe a boy. She seemed his own height and build. Maybe it was a boy.

"You Donjeo?" the uglier of the two men asked.

"Yes." 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 ugly man added.

"But I got work to do. Leotin said..."

The ugly man pulled a sack from behind his back and threw it over Donjeo's head. Then something meaty and large impacted against the side of his skull, darkness overtook him, and he fell to the ground.

HOURS LATER

BITING FLIES and a jostling floor woke Donjeo from a slumber like none he'd ever known. He opened his eyes to find himself leaning against the side rail of a wagon bed, three men seated beside him.

"Wait..." Donjeo tried to conjure words and thoughts to make meaning. "Where am I?"

"Headed north," one of the men said. Donjeo noted the chain that bound the man to the wagon.

"I can't go north." Donjeo's lower lip quivered with his growing confusion and fear.

"Headed ta the mountain whether yas want ta er not," the man said.

"There must be a mistake." Donjeo looked around. He saw many wagons before and after the one he rode in along the road. "I'm with the carnival. I'm the animal keeper. I work for Leotin. The carnival master."

"Got's a new master nows. Now ya works for the Teyett." The man sighed and pulled the chain binding his arm to the wagon. "Like we all does."

Donjeo looked to see a similar chain and cuff encircling his wrist. He tugged at it. It held firm. What had happened? Where was he? There must have been some manner of mistake. Had he gotten

lost? Had the carnival left without him? The last thing he remembered ... He didn't remember the last thing he remembered. Surely, Leotin was looking for him and would find him soon. Until then...

Donjeo tried not to think about what would happen if Leotin did not coming looking for him. Instead, he attempted to figure out why he sat in a wagon heading north. Had he done something? Had something been done to him? Was it a punishment? For what crime? Who were those people in the stable? How long had he been unconscious? Would he ever see the girl from the kitchens again?

Too many questions. His stomach growled at him and another question arose — when had he eaten last? When might he eat again? Where were they headed north? And what would be expected of him?

ONE YEAR AGO

BOOTED FEET slapped the muck of the rain-sopped road. Donjeo trudged through the deluge, a bucket of water in each hand, feeling tired and ridiculous. Buckets of water in the rain! But the horses needed water and the rain would not fill the buckets as fast as the well. He stepped out of the downpour into the stables and emptied the buckets into the water trough along the wall. He sighed, taking a moment to breathe and enjoy merely being damp and dripping rather than soaked and sodden. He knew he could not pause long. If he rested, he might daydream, and daydreaming led to his work slowing down, and slowed work resulted in beatings. Many things led to beatings, but particularly daydreaming.

“Get a move on, boy! Horses won't water 'em selves.”

Donjeo flinched at the stable master's voice and headed back into the rain. “Yes, sir!”

“And muck those back stalls when you're done!” the stable master called after him.

“Yes, sir!” Donjeo called back.

He ran through the muddy street, dodging soldiers and craftsmen, women with bundles of bread or baskets of vegetables wrapped with thin cloths against the rain. He always did his best to keep the stable master happy, because the broad-shouldered man delivered the bulk of the beatings. Still, it might have been worse. The stable master only beat him when he failed or made a mistake or slowed down or got caught daydreaming. Many of the men and boys conscripted to work for the army were beaten just to ensure they feared being beaten. And at least he had work to do that he enjoyed. He only tended horses, but there were more than a thousand horses in the camp. It took a large stable staff, and if he disappointed the stable master, one of the men working in the fields or hammering steel in the forge, or carrying equipment for the soldiers, would be happy to take his place.

Some of the men, the ones not too scrawny, got pulled from the workforce and trained to be foot soldiers. They thought themselves lucky, as they got better food and better accommodations and learned to wield a sword. But Donjeo had seen *The Saga of the Fallen Lands* too many times to believe they were fortunate. He also noted how their training differed from other soldiers, and

how they were separated from them into their own unit. He had never seen battle, never witnessed a war, but he knew the phrase *sword and spear fodder* from the play. He would rather provide fodder to the horses than be fodder for the front lines.

At the well, he went straight to the front of the line. The stables took priority over even the kitchens. While he waited for the man operating the winch and rope to pull a bucket of water, he smiled at the girl behind him. He'd seen her several times the past week. He guessed she worked in the bakery. She had the most enchanting green eyes. Such a contrast with her dark-brown skin.

"Are you new?" He kept his voice low so only she heard.

"They said not to speak to the boys." The girl looked away.

"They told me not to speak to girls, too." Donjeo smiled. "The rain is awful, isn't it?"

"I guess." The girl seemed noncommittal despite the water running down through her mass of black hair and into her eyes.

"I'm Donjeo."

"Tesmelda," the girl said.

Then the man at the well filled the buckets and Donjeo had no more excuse to talk with Tesmelda. He smiled and lumbered back through the mud toward the stables. He'd lost track of how many days he'd been in the mountain camp and wondered how long before the start of the war. How long could you hide a massive army camp in the mountains before someone discovered it? And who would they attack? Rumors said the Shen, while some said Juparti or Punderra. He didn't care. He only hoped it came soon. He knew Leotin would never find him in the remote mountain valley, and his only chance at escape might come when they marched south for the war.

ONE WEEK AGO

STARS SHIMMERED in the smoky haze of a hundred campfires. Donjeo lay on his back watching the celestial lights through thinly slitted eyes, waiting for the voice of the stable master and for his plan to begin. He heard footsteps thudding against the packed earth.

"Boy!"

A boot smacked his side and sent him rolling. He sputtered as he got to his feet. "Yes, sir! What, sir?"

"What? The horses, that's what. Six are missing!" The stable master smacked him upside the head.

Donjeo stumbled back. He'd taken far harder strikes to the head, but he found that feigning the power of the impact reduced the likelihood of a second blow.

"But I tethered them all myself, sir." Donjeo shook his head, pretending confusion.

"Well, they ain't tethered now," the stable master barked.

"Thieves?" Donjeo suggested. "Could it be horse thieves?"

"More likely you was thinkin' bout that bakery girl again." The stable master frowned and pointed into the darkness. "Now clear yer head and go find them horses, or I'll clear yer head fer good."

“Yes, sir!”

Donjeo ran to where he'd tethered the horses earlier that night. The spot where he knew the stable master would check his work. The place where he'd freed the six horses and sent them into the nearby woods. He ran into those woods now, knowing the horses would be close. He'd only have a little time. He stopped and dug beneath a pile of leaves at the root of a massive lanish tree. He pulled forth a pack, the one he'd planted earlier that day. It contained enough stolen food to last him for several days and feed for the horse for at least one. It also contained the coins the stable master kept hidden in the chest at the back of his wagon. With the pack on his shoulders, he raced into the woods.

He found the first horse easily enough. The others wandered nearby. He tied them together, one to the next, and led them deeper into the trees. After an hour, he came to a road. He remembered the road and where it led because he'd traveled it twice with Leotin and the carnival. He knew many roads. He'd spent long hours memorizing the map Leotin carried with him.

Just thinking of Leotin set Donjeo's eyes to watering. He would get home. Or he would die. This he'd assured by stealing the horses and the stable master's coins. But he'd rather be dead than trapped in an advancing army. He led the horses up the road for two hours until he came to a small town. He remembered the town clearly, knew where the inn sat and where to find its stable. He led the horses in as quietly as possible. He recalled the inn had no stable boy, because the owner didn't like to pay for one. He occasionally hired a local boy to feed the horses during the day instead.

Donjeo tethered five of the horses and took a saddle for the sixth. A fair trade. He guided the horse through a field in the back and out of the town. Once across the field, he found the main road again. The road the army would travel on soon. The Old Border Road. The army had marched down from the mountains in the north of Atheton, and then taken barges along the Goha River to the Old Border Road, which they had quickly marched along for days. Now he mounted the horse and followed the road for several hours before bedding down in a clump of trees. He figured the stable master suspected him of deserting, but he would never guess Donjeo chose to run ahead of the army.

Before dawn, he saddled the horse and headed down the road again. When he saw a small merchant caravan several strides up the road, he veered off on a side lane as soon as he could and then made his way quickly through the fields and woods beside the road until he came out again far ahead of the caravan. He'd heard about the fake merchant caravan and its deadly purpose — killing anyone who tried to pass it in order to keep news of the advancing army from spreading.

With the impostor caravan and the thousands strong Atheton army finally behind him, Donjeo did his best to press ahead as far as possible each day, knowing that every step brought him closer to home and those he loved. He only hoped his daring escape did not prove futile. The carnival should be on the Old Border Road this time of year, or someone would have seen them and be able to tell him which way to find them. And he would find them.

THE PRESENT

LIGHT FROM the rising sun shimmered across dew-dampened grass. Donjeo bit his tongue to keep himself awake as his head nodded while he rode in the saddle. He blinked and breathed in the cool, cloud-like air. A new day of riding and walking. A day closer to home. Closer to Leotin and the rest of his family. It could not be long now. He'd been on the road for over a week. He hoped to find a merchant caravan or a group of pilgrims, or someone to follow close behind or ride with. A boy his age on a horse offered an easy target for bandits or the roaming militias. They might leave him alive, but both would surely take his horse and search him for the coins he'd hidden beneath his shirt. That would slow him down. Best to find companions for the road. He began to feel excited and quashed the emotion. He would not let himself daydream of success. He would keep his mind on his goal and on the road. Daydreamers got ambushed. Daydreamers got caught by the army. Daydreamers ended up dead. There would be ample time for daydreaming when he found his family. Maybe today. Yes. Maybe today.

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

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

CHARRED FLESH and ashen wood — twin smoke-infused smells permeated the air. Fire-blackened and soot-stained bodies lined the pier. Behind them sat the scorched skeleton of a ship. Abananthus stood a dozen paces from the smoke-charred corpses of the rakthor crew, the late morning sun beating down on the thinning patch of hair at the crown of his head. Kadmallin waited beside him, his arms crossed, hands fidgeting, seeming uncertain where to put them without the twin sword handles normally at his waist. He'd insisted that they both refrain from wearing any weapons. This had not bothered Abananthus, who never liked the weight of a sword sheath slapping his hip nor a dagger dangling from his belt. Weapons always reminded him of the things he had done with them, things he'd rather remained in the fog of forgetfulness.

They waited for the rakthor standing beside the bodies to decide. Twelve rakthors managed the search and salvage of the ship. No humans were allowed near it. Kadmallin had addressed the one that appeared to be in charge and requested to examine the remains. He'd explained that he worked in the employ of a rakthor consulting with Ambassador Katvash to find two missing rakthors. It had surprised him to hear the strange rakthor tongue coming from Kadmallin's mouth. The rakthors appeared impressed by this. He supposed it made the story more likely. And the tale was mostly true, so why should they not believe it. The risk, of course, came in the possibility that Viktik survived somewhere nearby and might recognize Kadmallin or himself. For this reason, Kadmallin wore Abananthus's hat. Not the best of disguises, but the best possible, given the circumstances.

Kellatra and Rankarus were up on the coastal road along the rocks above the docks. They'd all stayed there through the night watching the remnants of the fire, waiting for the city guards to disperse what remained of the mob. Most of the people had wandered away after the wind picked up and the rain poured down to douse the blaze consuming the ship. Kellatra's work. It had taken nearly half an hour for her to quench the flames, and she'd refused to do so more quickly. Abananthus agreed. They had enough problems without needing to deal with Kam-Djen fanatics raving about Dark Sight. As they waited, a thought occurred to Abananthus that had escaped him until then.

"Why did you request for me to join you?" Abananthus asked.

Kadmallin remained silent a moment, then sighed. "I need you because if there is a body, I might not be able to carry it myself. You're big. You look strong." He looked up and down the line of the dead rakthors arranged on the dock. "And I don't honestly know if I could stand beside Rankarus this long without feeling angry."

"Then best it is me." Abananthus stood a little straighter. "He feels badly that things worked out as they did, but his apologies might sound better after we understand how things actually transpired."

“Exactly.” Kadmallin’s voice sounded rough, as though he held back more words.

“*A thing should not be truly discussed until that thing is truly done,*” Abananthus quoted.

“Sage Nohanatt.” Kadmallin nodded.

“You are familiar with the great sage?” Abananthus felt an unreasonable sense of satisfaction. People rarely knew the sources of the words he could not stop himself from quoting.

“Sketkee introduced me to his work.” Kadmallin sighed again.

“A rakthor who reads Pashist sages?” Abananthus let the strange idea fill his mind.

“She is unique among her people.” Kadmallin’s eyes flicked to the row of dead bodies.

“How did you meet her and come to be in her employ?” Abananthus had wondered this very question since meeting the two of them. Kadmallin claimed to be her personal guard, but she treated him as an equal in their conversations and undertakings.

“I was the commander of the targas in the palace of Rhegan Godathuaa in Kanhalla.” Kadmallin paused a moment as though stepping back in time with his thoughts and words. “Sketkee was an ambassador at the time. She’d just been stationed to the city. A faction of lesser rhagas hoped to embarrass and weaken the Rhegan’s position with the rakthors by killing the new ambassador. I saved her life. Over her time there, we became ... better acquainted. When she convinced her superiors of the benefit of a survey of the Iron Realm’s different faiths and how they might impact the political demands and decisions of each dominion, she asked me to accompany her as her personal guard. Not that she needs one. But it helps to have a human in front of you when you look like a creature from a story meant to frighten children. And it makes the few fools who get past me underestimate what they face.”

“How long have you been her personal guard?” Abananthus wondered at the stories the two might tell of traveling the Iron Realm researching the many faiths. What had they seen? Who had they met? It made him nostalgic for the road and the merchant caravans of his youth.

“We traveled together for a little more than ten years.” Kadmallin sounded wistful, a slight smile on his face. “Then she sailed to the Sun Realm to attend her father’s death and did not return. She became a philosopher of nature. Hard for her people to understand. Most rakthors only have one occupation in their whole lives. But it made sense to me. I think she was always a philosopher, even as an ambassador. She wrote me last year and asked if I would join her on a new research mission. So, here I am.”

“What did you do for all those years she was away?” Abananthus heard the sense of loss in the man’s voice. He’d missed her in those years apart.

“I worked for the households of a few rhagas.” Kadmallin sniffed as though remembering a bad smell. “The last in the south of Juparti. A cruel man with no more wisdom than a door post. I was glad to...”

Kadmallin broke off as the rakthor in charge walked toward them. He stopped and barked something in the rakthor tongue as he gestured with his hand toward the dead. Kadmallin replied with a short bow.

“Let’s go. They’ll only give us a few minutes.” Kadmallin strode forward and Abananthus followed him.

He had been avoiding thinking about this part, the necessity of examining the deceased rakhthors up close. The scent of roasted flesh filled his nose — sweet but tinged with a charcoal sting. It reminded him of the stories the pilgrims told of finding their brethren tied to trees and burnt alive along the Old Border Road. He never imagined such a thing until now and did not want to contemplate it further. Fortunately, inhalation of smoke appeared the main cause of death among the rakhthors arranged around the docks.

“Dead is still dead, but death by fire is the worst death of all.”

Abananthus did not know if this were true and had no desire to test the maxim. He looked at the corpses, keeping his eyes on their faces. He did not see Sketkee, and while he’d tried not to look directly at Viktik in the alley where they had staged the robbery, he did not see the rakthor ambassador lying on the dock, either.

“They aren’t here.” Kadmallin sounded and looked relieved. He nodded to the rakthor in charge and led the way off of the pier.

“Maybe they leapt into the water or found a small boat.” Abananthus did not have trouble sounding optimistic. If they were not dead on the ship, then it was only a matter of finding them.

“Possibly,” Kadmallin replied. “They might also have avoided the ship altogether if they saw the mob on the docks first.”

“Maybe she will head back to the pilgrim town,” Abananthus said.

“If Viktik doesn’t get suspicious and try to stop her,” Kadmallin said.

“We will find her.” Abananthus resisted the urge to place his hand on Kadmallin’s shoulder. He did not know him well enough for such a familiar gesture, and the man did not strike him as one with a fondness for uninvited familiarity.

“Oh, I’ll find her.” Kadmallin took off the hat and handed it to Abananthus. “I just hope she doesn’t do something unexpected before I get to her.”

“Unexpected?” Abananthus could not make his mind conjure up an image of Sketkee being spontaneous or unpredictable.

“How do you think she ended up with that artifact in the first place?” Kadmallin laughed.

The man’s mirth put Abananthus more at ease. He wasn’t certain what Kadmallin referred to, but if he thought the situation warranted levity, things could not be all that bad. They had the artifact, which worried him as much as Kellatra possessing even a poor copy of that damnable codex, but it still seemed like a victory. Now they only needed to find Sketkee again and...

And then what?

Abananthus didn’t really wish to consider that and, he tried not to.

“A man who does not know his past cannot hope to see his future, and a man who never tries to foresee his future does not need a past.”

Abananthus did not understand why that saying came to mind, so he ignored it. Best to focus on the largest and most pressing of the problems at hand — how did they find a rakthor hiding in a city riled against her kind before people spotted her and attempted to kill her?

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THE CARNIVAL



THE OTHER DONJEO

DANDELION WISPS floated through sun and shadow, a small cloud of white seeds rolling across a field and through the narrow stand of trees. The Other Donjeo waved a dandelion puff from his face as he hung a bag of oats around a horse's neck. The carnival spread out beneath the shade of a row of conifers at the roadside, everyone enjoying a midday meal break. Once he'd fed the horses, he filled buckets of water from a cistern in a wagon at the rear, placing them for the animals to drink. Finished with his chores, he found the cook and grabbed a cold, thin loaf of dinbao, smeared it with soft goat cheese, and folded it over with leftover chicken from the previous night. A simple, quick meal. He collected the empty oat bags from the horses as he ate, making sure none of them drank too much. They had enough draft animals for all the wagons now. It'd been over a week since the horror of the creatures in that small town. They still did not know where the old man and the boy had gotten off to. Probably sneaked out in the night and headed south, he assumed. He could not guess why.

As he worked his way up the caravan line of horses and wagons, he passed the outlanders sitting in the shade. He waved to them. He liked them and was glad that Shifhuul had not died at the castle. The revelation of Yeth as a seer concerned him, but he knew he could do nothing about it beyond being cautious. He held a fondness for Tarak rooted not merely in the roagg's good nature, but in their similar heritage.

He passed Palla and Ranna sitting in the back of a wagon at the front. They seemed inseparable, and many in the carnival spoke in hushed and amused tones behind their backs about the amount of time they spent together, particularly in the evenings. But carnivals were forgiving places, especially one composed of pilgrims and former militia. Some did not like what they saw as impropriety, and others made clear that any threat to the women would be a threat to all. He did not care. They were good women and good to him. They were all good to him. Which left a stabbing pang of guilt in his heart on most days, but he'd learned to ignore that along with many other things. Like the longing and the fear.

As he tended to the horse at the head of the column, he saw someone walking with a limp toward them down the road ahead. A boy about his age. It took a moment at that distance to see the boy clearly, and his breath caught in his chest as he did. He recognized that youth. Knew that face. A face as much like his own as one hand to another.

Donjeo. The real Donjeo.

How? How here on this road? After so long?

He turned and hurried back along the row of wagons past the people of the carnival, seeing them but not registering their presence. His mind flooded with conflicting impulses and thoughts. He spotted Leotin speaking with several of the pilgrims and turned away from him. He walked through the trees and into the field. Beyond the field lay a small forest. He started running. He

knew he shouldn't but did not know what else to do. His master would have instructed him to kill the boy. Kill Donjeo. Just as he'd been ordered that crucial night. But he could no more kill Donjeo now than before, even if there had been an opportunity.

So, he ran. Ran and remembered.

TWO YEARS AGO

SLENDER HANDS on a slender face. Eyes fluttering into unconsciousness.

Kanma gripped the boy's head, focusing on willing him to remain in slumber. As his eyes closed and his knees buckled, she eased him to the hay-strewn floor of the stable.

"How long's this gonna take?" the larger of the men behind her asked.

"It is not a thing to rush if it is to be done well," Kanma replied.

Her people accomplished this without benefit of The Sight, willing a subject into unconsciousness to probe their mind for memories. This she did now, pressing her consciousness into the boy's, collecting images and remembered words. They came in a jumble. She would need to sort through them later. A full conversion took hours, but she did not have such time. She skimmed what she needed from the boy's remembrances. A name and face featured prominently in his thoughts, and so she concentrated on those. Leotin. With the images and sounds came emotions as well. She took these with care. Here came the real danger of becoming someone, of mimicking their life — that the emotions of their heart supplanted her own and left her believing herself more the boy than Kanma. She did not worry over this danger. She held a surplus of emotion in her heart. Anger chief among them. And fear. And longing. She forced thoughts of her captive mate from her mind and concentrated on the boy.

Having taken all the memories she had time for, she moved to the next phase of the transformation — assuming his physical likeness. Her people began their lives without a determined sex, altering it as required. Though she currently thought of herself as female, she had spent several days transforming her body into that of a typical boy of fourteen, the approximate age of the one before her. As her hands touched him, they absorbed through his skin the physical information she required to fulfill the conversion. She could not explain the process to anyone, but she instinctively intuited how to accomplish it. And though rare among her kind in that she, like her captive mate, possessed The Sight, she did not understand how those ancient Juparti seers fashioned her people so many years ago. Such knowledge existed beyond her ken. But she knew how to become someone. She sensed the metamorphosis taking place in the bones and flesh of her body as she stood up from the boy.

"That it?" the large soldier asked.

"It will take a few hours to complete," Kanma replied. "By morning, it will be finished."

"Then best make sure none of 'em sees ya afore then." The soldier and his burly companion bent to pick up the still unconscious form of the boy. Donjeo. His name was Donjeo. She would need to begin thinking of herself by that name.

"What happens to the boy?" she asked.

“Best you don’t worry ’bout that,” the soldier said.

“Will you kill him?” Kanma found herself disquieted by the idea of the boy dying in order to for her to replace him. She’d seen that happen often enough, people killed as she temporarily took their lives. A death ensured no one ever saw them together.

“He’s not long fer the world.” The soldier looked at the slumbering boy and sighed.

“Don’t kill him.” Her voice sounded urgent in her own ears.

“We gots our orders.” The soldier shook his head.

“I may need him.” Her mind raced to think of a believable excuse as she calmed her thoughts and took hold of The Sight. “The transfer has been done quickly. I may need him alive one day if something goes wrong.” She subtly pressed her will into the minds of the two men, an ancient skill for those of her people with The Sight. Uncertain and rarely used. “Don’t kill him. Find another way.”

The soldier stared at her a moment. She dared not try again for fear he would realize what she did. She had little mastery of the skill as it could only be used with the greatest care on simple minds.

“I think I knows a way,” the soldier said as he and his ever-silent companion glanced at each other and nodded. They said no more as they walked away.

As the men carried the boy from the stables, she untied the cloak, pulled it from her shoulders, and tossed it aside. She stood in clothes very similar to those the boy wore. She finished brushing down the horses, struggling with the memory of what to do. Then she climbed in the hay loft above the stable and fell asleep.

She awoke as Donjeo. No longer she, but rather he. And this other Donjeo was intent on fulfilling his master’s desires, spying on the carnival and Leotin for the Teyett Havarez. In return, the Teyett would spare his mate’s life. As long as he performed his duty, his mate remained alive.

THE PRESENT

RUSTLING LEAVES created the only sound in the small, open space between trees. His rapid passage through the woods spooked the animals and insects into silence. He leaned against a trunk to catch his breath. He didn’t know how far he’d run, only that he needed to run farther. His legs trembled from exhaustion as he pushed away from the tree intending to resume his flight. A motion beside him brought him spinning around. Shifhuul stood between two trees, staring at him.

He did not know how to respond, or what to do. He sought The Sight but could not clear his mind.

“Come back now.” Shifhuul stepped forward into the clearing.

“Stay back.” He raised his hand. “I don’t wish to hurt you.”

“You not hurt me. You saved me.” Shifhuul took another step forward and grinned. “With birds.”

“I can’t go back. You don’t understand.” He staggered backward, confused. How did the wyrin know what he’d done with the birds to save the outlanders from that militia? How long had

he known?

“Where you go?” Shifhuul asked, his voice gentle.

“To find my mate.” Could he do that? How could he return to the Teyett now and demand his mate? Another thought occurred to him. “Where are the others?” Did the outlanders hunt him as a team? He sought The Sight again, frustrated at its elusiveness.

“Only me.” Shifhuul folded his paws before him. “My mate dead. My child dead. When you see last your mate?”

“Two years ago.” He blinked at the pain of the memory. His mate in an induced sleep, caged like a wild animal. How long could they keep his mate asleep to protect against the use of The Sight? Could his mate survive two years?

“What your name?” Shifhuul asked.

“Donjeo...” He blinked. His name but not his name. A boy but not a boy. “I am Kanma.”

“Come, Kanma.” Shifhuul gestured for him to take his hand. “You forced to pretend. Leotin forgive you.”

“I can’t.” He sighed and his mind relaxed, finally embracing The Sight. He did not want to hurt the wyrin. He liked him. Liked all the Outlanders. That was why he’d risked being exposed to save them. He liked everyone in the carnival, Leotin in particular. For him, he held a strange love. Like a father to him, even as he pretended to be as a son to him. The emotions of it confused him and he blinked as The Sight slipped away. Could Leotin forgive him? Could any of them? And what of the real Donjeo? Would he not demand justice?

“Come.” Shifhuul stepped forward and took his hand. “You tell story. They keep you. If Leotin keep militia, Leotin keep you.”

Could this be true? Leotin and the carnival folk had accepted some militia into their fold. Could he find forgiveness as well? And what of his mate? Could Leotin help? Could he intervene with the teyett? Would he?

He took one step and then another, following Shifhuul into the woods. He did not know what to do, so he decided to trust the wyrin. He had come back from the dead, after all. Possibly, he returned with special wisdom. Maybe Kanma could be forgiven, even if he never forgave himself.

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

INTERLUDE



CINNAMON SPICED biscuits submerge briefly in clove-tinted tea. A Juparti spice merchant sits at the garden table of a seer of the same dominion in the city of Lhanassa.

“You are certain the wyrin is not mistaken?” the seer asks before placing a sodden biscuit in his mouth.

“Wyrins aren’t as unimaginative as rakhors, but they are usually reliable with reports.” The merchant looks at the tray of biscuits. He’s eaten four already and his wife regularly admonishes him to lessen his consumption of sweets. “I have done business with this wyrin for more than a decade. He is reliable. Besides, I have heard similar stories from the captains and crew of my ships. Stories so wild, they are easy to ignore.”

“I have heard stories as well. I assumed them to be fabrications of the simple-minded. Artifacts of those hoping to make the dreams of this goddess seem more normal.” The seer takes another biscuit and dips it in his tea. “If what the wyrin writes about these happenings in the Stone Realm and the Sky Realm are also true, this may affect more than merely your trade routes.”

“This is why I came to you.” The merchant licks his lips as he watches the seer devour the damp biscuit.

“I will take this matter to the high council and advise them of it,” the seer says. He pauses and visibly considers something.

The merchant wonders if the seer will take another biscuit. He desperately wants one. There are only two left.

“I am acquainted with a Keth seer from Punderra who may know about this strange phenomenon, or who should be made aware if it is not,” the seer says. “I will speak with her as well.”

“Thank you,” the merchant says. “This is why I came to you.”

“I am glad you approached me.” The seer stands, and in standing, bumps the small tea table with his knee, sending it tilting sideways, cups and tray and biscuits crashing to the stone garden patio.

The merchant looks at the broken biscuits, ants already inspecting them, and curses not acting on his desires sooner. Then he reflects and wonders if it is an omen. As he looks up to the seer, he wonders if they can act fast enough to forestall a catastrophe befalling the world.

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



EPISODE TWELVE



THE CARNIVAL



SHIFHUUL

BEE WINGS hummed in the air above the wildflowers along the roadside.

“Two years. Two years of lies.”

“I had no choice.”

A cricket added its chirp to the hum of the bees — a small duet of insect sounds.

“As you have explained. She has your mate.”

“What else could I do?”

A sparrow in a high tree branch called out to unseen companions, making the duet a trio.

“Why did she let him live? That is unlike her.”

“I saved him. She ordered him killed, but I saved him.”

The flock hidden in the leaves of the nearby bushes called back their communal song, turning the trio to an ensemble.

“Why would you do that?”

“He was but a boy. I ... I don’t know.”

Shifhuul stood with his paw still held by Kanma, the boy that wasn’t a boy. The Donjeo that was not Donjeo. They stood with Leotin, Palla, and Ranna a good distance from the rest of the carnival gathered to watch their conversation, curious at the event of double Donjeos. Yeth and Tarak waited behind Shifhuul. He listened to the interplay of the animals and insects of the roadside trees and fields as much as the conversation between Leotin and the ... what had Leotin called him or her or it ... a *soul catcher*. A very human name. And only humans would think to make such beings. The wyrin seers never fashioned creatures through The Sight. The notion never occurred to them. It was unnatural. Now he stood holding such an unnatural creature’s hand, wondering if he had judged Leotin correctly, whether the human would forgive this soul catcher and take it into the fold of his carnival as he had done for so many others. As he had Shifhuul and his fellow outlanders.

He could not say for certain why he’d pursued Kanma into the woods. He’d seen the true Donjeo coming down the road and glanced at the look on the false Donjeo’s face just before he ran into the trees and across the field. Many things occurred to him in that moment — that the boy he’d called Donjeo for so many months was an impostor, that the true Donjeo walked toward the carnival after a long time away, that the false Donjeo had to be a creature born of The Sight or some manner of seer or possibly both, that such a creature empowered by The Sight explained something otherwise only explicable by the presence of the goddess the pilgrims worshiped. As he’d chased after the boy who was not Donjeo and tracked him through the woods, he’d become convinced of his hunch. The boy-seer-creature-impostor had saved him, Yeth, and Tarak from the militia with that mysterious flock of birds. As he tracked him-it, he realized that such a powerful person, possessed of The Sight and the ability to change their form, made a powerful ally on the

road to the Forbidden Realm.

“I do not know what to do.” Leotin looked up to the sky in an apparent attempt to keep his eyes from the twin Donjeos.

“You could let him stay.” Palla frowned as she looked at Kanma and then Donjeo. “Let *it* stay?”

“Her,” Kanma said. “In my natural form, I am female.”

“What?” Donjeo blinked at Kanma. The boy seemed confused that a woman might impersonate him. Shifhuul understood the confusion. He found it unsettling to contemplate as well.

“I do not know if that is possible.” Leotin lowered his eyes to Kanma.

“Please.” Kanma released Shifhuul’s paw to clasp both hands before her in a gesture of contrition. “I have nowhere else to go. I cannot go back to Atheton if what Donjeo says is true. Only the Teyett can free my mate. I can contact her, but she will not heed my pleas. Only you can persuade her. I beg you.”

“You can contact her? Beyond the night jays?” Leotin leaned closer to Kanma.

“Yes. I have the means to send short messages between us. This was my purpose in spying on you. To ensure your fidelity.” Kanma leaned back at the glare in Leotin’s eyes. “But I have not made contact since the siege of the castle.”

“Why not?” Leotin asked.

“I hoped for some change. Some turn of events that might give her cause to reward me with my mate’s release.” Kanma lowered her head. “You stopped sending the night jays, and I figured if she considered us dead, that would help. If she knew you betrayed her, she might have ordered me to kill you.”

It seemed confused thinking to Shifhuul. But he could not easily judge one whose mate’s life sat under the sword of another. He did not know what he would have done if someone held his wife and daughter captive. And he could not imagine what years of that state might do to his line of reasoning.

“Is he...” Palla started to speak and then shook her head at Kanma. “Is she speaking of Teyett Havarez, ruler of the Atheton Dominion? The same woman Donjeo tells us is leading several armies to conquer both the Daeshen and Tanshen dominions?” She stared at Leotin, her eyes wide.

“Yes.” Leotin paused and took a moment to look at the carnival folk assembled out of earshot. “A fact best kept between us here. I fell into debt to the Teyett and the service of that debt required me to supply her with information. She is not a woman to thwart when in her debt.”

“She is most dangerous and cunning,” Kanma added. “And the most powerful seer I have ever encountered.”

“That explains a great deal.” Leotin stroked his chin. He looked at Kanma and placed a hand on Donjeo’s shoulder. “I do not know if I can allow you to stay. Donjeo must have a say. His is the life that has been taken.”

Donjeo swallowed and looked around, clearly uncomfortable as the center of consideration by those around him. “I suppose ... well, he ... I mean she ... she had no choice, did she? And if she tells the truth, she saved my life. So, I guess ... would you have to look like me?”

“No.” Kanma looked down. “I can change to a different form.”

“Then I guess ... I guess it’d be okay. I guess.” Donjeo sounded understandably uncertain to Shifhuul’s ears.

“I am still undecided.” Leotin placed his hand behind his back. “I need time to think.”

“We could take a vote,” Palla suggested. “It affects everyone.”

“It is my carnival, and I will decide.” Leotin’s tone made clear his rejection of Palla’s suggestion.

Shifhuul sighed. Humans. Debating and thinking when the answer gave them no real choice. His impatience, for humans in particular, gained the better of his reticence.

“Kanma stay or I go.” Shifhuul raised his voice as he spoke to Leotin. “I go they go.” He gestured to Yeth and Tarak. Like himself, the two other outlanders had remained silent throughout the discussion of Kanma’s fate. He hoped now they would confirm his statement, as he’d brought them into his bargaining without advance warning.

“I go where Shifhuul goes,” Tarak said, his deep voice rumbling. Shifhuul assumed the roagg held an affinity for Kanma, as both their people had been fashioned with a malignant use of The Sight to serve the whims of humans.

“As do I.” Yeth nodded to Shifhuul. He suspected she, too, understood the advantage of having someone like Kanma as an ally. He wondered if she also guessed at the source of their salvation from the militia by the birds months ago.

“Am I being threatened?” Leotin scowled, his voice deep with anger.

“No threat.” Shifhuul spread his hands wide. “Advice.”

“I think he is right,” Palla said as she looked between Kanma and Donjeo.

“I, too,” Ranna added from where she stood, as always, beside Palla.

“I have yet to grow accustomed to Palla offering her opinion unrequested; there is no need for you to mimic her.” Leotin scowled at Ranna.

Donjeo and Kanma laughed in unison, a laughter that brought all eyes toward them and left their own eyes locked together. Leotin looked between them and sighed.

“You may stay for now,” Leotin said. Kanma’s face brightened and Shifhuul noted the annoyed frown Leotin cast toward him. “But for the sake of my sanity, wear some different clothes until you can stop looking alike.”

“Of course.” Kanma wiped sudden tears from her eyes. “It will take a day or more to change.”

A sound came to Shifhuul’s ears and a scent on the wind. He turned and looked ahead, eastward down the Old Border Road. At the edge of his vision, he saw a caravan of several wagons and men. Merchants maybe.

“Caravan comes.” Shifhuul pointed along the road toward the dust cloud that approached with the horses and wagons.

Tarak raised a hand to his eyes and stared along the road. With vision as good as Shifhuul’s, he saw what approached better than the humans. “Three wagons. Twelve men.”

Donjeo limped into the middle of the road, favoring his left leg. He raised a hand to shield his eyes from the sun. “Those aren’t merchants.”

“What do you mean?” Leotin stepped to stand beside Donjeo.

“They’re a vanguard unit.” Donjeo’s voice cracked with a hint of fear. “They pretend to be a band of merchants. They ride ahead of the army. If anyone passes them on the road, they kill them. It keeps word of the approaching army from spreading. I thought I was days ahead of them, but my horse was stolen, and I hurt my leg and...”

“And now they are upon us.” Leotin placed a hand on Donjeo’s shoulder and the boy relaxed. “If we do not engage them, will they attack us?”

“I don’t think so.” Donjeo licked his lips. “They only care about people trying to get past them headed west.”

“Then, as we are heading east, we will pose no threat.” Leotin raised his free hand to his chin. “We’ll need to get off the Old Border Road before we run into the army. How far are they behind these soldiers posing as merchants?”

“A day, I think.” Donjeo squinted his eyes. “I passed a side road north a little more than a day ago.”

“Then we will make for that road with all haste.” Leotin turned and spoke to those around him, Palla in particular. “You heard Donjeo. Pass the word to our people. Tell them to wave to the men in the wagons, be friendly, but give no mind to them. We want them to pass and pass quickly. And make ready to take to the road as soon as they are a pillar of dust behind us. We have a heavy, fast march ahead.”

“Hide.” Shifhuul tapped Donjeo’s arm. “You and Kanma hide in wagons.” From the boy’s story, there appeared a good chance the false merchants might recognize him. Seeing two of him would surely make them stop.

“Yes.” Leotin looked between Donjeo and Kanma, seeming momentarily confused by which might be which. “Hide now.”

“Come with me.” Palla stepped forward and took the arm of each boy. “We’ll put you both in the props wagon. No one will look there if anyone starts looking at all.”

As Palla led Donjeo and Kanma away past the row of carnival wagons, Leotin walked over to Shifhuul.

“Never do that to me again.” Leotin’s anger showed more on his face than in his voice.

“It save us with birds.” Shifhuul spoke low so no one around heard his words. “Carnival need such ally.”

Leotin said nothing for a moment, stroking his chin. “Yes. Yes, we do.” He held Shifhuul’s eyes. “Still, don’t ever try to force my hand before the others again. You’re not Palla. You’re smarter than that.”

Leotin nodded to him and walked off. Tarak and Yeth stepped up to him a moment later.

“We might do well to hide also,” Yeth said.

“Or at least sit behind the wagons out of sight,” Tarak added.

“No box. Hide but no box.” Shifhuul refused to spend another moment in that horrid box.

“No more boxes for you,” Tarak agreed.

The three looked at the approaching wagons then walked back to find a place out of the way

to wait. Shifhuul walked between them, reflecting on how much of his life revolved around pretense and deception — the outlanders pretending to be carnival attractions and not scouts for their realms, him pretending to be dead when he lived, Kanma pretending to be Donjeo, and now approaching soldiers pretending to be merchants. He longed for simple truth. Truth and a quick ride to beat the marching army to the side road, or else they'd need a new story to pretend.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena turn the page.

THE CARNIVAL



LEOTIN

THE SMELL of damp autumn leaves mulching in the roadside grass mingled with the aroma of tired horses and exhausted people. Leotin leaned against the lead carnival wagon, his personal sleeping carriage. Donjeo, the real Donjeo, stood beside the horse, Maws, whispering in his ear. He'd always loved that old, cantankerous horse. The only animal Leotin had refused to eat during the castle siege. He sighed, still unable to fully settle his mind for the confusion of the situation. How had he never noticed that Donjeo had been replaced by a *kadmatakad* — a soul catcher? There must have been signs, things the creature got wrong, but he'd ignored them and ... and the real boy he cared for suffered as a captive for years. But he had him back now. He found it hard to swallow as he looked away from Donjeo.

The soul catcher, *Kanma* it called itself, stood near *Shifhuul*, back along the line of wagons. The creature stayed close to the *wyrin*. He did not blame it. Not for that. He blamed it for much else, however. But the present presented no time for dealing with the creature or what it had done.

They needed to get to a suitable side road with all haste. They'd passed a lane heading north, but that would have put them in dangerous *Atheton* territory. They'd seen a small path heading south, and he remembered it from his travels. It dead-ended in a ramshackle town. He'd considered taking it and then returning to the Old Border Road once the army had passed, but it risked too much. There might be troops left behind to secure the road. No, they needed to get to the road Donjeo had passed on his way to finding them. It could not be much farther. A few hours at most. They'd marched through most of the night and began again before dawn. It had to be near. They only stood waiting at the roadside out of necessity.

"It'll take an hour or more to fix the wheel of that wagon."

Palla's voice at his side startled him. He hadn't heard her approach.

"We'll have to abandon it." Leotin turned to Palla. She looked tired. Dusty and anxious. He wondered if he looked as poorly. "Transfer everything to other wagons and strip it quickly of any parts we might use. We ride again in ten minutes."

"I figured you'd say that." Palla offered a grim smile. "We've already started. We'll be ready to ride in five minutes."

"Good," Leotin said. He watched her walk back to the wagon with the broken wheel. He'd been very fortunate to find her. A surprisingly good actor, pretty enough to attract the coin of men come to see a *tahneff* or *kinsett* on stage, always willing to do the most menial work, and an oddly easy fit among the other carnival folk. But he most appreciated her desire to take charge. Unlike the majority of people, she enjoyed being in charge not for the power it conveyed, but for the pleasure in getting things accomplished. She also, he admitted, offered sound advice, whether requested or not. If only he could teach her to cease offering unrequested counsel in public. She had not revealed the true story of her past, but he did not care and did not expect it of her. Many

in the carnival held secrets or fled from complicated pasts.

He escaped from his own secrets. Secret no longer, but a past best run from in haste. He did not wish news of his being alive to reach Teyett Havarez. He pushed that thought aside and looked to where Donjeo still talked to the horse.

“Time to go,” Leotin said.

Donjeo nodded, limped back to the wagon, and climbed in the driving seat where he’d been riding with Leotin for the past day. Leotin joined him. Shortly thereafter, the carnival caravan once more rumbled down the road, pressing the horses with all haste to find the path to their salvation.

“How much father do you think?” Leotin asked after the afternoon sun began to sink to the west.

“It’s got to be close.” Donjeo stood up momentarily, shielding his eyes. He sat down. “It’s got to be.”

“We’ll find it.” Leotin flicked the reins.

“I’m sorry.” Donjeo lowered his head.

“You cannot apologize, for you have done nothing wrong.” Leotin frowned at the boy.

“I feel like I led the army right to you.” Donjeo frowned as well.

“You warned us of the army,” Leotin said. “Not the same.”

“Feels like it,” Donjeo said.

“It is I who should apologize to you.” Leotin swallowed hard against the sudden tightness in his throat. While they had spent a day side-by-side in the driving seat, they had not really spoken of his time as a captive. Donjeo had provided only the briefest sketch of events. He’d been more interested in hearing what had happened to the carnival during his time away. “I should have noticed you had been replaced. I should have seen through the impostor. Should have gone back for you.”

“You couldn’t know.” Donjeo turned to Leotin. “It ... she looked like me. Sounds like me. Took my memories somehow. I’d think she was me if I didn’t know I was me.”

Leotin’s lips curved up in amusement at Donjeo’s statement. It faded as he contemplated the boy’s captivity. Now that they spoke of it, he found he wanted to know more. He needed to understand what had happened to the boy.

“Were you treated badly?” Leotin’s voice came out rough and choked.

“No.” Donjeo cocked his head. “Well, yes, but not so badly. Not as bad as others. I worked for the stable master. In the mountains. That’s where the army trained. He beat me sometimes. Only when I made mistakes. I tried not to make mistakes. But it wasn’t so awful. They didn’t try to make me a soldier. I didn’t have to train to fight. The stable master knew I’m good with horses. He insisted he get to keep me. It might have been worse. They would have killed me if it ... she ... Kanma hadn’t made them send me north. Why did she do that?”

“I do not know.” Leotin wondered this as well. Did the soul catcher lie to protect herself, or had she truly saved Donjeo from death? It fell far out of character for Teyett Havarez to leave the boy alive. Surely, she’d ordered his death. Why had Kanma saved him? It bothered him that he now felt a debt to it ... her, after years of deception.

“There were good things.” Donjeo’s face brightened. “The horses are beautiful. Especially the horses for the saptans and commanders. So tall. So fast. And there was a girl. Tesmelda. She worked with the bakers. I saw her at the well most days. And other places sometimes. She traveled with the army, too. I wonder what will happen to her?”

It struck Leotin again how much the boy had grown in his time away. Two years and the boy had become a man by all accounts. Taller now than Leotin himself. And a girl. Leotin smiled at the idea of Donjeo smitten with a girl. It pleased him to think of Donjeo in love, even though he knew the boy’s heart would ache at the loss of the girl and the cause of their separation.

“I am gladder than I can tell you that you have returned to us.” Leotin slapped Donjeo’s knee. A dark thought occurred to him — that in many ways, Donjeo had never left them, never left him. It created a conflicting series of emotions bubbling up within him. “It is a miracle you are returned. I am very proud of you for your escape and for finding your way back to us. Back to me.”

“I tried to think what you would do,” Donjeo said. “You always have a plan, always know what to do when things go wrong. I tried to figure out what you would do to get free. And I waited. You always tell the actors that their exit must be as well-timed as their entrance.”

Donjeo told a little of his escape. Freeing the horses and stealing one. The days on the road. Losing the horse to a farmer with a pitchfork. Falling out of a tree where he’d been sleeping and twisting his knee. A harrowing adventure for a boy fleeing an army.

“I think I see it.” Donjeo stood again, placing one hand behind him on the wall of the sleeping wagon to steady himself on his good leg. He shielded his eyes with his free hand. “Oh.”

“What?” Leotin stared down the road, knowing the boy’s young eyes could see ahead better than his own.

“I see the road, but I see something else.” Donjeo sat with a thud, shoulders slumping. “Banners. The banners for the Atheton army.”

“Faster, faster, go.”

Leotin turned as Shifhuul ran beside the wagon, his small, furred wyrin legs flashing beneath him.

“Army comes. Road soon.” Shifhuul gestured with his arms forward.

“Send word back,” Leotin shouted as he cracked the reins. “Full gallop to the road. Forget anything that falls off the wagons.”

Shifhuul nodded and slowed and turned to relay the message to the wagons behind them.

“Yah!” Leotin cracked the reins again, urging the horse forward. It could not run with the weight of the wagon hitched to it, nor manage more than a fast trot, and certainly not the gallop Leotin had suggested. He knew the rest of the wagons were similarly hindered. He felt lucky they’d managed to buy enough horses in the last week that the wagons were no longer pulled by the carnival folk. Those still on foot would have to run, but at least they would not have to haul the wagons while doing so.

He saw the flags of the approaching army as they neared the opening to the lane that crossed the road ahead. He craned his neck around the side of the wagon to look back at the caravan behind him. The wagons jostled and wobbled on their age-warped wheels. People ran beside them. The

roagg, Tarak, carried two children in his massive arms and another clung to his neck on his back. Yeth also carried a small child. Fear filled the eyes in the faces of his people. That fear struck at his heart.

He turned back to the road ahead, shouting and urging the horse, Maws, to a faster pace. He judged their speed matched against the speed of the marching army, gauging which would reach the road first.

“We can make it.” Donjeo leaned forward, his body rigid as he held on to the rail of the driving seat, the wagon bouncing beneath them.

Leotin considered the assessment and found it only partly true. He sighed. So close. So very close. Already his mind began to consider the possible courses of action, the lies that would need to be told, the story required to make sense of everything. He sighed again as he pulled the reins to slow the horse.

“What are you doing?” Donjeo turned to him, his eyes wild. “We can make it. We can.”

“We can make it.” Leotin slowed the horse and wagon to a slow walk. “This wagon. Maybe four or five others. But not all of them. And whoever leads that army will want to know why we race to avoid it. Another hour and we’d have been safe down that road. Another ten minutes and we might be far enough they’d let us go. But we’re too close. Best we pull aside, let them pass, and hope they allow us to carry on.”

Leotin pulled the reins and steered the horse to the right, off the side the road, and into a small clearing by a field. It’d be tight, but there was room enough for the army to pass and the carnival to remain out of the way.

“You’re right.” Donjeo shook his head. “I wasn’t thinking.”

“It’s hard to think beyond yourself when danger threatens.” Leotin placed a hand on Donjeo’s shoulder. “Now get in the back of the wagon. Someone may recognize you. Stay in the shadows but keep an eye out the windows.” He moved his hand to tap the wooden shutters covering the small, front window. “I need you to whisper through this window and tell me what and who you recognize. You’re my spy and scout here.”

“Right. A spy.” Donjeo looked torn between smiling and biting his lip. “A spy in the wagon.”

As Donjeo climbed down and limped back to the rear of the wagon, Palla walked up, and Leotin climbed down to join her.

“Not fast enough.” She wiped the sweat from her brow with the back of her hand.

“No. Not fast enough. We’d never have all made it.” Leotin looked back at the carnival wagons pulling to a halt beside the road.

“Thanks for not leaving the rest of us,” Palla looked eastward toward the advancing army.

“A carnival master *is* his carnival.” Leotin’s voice became indignant.

“I know that.” Palla smiled at him, the smile she used when teasing. “But some men might have been tempted. I’ve told everyone to grin and wave and say nothing. Wait for them to pass.”

“Good,” Leotin said. Again, Palla gave the orders he would have before he needed to speak. Maybe she would make a good carnival master one day. “Tell that ... tell Kanma to hide in a wagon. I’ll keep Donjeo in mine. Best neither one is to be spotted, and especially not both. She

still looks too much like him.”

“Kanma is gone,” Palla said. “She and the outlanders are hiding in the trees near the field. I figured it best if they weren’t seen. Armies have a way of conscripting people who look like they can fight.”

“Well done.” Leotin took a deep breath and readied himself. The sound of feet stamping the ground filled the air. He saw the men in the front rows of the soldiers marching five abreast down the road. Three men on horses led the column. More mounted soldiers rode behind, along with horses pulling camp wagons. “Stay here. With me. I may need your advice. Just...”

“Just try not to offer it while you’re speaking.” Palla laughed, a noise that faded quickly. “How much trouble do you think this can be?” Her voice lost all hint of levity.

“Not as bad as being under siege in a castle, but the end result might be the same.” Leotin gestured to the driving seat of the wagon. “Climb up.”

Palla leapt into the wagon seat and Leotin joined her. The three men leading the army were close enough now to see the ranks painted on their armor.

“Do you recognize them?” Leotin whispered to Donjeo.

“The one in the middle is High Kenagal Tancoldo. He leads the army. The two men with him are Kenagal Koble on the right and Kenagal Talcon on the left. They each command a ... I don’t remember what the soldiers call it, but they each command several thousand men. The others behind them are saptans.”

“Fifteen thousand men doesn’t sound enough to invade the Tanshen and Daeshen dominions,” Leotin mused aloud. He remembered how many men a kenagal traditionally commanded.

“They have seers among them,” Donjeo said. “And something else.”

An army with seers and fifteen thousand men might defeat the weakened Tanshen and Daeshen forces in the field, but how could they hope to take the capitals, much less hold them? He understood little of military history, but he knew not to underestimate Teyett Havarez, the would-be kimpadess.

“Do you know anything about the kenagal?” Palla asked. “Is he harsh on the men? What do they think of him as a leader?”

Not the questions of a merchant’s daughter, Leotin noted, but good questions.

“The men love him,” Donjeo whispered. “They all talk about how he’ll lead them to victory for the kimpadess. Even when he hands out punishments, the men say how he’s stern but fair.”

“He may be easier to bargain with if we need to bargain.” Palla rubbed her hands on the cloth of her breeches.

“Yes.” He wished she wore a dress. At least for the day. A woman in men’s clothes attracted unwanted questions. They were a carnival, however, and other women among them dressed as she did. Hopefully, it would not matter.

“Anything else?” Palla asked Donjeo.

“It’ll take a good two hours for them to pass,” Donjeo said. “And they might take the horses. They sometimes took horses when we passed through a town.”

“Lucky then we now have horses to give them.” Leotin considered himself fortunate to have

something to offer the army should they wish to take anything. They had little food and less coin.

“Will they bother the women?” Palla asked in a cold tone. “Armies are not often good for women.”

“No,” Donjeo said. “The kenagal hangs men for rape and burns their bodies.”

“Good.” Palla said no more.

“Hide now. They’re too close to keep talking like this.” Leotin filled his chest with air and breathed out slowly three times, the ritual he always used to dispel his nervous thoughts before stepping on stage.

As the army grew close, the high kenagal and one of his saptans broke off, trotting over to Leotin. The remaining kenagals continued to lead the convoy of foot troops, cavalry, and wagons along the road.

“Kinao,” the high kenagal said in Shen with a thick, Easad accent.

“Kinao, sir.” Leotin raised a hand in greeting. He had not expected anyone from the passing army to address them, especially not the high kenagal himself. He remained calm, but only with effort.

“I am High Kenagal Tancoldo, of the Atheton army, first spear of the Kimpadess Havarez. This is First Saptan Tioga.” The kenagal offered a slight nod to Leotin. The man sat straight in his saddle, seeming unhindered by the bulk of his painted-blue armor. His light-skinned naotus features, tanned from days in the sun, contrasted with the pointed gray beard adorning his jaw. His bright-green eyes scanned along the train of carnival wagons. “What have we here? A carnival?”

“A carnival indeed, sir.” Leotin raised his chin with his voice. He knew the role of harmless but proud carnival master well. “I am Leotin, the carnival master. This is Palla, my assistant.”

“I’ve always enjoyed carnivals.” The kenagal looked at the painted wagons beside the road. “There used to be one that came through the towns near Havataz in my youth. Came every few years. These wagons are bit faded, but they reminded of the wagons I saw as a boy.”

“You may have seen a previous incarnation, kenagal, when my father led the carnival.” Leotin worried at the man’s tone and his interest in the carnival. Why did a kenagal stop to talk to carnival folk?

“Where do you head now?” Kenagal Tancoldo asked.

“Juparti, kenagal,” Leotin said. “With the fighting between the Shen dominions aflame again, it seemed wise to seek less volatile towns for our performances.”

“War creates ... uncertainties.” A sliver of a smile touched Kenagal Tancoldo’s lips.

“Indeed.” Leotin had no more idea how to answer the kenagal’s statement than he understood why they spoke at all. He only hoped Palla remained silent.

“Do you understand what happens here?” Kenagal Tancoldo gestured to the troops marching past along the road.

“I know little of such matters, kenagal.” Leotin felt himself being drawn into a trap but did not know toward what end. He thought of the Atheton children’s story of Rabbit Thalto lured by curiosity and carrots into the den of the Wolf Ulido. He did not think a friendly stag would arrive to save him as it had Rabbit Thalto in the story.

“The Atheton army marches to subdue the Shen dominions. To end their long war. To establish the first vassal states in a Fourth Great Dominion.” Kenagal Tancoldo stared at Leotin, eyes examining him.

“I am sure Kimpadess Havarez will be a wise ruler.” Leotin recalled the name to call an Atheton teyett who sought to rule the whole of the Iron Realm. This knowledge revealed much of the reasons for his travel across the realm in the past few years and the purpose for the information he sent back to the kimpadess. She’d been using him to silently scout the other nations and supplement the spies she likely controlled in their palaces.

“The kimpadess is very wise.” Kenagal Tancoldo smiled. “She, too, possesses a fondness for carnivals.”

The kenagal’s statement hung between them, currents of unstated threat and understanding keeping it suspended. Leotin realized then the nature of the trap and the futility of attempting escape, at least at this stage. The best he might hope was to mitigate the risk to those similarly held by the snare.

“Leotin has often recounted with fondness the many times he and the carnival have performed for Kimpadess Havarez when she was teyett.” Palla leaned forward as she spoke. “I am newly to the carnival, but he frequently speaks of his admiration for the kimpadess and the joy he feels when in service to her.”

Leotin glanced at Palla, seeing her face filled with the smile he’d come to know from her performance as a kinsett. She clearly understood the nature of the trap, and he admired her attempt to set him in a more favorable light before it snapped closed about them all.

“That is good to hear.” Kenagal Tancoldo tilted his head toward Palla but did not return her smile. “I believe the kimpadess also remembers you fondly. Before I began my journey, she instructed me that should I cross paths with such a carnival as yours that I should bring them under my care.”

“That is very kind of the kimpa...” Leotin began to say.

“You and your carnival will accompany me westward.” Kenagal Tancoldo’s tone made clear he offered not an invitation but a command. “Our forces will split soon. A third each. Two full battalions will head south and north to dispatch what remains of the Shen armies. I and the remainder of the army will proceed to Tanjii. The troops will be happy of your entertainment along the way. You will, of course, be provided for. Food for your people. Feed for your horses. And my personal protection.”

“I accept your hospitality, and by extension that of the kimpadess, with great honor, kenagal. My carnival is at your disposal. I hope we will bring you and your men many hours of amusement.” Leotin bowed deeply from his seat, the trap he’d expected clamped around his neck. One brightness shone through the dark news of his new entrapment — they headed to Tanjii and surely the kimpadess preferred to rule from either the Tanshen or Daeshen capital. He might escape an audience with her.

“Pull your carts in line with the supply wagons at the rear. We will march until an hour before sunset and make camp.” Kenagal Tancoldo edged his horse closer to Leotin.

“I can suggest several places that might make suitable campsites for the army, kenagal.” Leotin thought it best to be useful as quickly as possible.

“We scouted sites months ago,” Kenagal Tancoldo said. Leotin wondered at the casualness with which the kenagal disclosed that information before he realized that revealing it didn’t matter as the army would likely march unimpeded all the way to Tanjii. He now understood the import of instructions he received while traveling along this stretch of the Old Border Road previously. He’d probably provided at least some of the information about scouted campsites. A carnival and an army camp had similar requirements that differed largely in matter of scale. The kenagal studied him a moment longer. “When the kimpadess spoke of the carnival, she mentioned that the master she knew had a son, a boy who tended the animals. We could use a stable boy good with horses. We lost ours to bandits a week ago.”

“Alas, kenagal, while not my son, I know the boy you speak of, and he lost his life more than a month back.” Leotin had no trouble bringing emotion to his voice as the boy in question nearly did lose his life and might still if this trap was not unsprung with haste. “We were trapped in a castle in Daeshen, under siege first by militants hunting heretic pilgrims and then by the Tanshen army. The boy died of an arrow wound. We lost many people there. We nearly died from starvation before the Daeshen army arrived. We had to eat everything, even my prized night jays.” A story true in almost all details, and one that would explain the absence of his communication with the kimpadess since leaving the castle.

“A shame.” Kenagal Tancoldo stared at Leotin a moment longer, his eyes searching for any deception. Seeming to find nothing to concern him, he looked away. “Saptan Tioga will make sure you’re properly hitched to our caravan and will see to your needs when we make camp. You can perform for the men in groups of a few hundred each night. We’ll provide torches and lanterns. Perform what you wish but be sure to lighten the men’s moods. If you must stage scenes from the great play, make certain they are of the righteous army being victorious.” He tugged the reins of his horse and rode back up the line. The saptan stood silent at a distance. Watching the troops pass. Watching the carnival. Waiting.

“At least he offered to feed us.” Palla sighed. Even she could not project optimism when facing an army.

“Let us hope they do not feed *us* to *that*.” Leotin gestured with his chin to a large wagon approaching them. Twice the normal size and drawn by four horses, a massive iron cage mounted the wagon. Within the cage sat a creature Leotin had only heard of in folk tales and never imagined to witness with his own eyes. A monster shaped like a man, four times the height of a normal human and more than twice a man’s width, its body covered in massive plates of white, bone-like armor. A curved horn protruded from the center of its pale forehead, the rest of its skull helmeted by ridged, bony armor. Its large black eyes stared into the distance.

“What is that thing?” Palla gasped from beside him.

“A gadkithal,” Leotin said.

“A bone-giant,” Donjeo whispered from within the wagon. “I heard its mate fights for the other half of the army in Daeshen. Folks say there’s a seer that travels with it and can control it.”

“A priestly seer?” Leotin asked. The Atheton dominion prohibited all but the Tot Gioth priests from using The Sight.

“I don’t think so,” Donjeo replied. “There’s several seers with the army. At least eight. Maybe more.”

“The kimpadess is wise and cunning.” Leotin did not need to ask to know that the seers Donjeo referred to would be trained and use The Sight in combat. It ran contrary to the Tot Gioth scriptures, but he doubted Kimpadess Havarez allowed that to present an impediment to her plans for the conquest of the Shen dominions. He watched the sorrowful and deadly monster as its wagon cage rumbled past. This made him think of the other monsters he’d seen recently. The kellitsaras. He realized the kimpadess had loosed them on the Tanshen people to wound them and make them pliant for an army to save them — any army.

What had he dragged his people into? And how could he save them all while forced to attend an army marching to war with a monster in tow?

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

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

GENTLE BREATH. In and out. In and out. Nothing but breath and heartbeat. Wind shifting hair and filling sails. Sunlight warming skin and air and wooden decks. Calls of birds across the water breaking against the bow. Ocean below. Sky above. Sun beyond.

Stillness.

Equanimity.

Sha-Kutan sat on the raised forecastle deck of the pilgrim ship, legs crossed, eyes closed, hands cupping lapis prayer beads in his lap. He had decided to use the time afforded by the journey across the Zha Ocean to resume his daily practice of prayers and meditations. There had been few moments while fleeing through the Tanshen Dominion to sit and peacefully embrace the stillness within. He should have begun when they departed the docks in the pilgrim town up the coast from Tanjii. Daily customs once broken were difficult to restore. With the Forbidden Realm closer each day, he hoped to reestablish his habits strongly enough that they would not easily be shattered by whatever events might befall them upon arrival.

Sao-Tauna...

Approaches.

He continued his breathing meditation, keeping his eyes closed and his mind focused on the breath passing in and out of his nose. He heard the girl sit beside him on the deck. He opened his eyes to see Sao-Tauna mimicking his posture, her slender legs crossed, her hands cupped in her lap, eyes closed.

Does she mock?

Or does she seek instruction?

As he stared at her, she opened her eyes and gazed back.

“Do you wish me to teach you how to meditate?” Sha-Kutan asked.

“Yes, please.” Sao-Tauna blinked calmly.

What child wishes to learn meditation?

She is a very strange child.

“Why?” Sha-Kutan asked.

“It looks quiet inside,” Sao-Tauna said.

“Yes.” Sha-Kutan nodded in agreement. “It is for quieting the mind.”

She can be particularly preceptive.

When she speaks.

“Why do you wish to quiet your mind?” Sha-Kutan often found the child’s behavior curious, but never more so than when she interacted with him alone.

“When it’s still inside, I see ... things ... more clearly.” Sao-Tauna rubbed her nose with the back of one hand.

Should we ask what things?

Or is it better not to know?

“As you wish.” Sha-Kutan closed his eyes once more. “Close your eyes, but do not clench them shut.” He did not need to see the girl to know she complied. “Now simply breathe. Let the breath flow gently and evenly through your nose. Calm, shallow breaths. In. And out. In. And out. Focus on the air filling your lungs. The air leaving your lungs. In. And out. Nothing but breath. Nothing but air. With each breath you release, all the thoughts of your mind are dispelled. All the tension in your body released. Just breathe until there is nothing but the breathing. If your mind wanders, bring it back to your breath. In. And out. In. And out.”

Sha-Kutan held his mind suspended in the moment of his breathing. Nothing but breath. Nothing but in. Nothing but out. An ancient and simple meditation, it brought an inner stillness that had been too long absent. While he knew many more complicated meditations, he avoided most of them. Some, if followed with dedication, would grant not merely inner peace, but a deepened perception of the world beyond his mind. He’d abandoned such meditations when becoming more than a man. While he had reached ecstatic inner depths as a monk under the tutelage of Nakupan, he did not think it wise to settle his mind so far that he might once more apprehend the true nature of reality. This way of understanding many called The Sight. And while it required mastery of The Will to bend reality to one’s desires, he felt that he already possessed more power than should tempt anyone. And so, he confined himself to simple meditations with great benefit for calming and dispelling anger and fear.

In the stillness of his breath, he sensed another presence ascending the ladder from the lower decks. Ogtankaa stood before him, watching. *What did she make of this?* he wondered but let the thought drift away. Breath alone. In and out. Only the breath. Only the moment of the breath.

“Lee-Nin wishes to see you, girl,” Ogtankaa said.

Sha-Kutan opened his eyes and tilted his head back to look at Ogtankaa. She glared at Sao-Tauna.

She lies.

But why?

“Yes, Ogtankaa.” Sao-Tauna stood up and turned to Sha-Kutan. “Thank you.”

“You may join me whenever you wish.” Sha-Kutan watched the girl carefully descend the ladder to the lower deck, her short legs reaching out for purchase on each rung.

“You should not teach the girl these things.” Ogtankaa’s brows narrowed with her words.

“She wished to calm her mind.” Sha-Kutan understood what the woman feared. She applied the same fear to Sao-Tauna that he applied to himself.

“It may lead to other things,” Ogtankaa said.

“To The Sight, you mean,” Sha-Kutan said.

“She already wields too much power for a child.” Ogtankaa sighed and sat down beside him. “She is already too great a danger.”

“Sao-Tauna sees what most seers cannot.” Sha-Kutan often wondered how the world must appear through Sao-Tauna’s eyes.

“It is reckless,” Ogtankaa said.

“Or it may be cautious.” Sha-Kutan had not fully considered his actions in offering the girl instruction but now gave them greater reflection. “Is it not better that she learns to control her mind. To control her power. She will not be a child all her life. She is special, and there is no one she can truly turn to for instruction. If she should gain The Sight, it might help her master her other gifts.”

“You are not qualified to instruct the child in these things.” Ogtankaa sighed again and looked out toward the ocean waves. “I am vexed by this entire affair.”

“It is not what you expected.” Sha-Kutan understood her frustration. He’d experienced it deeply himself not long ago. Before he had surrendered.

“You are not what I expected.” Ogtankaa’s words came out slowly.

“We are, both of us, unique in our own way,” Sha-Kutan said. “And Sao-Tauna is even more special.”

“You will fulfill your oath and return when the girl realizes her vision?” Ogtankaa turned her eyes to his. He could not tell if she looked sad or angry.

“They will come for both of us again if I do not.” Sha-Kutan did not like thinking of the return, whether with Ogtankaa or her fellow beings from her true realm.

Breathe in.

Breathe out.

“They will cast me out for what I have done.” Ogtankaa looked away.

“You could stay in this realm. In this body.” Sha-Kutan knew which realm he preferred.

“I have ... we have considered it,” Ogtankaa said.

“They will need someone to protect them.” Sha-Kutan found it hard to breathe as the thought of being separated from Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna shattered his inner stillness. Each day closer to the Forbidden Realm transformed it from possibility to eventuality.

“I don’t know that I can accept that responsibility.” Ogtankaa clasped her hands together.

“Lee-Nin accepts it for Sao-Tauna.” Sha-Kutan did not doubt that Lee-Nin would do all she could to protect Sao-Tauna but worried it might not be enough. Maybe he should double the time he spent teaching her to wield a sword.

“Why did you accept it?” Ogtankaa asked. “Why did you follow and protect them?”

“I did not think on it.” Sha-Kutan remembered of that moment in the woods, watching Lee-Nin carry Sao-Tauna into his small farmhouse, knowing that the soldiers would soon find them, knowing he should run away if he wished to stay safe, and yet feeling his feet carry him toward the front door. “I am strong, and they are weak. What good is strength if it is not used for goodness?”

“Is that a Pashist teaching?” Ogtankaa asked.

“In essence but not exactness,” Sha-Kutan replied.

“I will not let her take any action that may harm this realm.” Ogtankaa’s sudden change of topic followed an alteration in tone. She frowned at him once more. “Whatever her destiny, I must uphold my vows.”

“We must both uphold our vows, and both seek to protect the innocent.” Sha-Kutan knew his past deeds as a man and more than a man violated this vow, but he’d tried his best to live by it ever since reciting the words back to Nukapan.

“You have the pieces of the medallion still?” Ogtankaa stared at his chest.

“I do.” Sha-Kutan placed a hand on it. “It does me little good beyond assuring my mind.”

“You should try breathing for that.” Ogtankaa smiled.

He did not bother to return the smile. He sensed Lee-Nin approaching and turned to the ladder once more.

“The new captain wishes to speak with you about something,” Lee-Nin said to Ogtankaa as she climbed up to the deck.

She, too, lies.

Ogtankaa will know this.

And Lee-Nin will know that Ogtankaa knows this.

Then is it really a lie or merely a way of saying something that cannot be put into other words?

Ogtankaa looked from Lee-Nin to Sha-Kutan and sighed one last time as she stood to her feet. She said nothing to either as she climbed down the ladder to the lower deck.

“What is she worried about now?” Lee-Nin asked as she sat beside Sha-Kutan.

“The usual things she worries over.” Sha-Kutan felt the warmth of Lee-Nin’s body against the exposed flesh of his arm from where she sat. “It will be good to arrive in the Forbidden Realm, so she will have something new to fret about.”

“Is that humor, Sha-Kutan?” Lee-Nin smiled at him.

“No.” Sha-Kutan sighed to himself. “But it is the best I can do.”

“It is a marked improvement,” Lee-Nin said.

They sat in silence for a time, watching the waves crest and fall in a similar motion to the undulation of the ship itself. He smelled her hair and the sweat from being in the sun all day, and the scent of contentment. Those recently familiar but still foreign and conflicting thoughts and emotions arose in his mind.

Breathe ... Breathe ... Breathe.

Meditation is little use in such cases.

Slowing his heartbeat by an act of will, he reached out his large hand and gently entwined his fingers with hers where they rested on the deck. She did not look to him, but lightly squeezed his hand. He sat there, holding her hand, wondering if words needed speaking, not knowing what words he should say, and wishing he possessed the courage to turn her chin to his and kiss her.

“Not many days now.” Lee-Nin’s soft voice barely registered above the waves.

“The new captain says five. Maybe a week at most.” These were not the words Sha-Kutan desired to speak.

“I wish we could keep sailing.” Lee-Nin held his hand tight. “Just sail past the Forbidden Realm and keep going. Sail until we landed someplace safe. Safe from everything. From the dreams and the Goddess. Safe from those creatures of light. Safe from the men hunting Sao-Tauna. Someplace we could simply be. Be what we wish with no one wishing us to be anything else. How

far would we have to sail to find a shore like that?”

“We would have to sail to another world, I think.” Sha-Kutan felt Lee-Nin’s words strike at his heart in a way he had not known possible. He ached to find that shore. To be what she spoke of. To live that life with her and Sao-Tauna. But how could it be? He did not even know from where his feelings arose, how could he know where they might take him? Whatever that destination, only days remained to find it.

“I wish...” Sha-Kutan frowned as his breath faltered, and he struggled to express the ocean of feelings heaving the waters within.

Breathe and be

Breathe and be.

“I wish I possessed the words to express what I feel in this moment, but these waters are so unfamiliar to me that I do not even know how to explain them to myself.” Sha-Kutan stared at the waves, the wind on his face, and Lee-Nin’s hand in his, and accepted that his words spoke a truth to himself as well as her.

“You are not a man of words.” Lee-Nin laughed and squeezed his hand again. “And silence is sometimes the best way for two people to know each other. Words can get in the way of what we mean.”

She turned to look up at him and he smiled at her. The smile did not fit his scarred face, but he hoped something of what he felt within projected on its surface. Lee-Nin seemed to catch the true nature of that misshapen expression and returned it, a smile that warmed him and blew the thoughts and doubts and concerns from his mind as though she breathed a radiant light directly into him.

Breathe and be.

Yes. Breathe and be.

They sat on the deck, holding hands and watching the waves until the sun sank to the horizon and Sao-Taou came to call them to dinner with the others.

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

THE WITNESS



HASHEL

HALLOW THORNS *and hollow crowns,*

Sun rises up and sun sets down,

The sapling grows to the mighty tree,

And all things end to set us free.

Loud applause, wild whistles, and calls for more followed Hashel as he stepped down from the hearth stones by the fire and made his way through the crowded inn, a clay cup in his hands and a smile on his face. Square coins fell into the cup one after another. He saw copper, brass, bronze, and tin, with a single silver among them. The coins stopped falling as another singer, a young woman with a large, and much-revealed, bosom took to the stone hearth and began to sing. She sang a familiar and bawdy song in an off-key voice, but she smiled brightly, winked at the men in the common room of the inn, and bent at the waist often to emphasize both certain words and her ample breasts. Hashel knew he could not compete with such entrainment and so determined to retire early for the night, as Ondromead would have said.

He ignored thoughts of Ondromead and instead, made his way back to the ale bar and handed the cup of coins to the innkeeper. They had the usual agreement that the innkeeper kept half of all the coins. Hashel wondered if the pretty girl singing got to keep more, or whether she instead, found herself as hassled by the innkeeper as by the men listening to her. With his earnings counted out and divided, Hashel shoved his share into a small pouch he kept inside his trousers with his shirt pulled down to conceal the bulge at his waist. No need to tempt the older boys in the streets. Especially not that night. After two weeks of singing in the inn, he'd made enough now to buy passage down the Goha River. One more night and he'd be on his way to finding Ondromead. He pushed that thought aside once more.

He left the inn and walked along the edge of the dark street, lights only coming from a few buildings. He followed side streets until coming to the house he sought. The temporary home he'd found. He walked around to the back of the brick structure to a wide horse stable. It held no animals but did house people. Twenty-odd pilgrims sat on the ground or in piles of hay, the light of several lanterns illuminating their cheery faces. The stable belonged to a wealthy pilgrim who offered it up to others in preparation for their journey.

"There's our boy."

A gregarious woman with wide eyes and an even wider smile placed an arm around him and rubbed his shoulder. Laoss. A pilgrim helping other pilgrims.

"It was getting late, and we worried about you," Laoss said.

"Yes, it can be a dangerous town after dark." Laoss's husband, Woban, patted him on the back. "We're glad you're home. And glad you'll be going with us all tomorrow."

A small cheer arose from the others in the stable. The people there, men, women, children from all over the nearby district, greeted Hashel warmly. He took his pouch and counted out nearly all the coins, handing them to Laoss. As the leaders of this band of pilgrims, she and Woban had arranged for a reduced fee for passage and meals on a riverboat leaving in the morning. They said the more pilgrims they placed on the boat, the lower the cost for all. It made sense to Hashel, who had few funds. His nightly singing in the inn provided him with slightly more than what it cost to feed himself in a day. He'd done well that night, and he could afford to hold a few coins to himself in reserve. For the next part of his plan.

He accepted a bowl of hot fish soup from one of the pilgrim women and found a place to sit and eat in a pile of hay near the other children. The pilgrims did not ask why he refused to speak, and most assumed he'd never been able to. He found them kind and happy. People looking to see their dreams become life. His own dreams only featured images of Ondromead. He saw him in places and with people he'd never encountered while they traveled together. He wondered if he witnessed glimpses of the real Ondromead in the world, or whether he imagined it all in his sleeping mind. It didn't matter much, and he didn't care. He enjoyed the chance to spend time with his friend. But he could not tell where Ondromead would be based on where he had been, so the dreams would not help him find the old man.

Hashel had a plan to find Ondromead, but he didn't know how long it might take or if it would even work. He intended to follow the pilgrims down the Goha River to the Tanfen Sea and buy passage on a ship to sail around the coast of the Tanshen Dominion to Tanjii. He reckoned that with the blockade on the city, and pilgrims pouring into it every day, and so many things happening, that Ondromead would have to arrive there to witness something. And when he did, Hashel would be waiting. He would follow the same path through the city at the same time each day as he had with Ondromead. Unless the old man never arrived. Or he arrived before Hashel got there. Or he did not go to the places he'd been with Hashel. Those notions lessened Hashel's hunger, but he finished his soup just the same. He knew not to take food for granted and to eat it when he had some.

He thought he had reason to hope that he'd find Ondromead. While he no longer awoke each day with his clothes cleaned, he did still understand the languages of Mumtiba and Shen. He'd heard merchants on the river speak the languages and it illumined his disposition each time. If he understood these languages, he must still have a connection to Ondromead, however faint.

He gave his empty bowl to one of the pilgrim women and curled up in a pile of hay to sleep. He noticed the others making ready for the night as well. A man doused all but one of the lanterns.

"Sleep and rest well, brothers and sisters," Woban's voice filled the stable though he spoke quietly. "Tomorrow, we head down river and make our way toward the Mother Shepherd and the Goddess. May she bless our journey as we race to meet her."

Murmurs of assent rose around the barn as Woban put out the last of the lanterns. With the darkness, Hashel's mind sank into slumber, filled with dreams of the places he'd rather be with the old man. He wasn't sure how long he'd slept, but sunlight crept into the stable when he opened his eyes to the first of the shouts.

“Damn thieves!”

“How could they!”

“What will we do now!”

“Maybe they’re at the docks!”

It took Hashel a few moments, as he rubbed the crusted seeds of sleep from his eyes, to understand the commotion. Eventually, he did, and his heart raced at the import of what the arguing adults said.

Laoss and Woban were gone. Along with all their conjoined coins. They had not been pilgrims helping their brethren make their way down river, but frauds, hustlers fleecing the flock of the money and disappearing into the night. Several of the pilgrims headed out the stable door, shouting their intention to go to the docks. Hashel agreed with this idea. Possibly, they were wrong. Maybe Laoss and Woban merely went ahead to pay the riverboat captain. In his gut, he knew this to be a lie, but the paucity of coins remaining to him helped him cling to the hope buried in that falsehood.

He ran with the other pilgrims to the docks along the river. They found no sign of Laoss or Woban, and many of them resumed their curses, while others resorted to tears. He did not speak, and so could not curse, but he sensed the tears on his cheeks. Tears he wiped away as he scanned the docks. There were several riverboats, most loaded with goods to carry downstream, but only one looked ready to depart and still accepting passengers. He ran toward the boat, reaching for his coin pouch as his feet slapped the old boards of the pier. His hand found nothing but a cut string at his trouser waist. They’d stolen his last coins as well! He did not know what god or goddess he appealed to, but he said a short prayer that one of them dealt to Woban and Laoss a firm and lasting justice. He kept running, but not toward the line of people embarking onto the long, low-slung riverboat. He ran instead to the front of the boat, leaping from the dock over the low railing, and landing on the foredeck behind a crate filled with what smelled like apples.

He sat still, staying low and hoping no one had seen him.

“Aie! You there, boy. Off my boat!” A man with a narrow face and long beard ran across the deck and grabbed him by the neck of his shirt. “Damn pilgrims. No free passage. This here boat is fer commerce not charity.”

Hashel felt his feet leave the deck of the boat and prepared himself to be tossed back across the railing to the docks. He saw several pilgrims there shouting, but with the blood of his heart banging in his ears, he could not tell if they spoke to beckon him back or urge the captain of the boat to leave his stay.

“Wait.”

That voice he did hear clearly — loud, deep, strangely accented, and filled with command. He did not understand what the voice wanted him to wait for, but he very much wanted to wait for it. It seemed the captain of the boat wanted to wait for the voice as well. Hashel’s feet fell once more to the deck. He spun around with his shirt still held firmly in the captain’s hand. He saw leather, brown and well worn. As he looked up, he saw more leather. Then fur. Up, several heads above the captain, he saw a face, one like a face he’d seen before. A face like Tarak’s, only slightly smaller with a hint of feminine lines and angles. A female roagg stood towering above the captain.

“I pay passage for boy.” The roagg’s voice sounded firm in its broken Easad. She reached into a pocket on the leather vest she wore and removed a gold coin.

The captain looked for a moment as though he might argue, but the roagg’s glare left him sputtering instead.

“Yer coin to waste!” The captain snatched the currency from the roagg and hurried away.

The roagg female knelt before Hashel. He restrained an overwhelming urge to throw his arms around her impossibly wide shoulders. He settled for reaching out and taking her paw, his eyes brimming with tears of gratitude. Why did she intervene? Why for him?

“I am Reeshka,” the roagg woman said.

Hashel placed a hand over his mouth, the gesture he’d found usually conveyed his meaning.

“You speak not?” Reeshka asked.

Hashel shook his head.

“A sheetoo that speaks not.” Reeshka bared her teeth in what Hashel hoped was a smile. “You make a good companion.”

Hashel did not remember what a sheetoo might be, but he considered himself lucky to find a companion.

“Hungry?” Reeshka asked.

Hashel nodded his head.

“Come. We eat.” Reeshka stood to her full height and headed toward an open place on the foredeck where a large animal skin lay. He did not recognize the origin of the thinly-furred skin but took it to be her assigned place on the boat. As he followed her, he turned and waved to the pilgrims still on the docks. They looked sad but shouted words of encouragement to him, wishing him the blessings of the Goddess Moaratana. He figured he must have someone’s blessings as he sat across from Reeshka and she offered him a chunk of dried venison. He would have thought the encounter impossible if not for his months traveling with Ondromead. He now recognized that seemingly inconceivable events took place whether one chose to believe in them or not. He nodded his thanks and chewed the rangy-tasting meat. As the boat glided away from the dock and the crew raised the sails along the twin masts, he wondered what unimaginable event might befall him next and how many of them he needed to witness before being reunited with Ondromead.

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

THE CARNIVAL



TARAK

MOSS-COVERED BARK, slender trees, rotten trunks hollowed out by ants, and a slippery, leaf-strewn ground. These comprised the main features of the forest alongside the Old Border Road. Tarak followed Shifhuul, Yeth, and the changeling creature, Kanma, single-file through the woods. While the wyrin and yutan had no trouble leaving little trace of their passing, his bulk and unfamiliarity with the terrain left him moving more deliberately. The forests in his realm were largely pine and spaced farther apart than these Iron Realm trees. He stepped over a fallen tree trunk and ducked under a low-hanging branch. He bent extra low to ensure the bow strapped to his back did not scrape the leafless limb. Fortunately, they only needed to move as fast as the river of human soldiers marching down the road 300 paces away across a field.

Kanma also moved with ease through the woods, not at all like the boy she'd pretended to be for the past two years. The features of the changeling began to alter even in the past few hours they'd tracked the army. The face looked more feminine now. Still similar to the boy Donjeo, but something like a sister rather than a twin. He wondered how she appeared naturally. She'd insisted on joining them to hide from the army. She did not wish to risk being recognized as Donjeo. Moreover, she did not wish to be recognized as her true self by anyone who might know she accompanied the carnival. He understood her fear and her actions.

Tarak turned toward the sound of the marching men on the road. He did not see them through the trees, but he heard them well enough. Fifteen thousand humans stamping the ground made a frightful noise, loud enough to spook the animals of the forest. It left their passage through the woods oddly quiet. With the passing army masking other noises, the density of the trees, and the breeze at their backs, it made him acutely aware that they had little idea what lay ahead of them. It did not concern him greatly, but he did not wish to stumble upon a human farming field or a cabin in the forest without warning. Through the trees, he caught a glimpse of something whitish-gray among the soldiers. It brought to his mind again the conviction that had possessed it ever since they hid from the advancing army.

"We must free it." Tarak spoke loud enough that his voice might carry up past Yeth to Shifhuul, but no farther.

"No, no." Shifhuul looked back over his shoulder. "Crazy, mad, not good idea."

"It is mad to release such a thing." Yeth pushed aside a branch with the tip of her spear and looked back at him. Her face conveyed more dismay than disagreement.

"It is not a thing." Tarak clenched his massive jaw against the deep-rooted anger that came to mind when thinking of the creature in the cage. A *gadkithal*, the humans called it. A bone-man. A bone-woman by the looks of the one in that iron-caged wagon. The roaggs called them *kathkads*. Bone-giants. He remembered his mother telling him stories of the creatures as a cub. They were thought all dead. It shocked him to see one alive. Another being, like himself and his people,

fashioned from The Sight by sheetoo seers. Used in war with no regard for their cares, or their wills, or their lives. Slaves. Another dreadful human invention absent among the peoples of the others realms. His people, the roagg, had been warrior-slaves for Juparti rhegans before their liberation by the urris. It was said the bone-giants gained their freedom in this way as well, choosing to hide in small bands in the northeast mountains of the Iron Realm. They should have migrated to the Stone Realm. His people would have welcomed them. They might not have died out. They might have flourished as the roaggs had. However, they had not all died out. At least one survived.

“It should be free.” Tarak kept his anger mounted to his reasoning. “All peoples should be free.”

“It is too great a risk,” Yeth said. “It may only lead the army to try and kill it.”

“Better dead than caged,” Tarak replied.

“Need to free carnival,” Shifhuul said. “Free friends.”

“He’s right.” Kanma spoke for the first time since asking to join them back at the roadside to hide from the approaching army. “My people were also fashioned by human seers to act as servants in war. Our fighting comes through subterfuge, but it can be just as dangerous and just as unskillfully forced upon us.”

“Both crazy.” Shifhuul shook his head.

“I will help you if they will not.” Kanma looked back to him, her eyes alight with anger. “I am strong in The Sight. You have seen what I can do.”

He had seen what she could do, even if at the time he considered the birds attacking the militiaman as more likely the act of the new human goddess. With Kanma’s help, he might be able to free the bone-giant.

“Good. Thank you. Tonight, then.” Tarak did not wish to prolong either the caged creature’s confinement or his own searing need for justice.

“If you can’t be dissuaded, I will help you.” Yeth looked back him, sadness stretching her long face. “If you were to fail for lack of assistance, it might jeopardize everyone in the carnival.”

Shifhuul stopped. Tarak assumed the wyrin meant to berate him, but instead, he turned and placed his paw before his mouth to indicate silence. Shifhuul sniffed the air as the wind shifted to come from the north. Tarak smelled it now as well.

“What is it?” Kanma whispered.

“Humans.” Shifhuul moved closer to the others, turning his back on them and scanning the woods as he quietly drew his sword

“Where?” Yeth asked as she raised her spear.

“All around.” Tarak backed into the position with the others, the outlanders on three sides and the unarmed changeling between them. He pulled his axes from his belt as he heard footsteps approach through the woods, encircling their position. A human male dressed in gray-leather armor stepped from behind a tree with his sword drawn. Black paint marked the blade. Five more men in similar attire emerged from the trees, two holding black bows with nocked arrows rather than swords.

“Scouts,” Yeth whispered. “Likely searching for anyone spying on the army.”

Tarak grunted. They’d walked right into the men. Had the wind turned earlier, they might have been able to avoid them, but scouts trained to hide in the woods were not easily evaded.

“What the hell?” The man who stepped from the trees first approached them, shifting his wide-eyed gaze between Shifhuul, Yeth, and Tarak. The three with swords closed in as well, while those with bows remained at a distance. “Where did you four come from?”

Normally, Yeth spoke for the trio as her more similar form tended to put humans at ease. This day, they found themselves joined by another, and Kanma spoke before Yeth replied.

“We’re with the carnival.” Kanma pushed her way between Yeth and Tarak to face the leader of the scouts.

“What carnival?” the scout leader asked.

Tarak wondered at the man’s question. Clearly, these scouts had been sent ahead into the woods before the army arrived and forced the carnival to join its caravan.

“We’re with a traveling carnival,” Kanma said. “We were heading west to Juparti when we met the army on the road. We hid in the woods. Humans can be funny when they meet roaggs and wyrin. I’m their trainer. We have an act in the carnival. But the carnival follows the army now. Headed back west. We thought maybe we should break off. Head off on our own. Maybe find another carnival to join.”

“Then why ya followin’ the army west rather than headin’ somewheres else?” The scout leader stared hard at Kanma but did not move.

“We left some things in the carnival. Props for our act. We hoped to sneak in at night and get them before we leave.” Kanma sounded calm as she lied, but Tarak smelled the fear on her. Her lies impressed him, however. “So, you see, we don’t have much but what’s on our backs. Nothing to take.”

Tarak admired the way Kanma implied she thought the scouts to be bandits. He wondered if her lies had a strategy or if she blundered ahead hoping for an advantage.

“We’re not bandits.” The scout leader lowered the tip of his sword. “Tell yer creatures to cast down their weapons.”

“If you are not bandits, what do you wish with us?” Kanma’s voice sounded confused, but Tarak knew this to be a ruse, one accented with the truth of her growing anxiety.

“We’re with the army ya follow.” The scout master gestured with his sword through the woods to the sound of the marching soldiers. “An’ we’re takin’ ya back with us. You can join yer carnival again. These three looks like they can fight. Our saptan can make use of ’em.”

“We don’t want to go back to the carnival to stay,” Kanma pleaded.

“We ain’t askin’ whatcha want.” The scout leader pointed his sword at Kanma. “We’re taking yas back to the army with us. Now tell yer creatures to throw down their weapons or we’ll kill yas.” The man gestured to the two men with bows as the three men with swords advanced.

“I told you. We can’t go back to the carnival. Not to stay.” Kanma’s voice sounded calm, the pleading edge lost.

“Shoot the big one.” The scout master nodded to the two bowmen who loosed their arrows.

Tarak did not try to evade the arrows, fearing they might strike his companions. He flinched against the expected impacts, but they did not arrive, instead flying past him. The separate grunts of two men told him where the arrows struck.

He threw his twin axes at the two bowmen. He expected them to dodge, but they did not move, held still in mid-motion. The axes crunched through the bones of the men's chests at nearly the same time. He saw the surprise in their eyes as they finally found motion and fell to the ground.

Tarak turned to see the scout leader on his knees several paces away, the edge of his own blade deep in his neck. Beside him one of the swordsmen fell to the ground with Yeth's spear in his chest. Meanwhile, Shifhuul slit the throats of the two swordsmen with arrows in their breasts before either tumbled to the ground. A moment later, Tarak, his fellow outlanders, and their new companion, stood in silence as the six men lay dead around them.

"I tried." Kanma sounded sad as she looked at the dead scouts.

"You did well." Yeth put her hand on Kanma's shoulder. "There were few ways this did not end in death for them or us." She stepped away to retrieve her spear from the dead scout's chest.

"Good with more than birds." Shifhuul smiled at Kanma as he wiped his blade clean on the pantleg of one of the dead scouts.

"Yes. Thank you. Was it you who pushed the arrows aside?" Tarak stared the Kanma, trying not to see Donjeo in her features and failing. He hoped she managed to alter her appearance soon. He found it disconnecting to hear her true voice coming from the boy's body.

"Yes." Kanma frowned looking at the dead men. "I hate the killing."

"I am glad you came with us," Tarak said.

"As am I." Yeth cleared her spear from blood with a torn sleeve from the dead man. She looked at the scout leader with his own sword in his neck. She'd obviously lodged it there with The Sight. "I believe we can learn a great deal from each other. About more than killing."

Tarak wondered what the two seers could teach each other. Maybe it would be good to have the changeling with them. If they trained to fight together, it would make their progress toward their ultimate goal of reaching the Forbidden Realm far simpler. Her presence also made it easier to free the bone-giant.

"We should hide the bodies." Tarak walked to the two dead bowmen to retrieve and clean his axes. "They will eventually be missed. If they are found dead, it will alert the army, and they will increase their night guards."

"I can dispose of the bodies," Kanma said. "It is part of what I was trained for." She walked to the scout leader and raised her hands, closing her eyes to thin slits.

Tarak watched as the body of the soldier gradually sank into the leaf-strewn ground, consumed by the forest loam. As the leaves blew to cover the place where the body of the man once rested, it occurred to Tarak why the changeling possessed such a skill — when taking someone's face and memories to replace them, one could not leave the person alive or a body anywhere to be found. He sighed as he wiped his axes clean. Kanma would fit in nicely among the outlanders. Maybe too well. A dark collection of killers, he and his companions. He noticed that Yeth had taken Kanma's example and now buried one of the other scouts in the same manner. They did have much to learn

from one another, it seemed.

After Yeth and Kanma finished hiding the bodies of the scouts, the four of them stood for a moment, as still and silent as the trees around them.

“We can scout the army while they set up camp.” Tarak felt it best to return them to the direction of their intended action.

“Yes. I have plan. All good. Good plan.” Shifhuul gestured with his small arm and trudged into the woods once more. “Go now. Gets dark.”

Tarak and the others followed Shifhuul into the forest. Of course, Shifhuul had a plan. The wyrin always had a plan. Tarak admired him for that. But he knew the real challenge they faced was not freeing the bone-giant but freeing the carnival. That would require a great deal more time and a far more intricate plan.

To continue reading the Carnival story arena turn the page.

THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

“YER’S IS a most dee-licious milk, miss.”

“That’s just soooo kinda yas ta say.”

“Where does ya get it in such quantity, miss?”

“Don’tcha know, it comes from ... why it comes from tha usual places.”

A wave of roaring laughter rolled over the stage where Palla stood, dressed as a milkmaid, a confused and wide-eyed look on her face, her hands held open and out before her breasts as though suggesting a source for the milk in question, the action that elicited the assembly of soldiers’ amusement.

“Why that’s most enlightenin’, miss.” Lhando, her fellow actor, dressed like a common farm boy, stood near her, leaning suggestively against the handle of an over-sized pitchfork placed between his legs. “I’s muss say, yas’ all has the most bee-utiful milky white skin.”

They performed a little known scene rarely found in *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*, in which a noble woman pretends to be a lowly milkmaid attempting to seduce a farm boy she has taken a fancy to, while in turn the farm boy is in truth a nobleman attempting to seduce a young milkmaid for whom he lusts. The exaggerated accents arose from the two high-born people trying to imitate the speech of poor farm folk and added to the amusement. It also helped keep from offending any poor farm folk who might be in the audience. A bawdy piece, Leotin thought it might work well for an army of men devoid of feminine companionship that didn’t require the exchange of coins. As the most prominent woman actor, and the one with the palest skin, Palla found herself center stage. As she looked at Ranna’s amused grin from beside the riser, she wished she were dealing with the real work of the carnival — figuring out how to keep them all alive.

“Why, that’s just soooo kinda yas ta says.” Palla batted her eyes with great exaggeration. “An’ might I says, yas’ all gots the biggest pitchfork I ever done seen.” The soldiers’ laughter crashed against the stage. She waited for it to die down, so her next lines were not lost. “Why I’s can barely see how yas can use that thing.” More laughter. “I’s surprised yas don’t hurt yas self...” More laughter again. A bit less pause and a hand daintily extended to touch the tip of the pitchfork handle with an outstretched finger. “...Or someone else!”

Soldiers in the front of the stage fell upon each other in their delight, doubled up and howling as Palla snatched her hand back, as though she’d touched something that burned her finger. She waved her hand before her face as though likely to faint. Lhando made to reach to her but managed to trip over the pitchfork, falling to the ground at her feet, the handle miraculously flipping up the front of her dress and pointing skyward again. The men in the audience roared and whistled as she patted down her dress.

“I’s told ya, ya’d hurt yerself.” Palla wagged her finger at her supposed suitor. “If’n yas come wit’ me, I think I can shows ya a better use fer that big thang.”

“Why I’d be happy ta help yas any way I’s can.” Lhando stood, the big, wooden handle poking up between them.

“I gots a big mound needs stickin’ wit that thang.” Palla touched the tip of the handle with her finger again and threw her body into an outsized shiver. The men laughed more. She sighed inwardly, realizing she’d probably need to repeat this role every night for quite some time. With a crowd of nearly five hundred, they needed to repeat it twice a night for thirty days to allow all the soldiers to see the performance. She’d have preferred something more demanding that did not rely on such broad comedic gestures. But as long as the soldiers laughed, they were not trying to kill the carnival folk, and that remained her prime objective.

“Why, what is it yas gots needs pokin’, miss?” Lhando let the wooden handle waver between them in a lewd arc of motion.

“I thinks theys calls it ... haaaaay.” Pall stretched out the word “hay” while smoothing her dress between her thighs.

“Why, I’m mighty good at pokin’ ... haaaay, miss.” Lhando made to step forward with eagerness toward Palla but struck the tines of the pitchfork with his foot, sending the handle smacking into his face. He shook his head as the soldiers shrieked even harder.

“Why don’ts I’s shows yas where it is. Ya’all just follow me.” Palla grasped the handle of the pitchfork and yanked it forward, Lhando holding tight to the middle as she led him off stage to cheers and whoops of laughter.

Down the steps and off the stage out of sight behind curtains suspended from two wooden poles, Palla sighed and released the pitchfork.

“They seemed to like that well enough.” Lhando grinned. He was always happy when the audience was happy.

The juggling brothers, Tambel and Themsal, pushed past them to get on stage. While Palla assumed the milkmaid skit would be the last of the show, Leotin insisted that they add the jugglers to end the performance. The men would love the milkmaid, but it might also rile them up too much and leave them all wanting something they could not readily have. Best to send them off with two men juggling flaming swords. As she’d be what the soldiers likely wanted after the skit, Palla agreed with Leotin. She’d have found the whole performance impossible if not for Lhando. He never made her feel uncomfortable with the content of the scene, and offstage, she never caught him looking at her in an untoward manner. She suspected he held the same regard for the juggler, Tambel, as she felt for Ranna.

“Ya had ’em lickin’ the salt from yer hand.” Ranna spoke from behind her, using an old farming phrase to indicate success in leading animals to the pen.

“I am rather certain that was not what any of them were thinking of licking.” Palla realized that she might do well to wear a wig for the next performance of the scene to help hide her identity offstage.

Ranna gave her a sly smile, and she smiled back, until the smile went on so long that she frowned, suddenly realizing that the reason for Ranna’s smile lay in Palla’s choice of words. Then she blushed.

“Help me out of this dress and stop grinning.” Palla’s frown deepened, though it held only her own happiness behind it.

“Gladly, miss.” Ranna laughed aloud as Palla’s blush brightened.

“There will be time for frivolity later,” Palla said. “We have work to do now.”

“Much work.” Ranna’s smile faded. “An’ with an Atheton army of the Tot Gioth surroundin’ us, the frivolity will have to wait a while, too.”

“Yes.” Palla hadn’t had time to consider how things between her and Ranna might look to the more religious men of the army. “Yes, you’re quite right.” She wasn’t entirely certain she understood things between herself and Ranna, but she knew she liked them just the way they were and would not risk them for anything.

“What’s first?” Ranna asked as she helped Palla change clothes.

“Leotin wants to make sure the carnival has a clear perimeter and that we double the usual guards,” Palla said. “But we can’t have them look like guards.” Leotin did not trust the soldiers Saptan Tioga set for the carnival. She wished the outlanders still remained in the circle of wagons. She always felt safer with them on guard. She assumed they trailed the army, waiting to see what happened. An outside force to help in a time of need. She hoped they were well. Best they stayed away. No telling what the army might do to them.

“We should make sure the women all sleep in wagons in the center of the circle.” Ranna handed Palla her work boots and placed her stage slippers in a box labeled for her costume and props.

“A good idea.” Palla wiped the paint from her face with a damp rag.

“That saptan is here ta see ya.”

Palla turned to the sound of Pankee-Jao’s voice. The girl stood pointing to where Saptan Tioga waited near the rear wagons of the stage setup. Palla wondered what the man wanted. He’d been very helpful in assigning them rations and a wide space in the conscripted field to set up their wagons and their stage, but his attitude made it clear he did not like the idea of a carnival in the middle of his camp.

“Thank you, Pan.” Palla patted the girl’s arm. “Help Ranna with the props and the cleanup. This is the last show. We’ll need to pack up and be ready to go at dawn.”

“Yes, Palla.” Pankee-Jao smiled and moved to help Ranna. The girl seemed much improved by life in the carnival, though she still cried some nights for missing her mother, and she stayed stick thin no matter how much food Palla and Ranna made her eat.

“Careful. Don’t like the look’a that one.” Ranna spoke quietly near her ear.

“I’m always careful with armed men,” Palla said with a wink.

“Seems that’s the only time, then.” Ranna frowned at her and watched her walk away.

Palla approached Saptan Tioga with a smile. Best to appear happy for the army’s *help*. “What can I do for you, Saptan Tioga?”

“I have a matter of some importance to discuss with you, ma’am.” Saptan Tioga looked around as though ensuring there were no ears nearby.

“If it is of any real importance, you should speak with Leotin, the carnival master.” Palla

wondered what the saptan referred to. There were too many things that could go wrong trapped in the midst of an army set to invade another land.

“You are much prettier off the stage.” Saptan Tioga smiled broadly as his voice deepened.

“My dear Saptan, you don’t appear to understand the rules of flattery.” Palla masked an inward sigh with a wide outward smile. “One cannot tell a gazelle it is more graceful than a sow and expect it to feel complimented.”

“You are right.” Saptan Tioga gave a small bow. “My apologies.”

“No apologies needed. Nor compliments. It is we who should compliment you on the efficiency of your hospitality.” Palla returned the bow. Best to apply some flattery herself. “Now, how may I help you, Saptan?”

“One of your men came to me with an interesting story and several accusations.” Saptan Tioga placed one hand on the hilt of his sword.

“We are a carnival and full of interesting stories.” Palla kept her face neutral, running through her mind all those who might have betrayed the carnival and Leotin and what accusations they might have leveled. She knew it gave her an advantage to provide the name rather than ask for it. “Are we speaking of a rangy-looking Daeshen man of middle years named Tau-Fhen?”

“We are.” Saptan Tioga’s eyes narrowed at the mention of the name.

“He is a former Shen militiaman who joined us during the castle siege Leotin spoke of.” Palla tried to figure out how much to tell the saptan while guessing at how much he had already been told. “He has never been ... comfortable in the carnival. I suspect he follows us largely to ensure a meal in his belly each night.”

“He told me a story of Leotin killing a tahn and taking over the castle you mentioned,” Saptan Tioga said.

“The tahn and his wife died in an accident while we were under siege by Tau-Fhen’s militia.” Palla shook her head as though sad at the memory. “Leotin was forced by the circumstances to assume temporary command of the castle. And lucky for us he did. And fortunate for Tau-Fhen that Leotin allowed his militia to enter the castle for their own safety when the Tanshen army arrived to set siege.”

“Very lucky for all of you.” Saptan Tioga did not take his eyes from Palla. She could feel him weighing each word she said, looking for truth to balance against the words he’d heard from the duplicitous Tau-Fhen. “He mentioned three outlanders as well. A roagg, a wyrin, and a yutan.”

“Yes.” Palla’s face brightened. “Tarak, Shifhuul, and Yeth. I do not know what we would have done without them. They saved our lives many times in the castle. And on the road with attacks by bandits and militiamen. It was a sad day when they departed. They left when your army approached. Headed north.”

“North?” the saptan asked.

“Yes.” Palla constricted her face to express sadness. “With respect, they saw the creature you have caged and feared they might not be treated well, so they fled. I tried to convince them to remain, but I failed.”

“I see.” Saptan Tiago remained silent for a moment, watching her.

Palla wanted to turn and run screaming, but she remained standing, her face still showing sadness and not fear. Never had she been so thankful of her time on stage presenting different masks to an audience.

“This Shen man told me of a boy being with your carnival. A boy who tended the animals.” The saptan’s lips moved but not his eyes.

“Donjeo.” Palla let the sadness on her face become grief. “He was like a younger brother to me. To us. As Leotin told the kenagal, the boy died in the castle.”

“He says the boy lived and fled when the army approached.” Saptan Tiago leaned closer. “He also says he saw another boy who looked just like him arrive before the army and who also disappeared.”

“I think Tau-Fhen is confused and in want of the ale he was used to before joining us.” Palla’s mind whirled in an effort to twist the proper lie alongside the truth. “I don’t know why he would say Donjeo survived the castle. There was a girl. Kanma. She looks very boyish, the poor thing. Tall and lanky. She worked with the outlanders. She left with them as well. I tried to convince her to stay, but she’d grown close to the female yutan, Yeth, who became like a mother to her.”

“And if I ask the others in the carnival to confirm what you’ve told me, as opposed to what this Shen man told me, they will verify your words?” The implied threat behind Saptan Tiago’s question stabbed at Palla.

“How could they not?” Palla blinked in mild surprise at the question, tightening the muscles of her legs to keep them from shaking. “We all saw and lived the same things. I cannot guess why Tau-Fhen would tell you such things.”

“It could be his hatred for the heretics.” Saptan Tiago’s eyes did not blink as he stared at her.

“He surely carries no love for the followers of the new goddess.” A tight chill spread throughout Palla’s stomach to radiate up her spine. Now the conversation came to the real danger.

“He said there are quite a few heretics among your carnival,” Saptan Tiago said.

“It is Leotin’s carnival.” Palla smiled demurely. “Again, I will choose to be honest with you, Saptan Tiago. It is Leotin’s custom that whatever dominion we travel to, all the members of the carnival display the trappings of that land’s chosen faith, regardless of what their individual beliefs may be. This tends to keep the locals from looking upon us as outsiders, as we are such a mix of people from throughout the realm. So, yes, again to be honest, there are among us those who follow the new goddess.”

“I see.” The saptan’s response gave no indication of his thoughts about her reply.

“I was under the impression that the followers of the new goddess were not persecuted in Atheton the way they are in the Daeshen and Tanshen dominions.” Palla’s fear of where this conversation headed and what it meant for her and Ranna and the other believers in Moaratana made it very difficult to present a calm continence.

“In the kimpadess’s benevolence, they are tolerated and encouraged to leave the dominion with all haste, though they are prohibited from any outward expression of their faith, such as prayers or displays of icons.” Saptan Tiago’s voice took on a near lecturing tone. “Members of the army are, of course, refused the liberty to leave on any pilgrimage, and they are punished severely

for attempting to do so.”

“The kimpadess is wise and compassionate.” Palla added a slight bow to her words. Now she understood the import for their conversation. The saptan wished to be assured that his men would not be incited to join the pilgrims or abandon their posts. She also realized how the kimpadess’s supposed compassion pushed even more pilgrims into the Shen dominions to destabilize them in advance of her invasion. Very wise indeed. Palla decided that she never wished to come face to face with the new kimpadess. “Allow me to assure you, saptan, the Goddess’s people among us are accustomed to being discreet. You will not notice them, and they will give you no cause to do so.”

“That is good to hear.” Saptan Tiago offered her a smile that implied his satisfaction, but also the threat of what might happen if he were to become dissatisfied. He paused a moment and Palla was not certain if the interview had concluded. “He also told me that you are a heretic.”

Palla had expected this earlier. She silently cursed Leotin for sparing Tau-Fhen’s life and herself for not seeing that the man needed to be pushed out of the carnival long ago. If only the monster in that town had taken his life instead of the others. But the man had a way of finding himself at the rear of any dangerous engagement. She needed to answer the saptan in a way that did not lose her his respect. She also needed to keep the atmosphere clear between the carnival and the army.

“Please excuse the rudeness of the question, but do you have the dreams, saptan?” Palla wasn’t certain how to proceed to defend her faith. She and Ranna had spent a great deal of time questioning their beliefs after Yeth’s revelation of what truly happened at that pond. What did she believe? And why did she believe it?

“I have.” Saptan Tiago’s voice softened. “And I have seen the star and heard the stories of miracles. But I am not a man to abandon my kimpadess, my kenagal, my men, or my faith.”

“That is commendable,” Palla said. “But those not bound by such duties and convictions have before them other possibilities. I, too, must choose between following the pilgrims to the Forbidden Realm and continuing to follow Leotin and the carnival.”

“And which will you select?” Saptan Tiago sounded genuinely interested in her answer.

“I do not know, but I wish I did.” Palla’s sigh expressed her real confusion and concerns. “I thought I knew for a time what I should do, but now, I am uncertain and torn. Follow those who gave me a home or those who promise me a new home.”

“I understand.” Saptan Tiago looked away over her shoulder toward the men encamped across the field. “I have chosen the home I know.”

Palla did not know how to respond to the man’s honesty, in particular because it sounded a bell with her depths as to the gravity of the choice that would one day come before her. Could she leave the carnival? What if Ranna insisted on joining the pilgrimage? Could she substitute her love of Leotin and the people she thought of as her true family with the love of Moaratana? Could she follow that call? Had she not already found her home?

She shrugged these thoughts from her mind and returned them to a more crucial question.

“What will become of Tau-Fhen?” Palla asked. “You will forgive me, but I do not think Leotin

will approve of him remaining in the carnival after offering up such spurious accusations.”

“He has volunteered to join the Atheton army.” Saptan Tiago’s tone filled with a dark amusement.

“You would accept a former Daeshen militiaman into your army?” Palla could not suppress her surprise at this revelation.

“I have little use for men who show such little loyalty. However, the kimpadess has decreed that all those in liberated dominions who wish to serve the Last Great Dominion will be offered the opportunity to do so.”

“Again, the kimpadess shows both wisdom and compassion,” Palla said. The kimpadess also showed a true strategic insight in how to build a Fourth Great Dominion. Conjoin the troops of all the dominions and use them to secure each nation against all others.

“And we are always in need of men to march at the front of a battle to prove their loyalty.” Saptan Tiago’s implication pleased Palla.

“I have never managed to see him at the front of a fight,” Palla said. “I am certain the experience will benefit him greatly.”

“I take it you have witnessed battles at close hand,” the saptan said. “I see you wear the trousers of a man, and I noticed you wore a sword the first time we met.”

“Both women and men have been called to defend the carnival and all we hold dear in the past months.” Palla felt palpably uncomfortable without her sword, but Leotin and she had both agreed it best if the carnival remained unarmed in the presence of the army, to avoid any possible confusions or confrontations. Rather than allow the saptan to pursue this trail of questioning, she began a new one.

“If I may ask, Saptan Tiago, why did you really approach me with your concerns rather than Leotin?” This question had been mewling in the back of her mind throughout the entire encounter. “He is the carnival master, after all.”

“Within our respective collectives, we are of somewhat similar rank.” Saptan Tiago nodded politely. “I find it is often best if those of equal rank discuss matters of general importance first, as this allows them to more clearly decide what matters must be brought before their commanders.”

“I see. I am flattered.” Palla wondered what portions of their conversation and Tau-Fhen’s allegations the saptan would convey to his kenagal.

“And as I said, you are quite pretty.” Saptan Tiago grinned at her.

“A compliment without comparison.” Palla smiled back. “I am, indeed, flattered.”

“I must excuse myself. Like you, I assume, I have many matters to deal with yet this night. Until tomorrow.” The saptan offered her a curt military bow. She returned it with a slight curtsy. As the saptan walked away, Ranna stepped up beside her.

“He gives ya any trouble, ya let me know and I’ll run him through myself.” Ranna’s voice sounded terse yet hinted at her fear.

“That’s very sweet of you, my yosa,” Palla said, using her private name for her, “but if anyone needs running through, I’ll wield the sword myself.”

“What did he want?” Ranna asked.

“To test for lies and offer a warning,” Palla said. “Come. I’ll explain while we walk. I wanted to take a late meal to Leotin in his wagon.”

“Leotin’s gonna get fat eatin’ so much in a day.” Ranna’s tone sounded light, but they both knew the food fed the hidden Donjeo.

Palla pitied the boy, trapped in the wagon for the indefinite future. How long would they be bound to the army and forced to march with it back across the Old Border Road? And could Leotin manage to keep himself and the rest of them alive, given the depth of his relationship with the new supposed kimpadess?

Palla explained her conversation with the saptan to Leotin before returning to the sleeping wagon she and Ranna now shared with Pankee-Jao. She fell asleep that night with her hand clasping Ranna’s beneath the blankets where the three lay side-by-side. Sometime late in the night, when the sister moons sat high in the star-filled sky, a pounding on the wagon roused her from sleep. She opened the door to see Leotin in his night robes, his face ashen in the pale light of the moons. Before she could ask, he explained his distress.

“Come quick. The bone-giant is free of its cage.”

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

THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

TENDRILS OF gray smoke curled through slender, metal vents along the top of the lantern, drifting toward the domed ceiling in the light from the flame-tipped wick. The curved walls of the room circled around several wooden tables strewn with sheaves of paper, ink quills, and more glowing lamps. Junari stood beside one of the tables in an upper chamber Raedalus had repurposed to serve as a joint study for himself and his team of clerks exploring and cataloging the temple.

“If you follow the path of the curving halls, you see that they are different on every level.” Raedalus traced his finger along a hallway marked on a map of the lower temple floor. “The spirals are tighter each time they descend, which is not what you would expect. One would think the spiral halls became tighter in arcs as they rose from the ground.”

“Raedalus, my friend, I am a priest, not a builder. Your meaning is escaping me, even though I see the enthusiasm on your face.” Junari sighed and leaned her hip against the table. It had been a long day, and she ached to be back in her chambers. Not that she had time for sleep, but she could at least sit and relax. She resisted the temptation to sit on a chair. Raedalus nearly bounced with childlike eagerness to share his latest discovery.

“Yes, my apologies.” Raedalus took a deep breath to calm himself. “I suspect there is another level beneath the ground floor of the temple.” He pointed to a different drawing that showed a spiral with a very narrow arc.

“Where?” Junari found the exhaustion fading as curiosity lit her mind. A secret level to the temple implied many things.

“I believe it was hidden.” Raedalus frowned as he looked at the maps of the temple spread across the table. “There is so much damage from the earth tremors that it will be even harder to find. If it is there.”

“If it is there, I am certain you will find it, Raedalus.” Junari smiled at her old friend, proud of his accomplishments and fully aware she would be lost without his counsel and assistance. “And if you do find this hidden level, it may tell us a great many things about those who built this temple.”

“What they look like, for one.” Raedalus gestured toward a stack of charcoal drawings on a nearby table. “I’d hoped to reconstruct what the builders looked like from the remains of damaged statues, but they all suffered significant destruction, even before the tremors, so that appears unlikely. But Zilaya is a very good artist, and she has not yet examined all the statues in the temple. She thinks she might be able to assemble a full composition from different fragments. Some of the statues in the city itself may remain more complete.”

“It is a good idea.” Junari lifted one of the drawings to the light and appraised it. The woman had an excellent hand. A shame she’d been born in the Daeshen Dominion where women were not allowed to be artisans. “She is very good. And very pretty.” Junari caught the fluster that fell across

Raedalus's face and smiled. So, he did hold a fancy for her. Good. He needed a woman in his life besides herself and Taksati.

"She is ... very talented." Raedalus shuffled some papers on his table in a distracted way.

"Let me know the moment you find something." Junari placed a hand on his shoulder in a motherly fashion. "Do not work too late. You need sleep like the rest of us."

"How strange," Raedalus said, his eyes mirthful. "I was just going to say the same to you."

"Good night, Raedalus," Junari said.

"Good night, Mother Shepherd," Raedalus replied.

She left him to his work. Kantula and Jupiterus waited for her in the spiraling temple corridor. They followed her back through the temple halls and stairs to the ground level, across the open plaza, and down one of the main streets. They walked, as they usually did, in silence. Kantula and Jupiterus preferred she did not speak to them when guarding her. They claimed it interfered with their presence of mind and the performance of their duty. She did not mind on this night, enjoying the silence, the cool air, and the way the light from the sister moons set the ancient streets aglow. She squinted her eyes, and the city seemed to fade from ruins into some hazy semblance of what it must have looked like thousands of years ago. Beautiful, vibrant, yet still mysterious.

As they neared a modest-sized two-level building at the end of the street, the one Taksati had chosen as the residence of the Mother Shepherd, she found her silence interrupted in the most pleasant way.

"Mother Shepherd."

She smiled at the sound of the deep, resonant voice.

"Bon-Tao." Junari stopped and turned, finding it very difficult not to run and embrace him and kiss him deeply. Even though Kantula and Jupiterus knew of her ... affection ... for Bon-Tao, such a display in the street, even at night, would not be fitting of her station among the faithful, some of whom still wandered the city even at this late hour.

"May I have a word, Mother Shepherd?" Bon-Tao stepped a bit closer and bowed slightly, as he always did in public.

"Would you like to come in?" Junari gestured toward her residence, a spark of hope igniting a flame of desire within her.

"Unfortunately, I cannot." The sadness in Bon-Tao's voice matched that of his face. They had found too little time alone these last few days. "I am to lead another hunt for the fire-plants soon. But I wanted to share with you the results of Tanagaal's latest examinations of the creatures."

"Has he found something that will help us kill them more quickly?" Junari thought with sorrow of all the people they had lost to the horrible, deadly plants.

"Not kill them, no, but trick them." Bon-Tao's grin looked wicked in the pale moonlight.

"How so?" Junari asked.

"By masking our smell." Bon-Tao lowered his voice as he stepped closer. "Tanagaal has discovered the means by which the plants determine their prey. It is by scent. Something in the leaves allows them to taste the air. This is why they will attack a human and not a dog or other animal. He found that if covered in scented oils, the plants he captured did not try to attack until

in actual contact with human flesh. Cinnamon, clove, and clovatt work best. Lavender seems to make them attack all the quicker.”

“Is that why you smell like an autumn apple pie?” Junari sniffed at Bon-Tao’s neck, wishing she could plant her lips there against his exposed flesh.

“It is.” Bon-Tao leaned closer, his eyes seeking out her own. “We plan to test the oils in tonight’s hunt and announce the precaution to everyone tomorrow if it is successful.”

“A wise plan.” Junari felt the pull between their flesh — a magnet drawn to iron. But which was the magnet and which the iron? “You be careful.” She used the voice of the Mother Shepherd’s command rather than pose a question as Junari.

“I will return to you as always.” Bon-Tao’s hand twitched as he returned it to his side. She knew he longed to embrace her as much as she him, and that only fanned the flames of her desire.

She looked around. Kantula and Jupiterus stood not far away, staring in opposite directions, up and down the street. She saw no one, and no one at the windows or in the doorways of the nearby buildings, but that did not mean no one watched from the shadows. Someone had spied on them in the past and might do so again. She decided that if anyone did spy on them, they would likely learn nothing new. She leaned forward, raising up on her toes, and kissed him. She did not reach for him, but let her lips, however briefly, speak for the passion of the embrace she wished to share with him. All too quickly, she leaned away.

He stared at her a moment, smiling in silence.

“Good night, Mother Shepherd.”

“Good night, Bon-Tao.”

He bowed again, turned, and walked back up the street. Junari watched him for a moment and then headed to the ancient building fashioned by an unknown people that she now called home. Two guards, one man and one woman, as customary, stood outside the only door. Kantula and Jupiterus entered first, lighting lanterns and checking the rooms of the building before leaving her.

“Good night, Mother Shepherd,” they said in unison.

“Good night, Kantula. Good night, Jupiterus.”

The nightly ritual of each person wishing the Mother Shepherd a good night had struck her as an annoyance at first, but she soon recognized it as ceremonial to the position she held as much as benedictions for her own peaceful slumber.

She settled among several cushions on a rug before a low table strewn with papers. As she sighed, a knock came at the entrance.

“Come,” Junari said as Taksati’s young assistant, Atula, entered carrying a tray with a steaming cup of tea and a bowl of walnuts and sliced cheese.

“Good evening, Mother Shepherd,” Atula sat the tray on the edge of the table. “Taksati said you needed some ... what did she call it? Fortification. Fortification for your late night of work.”

“Thank you, Atula.” Junari picked up the cup of tea and inhaled the scent of jasmine and mint. Taksati knew her too well. And she’d chosen well in her assistant. The girl reminded her of herself at that age. All gangly limbs and sharp curiosity.

The girl fidgeted and crossed her legs. “She also said I was to tell you to get some sleep, but

that's her telling you that and not me."

Junari laughed at the girl's consternation. She also noted how her speech had grown more sophisticated under Taksati's tutelage. No doubt she thought the girl would make a fine priest one day. No doubt she was right.

"Thank you, Atula," Junari said. "You may tell Taksati that I received her message and will give it the usual consideration."

"Yes, Mother Shepherd." Atula frowned and bowed. "Good night, Mother Shepherd."

"Good night, Atula." Junari watched with amusement as Atula clumsily backed out of the room.

Junari sipped her tea and nibbled at the nuts and cheese as she read through the papers Taksati left each night on her table. Her days were so filled with meetings and leading [prayers](#) and dealing with emergencies involved in refurbishing the temple or rebuilding the city that she had little time for the administrative duties of being the Mother Shepherd. She liked to know what happened in the city, what concerns her people held, and whether she could help them. How many rations remained in their stores? How were the hunts in the jungles for meat proceeding? Had enough buildings been cleared to house the faithful? How were plans progressing to clean more buildings for the next wave of pilgrims who arrived? So many details, all listed in black scratches on cream tinted paper. The words and numbers spoke to her, calling to her beyond their intended meaning, luring her to drowsiness, seducing her with thoughts of slumber...

Junari woke to the sensation of cold steel pressed to her neck. She opened her eyes to see a girl kneeling before her, holding a knife blade to her throat. Not a girl. From the raven's feet at the corners of her eyes, Junari judged her to be in her mid-thirties. A woman. A small woman with pale skin, crimson hair, and piercing, emerald eyes that spoke of fear and triumph and disgust.

"Do not cry out," the woman whispered. "I can kill you before your guards can save you."

Junari did not move, did not speak. She remembered the woman. One of the Tot Gioth believers she'd been forced to take with the pilgrims. Tonetta. It was hard to miss the woman's striking red hair and green eyes. How had she gained entrance? An overturned basket behind the woman caught Junari's eye and provided the answer. That basket should have held her laundered clothes, delivered that morning as she departed. Had the woman hid in the basket all day, folded like a priestly robe? It explained why her guards did not notice her. Who expected a woman so small concealed in a basket for clothes? She felt a pang of sorrow for Kantula and Jupiterus. They would blame themselves for the oversight and her death. Junari decided her circumstance demanded a more positive line of contemplation.

"Why have you not killed me?" Junari hoped the question did not prompt deadly action, but it seemed to her a most pressing mystery.

"I wanted you to know who kills you." The woman leaned close, her breath faintly metallic. From dehydration, Junari surmised. How long *had* the woman been in that basket?

"You are of the Tot Gioth." Junari looked the woman in the eyes, wondering if the Goddess might respond to a silent prayer of protection. "I know you do not believe what we believe, but you have seen what we have seen, and my death will make no difference. I am only one possible

vessel for the Goddess.”

“I am Tot Gioth, but I am not with the others. I have not been sent by the others.” The woman’s words made Junari blink in momentary confusion.

“Who?” Junari did not bother asking more.

“Kimpadess Havarez sends you to the embrace of your heathen goddess.” The woman spat the words at her and Junari’s mind reeled with their import. She did not recall the meaning of the word *kimpadess*, but the woman could only refer to Teyett Havarez, the ruler of the Atherton Dominion. Why did she want Junari dead? To destroy the new faith? To slow its growth? The teyett allowed pilgrims to pass unmolested through her dominion as long as they did not linger. Had this been a ploy of some kind? Or merely a plan to rid her land of heretics, so she could kill their leader far across the ocean?

“Tonetta.” The woman blinked at Junari’s use of her name. “You are the night-blade of the Atherton ruler, but you are more than that.”

“Silence,” Tonetta hissed.

Junari knew silence led to death and only by speaking could she hope to avoid that end.

“You are a woman of intelligence and resourcefulness and patience, Tonetta.” Junari felt the blade of the knife pierce the flesh of her neck at the mention of the woman’s name. “You are cunning enough to have found a way to kill me at any time these last weeks. Why wait? Why not kill me on the boats? Why not kill me after we landed, or after the great wave? Why wait until now when the temple is on its way to being rebuilt, now when the streets are cleared of the fire-plants and people have places to sleep and enough to eat? What has stayed your hand all this time?”

Tonetta bit her lip, her eyes blinking back tears, the blade trembling in her hand.

“I think you waited because you do not really wish to kill me.” Junari did not know this to be fact but hoped to convince the woman of its truth. “I think you only act now because you know there must be ships close to landing any day. And one of those ships may carry another like you. Another night-dagger sent to kill me if you failed. One pretending to be a pilgrim. You must have been tasked late to your mission to be among the Tot Gioth sent with us.”

“I arrived in Tanjii too late to be accepted on one of the first pilgrim ships.” Tonetta’s voice grew soft. “I was told by a man from the Circle of Elders to join the Tot Gioth heretics. That I would be placed on the ships this way.”

Junari hoped the woman’s desire to speak in detail of her plan grew from an urge to talk rather than murder.

“Was it Kuth-Von?” Junari asked. “The man who instructed you.”

“Yes.” Tonetta bit her lip again.

Kuth-Von worked with Teyett Havarez? To what end? It did not matter in that moment. The woman surely did not know.

“You have had the dreams?” The look in Tonetta’s eyes confirmed Junari’s suspicion. “You have seen the star. You have seen the Goddess protect us at sea. You have seen her protect us after the great wave. You have seen me. You have witnessed me act in the interests of all people who follow the Goddess Moaratana. You have heard stories of me plunging a knife into my own flesh

as an offering to save the Kam-Djen people of Tanjii from the flames I called down on them with my prayers. In this moment, with your blade at my throat, it is no teyett, no kimpadess, who judges me and my deeds and my beliefs and decides if I live or die. It is only you. Why do you wish to kill me, Tonetta? Not why have you been ordered to kill me, but why do you want to?"

"They hold my son captive in Tanjii." Tonetta used her free hand to wipe a tear from her eye.

Junari sighed. She'd known the woman not to be a true night-dagger. Such men and women were rarely motivated by love of ruler or nation and simply killed for profit, with little concern for the reasons. Had Tonetta been an actual night-dagger, Junari would have been dead already, likely weeks ago. However, a woman secretly in service of the teyett, but not trained for such matters, might require inducements greater than coin.

"How old is your son?" Junari asked.

"Five." Tonetta blinked back more tears. "His father is dead, and he has only me."

"I see." Junari sighed and felt a wave of relief flood through her, the tension held in her body sinking into the ground. "Then you must kill me."

Tonetta looked askance at Junari. "What?"

"If it is a choice between a child's life and my own, then the choice is clear." Junari found the fear gripping her mind fade away with her certainty of purpose. "I told you the truth. I am but a vessel for the Goddess. She will find another vessel. I can be replaced. Your son cannot."

"I do not ..." The knife blade wavered as Tonetta fought back a sob. "I do not understand."

"You will surrender after you have killed me." Junari's mind saw the possible complications ahead of the woman and sought to allay them. "You will tell Taksati what you have told me. She will make certain word of my death is sent to Tanjii and that it reaches Kuth-Von swiftly. He must be instructed to release your son into the care of the pilgrims. He will be brought here. To you."

"You..." Tonetta's words faltered in her mouth.

"If you allow me to sit up, I will write it all down." Junari saw the path clearly now. Tonetta leaned back as Junari gently pushed herself to a sitting position and reached for paper and quill on the low table. "If I do not leave clear instructions, they may kill you. They may do so, anyway. Many will be angry and call for your death. You should have planned this as an accident. Why did you have no way of escape?"

"I intended to hide in the basket again," Tonetta said.

"Kantula and Jupterus will search everything upon my death." Junari shook her head as she started to write. "The Red Book of Moaratana speaks of the everlasting bounty of forgiveness, but it makes no proclamation about whether to put criminals to death. This letter may spare you, and I will instruct Taksati to do the utmost to return your son to you, but you may never be allowed to raise him. We are a young people here, and I cannot say what forgiveness the faithful may eventually find for you."

Tonetta placed her hand upon Junari's fingers as they clutched the quill, hovering above the blank sheet of paper.

"Cease." Tonetta placed the blade upon the table and pulled her hands away to hold herself, seeming impossibly small and frail.

Junari looked at her, the clash of emotions and thoughts holding her silent for a moment.

“I cannot kill you.” Tonetta spoke between gasps of breath. “You are too good. You are the Mother Shepherd.”

Junari reached out and pulled the tiny woman into her arms as Tonetta collapsed into sobs. Junari blinked back her own tears. In the space of a few minutes, she had prepared herself to die and now she faced another decision. She could finish the letter and use the knife to take her own life, but this seemed both unwise and difficult to accomplish. She’d plunged a blade into her breast once before and did not know if she could so easily force herself to do it again.

“I have an idea.” The notion appeared in Junari’s mind much like the Goddess’s star had arrived in the night sky — without warning and fully formed. “We will not forget this drama between us, but rather, as I planned, share it with Taksati. She will secretly send word back directly to Kuth-Von that I have been killed, but that such knowledge must not be given to the pilgrims across the ocean as a new Mother Shepherd has yet to be chosen. She will mention the capture of a certain woman responsible for my death and request that all relatives be sent to the Forbidden Realm with the next pilgrim ship to stand witnesses of character at her trial. This may not work as planned, but it is the best hope of your son being returned to you. You could take the first ship back to Tanjii with a similar note, but I fear that if the teyette has used you once as a night-dagger, she will do so again, and Kuth-Von will hold your son as long as she desires.”

It took time for Tonetta to recover herself. When she did, she barely spoke. The woman seemed shattered, filled with fear and regret. In the end, Junari convinced her to follow the first of the options she’d presented. She walked her to Taksati’s rooms next door, surprising the guards stationed outside both with the hour of her movements and the presence of Tonetta in her company. After much explaining, she left Tonetta with Taksati and Atula. She did not worry that the woman might once more attempt to kill her. She had only been looking for a way to leave that path and save her son. Hopefully, Junari’s plan provided that safety and eventually delivered Tonetta’s son to her.

Laster, as she fell to sleep, her thoughts turned to the eminent departure of the pilgrim ships headed back to Tanjii and questions of what events and machinations whirled in the Iron Realm, how they affected the pilgrims still there, those just beginning their journey, those about to cross the ocean, and what it meant for the temple and the faithful here in the Forbidden Realm. With one of her last conscious thoughts it occurred to her that it should no longer be called The Forbidden Realm, and that they needed a new name for their new home. The answer came with sleep — The Goddess Realm.

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

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

HARVEST-GREEN VEGETABLES tinted gray under the illumination of the twin moons and shadow-tinged trees — autumn colors faded in the pale light. Terraced hillsides circled around the city of Tsee-Kaanlin in the shallow Gaan Valley. Lights from lanterns and fires dotted the vale, accumulating density and intensity as they neared the city, where they grew so numerous as to give a shimmering glow to the night. Another line of luminescence snaked through the eastern road into the city, a trail of torches and lanterns stretching back beyond sight but moving inexorably forward.

Ondromead stood on a veranda overlooking the city. The light of several lanterns spilled through a door and across stone tiles that led to a sleeping chamber of the villa. He'd awoken in the grounds that day and spent his time wandering the gardens and rooms waiting for the moment he needed to witness. The villa belonged to Tahn Taujin Lin-Pi, the brother of the Tanshen zhan. He'd seen no evidence of the tahn in residence, but his wife, Pai-Neguha, and her mother spent much of the day gathered on the same terrace where he now waited. They had watched what he observed now — the Atheton army marching toward the capital city. Resistance of Tanshen soldiers occasionally slowed the approach but did not stop the army's advance.

With most of the soldiers fighting the Daeshen Dominion in the north, only the city guards stood to stop the Atheton forces. The walls of Tsee-Kaanlin offered further protection, but Ondromead doubted they would last long. The weakness of walls always fell to the gates, and from what he'd seen during the day, the Atheton army marched with seers. No gate ever held against several seers set to open it.

The Atheton army, this battalion of it at least, appeared to have taken barges down the Goha River, deep into Tanshen territory before swiftly cutting across the plains to the capital of Tsee-Kaanlin. A lightning-fast incursion. From his witnessing the last weeks, he knew a similar-sized army marched toward the Daeshen capital, while yet more soldiers followed the Old Border Road, troops to attack the warring northern and southern Shen armies directly. A masterful invasion by the Atheton ruler.

"We must."

"You wished for this duty, and now you must bend to it."

Ondromead turned his ears to the argument in the room behind him as two people entered. He recognized the voices and the argument. Pai-Neguha and her aged mother. They spent much of the day quarreling on the terrace, in the gardens, and every other room they occupied. The tingling sensation he knew so well told him the moment he'd been brought there for had arrived. He moved to where he could see the two women through a window as they spoke beside the bed.

"I have waited too long already." Pai-Neguha's voice sounded at the edge of panic.

"He is your husband," her mother replied, her tone annoyed.

"He should have sent word by now," Pai-Neguha said.

“He is trapped in the city with an enemy army marching on it,” her mother said. “And he is the zhan’s brother. He cannot be seen to flee.”

“Would you rather I wait until I am taken hostage by those Atheton heathens?” Pai-Neguha brushed a stray hair from her face. She looked tired and older than her thirty years.

“You insisted on this path, and you should walk it.” Her mother’s voice held both sadness and hint of contempt.

“Not this again,” Pai-Neguha sighed. “Always this.”

“You are only here because you did not listen to your heart,” her mother said.

“Did not listen to you is what you really mean,” Pai-Neguha said.

“I cautioned you all those years ago,” her mother replied. “You would still have any child you bore if you’d listened to me then.”

“We do not speak of her.” Pai-Neguha’s voice fell quiet.

“You are her mother,” her own mother said. “You were meant to protect her.”

“You do not know what she is.” Pai-Neguha sounded stricken, her voice filled with fear and guilt.

“She is a girl, your daughter above all else,” her mother said.

“You know not what you speak of,” Pai-Neguha turned from her mother. “There was no choice. The danger was too great.”

“It is lucky for her she found someone to protect her when her mother did not.” Her mother stared at Pai-Neguha’s back. “Do you even know if she is still alive?”

“I overheard Lin-Pi in his study in the palace.” Pai-Neguha wiped at her eyes. “It is said she boarded a ship headed to the Forbidden Realm.”

The women glared at each other in silence a moment before the mother spoke again.

“And so, what will you do now?” the mother asked. “Abandon your husband as you abandoned your daughter?”

Pai-Neguha did not reply. She stepped to the door of the terrace and stared out at the line of light reaching the city gates in the valley. Ondromead pressed himself into the shadows of the wall. As long as he remained still, the women would not notice him. He had seen them both several times before, but their conversation reminded him of another from years ago in a similar sleeping chamber on a country estate to the east of the city.

TEN YEARS AGO

“BUT YOU do not love him.”

“I am well aware of my own heart.”

Pai-Neguha stood at the dressing table, a long, silk robe flowing over her thin frame and pooling at her feet. Her mother stood beside her as she examined herself in a tall, narrow mirror. Ondromead watched from an adjacent sitting room, observing the two women through a partially open door. He’d been following one form or another of the same disagreement between the two throughout the afternoon.

“There are consequences to marrying for position.” Her mother adjusted Pai-Neguha’s hair.

“There are consequences to marrying for love.” Pai-Neguha brushed her mother’s hands away from her hair.

“I do not understand how you can be my child.” Her mother sighed loudly.

“I do not understand how you can be my mother.” Pai-Neguha glared at the older woman through the mirror.

“You love Thao-Yai,” her mother said.

“I care for him a great deal.” Pai-Neguha bit her lip.

“I recognize the sight of a girl in love,” her mother said. “I saw it often enough in the mirror when I was your age.”

“My feelings are of little importance.” Pai-Neguha smoothed imaginary wrinkles in her robes. “He has little coin and fewer prospects. He will not even inherit his father’s failing estate. How can I marry such a man?”

“Because you love him,” her mother replied.

“It is easy for you to lecture on marrying for love,” Pai-Neguha said. “Father was a wealthy and successful minister when your parents arranged for you to meet him.”

“Wealthy, successful, handsome, kind, and much more.” Her mother looked away, sadness filling her voice. “But had I not loved him, these things would have meant nothing. And now that he is dead, they truly mean nothing. Now, all I have of him is the memory of his love for me.”

“I am marrying Lin-Pi.” Pai-Neguha spoke with firmness, but the look on her face suggested silent doubt.

“I cannot make you marry the man you love,” her mother said.

“No, you cannot.” Pai-Neguha walked away from the mirror and her mother as she strode out of the room.

Ondromead watched as the older woman sat in a chair, sniffing as she cried, dabbing her tears with the sleeve of her silken robe. He found the conversation odd and in contrast to other similar arguments he’d witnessed. Usually, the parent insisted on the child marrying for position and wealth while the child desired to wed for love. It made him sad that he would never know any of those bonds or emotions. Filled with that heartache, he took the black book from his satchel and sought a place to write.

THE PRESENT

“THE CITY gates have fallen.”

“Seers. The heathens bring seers to battle.”

Ondromead watched the two women standing in the doorway of the terrace as they witnessed the fall of their city. The memory of their previous conversation lingered with him as he listened to them, their voices seeming distant. He thought to his assumption that he would never realize the bond of another person, never comprehend the feeling of love in his heart. He now apprehended with sadness how wrong he’d been. He did not understand what to call the connection he held with

Hashel; he was not son nor nephew, but he loved the boy. His eyes brimmed with tears as he thought of the possibility of never seeing Hashel again. The boy had never spoke to him, not once, but he felt as though they shared so many things between them. He knew nothing of the boy's past, nor why he did not speak, but such things were unimportant in many ways. What mattered was what they shared and witnessed together, not what they'd been or seen before they met. The ache of that separation pained him, made his chest tight, his stomach queasy. He blinked back these feelings and tried to focus on the women he'd come to witness.

Pai-Neguha turned from the balcony and strode across the floral-patterned carpets of the room. She opened the door and spoke to a male servant waiting just outside.

"Send word to my husband that my mother is ill and that I am taking her to our estate in the south," Pai-Neguha said to the man. "When you have sent the runner, wake the stable master and inform him of our departure. We will need a wagon, not a carriage. Then return and assist us in packing. We'll leave with all haste. My mother is very ill."

Pai-Neguha closed the door and returned to her mother's side.

"I am ill now?" Her mother's tone sounded curious as well as sarcastic.

"I have decided that you are right." Pai-Neguha raised her chin.

"I feel you misunderstand me." The mother turned to her daughter, face tight with annoyance. "I am counseling you to follow your duty, to follow the path you chose, and remain at the side of your husband, or at the very least to remain in his villa."

"You also counseled me that I have a duty to my daughter." Pai-Neguha turned to stare at her mother.

"And how will you fulfill this duty at your husband's southern estate?" her mother asked.

"We are not heading to the estate," Pai-Neguha replied. "You have seen that army. They have seers, and our men are all in the north and shattered by battle. The Athetons cannot be stopped. And I have no desire to live under the heel of that Havarez swine. We will take the wagon south to the coast where we will find a ship."

"A ship to where?" Her mother looked confused by this announcement.

"To the Forbidden Realm, of course." Pai-Neguha smiled at the surprise on her mother's face. "To find my daughter." She waited a moment, but when her mother did not reply, she returned to the room and began pulling clothes from a cabinet.

Ondromead wondered at the girl in question. He'd heard her mentioned twice now. It struck him as odd he had not witnessed her himself. And doubly strange that he had not been called to witness any of the events supposedly taking place in the Forbidden Realm. Then again, for all he knew, the girl and everyone who had voyaged to the Forbidden Realm lay dead at the bottom of the Zha Ocean. This might explain his absence from the continent he had never visited.

The twitching in his hand called him away from his thoughts and to his quill. The mother stepped into the chamber, and he dug the black book from his satchel once more. As he did so, a new thought came to him. If this woman could seek out her daughter, knowing not where she might be or if she lived, could he not also conceive some way to search for Hashel? He might be cast each night to a new place, but could he not think of a way to signal the boy, or at least learn

of his whereabouts? Surely, someone he met would eventually have seen the carnival. He did not know exactly how, but he now possessed the will and determination to find Hashel and be reunited with his sole companion and friend. Regardless of how long it took.

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

THE CARNIVAL



KANMA

SILHOUETTED CLOUDS crawled across the night sky, the light of the twin moons illuminating their forward edge as the wind blew them slowly eastward. Kanma lay beneath a supply wagon in the army camp. Her body had nearly completed its transformation. She already thought of herself as female. She found the shape familiar. Almost comforting. She'd spent more than half of her life in the female form. She appeared to be a brown-skinned and spindly-thin teenage girl with shortish hair. She might have been the sister of the girl Pankee-Jao. She'd used a touching of the girl, taken weeks ago, as a template. She'd been trained to take touchings of people often. One never knew when a spy might need a new face. It had occurred to her, when she first saw Donjeo approaching the carnival down the road, that she might use that touching to blend in and hide once more among the humans. But she would have needed to kill the girl to make that plan work, and she could not bring herself to end one more life to protect and conceal her own identity.

The wyrin, Shifhuul, lay beside her. They waited for the intermittent clouds to once more cross the path of the crescent moons. The wyrin's plan presented a number of complications, but so far had gone well. Under cover of the clouds, she had used The Sight to bend the attention of one of the soldiers guarding the perimeter of the camp and sneak to the supply wagons, where they stole a single jug of wine. Now they sat beneath the wagon, waiting for the clouds to give them cover for their next move. From the pace of the wind, they had a few minutes yet. She looked across the camp to where the strange bone-giant dozed in its cage of iron. A tent sat next to the wagon, their next destination.

As she waited with the wyrin, she could not stop considering his actions. He had protected her. No human had ever done that. They only wished to use her or kill her. Could it be because he was wyrin? Did he see her differently? Only her mate had ever tried to protect her. Her people did not expect to receive kindness from those not like them. They called themselves the *tarikatan* — those who transform. They met rarely and only by chance, usually while in the forced employ of some human ruler. She had met her mate, Jupadus, in this way in Nevaeo.

Thinking of Jupadus left her saddened. Did he still live? Had he escaped? Did the kimpadess use him as well, threatening him with her life, telling him that his mate would be held captive for his compliance? How could she see him again? Had she made a mistake in abandoning her reports to the kimpadess? Why did she feel so loyal to Leotin? His affection for her only came because of her deception. But he had allowed her to stay with the carnival. For the day, that remained possible. Why did he do that? The wyrin's threat?

"Why did you follow me?" Kanma whispered low, her voice blending into the nighttime sounds of the army camp, but easily heard by the wyrin lying beside her.

Shifhuul looked at her, the features of his furred face hard to read in the black shadows beneath

the wagon.

“Saw the boy. Saw you run. Knew what you are.” Shifhuul’s broken Shen required the listener to fill in the gaps of his meaning. Kanma desired more direct answers.

“Why convince me to come back? Why plead for me to Leotin?” The possible answers made no sense to her.

“Why save us with birds?” Shifhuul smiled, his teeth gleaming white in the dark.

Kanma did not need to think about that to reply. While her people were often trained to use The Sight, not all could accomplish it. She’d used the power to fulfill the desires of many masters, passed from one to the other as property. She’d only used The Sight for her own desires twice. First, to free herself and her future mate from a master’s harsh rule, and second, to save the outlanders from the militiamen.

“You three keep the carnival safe,” she said. “Without you, it would be more dangerous.”

“Useful.” Shifhuul nodded to her. “Like you.”

So, he’d tracked her and defended her because he thought she could be useful to the carnival? Or useful to him and the outlanders? Did it make a difference?

“How did you know about the birds?” Kanma did not understand why the wyrin kept silent about such a thing if he knew all along.

“The wind.” Shifhuul tapped his nose. “Smelled you on the wind. Thought I wrong. Thought not you. See Donjeo. Know you not you. Might be more. Remembered birds and smell on wind.”

Kanma realized that the wyrin’s broken language hid a perceptive and cunning mind. And she realized that he was right. She did fit well with the carnival, even if she never revealed her true face among them.

“Why you help?” Shifhuul asked. “Why free bone thing?”

“Tarak is right,” Kanma said. “The humans made them to be slaves, but they should be free.”

“Humans make problems many.” Shifhuul nodded. “Come. Us be use more.” He pointed to where the clouds above swept forward to conceal the twin moons.

With darkness once more smothering the camp, Kanma and Shifhuul crept from beneath the wagon and made their way from tent to tent, wagon to wagon, eyes sharp for roaming guards, until they reached the edge of the iron cage holding the gadkithal, the bone-giant. As they stealthily moved from place to place, Kanma embraced and held tight to The Sight. It gave a sense of comfort to know she wielded a means of attack should she need. It also provided her with a deeper perception of her surroundings, the shadows more revealing, the breathing of the sleeping soldiers sharp in her ears.

Two guards stood on opposite sides of the wagon-cage. Fortunately, neither were well positioned to see the entrance to the seer’s tent. The tent beside the wagon-cage announced the importance of its occupant through its size. Most of the tents were not big enough to stand in, but this one could accommodate several upright humans. Shifhuul slipped a dagger from the sheath at his waist. Kanma gripped the jug of wine tightly as she pulled back the canvas flap and stepped inside the tent.

She needed only a moment for her eyes to adjust to the absence of light. Fashioned by ancient

Juparti seers to serve as spies and night-blades, her people possessed exceptional vision in the dark. A rug covered the hard ground, a small table with two chairs sat to one side, and a low sleeping cot filled the space at the back of the tent. A man snored on a thin mattress among woolen blankets. The seer who controlled the bone-giant. They could not allow him to waken and either alert the soldiers sleeping nearby to attacking them, or worse, set the gadkithal against them.

She handed Shifhuul the jug of wine and stepped close to the bed, raising a hand above the sleeping man's head. While she had used The Sight to place many humans into a deep sleep, she had never used it on a person already in slumber. It required a different concentration. A more subtle application of The Will. She focused her thoughts and intentions on the mind of the sleeping seer, forcing his body deeper and deeper into sleep, slowing his breathing and the flow of blood, urging his brain to remain dim in dormancy. She willed him into that state and held him there as she pulled him into a sitting position and motioned to Shifhuul.

The wyrin uncorked the jug of wine as she bent and held open the man's mouth. Slowly, they poured wine down his throat, coaxing him to swallow, to drink while he slept. When it seemed he'd drunk half of the jug, they let him sprawl back upon his mattress. Shifhuul sat the wine jug beside the bed.

"Will sleep?" Shifhuul asked.

"He will be hard to wake," Kanma replied.

Shifhuul's plan required that the seer not be able to impede their release of the bone-giant, but also that he remained alive to take the blame for the creature's escape. They hoped that by making it appear he'd succumbed to a drunken stupor that the kenagal would believe the man also left the iron cage unlocked.

She followed Shifhuul as he peeked out of the tent to ensure no one stood nearby. She saw over his shoulder that the clouds still covered the moons. She slid through the tent flap behind him, and they dashed to slide beneath the wagon holding the bone-giant in its cage. The creature still slept, its breathing labored — a soft, constant rumbling that drowned out the sounds of the camp.

"Ready?" Shifhuul asked her.

"Yes," she said, turning her head to look at the feet of the soldiers guarding opposite ends of the cage-wagon.

Shifhuul picked up a stone the size of his paw and tossed it from beneath the wagon. The stone landed with a muffled thump in a patch of matted grass. Kanma watched as the feet of the two soldiers converged on the place where the stone sat.

"Ya hear that?" one of the men asked.

"Animal, maybe?" the other man suggested.

As the soldiers spoke, Kanma reached out with The Sight. A moment later, they fell to the ground, unconscious.

"Sleep good?" Shifhuul asked.

"Not as well as the seer, but they won't wake soon." Kanma crawled out from beneath the wagon, Shifhuul close beside her.

They walked around the cage-wagon to the large door at the rear, constantly vigilant for the

unsuspected appearance of an unforeseen soldier wandering in the night. A large, metal bolt held the rear door of the iron cage closed. A massive lock fixed it in place. Kanma had never seen a lock so big. Fortunately, dealing with locks of all kinds had consumed a good portion of her training.

“Quick, quick.” Shifhuul stood with his back to her, watching the sleeping army camp.

“I need a moment.” Kanma glanced to the cloud bank above, seeing that its eastward path would free the light of the moons very soon. She focused on the inward machinery of the lock, opening herself to it, becoming as one with it, and willing it to move as it needed to in order to open. A moment later, the latch of the lock lifted out of place. She reached up to heft it free from the bolt securing the cage door. To the bolt she applied another willing of The Sight, making certain the metal moved smoothly and silently as she pulled it aside. She did the same with the hinges of the big iron door as she tugged it open.

“Wake it.” Shifhuul glanced over his shoulder at the open door and the bone-giant still asleep in its cage.

Kanma reached out with The Sight, using it to gently shake the bone-giant until its eyes fluttered open. It snorted air and looked at her. In that moment, she nearly lost The Sight. Her breath caught in her chest. A bone-giant presented a deadly danger to whoever faced it, even if that person ended its captivity.

“You are free.” Kanma stood back from the door. “Go.” She gestured to the north of the wagon, both the quickest path through the army camp, and the direction of the lower reaches of the Rantu-Ting Mountains where the creature might safely hide.

The bone-giant moved with a surprising grace and swiftness, given the bulk of its body. The wagon wheels creaked under the shifting of its weight, and a moment later, the creature stood towering above Kanma and Shifhuul.

“Run now,” Shifhuul said to the bone-giant.

“Thank you.” The bone-giant’s words, spoken in a heavily accented Muntiba, reverberated against Kanma’s chest.

The ground shook as the bone-giant stomped down the open lane between tents and men sleeping in the night air. Kanma felt an emotion flood upon her, one unfamiliar to her, but known from the descriptions of others — pride. She’d freed another like herself from bondage, one made by dark seers and forced to become a slave to the whims of a powerful human. Had she, too, been freed in this way by Shifhuul and Leotin? Could she ever truly be free while her mate suffered somewhere for her disobedience?

“Come.” Shifhuul took her hand and pulled her from her thoughts, leading her south, away from the bone-giant.

They ran from shadow to shadow, racing the clouds that would soon unveil the moons to illuminate them in their flight. They dashed down a slender alley between the backs of two rows of tents, leaping agilely over guy-lines. A series of shouts and cries rose up behind them from the direction the bone-giant ran. It must have encountered some guards in its flight. She did not worry for it. Only the seer assigned to it, or one of the other seers asleep on the opposite side of the camp,

could hope to stop it now.

The world brightened and Kanma looked up as the moons climbed from behind the clouds. As they did, another series of cries and shouts farther away broke the night air. A light came with these cries. The light of a fire. They ran into the higher grass of the open field beyond the army camp, crouching low as they fled. She saw flames attacking tents on the western side of the camp. Yeth had been watching their progress through her near-glass and waiting for the moment to create a diversion, to pull the attention of the men away from their escape.

The diversion worked, allowing them to cross the field unnoticed, but it failed as they ran to the edge of the nearby woods. Two soldiers stumbled from the trees, buttoning their shirts and buckling their sword belts, looking confused and embarrassed as they nearly ran into Shifhuul and Kanma.

“You. Stop!” the first of the two men shouted as he tried to pull the sword from the belt falling from his waist.

“Help!” the second man shouted, already pulling his sword free.

Shifhuul drew his blade, but Kanma acted first. Still in the embrace of The Sight, she swept her right hand through the air before the men, willing them to sleep. The men’s eyes rolled up in their heads. The first man fell to the ground, but the second swept out unexpectedly with his sword, slicing a gash across Kanma’s right thigh. She clutched at her leg as the man fell to the ground and anger exploded with the pain. She raised her free hand toward the man, intending to snap his neck with The Sight, but Shifhuul grabbed her arm.

“No kill.” Shifhuul shook his head in the moonlight and pushed her into the trees. He quickly tugged the cloth belts at the two men’s waists and yanked their pants down.

Kanma watched him, understanding what he did. If two dead soldiers turned up, their ruse of the bone-giant escaping on its own would never work. But two soldiers asleep near the woods with their pants half off told a different story. But what would they make of the blood if they saw it? She could try to use The Sight to heal herself and remove the blood from the grass, but they had no time. At the least, she needed to staunch the flow of blood coming from her wounded leg. It would not take an experienced eye to track their path into the woods leaving a blood trail.

Shifhuul pulled her shirt from Kanma’s trousers and used the tip of his sword to slice a swath of cloth free. He tied this tight around her leg above the bleeding gash.

“Good?” he asked.

“It will do. We must go.” Kanma winced as she placed weight upon the leg and followed Shifhuul into the woods. She held to The Sight. It helped quell the pain. She could not run, but they moved as fast as possible, circling westward around the camp site until they reached a small clearing by a creek. The meeting place.

“Leg?” Shifhuul bent at the knees to catch his breath. He looked all the more animal-like to her as he panted, his mouth wide open, tongue hanging loose.

“Painful. There’s an easy blood trail through the woods.” Kanma leaned against a tree and breathed deeply. Once, at the peak of her training, she’d been able to run for an hour or more and barely feel winded, but her time with the carnival had left her soft. The gash in her leg did not help.

“They come.” Shifhuul cocked an ear toward the trees to the west. A moment later, the yutan and roagg parted two low branches to step into the clearing.

“We must move quickly.” Yeth went to Kanma and examined her leg. “What happened?”

“Soldiers at the edge of the woods,” Kanma said. “They surprised us. One of them managed a hit. I’m not very good at healing with The Sight.”

“The soldiers chase the bone-giant,” Tarak said. “With dogs.”

“Dogs, I hate.” Shifhuul spat to the damp grass.

“Two of the dogs followed your path.” Yeth shook her head as she leaned away from Kanma’s leg. “I can stop the bleeding, but to heal this cut will take too much time.”

“It will not be long before they assemble a party to follow that trail.” Tarak sighed as he looked to Kanma and Shifhuul. “It was a good plan. You did well. It is free.”

“Even if you stop the bleeding, I can’t run,” Kanma said.

“Yeth heal. Tarak carry. We run.” Shifhuul spoke as though giving commands to children, the look on his face seeming to question why they were not already running.

It took a few minutes for Yeth to stop the bleeding of the long laceration curving across Kanma’s thigh. She watched the yutan woman’s work with interest. Kanma’s training had focused more on killing others than healing herself, and much of what she’d learned of The Sight had been self-taught. When the blood stopped flowing, Tarak took her into his massive, furred arms. The scent of his pelt surprised her. It smelled like spiced oils. They headed south and then east, hoping to find a road that allowed them to follow the carnival’s captive progress with the army as it marched toward war with the Shen. They also hoped they could outpace any pursuers. As Kanma rode in the roagg’s arms like a child, fleeing from Atheton soldiers surely hunting them, she wondered how her choices led her to that moment and if she regretted any of them. As the sun came up, they paused at the edge of a farmer’s small plot of autumn wheat, a golden light setting her and her companions aglow. She decided that she regretted nothing, for the choices of the past few days had been the first real choices she had ever made for her life. She liked choosing her own path, and she would not let someone else choose a path for her again.

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

THE SEER



ABANANTHUS

SEASHELLS AND sand-palaces shimmered in the salt mist of the ocean shore, glowing under the hazy mid-morning sun. Abananthus sat in the sand along the beach, not far from the small house he shared with the family. Luntadus and Lantili played nearby, forming palaces in the damp sand with their small hands and decorating them with seashells they'd collected earlier. He'd agreed to mind the children for a time while Jadaloo ran an errand to the center of the pilgrim town. Their parents had left for the day an hour earlier, Kellatra off to help work at the bakery while Rankarus assisted in the building of another vessel.

Abananthus breathed in the damp morning air, enjoying the prolonged moment of relaxation and the company of the children. He'd seen little of them the past week, with most of his time consumed by searching for the raktbor philosopher, Sketkee. Fruitlessly searching. After thoroughly checking the docks, they'd started at the embassy and divided the neighboring streets into a search grid of Kadmallin's devising. Both Kellatra and Kadmallin had to conduct the search while disguised. They could not risk the raktbor ambassador, Viktik, spotting either of them and realizing he'd fallen for a deception. They'd spent the days checking inns and asking veiled questions of patrons and people in the streets, all with no results. They'd found raktbors, certainly, but not the two they sought. With the raktbor embassy overrun and abandoned, the staff sought refuge in a few inns that accepted their kind and in several official city buildings. Rankarus's distraction mob had grown into a general distrust and hatred of the raktbors throughout the city. It made finding Sketkee all the more difficult, assuming she still lived. Or that she had not been trundled off back to the Sun Realm as a captive of the ambassador.

"Come help, Uncle Aba."

Abananthus looked to Luntadus as the boy patted wet sand into the shape of a narrow tower, happy for the distraction from his thoughts.

"My hands are too big for such delicate work." Abananthus smiled, comfortable where he sat and uninterested in bending his bulky frame toward the palace of sand the children created. He'd missed his time with them. They were a very significant portion of his reason for following the family on their journey. He and his late wife had talked of children but had found no luck in having them before her passing.

"Uncle Aba doesn't want to get covered in sand." Lantili hardly had any sand on her. Somehow, she always managed to remain cleaner than her brother.

"Just so," Abananthus said. "The older one gets, the more one appreciates watching sand-palaces being made rather than making them oneself."

"You're no fun." Luntadus pouted as he patted sand into place.

"So, I have been told by you repeatedly," Abananthus said.

"We still love you, though." Lantili grinned at him. "Don't we?" She shoved her brother when

he did not immediately respond.

“Yes.” Luntadus continued his pout.

“That’s a very tall tower you’re building.” Abananthus wondered when the sand structure would collapse, surprised it hadn’t already.

“It’s from a dream I have.” Luntadus shared the source of inspiration for the tower as though mentioning something he’d seen every day.

“How often do you have this dream?” Abananthus knew children had the Goddess dream of the Forbidden Realm — he had the dreams himself — but he’d never seen a tower like this in his dream. Of course, he did his best to forget the nightly intrusions upon waking. He had enough forces pushing and pulling his life in various directions, and he had no desire to add a goddess to the list of influences.

“Every night.” Luntadus cautiously added even more sand to the top of his tower. “It’s a black tower in a field of snow. And there are people there, but they’re all frozen. And a white dog. I like the dog.”

“Do you have this dream, Lantili?” Abananthus asked.

“No. I have the other dreams.” Lantili frowned as she added a seashell to her domed castle of sand. “Do you think the blue ones look better or the pink ones?”

“You could use both and alternate them,” Abananthus offered.

“Yes.” Lantili’s face brightened at the suggestion. “You’re very good at this, Uncle Aba.”

“I made a great many sand-palaces in my youth.” Abananthus decided to speak to Kellatra and Rankarus about Luntadus’s dream. Maybe his mother would know what to make of it. They’d been fortunate that his strange ability had not manifested again. It seemed to be brought on by fear, and they all made their best efforts to keep the children from feeling afraid.

“Grumpy is coming.” Lantili looked past Abananthus’s shoulder down the beach.

He turned to see Kadmallin approaching. “He’s concerned for his friend.”

“He’s still grumpy,” Lantili said.

Abananthus could not blame the man. He, too, worried at Sketkee’s fate. He’d felt certain they would have found her by now. Each day they did not only heightened the probability they never would.

“Are you coming or are you making sand-palaces today?” Kadmallin did not sound amused at the notion.

“He’s too old to make sand-palaces.” Luntadus’s pout returned.

“I’m watching the children while Jadaloo runs an errand.” Abananthus stood and brushed sand from the seat of his pants. He doubted Kadmallin would sit, and it seemed ridiculous to stare up at the man while talking. “Then I need to show some effort helping with setting in stores for the pilgrims. Kellatra and Rankarus are working now.”

“There are still three neighborhoods to search.” The look on Kadmallin’s face made Abananthus thankful for the extra hand in height he held on the man. He could be as intimidating as his raktbor companion.

“There has been a great deal of grumbling among the pilgrims that we have been shirking our

assigned labors,” Abananthus said. “And more grumbling that we should be put out of our house because of it.”

“I see.” Kadmallin sighed and looked out at the ocean waves.

“We will all resume the search in the evening.” Abananthus saw the sadness and pain in Kadmallin’s eyes. He worried at Sketkee’s absence the way one did for a spouse, not an employer. Something about the ocean and the children and Kadmallin brought to mind an aphorism he’d long hoped to forget.

Whether swift or slow, late or early, death takes us all.

It reminded him of a moment he avoided in memory, but never wished to forget.

TWENTY-THREE YEARS AGO

“COME WITH ME.”

“I have too much work to attend.”

Hazel eyes squinted at Abananthus and he looked to his wife, Afaroti. Her raven-black hair shifted in the breeze, blowing across her strong, almond-tinted cheekbones. He knew she spoke the truth, but he also knew the work needed to be done.

“You hired men to pack the wagon, so you do not need to,” Afaroti said.

“I must make sure it is packed correctly.” Abananthus believed each load had only one way to be laid into a wagon — the proper way.

“You can check their work when we return.” Afaroti placed her slender hands on his arm. “We never come this far south. When will we have the chance again to walk along a beach and feel sand beneath our feet?”

“You are right.” Abananthus sighed. He did miss their walks together. They’d had too little time for walking alone on the caravan journey south. Then again, she had insisted on coming with him, rather than minding their shop in Vendau, so he could not really complain. “You go ahead. I will finish a few things and set the men to loading with clear instructions. I will meet you shortly.”

“You are impossible.” Afaroti sighed, her long, black hair swaying as she shook her head at him.

“Impossible not to love, you mean.” Abananthus grinned and pulled her close, kissing her.

“You are impossible in many ways.” Afaroti laughed as she walked away. “Not long. I’ll be waiting.”

“Not long,” Abananthus promised.

He watched her go until she turned a corner out of sight, heading toward the beach of the small Juparti coastal town of Katan Tandar. He turned his attentions to managing the men as they loaded the six wagons of his caravan. The men laughed when he encouraged them to hurry, teasing him about how hard it would be to get the sand from the crack of his ass after his wife had her way with him on the beach. His wife, only five years younger than his thirty years, made a bold impression on the men of his caravan. Few merchants brought their wives, and few merchant wives were so lovely, and even fewer still showed so little concern for the opinions of the men in the

caravan in how often and how loudly she enjoyed the pleasure of her husband's company. And they enjoyed the pleasure of each other's company as often as possible. Afaroti wished for children, and he wished to give her children, but in the two years of their marriage, they had yet to succeed in that endeavor. He wondered if her field might be barren or if his seed were too weak. Regardless, he enjoyed the effort and her company above all else. He did not care if they had no children as long as they had plenty of time together.

"Nathus. Come quick."

Abananthus turned to see one of his men, face stricken, gesturing wildly to follow him. He'd sent the man out looking for more spices to sell over an hour ago.

"What is it?" Abananthus began to run.

"Afaroti. Down by the beach." The man ran faster and Abananthus outpaced him.

He raced along the street leading to the ocean. As his feet touched the hard-packed beach, he saw her, dress soaked, black hair splayed above white sand, lying at the seashore, waves rolling in nearby. Several people knelt around her, holding her hands and head.

"Afaroti." Abananthus knelt beside her, brushing wet hair from her face and wiping the pale vomit from her mouth. Her eyes did not open as he shook her. "What's happened?" He looked up to the concerned faces surrounding him.

"Red Catcher jellyfish," one of the women said.

"We cut it free and cast it off," one of the men said. "They's rare here. Hardly even see 'em."

"What can be done?" Abananthus stroked Afaroti's cheek.

"Nothin'," the woman said, face sad. "Once stung, all is done."

It sounded like an aphorism he would have added to his mental collection, but he did not doubt it. Afaroti's breast did not rise with breath. He felt no beat of her heart where he placed his hand on her throat. She did not respond to his calls of her name or his tears falling on her face. His wife lived no more.

He did not blame himself in that moment for her death, the sorrow overpowering him, but in the days and years that followed, he could not help but believe that if he had walked with her along that beach that she might have lived, that he might have spotted the deadly sea creature, or that it might have killed him instead. And always, when he thought of her passing, he remembered the first aphorism she had taught him, one passed down from her mother.

Whether swift or slow, late or early, death takes us all.

THE PRESENT

SAND CRUMBLED beneath its own weight, falling to a pile of damp, salty earth.

"I told you that was too high." Lantili laughed at her brother.

"It's taller in the dream." Luntadus sighed and began building his tower again, this time with a wider base.

"Wait for me," Abananthus said to Kadmallin. "Jadalo will be back soon. We will go together."

“And the pilgrims? What will you tell them?” Kadmallin narrowed his eyes at Abananthus.

“I will tell them we must find your friend,” Abananthus said. “Kellatra and Rankarus work. The worst that can happen is the pilgrims make me sleep on the beach.”

“Plenty of room on the beach near me.” Kadmallin frowned at the implication of Sketkee’s absence from their camp. “Thank you.”

“We will find her.” Abananthus did not know what else to say and found his thoughts too afflicted by the memories of his wife. He remembered the feeling of sudden bereavement. He could not watch someone who suffered from the fear of such a possible loss without helping.

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

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

THE CARNIVAL



YETH

STEEL MET steel, wood met bone, and the cries and calls of combat echoed among the trunks and branches of the forest trees. The Atheton soldier Yeth struck in the head with the butt of her spear crumpled to the ground. Another soldier rushed her, his sword arcing through the air. She waved her spear to the side and, propelled by The Sight, the man fell sideways into a tree. Yeth spun, her enhanced state of mind allowing her to comprehend the events around her at a glance.

Two soldiers wrestled with Shifhuul, trying to subdue him. Kanma cast two arm-sized branches through the air with The Sight, smacking the men in the head and knocking them to the ground. Shifhuul scrambled to his feet, while nearby, Tarak fought two soldiers with his twin axes, trying to disarm them without killing them. They agreed that for the sake of everyone in the carnival trapped under the care of the Atherton army, it would be best if the outlanders did not kill any more members of the army they encountered. Tarak knocked one soldier's blade to the side and struck the man in the head with the handle of his axe. Yeth used The Sight to send the second man tumbling backward to crack his skull on a tree trunk.

"Quickly. We must move. There may be more behind them." Yeth pointed in the direction they'd walked through the woods before the soldiers came upon them. She ran in the opposite direction. Shifhuul grabbed his fallen sword and raced behind her. Tarak scooped Kanma into his arms and followed them. The changeling, now looking like a human girl, could walk, but Yeth had not had time during their one short respite to do more than a cursory healing of her thigh. The cut severed the muscle deep, and while Yeth had woven the skin back together, remaking the flesh beneath would take more time than they possessed.

They had fled all through the night and through the next day, stopping only for a few hours after sunset. Now at midday, a day and a half since freeing the bone-giant, they still ran. She'd led them down several streams and tried backtracking twice in hopes of losing the humans who followed, but their dogs and their tracking skills proved too expert to the task. She suspected a tracker aided by The Sight pursued them. With exhaustion and the lack of food slowing her and her companions, she knew their best hope now revolved around the humans tiring of the chase. She did not consider this likely. As she broke through the dense bushes at the edge of the woods surrounding a field of cut wheat, she realized it to be hopeless.

A circle of at least forty Atheton soldiers spread across the stubbled field in a wide arc. They must have outpaced them via the Old Border Road and then swept south to noose them in. In the center sat two men on horses. She'd seen the one. A commander. A *saptan*, the Athetons called them. He'd been with the leader of the army when it encountered the carnival. She'd later spied him speaking with Palla. Yeth came to a stop, her breath ragged, her lungs stinging. Tarak and Shifhuul halted beside her.

"Bad, bad. All bad." Shifhuul wiped snot from his snout.

“There are too many.” Tarak snorted and coughed.

“We have the advantage of two with The Sight.” Kanma leaned on Tarak as he put her down.

“No, we do not.” Yeth noted the look on the second horseman. She understood it well. The look of seeing all that could be seen, hearing all that could be heard, knowing how to bend it to one’s will. She released her own hold on The Sight. “The man on the horse is a seer. A battle-trained seer. We will be slaughtered if we do more than comply. Release The Sight before he notices us.”

“Very all bad,” Shifhuul growled.

“Cast down your weapons,” the saptan called to them as he rode forward. “If you surrender, you will not be killed. If you resist, you will die. Do not test the paltry patience that remains in my bones.”

Yeth threw down her spear and shrugged off her quiver and bow. Tarak and Shifhuul similarly disarmed, casting aside bows, sword, axes, and daggers. Even Kanma dropped the one slender blade she carried, a loan from Shifhuul.

They stood silent, waiting for the saptan and his seer to approach as the soldiers moved to surround them. The saptan brought his horse to a halt five paces away as several soldiers approached with ropes and began to bind the wrists of the outlanders.

“I am Saptan Tiago,” the soldier said in Easad. Yeth understood it well enough, though she did not speak it well. “I take you captive in the name of the army of the Fourth Great Dominion.” The saptan dismounted and approached as the soldiers continued to wrap ropes around them. They applied a significant amount of binding to Tarak’s wrists. The saptan stood before them a moment, examining them each in turn before speaking again. He looked at Kanma when he spoke. “Tell me, why did you free the creature?”

Kanma did not respond, but Tarak did, speaking in Shen.

“Whatever war its ancestors were created for, it is not a monster, and it should be free to choose its life.” Tarak raised himself up to his full height as he spoke. The soldiers binding him shied back at the sound of his voice.

“I see. Idealists.” Saptan Tiago frowned. When he spoke again, he did so in Shen. “Do you all speak Shen?”

“We were with the carnival for some time,” Yeth said in Shen. “It is the language we all share.”

“Yes. You were with the carnival.” Saptan Tiago addressed Yeth. “Why did you leave when we approached?”

“We saw how you caged those not human,” Yeth said. “We thought it best to leave.”

“But not before releasing a monster, and that is what that walking mass of plated bone is, upon the people of Daeshen?” The saptan looked angry, confused, and slightly amused.

“We have explained our actions.” Kanma’s voice sounded defiant. Yeth did not consider it the best tone to use, but she agreed with the sentiment. They could say nothing to exculpate themselves at this point.

“And you will be held to account for your actions. All of you.” The saptan offered a long glare

to Kanma, who returned it in kind.

“The girl cannot walk,” Yeth said. “She injured her leg. May the roagg carry her?” She noted that the saptan had not asked for their names, did not likely view them as persons. Maybe he saw Kanma that way, but only because he thought her to actually be a teenage girl.

“Yes.” The saptan gestured toward the men with the ropes. “Tie her into the roagg’s arms.” As they waited, the man Yeth took to be a battle seer slid from his saddle and approached the saptan. He whispered something in the commander’s ear while looking between Yeth and Kanma and then returned to his horse.

“I am told that you and the girl may be seers.” The saptan stared at Yeth as he spoke.

“This is true.” Yeth avoided falsehood, as it might return later as a greater problem. “I was trained among my people as a scout first and a seer second.”

“And you?” the saptan said to Kanma.

“My mother is a village seer,” Kanma replied. “A healer. The local priest didn’t mind her as long as she only healed people. She taught me some before she died.”

Kanma’s lie made Yeth wonder at the extent of the changeling’s training in The Sight. It also made her wonder for the first time just how old she might truly be.

“I will say this once and once only.” The saptan addressed them all. “We will lead you back to the main army where the kenagal will cast his judgment upon you. If you speak, you will be beaten. If you try to escape, you will be killed. If either of you try to use The Sight, you will be beaten unconscious and kept that way until we reach the army. Is that clear?”

Yeth remained silent and nodded her head in affirmation. The others did as well. No need to risk a beating.

“Good.” The saptan said no more and remounted his horse, squeezed his legs, and pulled the reins, leading the troop across the field to the north.

The march back to the Old Border Road took the rest of the day. As the outlanders had been trying to keep pace close to the army and the carnival, but had been moving more swiftly, they actually needed to wait for the column of marching soldiers to catch up to them. Exhausted from evading their trackers, hungry, and parched for lack of water, Yeth and the others were shoved into the bone-giant’s former cage near sunset. They sat together watching the camp being assembled around them — tents erected, latrines dug, cook fires and watch fires lit. A ring of ten soldiers stood guard around the cage.

“What do you think they will do with us?” Kanma whispered.

“If smart, kill us.” Shifhuul looked unusually complacent at the suggestion of their demise as he leaned against the bars of the iron cage. She suspected that dying once left him unimpressed by its continued mortal threat.

“Leotin may be able to negotiate for us.” Tarak’s voice sounded no more convincing than the look on his face.

“We will have to wait and see.” Yeth thought about her son and her estranged mate. Once more, she considered that she might never see them again. Might never hold her son. Never apologize to them both. Each time she faced death, this thought came to her, but each time she

escaped death, she knew she could do nothing to change the facts of her departure from her homeland. Only one way existed for her to make restitution for her actions and find reconciliation with her family — she needed to survive her mission in the Iron Realm and eventually, return home.

Well after sunset, with four fires burning bright nearby, the kenagal approached with the saptan and several soldiers. Behind them walked the seer and two more men Yeth assumed to be seers. Behind these followed Leotin and Palla. Yeth and her companions in the cage stood to their feet as the humans assembled around it. Built to house a bone-giant, Tarak did not even need to stoop in the cage.

“These are your outlanders?” The kenagal spoke to Leotin.

“They are, kenagal.” Leotin cast his eyes downward. “I must apologize on the behalf of myself and my carnival. Had I possessed any inkling of what they might do, I would never have allowed them to leave. They have all been exemplary members of the carnival until this moment.”

Yeth admired Leotin. He worked to separate the carnival from any punishment for their actions, while at the same time attempting to speak for them.

“I do not hold you responsible, Leotin.” The kenagal glared at Yeth and the others in the cage. He spoke Easad, and Yeth listened closely to understand him. “You have cost me time, work, coin, and caused me great embarrassment with my kimpadess.” He turned to the saptan. “Kill them. However you wish, but kill them.”

“Kenagal, might I...” Leotin began to say as the kenagal rounded on him in a fury.

“Do you wish to join them?” the kenagal asked, his voice hoarse, his eyes bulging.

“No, kenagal.” Leotin backed away. Beside him, Palla wiped tears from her eyes.

Yeth saw in her mind’s eye the sight of her mate and son, a mirrored look of disappointment on their faces. She had failed them. Again. They would never know she died thinking of them. Never grasp the burden of her regret. A remorse she did not understand how to conjoin with the knowledge that she had done right in killing the criminal Fell, even if it resulted in her near banishment on this mission to follow the pilgrims in the Iron Realm. What she’d done could not be accepted by the yutans. A notion crossed her mind. Her ways might be accepted by the humans. If she could convince them.

“Kenagal.” Yeth spoke as loudly as her parched throat allowed. “We can repay you.”

The kenagal stopped and turned back to them, staring at Yeth.

“They speak?” the kenagal asked the saptan.

“Only Shen, apparently,” the saptan replied.

“We have taken a valuable asset from you.” Unsure how to convince the kenagal of the idea still forming in her head, she blundered ahead, hoping her words made sense. “We can replace that asset. I am a scout in my land. And a seer. Tarak, the roagg, is deadly with his axes and his bow. The wyrin, Shifhuul, is stealthy and a master of woodcraft. He and the girl, Kanma, released the bone-giant alone. They sneaked into your camp and opened the cage with no one knowing. She, too, possesses The Sight, but in a limited way. We can fight for you. We can be your replacements for the bone-giant. We can be your scouts.”

The kenagal looked at Yeth for a long time. She held her breath as he studied her and the other outlanders. When he spoke, he did so to the saptan.

“They’ll fight as vanguard scouts,” the kenagal said. “If they try to escape, kill them. If they do escape, or they don’t come back, kill someone from the carnival for every day they’re gone. And they stay in the cage.”

“Yes, kenagal.” The saptan gave a fisted salute as the kenagal stomped off, followed by the seers and the soldiers. The saptan turned to Leotin and Palla. “You can speak with them. I’d encourage them to follow orders and not to run if I were you.” The saptan smiled and walked away.

“Thank you,” Tarak said to Yeth as Leotin and Palla approached the cage.

“Good bad plan.” Shifhuul grinned.

“Better than dying,” Kanma said. Yeth wondered if the changeling would remain in the form of the girl upon death or if she reverted to her true body.

“A narrow negotiation and a foolish act.” Leotin sighed, his eyes sad. “You should have stayed with us. I could have protected you. And you might have freed that creature on some later day.”

“It is done now,” Yeth said. “We have a chance.”

“Why did you risk it?” Palla stepped closer, wringing her hands.

“It was not a slave,” Tarak said. “My people knew that life before the urris saved them.”

“Mine still know that life,” Kanma added quietly.

“Only humans cage,” Shifhuul said.

“It needed to be done, and we were the only ones who could do it.” Yeth knew Palla saw this truth. A justice that needed doing, needed doing regardless of the costs.

“I understand.” Palla nodded her head. “I’ll see if I can talk the saptan into at least letting you out of that cage.”

“No, no.” Shifhuul waved his paw. “Cage good. Ride no walk.” He sat and leaned once more against the iron bars.

“He is right,” Yeth said. “We could use the rest. Some water would be good. We’ve had little. And food. It has been days since we’ve eaten.”

“I’ll see to it,” Palla said.

“Be careful.” Leotin’s voice lowered as he looked into each of their eyes. “I know you did not intend it, but your servitude is now bound to the lives of everyone in the carnival. Do not fail the kenagal.”

“We will not.” Yeth’s words marked the end of the exchange. She sat and watched as Leotin and Palla walked back to the carnival portion of the camp. She’d saved her life and the lives her friends, but in doing so, she had placed her other friends in danger. A narrow beam to balance upon when all lives were threatened by the coming war she now needed to help fight. A balance she needed to maintain to stay alive and see her son again.

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

THE WITNESS



REESHKA

WATER-HAWKS CIRCLED high above, swooping down in steep arcs to skim the surface of the river, snatching fish in their claws and soaring in wide curves to land among the branches of the trees along the shore. Reeshka and the boy sat on the forward deck of the riverboat, watching the strange birds hunt fish in the shadows near the riverbank. While the birds flew high in the mid-day sun, they only plucked fish from the shadowed waters. She assumed the water near the middle of the river to be too warm, the fish staying too far below the surface. Such birds did not exist in Rarag Shak, her homeland, what the sheetoo called the Stone Realm. Many things present in the sheetoo realm were new to her. The sheetoo in particular.

She looked at the small boy beside her. Sheetoo cubs were small and frail, but this one seemed smaller and more fragile than usual. It did not speak, which she did not mind, but it ate well enough. The boy appeared very grateful. She still found it hard to read human faces. So flat and furless. She wondered if the boy might be mute. She'd known a roagg once as a child who did not speak through a defect of his birth. He'd died. Fallen from a cliff among the mountains. At least his father had said as much. She had not known whether to believe him. Some roaggs could not tolerate any defects in their cubs for fear it reflected poorly on them. A male roagg unable to sing the [hunting songs](#) was considered a great shame and burden by many fathers. And some mothers.

She turned away from the boy. Had his family cast him out? Or did another reason impel him into silence? She had known days when she did not wish to speak. Maybe the boy restrained himself for similar reasons. He did not appear dimwitted. But then again, he was sheetoo, which made her wonder at her actions. Why had she intervened with the riverboat captain and paid for the boy's passage? She did not know him. Had no reason to protect him. Yet, she found herself doing so without even considering it. Could it simply be that she had never had cubs herself and felt protective of the sheetoo boy after all she'd been through? Maybe.

Thinking of her journey and looking at the gentle waves along the river made her stomach clench. She'd spent too much time on water. She'd caught a trading vessel on the western coast of Rarag Shak, intending to sail around the northern reaches of the sheetoo realm and then along its western coast to the city of Tanjii. She'd heard that the pilgrims all headed there and assumed that if her mate held true to his purpose, he would eventually end up there as well. How hard could it be to find a roagg in a city of sheetoo? Harder to reach that city, it seemed. Her ship had taken on water and floundered over the northern coast of the land called Atheton. After nearly drowning as the ship sank, and swimming to shore, she swore off sailing. From studying a map of the sheetoo realm painted on the wall of an inn, she instead traveled by hired wagon to the head of what the sheetoo called the Goha River and made her way south. She had not yet decided whether to leave the river where it crossed a path called the Old Border Road, or if she should continue along the river until she reached the southern sea and once again try to sail west to Tanjii. The thought of

being on a ship in the open sea far from shore made her stomach tense once more.

“Tarak, you fool. Tarak, my love. Tarak, where are you?”

She spoke the words aloud in her own tongue as she often did, using them like a prayer to calm her mind and settle her resolve. A roagg alone in the land of sheetoo. This notion also made her stomach twitch. She repeated her prayer-like phrase once more. As she did so, she saw the boy looking up at her, his eyes wide in surprise.

“I speak in my own tongue,” Reeshka said in the human language called Easad. She spent her time on the ship learning the Shen language in preparation of landing in Tanjii but had needed to learn a whole new language in the Atheton land.

The boy frowned and shook his head. He pointed at her mouth. She did not understand but spoke in her own language, thinking it amused him.

“You like the sound of my roagg words?” Reeshka said in roagg.

The boy nodded. Reeshka’s eyes narrowed in bewilderment.

“You can understand me?” Reeshka asked.

The boy nodded again.

“How is that possible?” Reeshka glanced around, but the two sat alone on the forward deck.

The boy shrugged.

“How does a sheetoo boy know roagg words?” Reeshka could not fathom how the boy understand the roagg language. She’d not met a single human her journey so far who did.

The boy merely shrugged again. Then he gestured toward her. And then pointed west. He repeated this action again but pointed to her and then raised his hand high above his head. And then he pointed to his hips and next motioned as though chopping with an axe.

Reeshka sucked in a quick breath, her eyes blinking. This could not be. It could not be possible. She must dream. Only a dream explained such a thing. A boy who did not speak but who understood her and had seen...

“You have seen a roagg before?” Reeshka dared not ask but knew she would.

The boy nodded enthusiastically.

“Did this roagg have a name?” she asked.

The boy nodded.

“Was that name Tarak?” She did not take her eyes from the boy, watching every aspect of his being.

The boy smiled and nodded again.

A dizziness came across Reeshka’s mind and she nearly fainted. She placed a large paw on the deck to steady herself where she sat. A dream. Only a dream...

“Where did you see him?” Reeshka leaned closer to the boy.

He pointed to the west again and south. He made the gestures of sheetoo riding horses or wagons. She could not tell which, but she understood what he meant.

“The Old Border Road,” Reeshka said. That made sense. It ran direct to Tanjii. “He heads to the city. To Tanjii.”

The boy shook his head and pointed east.

East. That made no sense.

“Does he travel with pilgrims?” Reeshka tried to understand why he headed farther from Tanjii. Then she thought of the news she’d heard along the river, of troops in long riverboats days ahead of her. And their destination. And the war in the Shen lands.

“He flees the Shen war?”

Another nod.

“And does he hope to reach this river and follow it south to the sea?”

The boy frowned. Uncertain. Well, one could expect a boy who did not speak to know only so much. Another, more important question occurred to her.

“How long since you saw Tarak?” Reeshka asked.

The boy thought for a second and then displayed all the digits of both hands. Ten.

“Ten weeks?” Reeshka tried to calculate based on her limited knowledge of the sheetoo realm where that placed her mate.

The boy shook his head and flashed his ten fingers again.

“Ten months?” Reeshka worried that any information the boy might possess to be wholly useless and dated.

The boy shook his head and again and waved his ten fingers.

“Ten days?” Reeshka did not see how that could be possible. “How long were you in that river town?”

The boy flashed his ten fingers again.

Maybe the boy lied. Or was confused. What he mimed did not make sense.

“But you said you saw him on the Old Border Road.” Reeshka leaned toward the boy, feeling annoyance cloud her tone.

The boy did not lean back as he nodded.

“How could you get from the Old Border Road to that river town in only a day?” Reeshka suspected the boy played with her. Teasing the roagg. But why would he do that? He relied on her for food. She had saved him and paid for his passage. He appeared sincere, but who could tell with the sheetoo, even sheetoo children.

The boy shrugged in response to her question and shook his head. He did not know. He seemed old enough to realize such a lie was easily discerned. But he also understood the roagg tongue. How could that be? Did he learn it from Tarak?

“How many days were you with Tarak?” she asked.

The boy raised two fingers.

This all made no sense. None at all. Did she believe a sheetoo boy who did not speak but understood roagg? Had he really seen Tarak?

“Tarak is my mate, and I need to find him.” Reeshka stared closely at the boy. He seemed surprised by her revelation. “Do you lie to me?”

The boy shook his head. How could it be? How should she believe him? If the boy spoke the truth, she would find Tarak along the Old Border Road. Ultimately. It should not take long to determine which direction he traveled. A roagg stood out along the road. The sheetoo he passed

would remember him.

“Leave the boy be, ya hairy beast.”

Reeshka turned to see four men from the crew standing on the deck nearby. The men had watched her closely the entire voyage down river. They’d been very unhappy with the captain’s decision to allow her on board, but the captain liked coin, and he charged her twice the usual rate. Because of her size, he’d said. She’d wondered if the crewmen would find their courage and finally confront her. The presence of the boy seemed to have helped them in their search.

As she looked at the men, silhouetted by the sun, it reminded her of another confrontation by four people not so long ago.

THIRTY-NINE DAYS AGO

“YOU SHOULD GO.”

“You are not welcome here now.”

A warm summer breeze blew across the mountain plateau, carrying both the scent of honeysuckle and a small clutch of butterflies. Reeshka stood on the plateau, looking toward the west, toward the sheetoo realm, toward her mate, Tarak. She turned to face four female roaggs, the mother and sisters of Karrat, her former mate, now dead after the battle of honor with Tarak.

“You have no people here now.” Griska, the mother of Karrat, growled her words. “You must find another clan.”

Griska spoke true. Reeshka’s mother had died the previous year. And her brother lay dead after a fall from the mountain side. She had no other near blood alive in the clan. But still...

“This is Tarak’s clan.” Reeshka looked down. To be cast out of a clan spoke to a great shame. What clan would take her in now?

“It is only his clan if he returns,” Griska said.

Tarak had been gone since spring, but Reeshka knew that Griska only confronted her now because her mourning period had ended. To have challenged her before then would have been looked upon poorly. An act of grief. Now it seemed an act of imprudence to allow Reeshka to remain.

Several thoughts clashed in Reeshka’s mind, each seeking expression. She selected the one she knew she should not to speak aloud.

“Your son is dead because he would not listen.” Reeshka’s voice filled with a strange mixture of fury and anguish. “He did not listen when I said I no longer wished to be his mate. He did not listen that Tarak did not wish to fight. He did not listen when Tarak tried to save him. He never listened. He only heard his own voice. But I hear you. I did not wish Karrat to die, and I do not wish to deepen your sorrow. And I will be gone with the next sunrise.”

Reeshka said no more, turning back to look out over the mountain valley toward the west. After a minute of silence, the other roagg females departed. She continued to stare westward. Toward her mate. Toward her love. She had contemplated many times her desire to follow him. She saw now that Griska and her daughters gave her a great gift by pushing her out of the clan.

Now she had no choice to make. She had to leave her homeland and find Tarak.

THE PRESENT

“ARE YA deaf, beast? Did ya hear me?”

Reeshka blinked in the sunlight as she looked at the four men.

“The boy comes with us and yer self should get off next stop.” The smallest of the men spoke. Odd that the smallest sheetoo held the other’s courage.

“Wish you to go with the sheetoo or stay with me?” Reeshka addressed her question to the boy. He did not hesitate in pointing to her. Reeshka turned back to the four men. “The boy stays with me. Go now.”

“We ain’t here ta argue.” The small man stepped forward. “We’re tellin’ ya how it is.”

Reeshka sighed and slowly stood to her full height, more than a head and a half above the tallest of the sheetoo males. She shook her head at them. “The boy is with me. Go now or find yourself in the river.”

She hoped the males did not try to attack her. They all bore long knives used for work on the boat. She carried an axe and a knife blade but had not yet drawn them facing sheetoos. She’d been challenged by sheetoo males on several occasions in her journey, and she’d taken great care not to kill any of them. The sheetoos she traveled with would easily turn on her if she showed herself to be a danger. Best to toss them in the river and let the captain deal with them.

“Now look here, beast...” The smaller male began to speak but sputtered to a stop, extending his arm and pointing toward the river behind her. The other men looked frightened and backed away. The small male followed them as they retreated.

“Demon creatures, the roaggs,” the small man shouted as he stumbled along the deck. “Said they’d curse us, I did.”

Reeshka hoped the man offered a ruse to cover a sudden lack of resolve in confronting her, but she’d learn to read one expression on sheetoo faces well — fear. She turned to see the boy on his feet staring out at the river. A water-hawk hovered above the river’s surface, a fish grasped in its claws, both motionless, the spray of the catch suspended in the air alongside them. The water around them turned night-black, the air growing dim, a cloud of viscous ink encircling them. As the river passed the strange event, the blackness dissipated until nothing remained but empty air above rushing water.

“Have you seen something like that before?” Reeshka looked down to the boy.

He looked back up and shook his head.

Looking out over the water, Reeshka realized that the sheetoo might be the least dangerous part of traveling in the Iron Realm. She did not know what she’d seen, but the tightness in her gut told her it bore an evil origin. She hoped the boy’s tale proved true. The day she reunited with Tarak could not come soon enough.

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

THE THRONE



KAO-RHEE

SILKEN SLIPPERS crushed woolen carpet, treading a path over and over. Kao-Rhee paced the length of his study, the windows open to allow a cool autumn breeze to balance the bright midday sunlight. He held his hands behind his back, his head down, the regular movement of his feet helping focus his thoughts. Too many things converged at once and he could do little more than await the revelation of their individual and collective arrivals.

In a chamber two levels below and three halls to the east, the regent zhan lay in early childbirth. Or if his suspicions about the origin and timing of Dju-Tesha's courtship with Tigan Rhog-Kan were correct, the birthing came exactly as one would expect. He'd likely know by the size of the child, assuming he saw it, which depended on its sex. And the arrival of the Atheton army marching on the city, and the orders its commander held in regards to a possible new heir to the throne.

His runners informed him that the Atheton soldiers would reach the edge of the city at any moment. He avoided going to the window to confirm this via near-glass, for fear of seeing the martial mass with his unaided eyes. The throne commanded too few soldiers in the north to slow the advance of the Atheton army upon the city. Only the city guards stood between the palace and the Athetons. As a precaution, and with Dju-Tesha's consent, he'd sent word through the city to surrender to the invaders without violence. They could not fight against such a horde of armed men, especially not when seers must walk among them. Only the presence of seers explained how the army marched through sealed mountain passes. He'd pulled the guards of the city all within the palace. He'd advised Dju-Tesha to surrender, but if a fight were necessary, best they held all their men concentrated in one place.

His head clerk, Tais-Ting, entered through the open study door. He'd insisted the door remain open this day. With so many messengers coming and going, the knocking and called requests for entry began to annoy him.

"The Atheton army has passed through the western gate of the city, Councilor." Tais-Ting bowed, his face a mask of shame, as though he personally had failed to slow the advance of the army.

"Thank you, Tais-Ting." Kao-Rhee found his feet taking him to the west-facing window. "Inform me when they have reached the gates of the palace."

"Yes, Councilor." Tais-Ting bowed again and left the room quickly. The man appeared on the edge of panic. Kao-Rhee assumed much of the city felt the same. They spent decades fearing an invasion from the south, fighting the Tanshen along both sides of the Old Border Road, only to find an Atheton army surrounding them in a matter of days. Ten days. A slow march from the Rantu-Ting Mountains to the city of Tagu-Lan. A well-trained and well-motivated army could have made that march in half the time if necessary. Why so slow? He knew the answer, and it

troubled him. The Teyett Havarez of Atheton wished to make sure the city and its leaders had plenty of time to consider their position, to contemplate the consequences of defiance. There was no true resistance. They had lost without a single blade stroke to the woman who proclaimed herself *kimpadess*, the Atheton equivalent of zhan, a new ruler for a Fourth Great Dominion.

Kao-Rhee stared out the window, watching as the larger mass of the Atheton army spread north and south, encircling the city. His messengers had informed him the army stood nearly 15,000 strong. That seemed an underestimation. It did not matter. Two thousand men and a handful of seers would have been enough to conquer the city. He saw clearly now the trap he and Tigan Rhog-Kan had led the nation into, sending all their troops south for a final push against the Tanshen. And the Tanshen army wielding night-steel armaments. He suspected those blades, which deteriorated over time, leaving their user unprotected, found their origin in Atheton forges. And the outbreak of the Living Death. A ruse to cover the creation of an army? The blindness of his spies? He wondered how many of them had been outright killed and replaced, and how many had been turned. A well-planned trap that he'd led his zhan and regent zhan mindlessly into the center of. Thinking back to the events that started the war between the Shen nations, he considered how long that trap had been in the making.

"Councilor?" The voice of his deputy clerk, Ling-Laingto, called him from the window.

"Yes?"

"The palace steward reports that all the supplies you requested have been laid in among the palace cellars and all record of them destroyed." Ling-Laingto stood straight. At least this man did not feel responsible for Kao-Rhee's failure.

"Good," Kao Rhee said. "And the stores throughout the city?"

"There are depots of grain and harvest vegetables in all six locations you chose, Councilor," Ling-Laingto said. There was no hope of holding out in a siege against the army, but the preparations gave the people something to do, something to feel hopeful about, and they gave the regent zhan options to consider beyond full capitulation.

"Thank you, Ling-Laingto." Kao-Rhee looked in the young man's eyes. "I think it is time you remove your markings of office and leave the palace to attend the other matter we discussed."

"Yes, Councilor." Ling-Laingto hesitated a moment. "Thank you for trusting me with this endeavor, sir."

"You have earned that trust, Ling-Laingto." Kao-Rhee stepped forward and clamped a hand to the man's arm. "I am certain you will bring great glory to the regent zhan and the Daeshen nation."

He sent the man on his way, hoping he did not send him to his death and place in motion his own. In truth, he had few men he could trust with the mission he'd given Ling-Laingto. He'd instructed his now former deputy clerk to head into the streets and begin the slow process of building an unseen resistance against the *kimpadess* once she took command of the city and the nation. He'd spent much time in the past ten days devising and explaining the strategy of that resistance force. How to recruit people. How to train them. How to arm them with the weapons Kao-Rhee had ordered hidden in the city. The *kimpadess* would not leave a full army surrounding

the city indefinitely. When the majority of her forces departed, the citizens of Tagu-Lan would be ready to rise up against the invaders. The problem with this plan rested in the fact that Kao-Rhee could not be seen to be planning it. Nor could any hint of it be associated with the throne. His deputy clerk, Ling-Laingto, needed to lead the entire operation himself. The man had wits, nerve, and charm enough to bring people to his side, but he lacked experience. Kao-Rhee feared he might set actions against the invaders too soon. Unfortunately, he could do nothing but wait now and see how his plan flourished in his absence.

“Husband?”

He turned from the window. When had he walked to the window? He’d been watching the army slowly progress along the main thoroughfare to the palace. He saw what he took to be the commanders of the forces, two riders at the head of the procession. One of them looked somewhat more feminine in form. The sight left his stomach cold and his skin tingling. If his suspicion proved true, he’d underestimated once again his new adversary. And it complicated the plan he’d just set in motion with Ling-Laingto.

“You wished to see us?” His wife, Sin-Tiku, gestured to indicate the presence of the woman she took to be no more than her former servant, Peda-Leng, who stood silent at her side, hands clasped before her, head bowed.

Kao-Rhee looked at the two people most significant to him in life, his beloved wife and the daughter he dared not reveal himself to. He’d requested their attendance, knowing he needed to speak with them, but in all his pacing of the carpet, he had not determined exactly what he wished to say.

“The Atheton army has breached the city and draws near to the palace gate,” Kao-Rhee began.

“So we have heard.” Sin-Tiku’s voice sounded surprisingly calm, and it bolstered his own sense of confidence. As always, she helped him, even when she did not know she did so.

“I fear Teyett Havarez rides with the commander of the army.” Kao-Rhee took his wife’s hands and drew her to the window. Peda-Leng remained respectfully where she stood. “The teyett’s presence implies many things, all of them dangerous.”

“Do you think she seeks to make Tagu-Lan the seat of her rule here?” Sin-Tiku asked.

“It makes sense, as it is closer to her own capital in Atheton.” Kao-Rhee considered the implications once more. “I fear she has other intents. Her messengers refer to her as kimpadess, the Atheton word for one who rules completely. Our city, Tagu-Lan, has traditionally been the seat of governance for nearly all the rulers of all the three Great Dominions. If she intends to fashion a Fourth Great Dominion, she may wish to rule from this palace. It upholds former tradition and presents a powerful symbol to the people of all the dominions.”

“There is nothing you can do to stop her?” Sin-Tiku squeezed his hands tight, her eyes betraying only some of the fear she must feel.

“Not at this time.” Kao-Rhee’s words stabbed at his heart with their implication of his failure. “It will be dangerous for all of us in the coming days, and for those close to me especially. I have asked Peda-Leng here for this reason.” He turned to his daughter who did not know she was his daughter. “I have arranged for you to return to your position as one of my wife’s maids. I wish you

to remain in her presence at all times. I am entrusting her safety to you.”

“It is my honor, Councilor.” Peda-Leng bowed at the waist. Kao-Rhee wished to take her hands as well, to express his concern for her, but he could not.

“It will create discord among my other house ladies.” Sin-Tiku frowned.

“No roles will change,” Kao-Rhee said. “Peda-Leng’s presence will be as one learning from a mother to manage a household, as she will do once her marriage is complete.”

“I do not understand.” Sin-Tiku shook her head at him. He sighed. He hated deceiving her.

“It is enough to know that I have reason to trust Peda-Leng,” Kao Rhee said. “And I am entrusting her with what is most important to me in the world.” He patted his wife’s hand. “The palace will be infiltrated with Atheton soldiers and spies. Those we thought trustworthy may be turned against us. Friends currying favor with a new and powerful ruler may be forced to betray us. Peda-Leng will not betray us.”

“Why do you put so much faith in this girl?” Sin-Tiku squinted at Peda-Leng.

“She has proved herself to me.” Kao-Rhee turned to Peda-Leng. “You will accompany my wife at all times. I have made arrangements for you to assume the sleeping quarters closest to our own. Additionally, I have requested that your betrothed live in my private compound within the palace. This way, he, too, will be close. I have spoken to him and he understands these provisions. Lastly, I have informed him of the means of leaving the palace quickly and departing the city without being seen, should the need for this arise.”

“Yes, Councilor.” Peda-Leng bowed once more. He could not read her face well enough to know what she thought of the situation and his demands. She seemed curious, concerned, and excited all at once.

“Is all this really necessary, my dear?” Sin-Tiku’s voice made clear that worry outweighed her skepticism.

“Unfortunately, much more is necessary, but this is all I can do.” Kao-Rhee raised his wife’s hands to his lips and held them there. He wished he could remain thus, with his wife and his secret daughter, wished he could make them known to each other, wished he did not have to face the consequences of his failure.

“Councilor.”

Head clerk Tais-Ting stood in the doorway breathing heavily.

“The regent zhan has given birth,” Tais-Ting said. “She requests your presence immediately.”

“Is it a boy or girl?” Kao-Rhee lowered his wife’s hands but did not release them.

“There is no word from the birthing women, only that you must come with all haste.” Tais-Ting bowed and stepped to the side of the door.

“I must go.” He kissed his wife all too briefly, nodded to Peda-Leng, then strode through the door and along the hallway toward the regent zhan’s private chambers. The child had arrived at the most dangerous time. If a girl, it might be possible to save her, but if a boy, a legitimate heir to the throne, he feared its life would be forfeit before it began. He quickened his pace to find out which.

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

THE CARNIVAL



SHIFHUUL

ROTTING, DAMP leaves and rain-soaked soil combined to produce an aroma of decay that filled the air in the edge of the woods behind the farm field. Shifhuul crouched low behind the trunk of an elm tree, his bow in his hand, an arrow nocked and ready. It had rained earlier in the day, the forest smelling more alive and yet more dead because of it. Dark clouds still filled the sky, looking as though they might release another downpour at any moment. It did not smell like rain, though. He hoped for rain. It would help them.

Yeth and Kanma similarly hid themselves behind trees while Tarak knelt beside a blackberry bush. Shifhuul watched the roagg bite one of the berries from the bush and crush it in the teeth of his long muzzle. He wished he'd hidden behind a berry bush. The food the humans gave them tended toward inedibility and small portions.

He looked through the last trees of the small forest and across a half-harvested field of wheat to a small farmhouse and two barns. He assumed the harvest of the field remained unfinished because the farmers were dead. He'd seen no sign of them. They might be trapped in the farmhouse. Possibly a female or two. But he'd heard no screams. He had, however, counted ten human male soldiers walking in and out of the farmhouse and barns. Tanshen soldiers by the green markings on their leather armor. They looked to have been making a home there for several days. They appeared to be what the Atheton saptan called *deserters*. Shifhuul had little familiarity with the term. Wyrins did not field large armies in the way of humans. Smaller fighting units made it harder for warriors to abandon their duty. Not impossible, but he did not remember any stories of warriors in his territory fleeing combat.

"It would be better if we waited until dark." Yeth leaned closer to him as she spoke.

"We can't be late in returning." Kanma pushed a lock of still damp hair from her now very girlish face. She no longer resembled the boy Donjeo at all. She looked more a sister to the girl Palla and Ranna had saved weeks ago and taken for a pet. Pankee-Jao.

"Can rain make?" Shifhuul addressed his question to both Yeth and Kanma. With two seers in the group, they should be useful for something.

"I've never tried. It's not easy." Yeth looked apologetic. At least he thought that to be the look on her face. He found it easier to read Tarak's emotions than yutans' or humans'.

"It would take too long. Hours likely," Kanma added.

"Make house or barn fire?" Shifhuul suggested. A distraction would allow them to approach quickly through the field.

"What if they have the farmers tied alive in the house or barns?" Yeth shook her head. He agreed. Best not to kill humans who didn't deserve it. Not that he knew if the Tanshen soldiers deserved it, but the saptan's orders were clear. The Atheton army's human scouts had found the farm and the Tanshen soldiers. The outlanders had a day to find the farm, kill the soldiers, and

return, or the kenagal would begin ordering the deaths of the carnival folk. So, they needed to murder these men and meet up with the army by the time it made camp that night.

“You could set the field on fire.” Tarak grabbed another berry from the bush in his teeth and bit into it, juice running out the side of his mouth. Shifhuul’s mouth watered with the desire for a berry. He thought about moving his position but did not want to risk accidentally being spotted.

“That might work. The wheat is still wet, but I could cause a swath to dry first.” Yeth looked out at the field, squinting, her eyes thoughtful. Was she thoughtful or annoyed? Shifhuul could not tell. After so much time together, he should know the difference.

“If Yeth creates the fire, I can make more smoke from it,” Kanma said. “The breeze will carry it to the house.”

“Good, good. Do now. We wait too long.” Shifhuul did not exactly give orders among the outlanders, as they had no clear leader, but he found that if no one pushed them into action, they had a tendency not to take action. Or to take it without consulting the others. Maybe they did need a leader. As long as he did not need to be that leader. Being the one to come up with the plans presented all the responsibility he could agree to bear, and far more than he desired.

Yeth’s and Kanma’s faces became still and calm. He’d at least learned to recognize this expression. They both held The Sight. He wondered what that felt like. Yeth had tried to describe it once, but she’d sounded like some wyrin wood mystic, talking about seeing and hearing more clearly, about a oneness with all things, being everything all at once. He could see and hear quite well. He didn’t need to think himself one with the trees and rocks, even if it did let him change reality like magic. There were plenty of wyrin seers in his home realm, but he’d never known any well. He’d met a few through his mother but found them annoying in a way he had difficulty describing. They tended to project a self-satisfied air of superiority that deeply irked him. He sensed none of that from Yeth or Kanma. Then again, as they were a yutan and something that looked human, possibly he simply missed the contempt on their faces.

He saw the smoke before the flames in the wheat near the farmhouse. The soldiers outside noticed it as well, shouting to their companions in the house. Within a few moments, the flames roared high as the smoke rolled toward the farm buildings in curling, black clouds that matched those above in the sky.

“Go we now.” Shifhuul dashed around the tree, bow in his paws.

The others emerged at the same time, Yeth with her spear in her hands, Tarak holding his twin axes, and Kanma bearing a dagger in each hand. They did not shout and yell as they ran across the field. They were not humans. Nor fools. The fire and smoke gave them the advantage of surprise. They used this to deadly effect.

Shifhuul closed his eyes briefly as he ran through the flames, holding his breath against the smoke and ignoring the heat. He hoped the dampness of his fur from the rain prevented it from getting singed. He had little time to consider his aesthetics as he leapt from the fire with his fellow outlanders and into the midst of the Tanshen soldiers. He put an arrow through the neck of the first man he saw. Beside him, Tarak’s axes took down two men at once. Yeth’s spear tip found a man’s throat. Kanma’s twin daggers flew from her hands with such force that the two men they struck

were knocked into the air, falling hard to the ground, blades embedded to the hilt in their chests. One of the remaining four men tried to draw a sword. Yeth's spear drove through his heart. The other three turned to run. Shifhuul nocked an arrow and took one of the three down with a shot to the back of his head. Kanma's blades flew from the hands of the two dying men clutching at them and hurtled through air and into the backs of the fleeing men.

With the soldiers dead and dying, Yeth turned and raised her hands, the flames sputtering out, the smoke drifting over the moaning men. Shifhuul dropped his bow, drew his sword, and ended the final pleas and prayers of the dying soldiers. As he wiped his blade on the trouser leg of one of the dead men, he looked at his companions. He had no trouble reading their expressions as they all reflected the same emotions he felt himself — anger and sorrow.

They searched the house and the barn to find a male and two females. All dead.

"We should bury them," Yeth suggested as she stared at the corpse of a teenage girl clearly raped and beaten to death.

"No time," Shifhuul said.

"Shifhuul is right," Tarak looked westward. "We must be back by sunset."

"I'll take care of the bodies if you can help me drag them into the yard." Kanma bent to grab the dead girl's shoulders. Yeth helped her. Tarak hauled the other two bodies outside behind them. Shifhuul watched. Dead humans were too heavy for a wyrin to lift. As Kanma made the bodies sink into the grassy earth outside the farmhouse, he found three stones the size of his paws and placed them as markers for where each human body rested beneath the grass. They stood in silence a moment, staring at the stones.

"We go." Shifhuul began walking the lane from the farm back to the side road that led to the Old Border Road and the Atheton army, and the carnival, and their friends, and the cage. The others walked beside him, none speaking a word. He suspected he knew their thoughts as they probably mimicked his own — one day, he would kill the saptan and the kenagal for using him like a cheap sword, to be blooded and disposed of with no concern for its strength or sharpness. He would be a sword because he must, but he would also have his revenge.

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

WAVES CRESTED gently, rocking the small rowboat in a rhythmic motion, up and down as the oars dug into the water. Clouds hid the sun, holding back the heat, giving a chill to the autumn sea air. Strong arms pulled at the oars, ignoring the cool breeze. Kadmallin watched as Rankarus rowed at a steady pace, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to see his destination drawing near. The smile on the man's face made a marked contrast to Kadmallin's own mood, which had darkened in rot with each passing day since Sketkee's disappearance.

"You could not explain this on shore?" Kadmallin did not appreciate the heaving of the boat among the waves. He hated the ocean. The seas. Rivers. Lakes. Humans may have been intended by nature to sail upon water, but he surely was not. He clenched his jaw and tightened his stomach against the impulse to regurgitate his lunch over the side of the small boat.

"I might be wrong, and it's easier to show you and confirm my hunch." Rankarus pulled at the oars even harder. The man vexed Kadmallin with his obtuseness. However, he did not fault him for his industriousness. He'd spent every spare moment assisting in the search for Sketkee. Even the days where he'd needed to work in the pilgrim town to secure his family's lodging, he'd still set out at night to Tanjii, bribing gate guards and prowling the city streets.

"We've checked the docks." Kadmallin took a deep breath and steadied himself with both arms on the sides of the boat. "Several times." They'd checked the shoreline as well, looking for any bodies that might have washed up from the current. He and Abananthus found one, but human, and decomposed several weeks. The dead man's faded clothes and worn shoes marked him as a pilgrim. He looked to have been robbed and thrown in the sea. He and Abananthus had buried the body. They informed the pilgrim council, but no one had heard of the man by his description. No one ever would now.

"We've watched the docks from hills and looked at the ships from the pier, but we've never looked at them from the ocean." Rankarus breathed heavily as he spoke against the exertion of the rowing. "We've scanned for signs of rakhthors and rumors of rakhthors, but what if they hired a cabin and kept to it. Or what if Viktik hired the cabin and kept Sketkee in it."

"He'd be hard pressed to hold her against her will without guards to enforce his own." Kadmallin's skepticism coated his tone. Viktik could not stand alone against Sketkee regardless of his ambassadorial combat training. He doubted the rakhthor had ever drawn a sword except in practice.

"If she's wounded, he might be able to keep her confined," Rankarus said.

"True," Kadmallin admitted. An unsettling thought, one he'd considered several times as a more palatable possibility than the alternative of her being dead. But if she were wounded, or held captive and drugged, his chances of finding her were more than slim.

"So, I thought that maybe if she'd been held in a cabin, she might try to signal you in some

way, like with the wagon,” Rankarus said. “I rowed this path earlier this morning, but it took me all day to locate you in the city and bring you back. See that ship? The one with the three low masts? There’s a small window at the rear, two levels under the aftcastle.”

Kadmallin pulled his near-glass from within his leather jacket, extended the brass tubes, and held it to his eye.

“You see it?” Rankarus asked.

“A red cloth pinned just below the windowsill,” Kadmallin said. Blood-soaked by the look of it. Faded a bit in the sun. It might have been there for days. Kadmallin did not lower the near-glass. “It’s held in place by a splinter of the wood along the frame.”

“It looks like it got caught there by accident in a strong wind,” Rankarus said. He sounded hopeful.

“There are plains tribes in the Kytain Dominion who will leave a blood-stained cloth atop their highest tent shaft to indicate a tribe member in mourning or in distress.” Kadmallin lowered the near-glass, his face grim. “They use it in their battles as well, to mark the location of the wounded. A bloody cloth on a spear. There are only a handful of people who know that signal and Viktik isn’t one of them.” He paused, thinking about the stained cloth and how much blood a rakthor could lose before succumbing to death. More than a human, he remembered. “I think you’ve found her.”

“Really?” Rankarus grinned, his mood leaching to Kadmallin’s disposition and allying his queasiness.

“Yes.” Kadmallin raised the near-glass again, this time inspecting the ship itself. “Now we need to find a way to get her free without giving the game away to Viktik.”

“I’ve been thinking about that.” Rankarus’s grin widened. “And I have a plan.”

Kadmallin lowered the near-glass at the excitement in Rankarus’s voice, feeling his own enthusiasm burn away in the face of the man’s bright optimism. Kadmallin found it very hard not to like Rankarus, but at the same time, he found it very difficult to like Rankarus. They were not of compatible natures. Odd then that those closest to them, Kellatra and Sketkee, so seemingly were. Kadmallin swallowed back the unease of the situation and the nausea of the waves to speak words he knew he’d regret.

“So, tell me this plan.”

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

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

INTERLUDE



CANDLE FLAME flickers in the chill autumn breeze as shadows shift across pen and ink and paper.

The Punderra seer sits at her night table writing a note short enough for a night jay's leg, but long enough to detail her concerns. In her bed, her lover, the Juparti seer, snores in post-coital satisfaction. Pompous and aloof in daily interactions, the man ironically becomes thoughtful and attentive in bed. She yawns. Very attentive.

She had heard of the anomalies as vague rumors, but when her lover shared his knowledge and his concerns, her own worries grew so nagging, she could not find peaceful slumber after their lovemaking.

This affects more than Juparti or Punderra or the Iron Realm, she thinks. If this is happening everywhere, then this affects the whole of the world.

I must inform not only the Punderra senate, but others as well. Thus, the short note to be sent by night jay to the rakthor philosopher she'd met years ago. Maybe she will understand these events in ways we seers cannot. At the very least, she can inform the Alliance to double the enforcement of the blockade. Damn those pilgrims and damn this renegade goddess who infects my dreams.

She seals the note in the small, wooden carrier tube.

Dreams should be for the dreamer alone, and goddesses should remain silent.

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



EPISODE THIRTEEN



THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

“WHAT DO you remember?”

Bright lantern light led to blinking eyes. Sketkee raised a hand to block out the glow of the lantern. What did she remember? The ship and the attack by the humans and then the fire. She remembered her abdomen sliced open by a shard of metal attached to a fallen beam of wood. Then a great quantity of blood, and after that, blackness. She recalled nothing but blackness until waking in a small room on a narrow bed. She recollected getting from the bed with great difficulty to open a window and see the ocean beyond. And tearing free a portion of blood-soaked bandage and wedging it in a wooden crack outside the window. Then closing the window and collapsing in pain near the bed. After that, nothing.

“What do you remember?” Viktik’s face came into focus as he repeated the question. He appeared blurry around the edges. Had she been drugged? Sketkee considered this for a moment and assumed it likely.

“I am in a cabin on a ship, I think.” Sketkee decided to offer as little information as possible.

“The sleeping tincture is powerful and likely still affecting you,” Viktik said.

So, drugged for certain.

“Where are we?” Sketkee held hope for one answer and refused to consider others.

“Still on the docks at the port of Tanjii.” Viktik took a seat in a chair near the bed.

Sketkee refrained from expressing her relief. If they were still in Tanjii, Kadmallin would be looking for her.

“How many days have passed?” She wondered how long Kadmallin might search before giving up. She discarded the question as soon she’d posed it. She knew he would not abandon her until he found her or saw her dead body.

“Fourteen days.” Viktik pointed to the bandages still around her midriff. “You were injured when we made our escape from the ambassadorial ship. Fortunately, I knew of a cargo vessel not far along the port with a captain amenable to coin. With the help of a rakthor sailor, I was able to swim with you beside the piers and carry you aboard. I rented two rooms. I have tended your wounds as best I could, but the damage exceeds my training. I used the sleeping tincture in hopes that the rest would help you heal. It has been less successful than desired.”

“I am indebted to you for my life.” Sketkee tried not to think of the moral juxtaposition created by Viktik’s efforts in the face of the fact that she had deceived and stolen from him. There was, she realized, a difficult relationship to quantify. She tried to move, and her stomach complained loudly, a sharp signal of pain stabbing into her brain. She moaned and lay still.

“I have tried to use human messengers to find the embassy physician, but with no success.” Viktik studied her as though gauging her health and her value to him. “I feel your wounds are too serious to attempt to ignore, or to try and treat here. I have arranged for the captain of this ship to

sail to the edge of the Alliance blockade, where we will be transferred to a rakthor military vessel. There, you can receive the treatment you need.”

“Are my injuries so severe?” Sketkee looked at her bandaged abdomen. They felt dire from within. She’d need to remove the bandages and examine the wounds herself. She sensed significant heat. That spoke to infection. She could reopen the wound, cleanse it, and make further sutures if she did not pass out in the process. Another option occurred to her. She had the services of a seer now, if only she could get to her.

“I stitched you as best I could, but I fear damage to some of the internal organs, which I am ill-skilled to repair.” Viktik’s eyes furrowed. “The ship’s physician of a rakthor naval vessel is your best chance at survival.”

“When?” Sketkee asked.

“The captain will take us to the blockade on his way down the coast the day after tomorrow,” Viktik said. “I tried to arrange an earlier departure, but he insists on calling no attention to his ship and taking his usual load. He fears word of rakthors aboard might lead to his ship ending in flames. A fear I share.”

“Two days.” Sketkee took a deep breath and regretted the pain it caused. She might last two days. Two days to find a way to escape. Or a method of signaling Kadmallin and Kellatra. Two days to find a means to stay alive before the infection killed her. “Two days,” she repeated and fell back into the darkness of sleep.

To continue reading the Philosopher story arena or the crossover between the Seer and the Philosopher story arenas turn the page.

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

THE SCENTS of coriander, basil, and cardamom rose on curls of steam from the stew pot and wafted over the table, past rosemary-roasted potatoes and yams fried in butter and cinnamon. Kadmallin swallowed the saliva collecting beneath his tongue and accepted a plate of food from Jadaloo. She cooked much better than one expected of a former barmaid at an inn. He took a bite of the crab-stuffed teal fish and closed his eyes to enjoy the moment. It made a wild contrast to the bland food he usually cooked for Sketkee, and it capped the first day of promise since they stole the artifact.

“This is excellent, Jadaloo.” Kadmallin took a bite of potato to balance the taste of the fish.

“I used to help Taosee cook back at the inn. She taught me everything I know.” Jadaloo served the children and then herself.

“I miss Taosee,” the girl, Lantili, said.

“Me, too,” the boy, Luntadus, added.

“If you miss her yelling at you to stay out of the kitchen, I can yell at you,” their father, Rankarus, rustled Luntadus’s hair. “There’s plenty for you to stay out of here.”

“I miss her sweet rolls,” Luntadus said.

“And her lemon cakes,” Lantili added.

Both children looked toward Jadaloo.

“I can make her [spiced fish stew](#), but I don’t bake,” Jadaloo said firmly, and the children turned their attention to their mother.

“You’d be better off asking your father to bake,” Kellatra said. “The last time I tried to make a pie, it came out with more charcoal than crust.”

“I hear Uncle Aba can bake.” Rankarus deflected the children’s attention to Abananthus, who frowned.

“My late wife let me help her make scarab tarts,” Abananthus said, “but if you don’t use the right beetles, they taste awful.”

“Bug tarts!” Luntadus looked as though he might spit out the bite of fish he’d just put in his mouth.

“Uncle Aba is teasing.” Lantili did not look as certain as she sounded.

“If we can find the right beetles, I’ll make you some.” Abananthus grinned as he bit down on a potato.

Kadmallin did not think the large man was actually related to the family, which only made him realize how little he knew about him and the others. They’d had scant time to make commonplace acquaintance before they stole the artifact and even less in the subsequent days as they searched for Sketkee. Though he should be elated that they located her, he found the meal around the table with the family left him sad, remembering his dead wife, Nennea, and the children

they never had. Or the family he'd never assembled around him. Kellatra and Rankarus were lucky and recognized it. They seemed good parents. Firm but loving. And good people. Of course, he did have a family of sorts. Sketkee. She was his family. A family of one. One who would never be able to return his affection, but one who also at the moment needed his help. Fortunately, dinner did not last long, and Jadaloo took the children outside to learn the constellations.

"So, you're certain it's her behind that window and not some accident of chance?" Kellatra poured Kadmallin a cup of charot wine from a clay jug. He couldn't imagine where they obtained wine or how they afforded it, but he accepted it gladly. Probably the result of some elaborate deceit Rankarus had contrived.

"It's possible that it's a coincidence." Kadmallin did not like admitting this truth, but his years with Sketkee and her cool rationalism forced his honesty. "However, it'd be very unlikely. It's a signal only the two of us would know."

"Why no other signal?" Abananthus asked. "Some second marking to confirm her presence?"

"She may have left something we didn't see," Rankarus offered.

"Or she may be injured and unable to leave further signals." Another thought Kadmallin preferred to ignore. "Or Viktik may be with her all the time and she has no opportunity."

"So, how do we get her off of the ship if she is in that cabin?" Kellatra poured herself a cup of wine. "I've seen that ship. They're loading to leave. And they have guards on the docks now after the riot at the rakthor vessel."

"I've been thinking about that." Rankarus took a sip of his wine before he continued.

Kadmallin found himself dreading the words the man might speak. After the fiasco at the embassy and the mob attacking the embassy ship, he had little regard for Rankarus's plans. He suspected the man had been a thief of some sort in his younger days. No wonder he'd taken to running an inn.

"It's a simple plan," Rankarus said. "The ship doesn't leave until the day after tomorrow. Tomorrow afternoon, I'll pose as a dockworker helping to load cargo and sneak on board. I'll hide until night fall and then make my way to the cabin with Sketkee."

"That seems simple in words, but difficult to accomplish." Abananthus stared into his already empty cup looking as though he wanted more wine but didn't wish to be rude by asking with such a small jug.

"That's the easy part." Rankarus sounded confident, and Kadmallin actually believed him. "The hard part is getting her off of the ship once I find her. For that, we need Kell in a boat."

"Ah. I see." Kellatra studied her husband, a skeptical look hidden behind her cup of wine.

"Exactly." Rankarus sounded almost enthusiastic now that his wife seemed to intuit his plan. "I can't get Sketkee out through the window; it looks much too small. I'll get her back to the upper deck. If she is wounded, Kell will use The Sight to float her over the railing and down to the boat. And the same for me."

"And then you row away?" Kadmallin foresaw a number of problems with the plan.

"I don't bake, and I don't row," Kellatra said. "With The Sight, I can push a small boat quickly and quietly from the ship."

“It’s a possible plan, but several things worry me.” Kadmallin realized rather sullenly that one of those was his absence from the plan. “There are a lot of guards on that dock. The crew will know each other. It’s not that large a ship to easily board and evade detection.”

“I can do this.” Again, that confidence of tone in Rankarus’s voice. “I’ve done this sort of thing before.”

“That was years ago,” Kellatra offered.

“And some skills fade,” Abananthus added.

“I admit that the riot at the embassy did not go as I’d planned.” Rankarus sighed. “But to be honest, it didn’t go well the first time I tried it, either.” Kadmallin restrained himself from reaching across the table and smacking the man, letting him continue instead. “But this sort of thing, getting in and out of places I shouldn’t be, well, I was very good at that at one time. And it’s not a skill that fades if it’s a talent you’re born with.”

Kadmallin realized they all looked to him to make the final decision on the execution of Rankarus’s plan. His uncertainty held his tongue. Maybe Rankarus could get on the ship. But it would not be easy to get Sketkee and Rankarus to the upper deck and the railing without someone on the pier seeing them. There were nearly as many guards at night as during the day, thanks to the riot and the burning of the rakthor ship. So many variables, as Sketkee would say, her unknown status the greatest of them. Again, he tried to ignore the real possibility that the bloody cloth did not signify her presence in that cabin. And the prospect that while she might have left it there to signal him, she might now reside in another cabin or might no longer be on the ship at all. The whole of the situation reminded him of a similar event — decades past — when he and Sketkee’s roles had been transposed.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO

ROUGH STRANDS of braided hemp bit into the flesh of wrists, ankles, and neck. Kadmallin lay on the dirt floor of the tent, trussed with heavy rope binding his joints, all knotted to his back, connected to a line looping around his neck and pulled back to his feet. He gave credit to his Kytain captors — as long as he did not try to move, he remained relatively comfortable for a man bound in rope and tossed onto the dirt. Moving, he’d quickly discovered, eliminated any suggestion of comfort. Deer hide covered the tall, angled, and interlocked posts of the tent, what the Thedshawk tribe called a *kersh*. The weather-aged leather blocked out most of the daylight, but he could tell from the gaps near the entrance that the sun sat near late afternoon. Nearly a day since he’d been taken captive.

They’d been crossing the plains of the Kytain Dominion for six months on a rakthor expedition to broaden their knowledge of the tribes and seek out any potential partners for trade. What were the differences between the tribes? What did they need that rakthors could sell them? What could they trade in return? The usual rakthor expedition to the dominion. The sort mounted every few years.

To call the land a dominion seemed over-generous to Kadmallin. Hundreds of tribes spread

across the plains with few settlements of any consequence, all speaking the same language, but with dialects and customs that diverged so much, they might as well be different peoples entirely. And such a mottled collection of people as well, every ethnicity of the Iron Realm present. Most tribes looked as a cross section of the entire realm, while some insisted on allowing only one ethnicity within their tribe.

Sketkee had been attempting to negotiate a territorial dispute between two such tribes over access to a small stream that ran through the plains. The first of the tribes, the Sakyoth, intermarried with both the naotish and gaotos people, while the second tribe, the Thedshawk, were wholly lindosh, with dark skin, narrow noses, and dark-brown eyes. The meeting between tribes had started well but soon devolved into shouting and then open fighting. Kadmallin and Sketkee attempted to intervene, to create distance between the two groups. Both took this interference as an affront, which only called forth more fighters on both sides. Kadmallin and Sketkee got separated, and having alienated both parties, were forced to flee. The tribes gave pursuit. It seemed the only thing that united them was their dislike of outsiders. With the Thedshawk tribe chasing Kadmallin, and the Sakyoth tribe chasing Sketkee, he soon found himself overrun and outnumbered. The plains peoples were irrationally proud of their martial skills, and he knew his sword could not stand against twelve spears. So, he surrendered.

He had no idea what had befallen Sketkee, but he assumed she'd escaped. He hoped she'd escaped, because he did not see how he might extricate himself from the Thedshawk tribe's clutches, and he now relied on her to rescue him. Something he hoped she got around to soon. The tent flap opened and took his thoughts to more pressing concerns.

A tall, dark-skinned man in deerskin trousers and vest of woven sheep's wool entered the tent and sat near the small, cold fire pit beside Kadmallin. They stared at each other in silence for a few moments. Having lived most of his life in Punderra, and traveled widely across the realm with Sketkee, he'd never much noticed a variance between the way people looked. Black, brown, pale, or some variation made little difference in most places in Punderra. Other dominions were more limited in their ethnic stock, due to the various waves of migration from Punderra millennia ago, but there had only been a few times when he'd felt out of place or noticed someone else put out of place. But here, lying bound on a tent floor, with a dark-skinned man staring at him with hostile eyes, knowing a whole tribe of equally distrustful people lay outside the tent, Kadmallin acutely recognized his difference and wished his skin were a little more tanned by the sun. The Thedshawk tribe was known for being violent towards those unlike them. There were other tribes similarly minded, one of them composed of light-skinned naotis people like himself. He'd felt even more uncomfortable visiting them for a week.

"You speak our tongue?" the man asked.

"Some." Kadmallin did not have the ability with languages that Sketkee possessed, but he'd made an effort to learn as many of the variations of the Kytain dialects as possible. He did better at understanding speech than trying to render it himself.

"I am Zigyoht. Chief of this tribe." Zigyoht had the bearing of a chieftain, someone used to getting what he wanted or taking it by force. "You took arms against us when you promised to

hold no bias in our meeting with the Sakyoth.”

“We tried to keep you from killing each other.” Kadmallin realized his great disadvantage, beyond being tied like a hog taken to slaughter, was his lack of diplomacy. He’d learned a great deal watching Sketkee for the past seven years, but he had no knack dissembling, his natural inclination falling to blunt honesty.

“This is not your place, to stop us killing.” Zigyoth leaned forward, hands on knees as he spoke.

“Negotiations by blood end badly.” Kadmallin wished he understood the language well enough to better express what he intended.

“Blood ends talk more quickly.” Zigyoth appeared pleased with that turn of phrase.

“It is a stream. Share and have no blood.” Kadmallin doubted the man saw the benefit of this strategy.

“We know your kind. You Yitkeeman vermin.” Zigyoth spat into the ashes of the fire pit. “We have fought you for many lifetimes.”

“I am from Punderra.” Kadmallin saw now the reason for the man’s animosity. He thought Kadmallin came from the Yitkeeman tribe, sworn enemies of his people. The two tribes had fought for centuries for no other reason than that they hated one another, each generation becoming more virulent in that belief and more violent in its expression.

“You do not fool us, even if you have fooled the snake woman.” Zigyoth jabbed a finger into Kadmallin’s chest.

“We are ... I am ...” Kadmallin struggled to find the right words. “I am a peace trader.”

“Lie maker is what you are,” Zigyoth said.

“No. Peace trader.” Not the best phrase, but Kadmallin decided to stick with it.

“Save your lies, Yitkeeman.” Zigyoth stood and stared at him. “Tonight, you meet Yagom, the god of our people. Tonight, you pay for your crimes by yirr hersh.”

Kadmallin’s eyes went wide at the mention of their god and the yirr hersh ceremony. A sacrifice ceremony.

“See. You know what is yirr hersh.” Zigyoth smiled. “Only a Yitkeeman lie maker would know to fear the yirr hersh.”

“Wait!” Kadmallin called out, but the man ignored the plea and strode from the tent.

He tried not to think about the stories he’d heard of the yirr hersh ceremony. It involved burning a sacrifiant alive and then eating their cooked organs. If he’d believed in any of the Keth or Passhist gods, he might have prayed to them. Instead, he prayed to no one that Sketkee remained alive and was looking to secure his release.

THE PRESENT

A CANDLE flame burned still in the silent air around the table, no breath forming words to make it flicker. Kellatra, Rankarus, and Abananthus stared at Kadmallin. He’d been silent for a long while, but none of the others seemed inclined to disturb his thoughts. He considered the events

all those years ago in the Kytain Dominion and how he'd survived. This helped him make his decision.

"The plan is not good enough." Kadmallin took a sip of wine, enjoying the fruity, smoky flavor that lingered on his tongue. "We need something bolder. I think we need Rankarus's riot again."

"What?" Rankarus looked as confused as his wife and friend.

"The riot went very badly last time." Kellatra put her hand to her chin. "And nearly worse."

"I know." Kadmallin began to see the plan he thought would work. "But this will be a more limited riot. The important thing is to get the ship away from the dock. A small riot at sunset will convince the captain to set off. He won't go far, though. They can't approach the blockade at night, so he'll anchor in the harbor. Safe from the riot in the docks. Then we four will approach the ship at night in the boat. Abananthus will stay with the boat. Kellatra will float herself, Rankarus, and me up to the deck. Can you do that?"

"Yes," Kellatra said.

"Good." Kadmallin continued. "Once on deck, Kellatra will put to sleep anyone we see awake. Then we will make our way down to the lower deck and find Sketkee's cabin. Rankarus will remain in place as a lookout to warn us if someone is coming. Then we get Sketkee and go back to the deck. We take a piece of her clothing and make it look like she caught it on a railing and fell overboard. Then we get her in the boat and head back to shore."

Rankarus took a loud breath and sighed. "I like it."

"It still seems a risk that the rakthor ambassador will search for Sketkee," Abananthus offered. "He might come back to shore and search the pilgrim town."

"Possibly," Kadmallin said. "But I think he'll be happy to consider himself rid of her. However, we could hide in the town. Or nearby."

"There is another option." Kellatra placed her hands on the table. Kadmallin stared across the table at her. "The captain who brought us here by way of the Tanfen Sea has offered to sail us to the Forbidden Realm for a price. We have finally assembled the gold he requires. We could take the boat from the rakthor ship straight to the one that will carry us to the Forbidden Realm."

"And how will you get past the Alliance blockade?" Kadmallin considered his own answer to that question.

"We'll need to rely on Sketkee for that," Kellatra said. "Or force if need be."

"You can't sink a blockade of ships." Rankarus frowned at Kellatra, then raised an eyebrow. "Can you?"

"I don't know." Kellatra acquired a frown of her own. "Maybe? I don't want to hurt anyone."

"Possibly, you won't have to." Kadmallin saw the idea more clearly now. "Can anyone here sew?"

"Jadaloo is a passable seamstress," Abananthus said.

"Good," Kadmallin said. "If she can make the flag I draw for her, and with Sketkee to speak for us, we may be able to slip past the blockade without a fight."

"We have a plan, then." Rankarus rubbed his hands together enthusiastically. "I'll begin the

work to provide a riot at sundown as soon as the sun is up. I'll need your help, Abananthus."

"Of course," Abananthus replied.

"I'll have Jadaloo start packing tonight," Kellatra said. "She and the children can board the ship at sunset and the captain can sail at full dark to avoid the attention of the pilgrims."

"Then let us all get a good night's rest," Kadmallin said. "Tomorrow will be a day and then some."

He'd been involved in enough plans throughout the years to accomplish impossible things that he knew more would go wrong than right in their attempt to free Sketkee, but he also felt for the first time since seeing that rakthor embassy ship in flames that he had some measure of control over events. With so many things that could potentially go wrong, he decided not to think about which ones were more likely to fail. He would free Sketkee, as she had freed him all those years ago.

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THE THRONE



TIANG-RHU

JAGGED SHAFTS of blue-white brilliance raced through the black night sky, illuminating clouds above and fields below. Thunder accompanied the lightning a moment later, rain falling in torrents blown sideways by the wild western wind. The bleat of a sheep cut through the din of wind and rain.

“Over here.”

Tiang-Rhu followed Tin-Tsu’s voice through the gloom and wet, holding a lantern before him as he waded through the sopping thigh-high rye of the field. The storm had come up while they ate and left them rushing to put the sheep from the pen into the barn. One of the sheep managed to escape in the confusion, which necessitated their trek through the thunderstorm in search of it.

“Do you see it?” Tiang-Rhu asked as he stepped beside Tin-Tsu, holding the lantern high. He saw nothing but shadows across the rye and deeper umbrage between the trunks of the nearby woods.

“I think I spotted it headed into the trees.” Tin-Tsu pointed. He held no lantern and used his free hand to wipe the water from his face, a useless gesture in the deluge.

“You should go back.” Tiang-Rhu placed his free hand on Tin-Tsu’s arm. While much recovered, catching a chill in a storm might do him great harm. “I can find it.”

“I’m fine.” Tin-Tsu patted Tiang-Rhu’s hand where it rested on his arm. “It’ll take two of us to haul it back. This way.”

“Stubborn man.” Tiang-Rhu sighed and followed Tin-Tsu toward the trees.

At least they could not get more wet. Even falling in a lake could not leave him more soaked. Already the chill of the water and the wind bit into his bones. He knew Tin-Tsu felt the same cold. But he recognized his friend as too mule-minded to turn back. The bleating of a sheep rose above the clamor of the storm. The stupid animal had, indeed, wandered into the woods. He held the lantern high once more only to have it sputter and flicker out. Tiang-Rhu offered a curse to the night.

“Good thing we left the other lantern lit in the house.” Tin-Tsu laughed as he pointed back toward the farmhouse. The single window glowed faintly, a beacon in the rain and darkness.

“Yes. We are very fortunate.” Tiang-Rhu made no effort to conceal his sarcasm. The bleating came again, and a shadow moved among the trees. “This way.”

He pushed the low, wet branch of a tree out of the way and rushed as cautiously as possible into the woods, his feet sliding on slick, fallen leaves. The rain did not strike down quite as hard beneath the shelter of the half-barren branches. He used tree trunks to steady himself, checking to make sure Tin-Tsu did not falter behind him. He found the sheep, standing between two oaks, its left hind leg sunk in hole of mud. Probably once a hedgehog hole, it sat now filled with water and congealed earth. He grabbed the creature’s leg as Tin-Tsu held it by the wool of its neck.

“There now, silly beast,” Tin-Tsu said to the sheep as Tiang-Rhu pulled the animal’s leg free of the thick mud. “We’ll have you home to dry in no time at all.”

“I suspect it will take a week for us to dry out, and I can’t imagine how long it will take for the sheep.” Tiang-Rhu bent and picked the sheep up. It struggled briefly but then rested comfortably in his arms. The smell of rank, wet wool might have overpowered him if the wind and rain were not so constantly cleansing his face and nose.

“Is it too heavy?” Tin-Tsu asked.

“I’ve grown strong hefting hay in the past weeks.” Tiang-Rhu cautiously picked his way through the trees and back to the field.

“We should have brought a rope.” Tin-Tsu slipped on the wet leaves and caught himself on a branch.

“Farmers don’t leash their sheep,” Tiang-Rhu said, then wondered at his statement. “Do they?”

“Who knows,” Tin-Tsu said as they walked from the woods to be assaulted once more by the pelting rain. “It is a shame there is not a book we might read to instruct us in the methods of raising animals and crops.”

“We could write such a book for other former priests who wish to take to the land,” Tiang-Rhu said. “It cannot take more than a decade or so before we know the craft well enough to scribble it down.”

Tin-Tsu laughed as they trudged back through the field of rye to the barn. They got the sheep settled with the rest of the small flock and the cow, goat, and pigs in the barn. They walked to the farmhouse, ignoring the impulse to run. They could not get more soaked and running only offered the chance to slip in the mud. Inside, they stripped down to their under-breeches and wrung their wet clothes into a bucket before hanging them by the fire.

“Fortunately, the fire did not go out.” Tin-Tsu brought a blanket, and they sat on an old, ember-scorched rug before the flames.

“Fortunately, only one sheep got lost in the rain.” Tiang-Rhu rubbed Tin-Tsu’s back beneath the rough-spun blanket, his friend’s flesh icy and clammy beneath his fingers.

“Still, a good day.” Tin-Tsu closed his eyes and reached back to rub Tiang-Rhu’s back in return.

“They are all good days in your company.” Tiang-Rhu watched the firelight flicker against the sharp cheekbones of Tin-Tsu’s face, wondering how he had fallen into the daydream of his youth. He’d ached when he’d been separated from Tin-Tsu as a boy, sent away as punishment and precaution. Of course, a boy with a less prominent father might have found himself in an unmarked hole in the ground for such transgressions. The years in the temple taught him to see both the hypocrisy of many of the men around him and the need to hide his own inner duplicity. To pretend to be the thing he was not so that he could be the thing he wished to be. And he’d found he did wish to be a priest. Or had wished to be a priest. Until now. Now what did he desire? He longed for nothing more than being at Tin-Tsu’s side. Here on a farm, if they stayed. On the road if they left. Or somewhere else. It did not matter.

As the fire worked to ease their chill, the rubbing of hands on flesh to create warmth became caresses that created a different heat, transforming to an embrace that left their lips touching before the flames. Tiang-Rhu felt the glow of the fire on his face and the warmth of Tin-Tsu's lips upon his own and lost all sense of time and place and inhibition. They spoke no words the rest of the night, kissing before the fire and falling asleep there in one another's arms beneath the blanket. Tiang-Rhu wondered, as the darkness of slumber took hold over his mind, what their kisses might mean and where they might lead. He did not speculate what his god might think, nor the priests of the temple, nor his family. He did not care. He only cared for Tin-Tsu.

To continue reading the Throne story arena turn the page.

THE THRONE



DJU-TESHA

A CHILL air circulated among stone columns, across multicolored marble tiles, and over the flesh of the men and women assembled in the audience chamber of the Daeshen palace. The men of the council stood shoulder-by-shoulder in a line, while the palace priests, the men of the city guard, and the tigans of the army stood opposite, creating a short aisle before the raised dais of the throne. Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee stood beside the throne. Dju-Tesha sat in the uncomfortable stone chair holding her swaddled newborn daughter, reassured by the prime councilor's close presence. She found it hard not to believe she'd failed her nation and the memory of her father and brothers. Regent zhan for only a few weeks and there she sat ready to surrender her country to invaders. Kao-Rhee tried to assure her that the events of the day had been set in motion long ago and that he himself bore the burden of responsibility for what transpired. His words were of little comfort, but having him close did settle her mind against the task to come. Her only solace came in knowing that the zhan of the Tanshen Dominion faced a similar situation.

"Where is she?" Dju-Tesha wished to have this done with, to know what came next.

"She is being guided through the palace by my head clerk, Regent Zhan." Kao-Rhee bent at the waist as he whispered.

"You are certain you should not have met her yourself?" Dju-Tesha had read through several books the night before, but there were no firmly established protocols for this sort of encounter.

"She will not likely take offense, and it helps to display my loyalty to the throne, Regent Zhan," Kao Rhee said. "I suspect she will value those who can offer loyalty and discard anyone who hints at duplicity. Meeting her before you did so yourself might suggest I wished to establish favor with her, for which she might as likely kill me as make use of me."

"Yes. Best to keep you alive as long as possible. Keep us all alive." The dozing baby squirmed in Dju-Tesha's arms, and she stroked the soft black hair of its head. A beautiful baby girl. Pai-Yungay. Named for the Dju-Tesha's favorite flower. Not a direct heir to the throne and no threat to the new kimpadess and her claims to rule.

"I believe she comes now, Regent Zhan." Kao-Rhee faced the tall entrance door where the two ceremonial guards straightened and tapped their spears against the floor in the traditional alert that someone approached the royal throne.

Dju-Tesha could hear them now. It sounded as though a small army marched down the hall toward the audience chamber. A moment later she entered, the kimpadess, the woman who had managed to accomplish what the leaders of neither Shen nation could during the course of a twenty-year war — bring them both to utter capitulation. She stood taller than Dju-Tesha expected, the ornate battle armor and the helm she wore making her appear even larger. What woman wore battle armor? She looked regal and commanding, powerful and filled with purpose as she strode across the room and past the assembled Daeshen court. Jealously throbbed momentarily in Dju-

Tesha's mind. She faced a woman more powerful than any man she'd ever met. Behind the kimpadess, walked fewer men than she'd expected. Ten soldiers of various rank followed behind a man whose armor marked him as the commander, the kenagal, of the Atheton army encircling the palace.

The kimpadess — how that salutation grated against Dju-Tesha's heart — stopped at the base of the dais and inclined her head. The soldiers halted behind her. Kao-Rhee stepped from the dais beside Dju-Tesha and bowed to the kimpadess.

“Regent Zhan Kon Dju-Tesha, it is with great solemnity that I introduce Teyett Tijaro Havarez, now Kimpadess.” Kao-Rhee rose from the bow to address the kimpadess. “I am Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee.”

The kimpadess remained silent for a moment. Dju-Tesha waited, unsure if she should speak first. Uncertain what to do and knowing she had no control over what eventually happened this day. She wished she felt seething anger toward the woman before her, but fear and sorrow overwhelmed any such violent emotion. She noted the pride the woman displayed in her very stance. Her title spoke of that pride as well. She did not call herself Zhan, as even Juparti-born rulers of past Great Dominions had done. She insisted on the Easad equivalent. A sign of pride in her nation, but also in herself, to mark her out as separate from the past, even from the handful of women rulers of previous Great Dominions.

“Thank you for not resisting the inevitable.” The kimpadess removed her battle helmet and handed it to the kenagal. She spoke excellent Shen with a pronounced northern accent. “I have no wish to destroy this palace, this city, or the people within, either.”

“With our armies deployed elsewhere, we could not hope to stand against a force that burrows through mountains.” Dju-Tesha knew she needed to surrender her nation, but she wished to be clear about her reasons for doing so. “We have also seen the damage even weakened night steel can inflict upon normal armor and weaponry. Your forces are superior. Bloodshed would be pointless.”

“You are more insightful and well-spoken than reports depict you.” Kimpadess Havarez's dark eyes seemed to probe Dju-Tesha, seeking faults. “I require complete and unconditional surrender.”

“I can make no demands, but I do request that as you assume the rule of this city and this nation that you treat its people as your own.” Dju-Tesha and Kao-Rhee had discussed what she might be able to ask of the new ruler of the land. It amounted to little. “I entreat you and your army to treat them as subjects, rather than a conquered people to be exploited.”

“It is my intention to rule a Fourth Great Dominion,” Kimpadess Havarez replied. “I cannot do so successfully if I consider the citizens of one dominion of greater value than those of another. This is the chief error most of the ruling zhans of the past made, and I will not repeat it.”

“Thank you.” Dju-Tesha inclined her head. She'd received as much as she could hope for and seen something of the depths of the kimpadess's thoughts for ruling the realm.

“You demand no assurances for your family?” the kimpadess asked.

“There is now only my mother, my husband, and my daughter.” Dju-Tesha held the child

tighter. “We are at your mercy, though I hope you will hold the servants, guards, and court advisers in your care.”

“A daughter.” Kimpadess Havarez stepped closer, examining the child.

“Yes,” Dju-Tesha said.

“She is lovely.” The kimpadess stepped back. “I will require that your armies in the south surrender immediately.”

“I sent word by horse messenger as your troops approached the city.” Dju-Tesha had needed to overrule the suggestions of Tigan Von-Tan, but Kao-Rhee had agreed with her in the matter. “My husband, Tigan Jangu Rhog-Kan, will receive his orders to surrender to your kenagal this day. Our armies are yours.”

“Impressive.” The kimpadess glanced at Kao-Rhee. “I must also insist on disbanding your council. I will replace it with one of my own, drawn largely from your people.” She gestured with her hand and the kenagal handed a piece of paper to Kao-Rhee. “These are the names of those who will serve on my council. Please see that they are brought to the palace to meet with me later this afternoon.”

“Of course, Kimpadess.” Kao-Rhee bowed.

Dju-Tesha suppressed expressing her surprise. The woman arrived with a list of Daeshen subjects to attend her new council. In all her reading of history, she never heard of a conqueror so prepared. Did the people on that list act as conspirators, or were they chosen without their knowledge to serve the new kimpadess? It chilled her to consider what other aspects of her new rule the kimpadess had already planned.

“I will, on a temporary basis, retain the advice of your prime councilor.” The kimpadess looked to Dju-Tesha rather than Kao-Rhee. “No one knows the palace or the land as well.”

“He will serve you as he has served me.” Dju-Tesha looked to Kao-Rhee. They had expected this. Hoped for it. It put Kao-Rhee in a dangerous position, but a position of influence.

“I think it is now time for the final formality.” Kimpadess Havarez stared at her.

A chill ran through Dju-Tesha at the woman’s look. Such confidence. How did she possess such confidence? She realized with great sadness that she could learn much from this woman who’d bested her and her counterpart in Tanshen. She sighed inwardly and used one arm to help her stand while the other remained clutching the child. She descended the steps of the dais and slowly knelt, still holding Pai-Yungay, who continued to doze, oblivious to the great shift in the powers of the realm taking place around her. Dju-Tesha did not know why the girl had not wakened to cry for her mother’s breast, but she silently thanked the child. Then she bowed her head.

“I, Regent Zhan, Kon Dju-Tesha, surrender my station and my nation without recourse to you, Kimpadess Tijaro Havarez.” Dju-Tesha spoke the required words deliberately and with great solemnity. Then she added her own. “May your rule be long and just.” She cared little for the former and already plotted against it, but she did truly hope for the latter.

“I accept your surrender.” Kimpadess Havarez looked even taller from where Dju-Tesha knelt. “Your current quarters in the palace will remain yours, and you will have free access to them. For the time being, you will not be allowed in the rest of the palace. In time, that may change. I will at

some point, require someone to rule this dominion in my stead. I would hope for it to be you. It is always good to have a woman on the throne. However, any attempt to subvert my rule in any way will be dealt with in the harshest manner.” The kimpadess turned her gaze to the child in Dju-Tesha’s arms for a moment. “I hope there is no misunderstanding in this.”

Dju-Tesha fought against her suddenly dry throat to speak.

“I understand fully. My loyalty has always been to the Daeshen people. I will do nothing to endanger any of them, particularly my child.”

“Thank you, Tahneff Dju-Tesha. Please rise.” The kimpadess extended a hand to help Dju-Tesha to her feet. She sensed great strength in the woman’s arm. She also noted the explicit demotion in rank. “You may retire to your quarters. I am sure, so soon after giving birth, you need your rest.”

“Thank you, Kimpadess.” Dju-Tesha bowed and began to walk from the room.

“You may all retire from the room.” Kimpadess Havarez raised her voice. “I will summon any of you I need to speak with. Councilor Kao-Rhee, please remain. I desire your advice.”

“Of course, Kimpadess,” Kao-Rhee said.

Dju-Tesha looked back to see Kao-Rhee’s head lowered as he approached the kimpadess. She’d expected the new ruler to assume her place upon the throne, but the woman seemed utterly uninterested in the symbolic seat of Daeshen power. Dju-Tesha looked away as her servants met her and led her back to her quarters, knowing that the part of her life as ruler had ended. Now she lived a new life, much more like her old life than she wished to admit. She would struggle against it, though. Would fight to restore the rightful heir to the throne. She looked down at the child in her arms. Guilt at the danger she placed the girl in stabbed at her chest. A risk required to set the world right. To see her son, the child she’d actually borne, seated upon the throne of the Daeshen Dominion.

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THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

A SPIDER spun its slender filament, descending from a web among the wooden ceiling beams of the small cabin, briefly illuminated among motes of dust by the amber light of sunset seeping through the narrow window along the back wall. Sketkee watched the spider with dispassionate interest, her thoughts consumed with assessing the various possible means of extracting herself from her predicament before the arrival of dawn and the departure of the vessel confining her. As she'd been ruminating on these very thoughts without cease throughout the day, the spider offered a welcome distraction that she nevertheless ignored. A spider would not help her escape from her cabin.

All of the various plans Sketkee considered to affect her own release suffered from the same mortal flaw — her body. While the heat she felt in her abdomen had not increased, suggesting that the infection she clearly suffered did not worsen, she still could not stand on her own for more than a minute. She'd tested her strength earlier that day and managed to walk to the door and ascertain that if she wished to pass through it unseen, she needed to pick the lock that held her in and kept prying human eyes out. While she might be able to make it to the upper deck, she would have to do so unseen, likely at night, and need to get off the ship and across the docks unnoticed, or at least unmolested. She had no cloak to conceal her features, though she could try wrapping herself in a blanket. And even if she got off the ship, she did not possess the stamina in her current condition to make it back to the pilgrim town. And, assuming she did manage to escape, Viktik would no doubt come looking for her. Which created a new set of problems.

She studied the spider, recognizing a metaphorical kinship with the fly trapped in the web it descended from. Held tight with nothing to do but await the inevitable. Although, she did admit, her long-term prospects exceeded those of the fly. If she found treatment on a rakthor blockade vessel, she would ultimately be well enough to return to the pilgrim town. Would Kadmallin have left by then? She did not think so. He would stay until absolutely convinced of her death. And the blockade would keep Kellatra and the artifact in place as well. It might take longer than she wished, but she could eventually reunite with them.

Footsteps in the hallway refocused her thoughts. A key slid into the lock of the door, and Viktik stepped into the room a moment later. She noticed the wind from the motion of the door blew the spider off its intended course and into the nearby wall. Again, she knew how it felt to find one's plans so easily disrupted by Viktik. She also considered that the fever attendant with the infection might be influencing her mind that she found herself so frequently associating her life with those of insects.

“How is your physical state?” Viktik placed a bowl of soup on the small table near the bed.

“It shows no improvement, but I sense no deterioration.” Sketkee sniffed at the soup. Some manner of beef broth. Her stomach rumbled in response to the smell.

“We will depart at first light,” Viktik said. “The captain assures me it should take no more than half a day to reach the blockade line.”

“I have been thinking about what to do after my return to health.” Sketkee thought it best to prepare Viktik for her plans. “Once I am healed well enough, I intend to return to my survey of the pilgrims and follow them to the Forbidden Realm. As I’ve said, I still believe there is much to be gained by an examination of that continent.”

“You may return and seek passage to the Forbidden Realm as you choose.” Viktik’s condescending judgment of that notion sounded clear in his voice. “However, once we have disembarked, this ship will sail south along the Tanshen coast. And there are no Alliance ships that will sail to Tanjii. You will need to take passage with me on the first returning ship back to Ranikttak. From there, you can seek passage to Tanjii once more. By then, the blockade may have ended.”

Sketkee considered Viktik’s revelation. It would be months before she might get back to the Iron Realm. And if the blockade continued, she could not reach it in any event. Unless she tried to sail to the far eastern coast and then sail around the southern Tanfen Sea. That added more months. Kadmallin and Kellatra would surely not wait that long. The woman would find some way past the blockade. And what would Kadmallin do? Return to Punderra? Wait for reasons of human sentimentality in Tanjii? Thoughts of Kadmallin took her fevered mind to memories of a mirrored event in the Kytain Dominion years prior.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO

WIND SWEPT the tall grass of the plains in rolling waves — a sea of wild grain swaying and undulating under an overcast sky. A circle of matted grass blanketed the crown of the hill. Sketkee sat in that circle, facing two humans from the Sakyoth tribe. The slender female with wrinkled, dark-russet skin that gave an approximation to her advanced age sat beside a young male of no more than twenty: tall, with broad shoulders, pale skin, yellow hair, and blue eyes. The leaders of their tribe. The very ones she had been attempting to help negotiate water rights to a local stream with the neighboring Thedshawk tribe. The one that now held Kadmallin captive.

“We can do nothing,” Lintartinth, the female, said.

“You could explain that our actions were intended to spare lives.” Sketkee found reasoning with humans a taxing endeavor in the best of circumstances, but appealing to the rationality of tribal people, steeped in custom and superstition, stretched even her considerable patience.

“Your actions offended both our peoples.” The male, apparently called Tallo for the color of his hair, nearly growled at her.

“No offense was intended, only the preservation of life and the continuation of the hill-meeting.” The tribes in this region of the Kytain Dominion had no word that directly translated to negotiations. All of the important meetings between adversaries took place at the top of the tallest available hill — presumably so both could see the approach of enemy warriors. It had not escaped her notice that Lintartinth and Tallo insisted on meeting her on a hill. Apparently, they now

considered her a potential enemy.

“There are only two ways to free your man,” Lintartinth said. “Battle or ransom.”

“We will not fight for you and we will not pay ransom for your man,” Tallo added.

“What form of ransom might they accept?” Sketkee had a limited stash of gold coins on her person and could only additionally offer her sword. However, the plains people had little use for gold except in making jewelry. They bartered for all their needs. Swords were uncommon among the spear-wielding people, but she might be able to convince the leader of the Thedshawk tribe it had ceremonial value.

“There are only three kinds of ransom,” Lintartinth said.

“Food, horses, and women,” Tallo concluded for her.

“Would you be willing to sell me horses? I have gold.” It seemed an unlikely prospect, but Sketkee knew she needed to offer.

“We have gold.” Tallo did his best to look menacing. “If we want your gold, we will take it.”

His size and fierceness might have impressed a human. Sketkee found it elicited an irrational desire to strike the man. She repressed that impulse.

“It is apparent that you can be of no use to me.” Sketkee stood. From the looks of the two humans, they were accustomed to others waiting for them to stand. She had no time for pointless human ceremony. “By turning away my assistance and that of my companion, you have ensured that there will be no further hill-meetings with the Thedshawk tribe. Your only means of access to the stream you need for yourselves and your livestock will be through battle. They outnumber you and they are more skilled warriors. You will lose and what is left of your tribe will be banished from the valley if not hunted down for ear trophies. You are a deeply irrational people. I hope you survive long enough to abandon that disability. I doubt we will ever meet again, but in the event that we do, I hope that I have been able to rescue my companion, for if I have not, I may be moved to an act of irrationality myself, which I assure, you will not survive.”

Sketkee turned and strode down the hillside. She had no other option left to her. She would have to rescue Kadmallin in the most human of manners.

THE PRESENT

“EAT AND REST.”

Viktik’s voice called Sketkee back from the past. He stared at her when she did not respond and did not move to take the bowl of soup.

“After you have been delivered to the ship’s physician, I believe it best if we end our association.” Viktik continued to stare at her as he spoke. “Our interactions have produced nothing but consternation for both of us and generated the potential for significant professional embarrassment.”

“As you wish.” Sketkee was not offended by the request for an outcome she secretly worked toward herself.

“I must admit, I do not understand your fascination with the Forbidden Realm or the delusional

humans who seek to go there.” Viktik looked genuinely confused.

“Every event has explainable causes.” Sketkee had begun to wonder at the source and wisdom of her interest in those twin topics as well, but she knew she needed to answer his question. “There must be a cause and explanation for the human dreams and the star appearing in the sky. Mass delusion and coincidence are the most likely of causes, but a true philosopher requires certainty for judgment. And as for the Forbidden Realm, if it is possible to make passage to that long-denied continent, it should be rakthors who explore its reaches in the interest of knowledge, not humans who will no doubt cover it with pointless temples to their non-existent gods.”

Viktik considered this for a moment before speaking. “If you believe this, you should approach the Central Governing Committee and appeal for funding of a full expedition.”

“I will consider that suggestion.” Sketkee would do no such thing. The stultifying, bureaucratic pace of such a process would exceed any patience she still possessed.

“Until the morning. Rest well.” Viktik left the room, locking the door behind him.

Sealed in her small cabin, tasteless bowl of beef broth still steaming at her bedside, Sketkee stared at the ceiling. Her options for escape had narrowed down to one. She spotted the spider crawling back up the wall to its web and its meal. Nothing, she knew, could save that struggling fly from its destiny as food for the spider. Her only hope of salvation lay with Kadmallin, who now had until dawn to somehow find and rescue her. As the spider attacked its enshrouded prey, Sketkee avoided the calculations on the probability of Kadmallin’s success and closed her eyes instead.

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THE CARNIVAL



LEOTIN

FRESHLY STAMPED grass, the sweat of humans and horses, animal droppings, newly dug latrines, smoke from campfires, the steam of stews brewing cow, deer, and horse meat with onions and root vegetables in a pot, oil applied to blades and armor, tent canvas damp and molded from too many nights in the rain with not enough time to dry in the sun — the smells of an army camp settling in for the night. The men of the Atheton army moved with a swiftness of purpose; surprising, given the length of the march that day. Leotin watched them as his own people assembled the makings of the stage and carnival camp within the confines of the larger military settlement. His folk did not move as fast. They'd be lucky to finish before the sun sank at the end of the Old Border Road. His carnival was not used to the pace set by a marching army. Even their recent hurried flight from the kellitsara creatures did not match the speed set by Kenagal Tancoldo. The man marched as though he planned to reach Tanjii by the end of the week.

It would be nearly three weeks before they reached Tanjii, even at their current pace. They moved quicker now that two-thirds of the army had split off, a third heading north to fight the Daeshen armies and another third heading south to attack the Tanshen forces. He doubted they needed as many men as they had, especially with the seers who rode with them. A single well-trained battle seer held the worth of several hundred men. He'd read stories of battles waged with seers, but even in Juparti and Punderra, the practice waned with the lessening of conflicts between the various local rulers. A strong central state discouraged provincial rhagas from holding their own seers for battle. And with well-established borders and trade between Punderra and Juparti, the rhexans of the two dominions had little cause to build such seer-centric armies. He doubted either of the dominions could stand against the kimpadess if she chose to invade them. He hoped it did not come to that. He also hoped he and his people were far away if it did.

Unfortunately, it looked as though he and the carnival would be in the thick of invading Tanjii, or at least observing the invasion from a distance. He hoped the latter. He preferred to see his battles on stage, with wooden swords.

"The kenagal wishes to see you."

He turned to see a soldier approaching across the matted rye grass. How many meals had they stolen from the local men and women by crushing their hard-tended grain with the army encampments? The man did not wait for a reply and turned back to the rows of tents as soon as Leotin acknowledged his presence. He followed the man to one of the larger pavilions in the compound and waited to be admitted.

"Leotin," the kenagal's voice called from within.

He entered the tent to find Kenagal Tancoldo standing behind a table covered with a map of the Iron Realm. He waved for Leotin to join him.

"Tea?" Kenagal Tancoldo asked.

“Thank you, yes, Kenagal.” Leotin always found it best to accept any proffered hospitality in a negotiation as it might be the only display of generosity. He had no illusions. Every encounter with Kenagal Tancoldo represented a bargaining of some sort.

“I have received word from the kimpadess.” Kenagal Tancoldo poured the tea himself from a small blue and white ceramic pot into a dainty cup. Leotin found it disarming to have the kenagal rather than a servant pour his tea. He suspected a silent purpose behind the action. “She is very pleased that your carnival has been united with our cause. Or should I say, reunited?”

The kenagal held his small teacup in his large hand, not drinking it.

“I am pleased as well.” Leotin took a sip of his tea, the heat stinging his tongue, the flavor of black leaf and blackcurrant filling his nose. He now recognized the new trap he’d fallen into not as one of metal to clamp limbs but as a pit of wooden pikes to impale him. He knew a little of how the kellitsara in that barn had felt.

“With the kimpadess’s missive comes new orders. For both of us.” The kenagal took a long sip of the tea, seeming to savor its flavor and heat. Leotin admitted that he admired the kenagal’s zest for dramatics. They were not as fully effective on him, but as his familiarity with theatrics were largely limited to the stage, the kenagal’s act still struck with considerable impact.

“I serve at the pleasure of the kimpadess,” Leotin said. Best to make clear his desire for obedience.

“As do we all.” Kenagal Tancoldo’s tone spoke to an ultimate authority holding sway over both their lives. Leotin saw the implication of the words. If a high kenagal’s life could be held by puppet threads, those that tied Leotin to action would be just as binding, but more easily severed. “You and your carnival will leave at dawn and proceed with all haste to Tanjii. The army will depart later in the day and move at half pace for the remainder of the distance. This will allow you to arrive in Tanjii in a little over two weeks, and the army to arrive several days later. Plenty of time to ensure no relation is seen between the two events. Additionally, your outlanders will be uncaged to accompany you. They are to be the center of your performances. As night jays may be spotted within the city as emissaries, I will be sending the seer Keerthor with you to guarantee that we remain in contact. The loss of his bone-giant has left him displaced. He will handle communications.”

“I see. Thank you, kenagal.” Leotin saw more than he wished to. The kimpadess sent him forward into Tanjii as a poisoned bait for a different trap. Leotin and his carnival had been to Tanjii many times and were well known there. Known enough to be trusted. They always performed for a private audience of the Circle of Elders and their families. It was no coincidence that the kenagal insisted that the outlanders be central to his show. They were to kill the elders should city leaders refuse to capitulate to the demands of the kimpadess and the army that arrived outside its walls.

“Saptan Tioga will also escort you,” Kenagal Tancoldo said. “To make certain ... all goes as it should.”

A mission as night-daggers with spies within his camp. Leotin nearly laughed at how far he now stood from his planned escape to Juparti just days ago. He bowed his head to cover the dismay on his face.

“His presence and his counsel will be much appreciated,” Leotin said. He took another sip of tea as he tried to discern how much he might hope to learn from the kenagal that he had not already gleaned. “If it is not improper to ask, kenagal, the city of Tanjii has repelled all invaders attempting to enter through the Kai Pass of the Fojao Mountains. How...?” He let the question trail off, tilting the tone of his voice into uncertainty, knowing he did not need to actually voice the query, merely imply it.

“You may ask any question you wish,” the kenagal said, “but I will only answer those you need to know the answers to.”

“Of course, kenagal.” Leotin bowed his head with the appropriate contrition. “My apologies if I have offended.”

“There is no offense as it is an obvious question that anyone might wonder.” Kenagal Tancoldo placed his teacup on the table. “Let your mind rest in the knowledge that the kimpadess grips all the chains of fortune tightly.”

That knowledge did not set Leotin’s mind at ease but only exacerbated its discomfort. Did the kimpadess hope to force the army through the pass with the aid of her seers? And would that be before or after Leotin and his outlanders killed the Circle of Elders? He hoped it unnecessary. He suspected the kimpadess had other measures in place. She might have an armada sailing around the coast to attack the city from the sea. It also occurred to him that she might have placed partisans and saboteurs within the ranks of the pilgrims passing through Tanjii. Or she might have bribed Tanjii officials. He did not know the kimpadess well enough to guess at her strategy, but he understood her well enough to realize she would hold and rule the city of Tanjii within weeks, and that if he did not play the part assigned him, he would find himself permanently removed from the cast of her great story.

“If you have no more questions, you should inform your people and make ready to depart with the dawn.” Kenagal Tancoldo stared at Leotin, waiting.

“Thank you for conveying my instructions, and thank you for the tea, Kenagal.” Leotin bowed as he placed the teacup on the table. The look in the kenagal’s eye as he left let him know that the man had not missed the phrasing of his statement. It positioned the kenagal as messenger and himself as an equal. While not true in current circumstances, they both labored for the kimpadess in their own ways. Leotin suspected that if he wished to survive this new mission and keep his people alive through it, he needed to start thinking of the kimpadess not as his master and himself an unwilling slave, but rather as his ruler and himself a trusted confidant and adviser. A phrase from the *Saga of the Fallen Lands* came to mind. “*Better to be the water of the great wave than the village it crashes upon.*”

As he walked back through the encampment to the ring of wagons demarcating the carnival, he considered the words to inform his people of their separation from the army. He’d need to think of a plausible reason for it. He’d also need to inform the outlanders of their new role as night-daggers. As it did not differ greatly from their present position as scouts, he hoped they did not balk at the assignment. He did not wish to consider what might happen if they decided to abandon the carnival and he could not fulfill the kimpadess’s wishes. He also considered how he might use

the soul catcher, Kanma, to his advantage. Could she replace the seer Keerthor or Saptan Tioga? And how might he use that to free them all if she did? Where could he run with his carnival from Tanjii to escape the kimpadess? Only one destination came to mind and it chilled him to think of it — The Forbidden Realm.

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

THE FIRES of sunset reflected along the western waves of the Zha Ocean, mirroring the flames waving through the air — torches held aloft by angry men and women shouting for justice and raktbor blood. The near-glass at Kadmallin's eye showed him the mob of nearly two hundred people rioting on the docks, calling threats and curses at a long, well-loaded cargo ship. Guards on the docks tried to control the crowd, but most seemed more interested in avoiding the rocks being thrown than hindering the advancement toward the ship. The gangplank, already pulled back in precaution, sat along the ship's deck. Sailors stood at the railing, looking fearful, ducking rocks, and casting back the occasional torch sent their way.

"You certainly do know how to create a riot." Kadmallin handed the near-glass to Rankarus. They lay on their bellies atop a small hill south of the city piers. Kellatra and Abananthus lay on either side of them.

"You should see how he riles the children." Kellatra sounded more impressed than amused.

"It won't be long." Rankarus put the near-glass to his eye. "The captain will give the order any moment."

"I saw no sign of Viktik," Kadmallin said. "Do you spot him?"

"No," Rankarus said. "He's probably locked in his cabin."

"Let's hope it's not the same cabin as Sketkee." Kadmallin worried again at the multitude of variables he could not know nor control.

"They're casting off." Abananthus pointed. Sailors threw mooring lines to the docks and pulled others to the deck as they used long wooden poles to push the ship back from the pier and the raging crowd. Once far enough from the docks, the crew began raising the three main sails.

"Well done, Rankarus." Kadmallin allowed himself the hint of a smile. The first part of the plan succeeded.

"Well done so far. We should get to the boat." Rankarus stood and helped Kellatra to her feet.

"It'll be full night soon," Kellatra said. "We don't want to lose them if they run black."

"How far do you think the captain will take the ship out?" Abananthus asked as he brushed dust from his shirt and trousers.

"At least a stride or two." Kadmallin stood and accepted the near-glass from Rankarus. "Far enough to relax about the mob at the docks, but close enough for the anchors to find bottom easily."

He led the way down the hillside in the dusky light. By the time they reached the small rowboat on the beach, darkness already cloaked the sea, clouds hiding the stars and moons. A thin peninsula of rock camouflaged their position from the harbor. They pulled the vessel into the water and climbed aboard. The motion of the small boat between the rise and fall of the waves set Kadmallin's stomach into its own form of riot. He held his teeth tight against the desire to vomit. Reluctantly, he began to reach for the oars, when he remembered Kellatra.

“Have you done this before?” he asked.

“No.” Her face held the imperturbable mask of calm associated with seers holding The Sight. “But how hard can it be?”

Without warning, the small vessel lurched forward, propelled by unseen oars across the ocean waters. Kadmallin held tight to the side of the boat. The unnatural motion unnerved him even more than being on open water. Beside him, Abananthus seemed nearly as disquieted as himself.

“This is wonderful.” Rankarus sounded giddy as he patted his wife’s leg where he sat beside her at the front of the small craft.

Kadmallin tried but could not find a way to enjoy the ride. The boat slowed as the shadowed form of the cargo ship came into view around the rocky jut of land at the edge of the harbor. It sat with its port side facing the shore. The sails came down slowly. Lanterns moved about the deck and lit several of the windows. He noted the dim light from the particular window they sought at the stern.

“I’ll slow us and wait until they have doused more lights and settled for the night.” Kellatra brought the small boat to a halt.

Kadmallin expected them to drift, but the boat stayed relatively still as the water rose and dipped around them. He realized Kellatra held the boat in place with The Sight. Thoughts of The Sight and the desire to distract himself from his nauseated stomach brought him to a related topic, one he’d not had time to address in the previous days with the constant search for Sketkee.

“Kellatra.” Kadmallin’s voice sounded weak in his own ears. He swallowed and spoke again as she turned to him. “Have you learned anything new regarding the artifact?”

“There has been little time to examine it,” Kellatra said. “It responds to my probing as it did before, but it does not reveal its purpose. I suspect it’s intended to somehow amplify a seer’s power in some distinct way.”

“So, a weapon, then?” Kadmallin wondered what a seer with an ancient urris weapon might be capable of. The thought did little to settle his stomach.

“Possibly.” Kellatra put her hand to her chin in thought. “I think it’s more a tool than a weapon. But I don’t know if it is a sword or a hammer or a needle. Once we have Sketkee returned to us, and we’re safely on our way to the Forbidden Realm, there will be plenty of time to unlock the nature of its purpose.”

“You trust this captain?” Kadmallin asked. The plan held for them to meet up the coast with the ship they’d paid for passage aboard once they’d freed Sketkee. That vessel would soon be sneaking from the docks of the pilgrim town with Jadaloo and the children aboard.

“We don’t have to trust him,” Rankarus said. “He knows not to cross us.”

“I explained my abilities and promised him I would hold him responsible if something happened to my children or he decided to abscond with our fee.” Kellatra’s voice made clear that crossing her held severe consequences. Kadmallin wondered what Kellatra might do to someone who harmed her children. Oddly, that thought did calm his stomach.

“The lanterns are being doused.” Abananthus pointed to the cargo ship across the black water. They waited a few more minutes, then Kellatra once more put the boat in motion, heading

straight for the starboard side of the ship near the stern. They approached silently, the waves smacking the side of the boat the only notice of their progress. Kellatra effortlessly guided the small craft to near the rear anchor chain sinking into the dark waters. Abananthus wrapped a rope around the chain to secure the boat and looked to the others as he picked up a bow sitting across the seating benches and began to string it. A quiver of arrows sat nearby. He had the easy part of the plan. Shoot anyone who saw the rowboat before they called an alarm.

“You’ll be fine with that if you need it?” Kadmallin understood he could do nothing regardless of the man’s response, but for some irrational reason, he found he needed reassurances as they put the plan into action.

“I spent a year living wild in the woods in my youth.” Abananthus nocked an arrow. “It’s been a while since I shot rabbits in the head, but I can manage at this distance even at night.”

“Shooting a man is different from shooting a rabbit,” Kadmallin said.

“As well I know.” Abananthus looked away momentarily. *“To take another’s life is to etch their name upon your soul until it is burned away by your own demise.”*

Kadmallin did not recognize the source of the quote, but he understood the meaning with great familiarity.

“Ready?” Kellatra asked.

Kadmallin and Rankarus nodded, their feet rising from the bottom of the boat. His stomach clenched involuntarily as the three of them rose through the air, up past the anchor hole in the side of the ship and finally to the edge of the railing. They hovered there a moment, their heads peeking over the lip of the side rail. Only one lamp remained lit, illuminating the crew, spread out and covered with blankets across the deck, looking much like the canvas-wrapped bundles of cargo they slept between. Seemingly satisfied that no one noticed their arrival, Kellatra guided them up the last few feet through the air and set them gently on the deck near the wall of the aftcastle.

Kadmallin drew a dagger from his belt and led the way toward the steep stairs to the lower level. Rankarus took up his position as watchman, squatting and leaning against the door to the aftcastle cabin, pretending to be a crewman fallen asleep. Kadmallin paused at the top of the stairs a moment to let his eyes adjust. He knew Kellatra could create light to guide them, but they did not want to give any hint of their presence. His eyes once more seeing shapes in the shadows, he cautiously stepped down the ladder-like stairs to the short corridor on the lower level. The floorboards of the lower deck creaked against their weight for the first few steps and then ceased. It took Kadmallin a moment to realize that Kellatra must be using The Sight to keep the wood from making sound. He reached the door to the cabin he hoped held Sketkee behind its wooden frame. He tried the handle and found it locked. Kellatra placed one hand on his shoulder as she held the other out toward the door.

“Try again,” she whispered.

As Kadmallin turned the handle of the cabin door, and the lock clicked free, he thought of the rescue years before when it had been him held captive.

TWENTY-ONE YEARS AGO

THE COOL air that accompanied sundown on the plains wafted through the open flap of the tent, bringing the scent of wild grass and wood smoke. The breeze chilled the sweat beading on Kadmallin's brow. He savored it — a cool drink of water after a day of dry thirst. The breeze did nothing for the ache in his throat, but it calmed him. He could not struggle with the ropes that bound him. Could not formulate a plan of escape. Could only wait and hope. A man who preferred action and motion to stillness, he despised waiting. He hated hoping nearly as much. What chance really existed that Sketkee might find him on the plains and barter for his life before the Thedshawk tribe began roasting him alive for their yirr hersh ceremony? Sketkee might have calculated the odds for him. He would have told her not to. In fact, he found the only positive aspect of the situation the fact that Sketkee did not lie trussed up beside him. At least she would be spared the painful death awaiting him. Another advantage occurred to him — fortunately, the tribe would roast him to death and then eat him rather than severing parts from him to cook while he watched and waited in agony to die. A death by fire could be relatively painless if the wind favored him. Smoke. He needed to breathe the smoke as fully as possible and let it render him dead or close enough before the flames got to him. Yes. His best and only plan — inhale deeply.

Kadmallin sighed, wondering if he should be using his last minutes in some more fruitful fashion, recounting life events, taking stock of his successes and failures, accounting those he'd wronged and those who'd wronged him. While the prospect of such a life review offered some distraction, it seemed as depressing as the knowledge of his imminent demise. His deficiencies weighed too heavily on him to consider for long. His failure to return in time to save his beloved Nennea chief among them. Would he meet her again in death? Would they be reunited for all eternity? He did not believe in gods or an afterlife, but he found himself hopeful he might be proved wrong. Nennea had believed in the Pashist gods, but that faith spoke of reentry of the essential essence into the world. Had she already returned? Did she wait to return with him after his own eventual death? He could not know. Other regrets came to him as well. He never spoke to Sketkee of his affection for her. Never confessed his desire. He wondered what she might have said. Might have done. The return of a familiar daydream calmed him as it transported him from the realities of his bondage.

The cries of men and the sight of flames rising in the air called him from his thoughts and into the moment. The cries became shrieks and screams. A moment later, Sketkee rushed into the tent, a bloodied sword in each hand. She dashed across the dirt floor, knelt at his side, and began slicing through the ropes binding him.

"I am pleased to find you still alive," Sketkee said.

"Not nearly as pleased as I am to see you." Kadmallin's dry throat croaked the emotion-clouded words. She'd come for him. It made no rational sense for a rakthor to risk her life for a human, but he should have known she would. He winced as he moved his now free arms and legs. She helped him to his feet, steadying him as his legs trembled.

"Can you walk?" Sketkee asked.

"Yes." Kadmallin forced his legs to respond to his wishes. "How many are outside?"

“Six fewer than when I arrived.” Sketkee handed him his sword. “I found your sword. Can you use it?”

“Well enough.” Kadmallin grabbed the hilt of the blade, its weight fighting against the quivering muscles of his arm.

“We should depart.” Sketkee jammed her sword into the leather siding along the back of the tent and drew the blade down, cutting a new opening. She slid through the rent material and pulled him out behind her.

He could not run, but he stumbled as quickly as possible as they dashed from one tent to another. They came across two men with spears who cried out and attacked. Sketkee silenced one while Kadmallin did his best to fend off the other. A warrior with a spear could offer strong resistance to one with a sword, but not from close quarters. The second man fell with Sketkee’s blade through his neck. The calls of the men alerted to their location by the now dead spearmen grew close. Sketkee spun and bent at the waist, spewing a stream of fire at a nearby tent, sending it up in flames.

“You should save your fire.” Kadmallin lowered his sword. His arms, bound for so long, couldn’t hold the blade upright any longer.

“We need a distraction.” Sketkee turned and belched fire onto another tent farther eastward. Then she took his hand and pulled him toward the west.

They stayed low and in the shadows. From the voices they heard getting fainter behind them, Sketkee’s ruse had worked, and the Thedshawk tribe ran east in pursuit of their escaped meal and its rescuer.

When they’d surmounted a hill at the far western end of the valley, out of sight of the Thedshawk encampment, they stopped for Kadmallin to rest. He felt a certain amount of pride that Sketkee had not needed to carry him. She certainly would if they went any farther.

“Thank you,” Kadmallin said between gasps of breath. “Thank you for finding me. For saving me.”

“How could I not?” Darkness shrouded Sketkee’s face, but he heard the intent in her voice, and it surprised him. “You are irreplaceable. Your death would be an unacceptable absence.”

He knew her words represented a great expression of consideration for a rakthor. Not human affection, but as close as he might hope for. He grinned, nearly laughing.

“Hopefully, I can repay you someday.”

“Let us hope that never becomes necessary.”

THE PRESENT

PAINTED PINE parted from polished oak, the hazy light of a lantern skittering between the gap, revealing the contents of the room once barred by the door. Across a small cabin with only a chair and a table for furniture, Sketkee sat in a narrow bed, propped up by several pillows. Kadmallin pushed the door open wide, sliding quickly inside, Kellatra right behind him. She closed the door as he went to Sketkee’s side. He grinned at her. He wanted to embrace her, but she would

chide him for wasting time with a useless human expression of emotion. He settled for taking her hand. She did not seem to mind as much as he'd expected.

"It is a great relief to see you. I began to suspect that you had not found my signal." Sketkee's voice sounded weak.

"We nearly didn't." Kadmallin found his own voice creaking, for different reasons. "You have Rankarus to thank for that."

"As well as the riot that led me to this." Sketkee pointed to her bandaged abdomen.

"He feels very poorly about that," Kellatra whispered from the door.

"Can you walk?" Kadmallin did not like the size of bandaged area on her stomach. He wished to examine the wound and question her as to its origin, but they did not have time.

"Yes, but not far. Which is why I did not attempt my own escape." Sketkee released his hand and used it to push herself up to a sitting position, slowly swinging her feet to the floor. She looked to Kellatra. "Can you heal me?"

"Yes. I think." Kellatra frowned. "But not here. It'll take time. And I'll need help to know what condition I'm restoring things to."

"Later then." Sketkee stood.

Kadmallin helped her up and steadied her.

"Clothes?" he asked.

"Only what you see." Sketkee gestured to the woolen trousers she wore, too short in the leg. Kadmallin saw no boots in evidence in the room either. "Lean on me."

"Gladly." She placed an arm around him, and they started toward the door.

Kellatra held up a hand to halt them. She placed an ear to the door.

"Footsteps," Kellatra whispered. She paused, listening again. "Voices."

Kadmallin looked around the room. The window at the rear offered the only egress. Too small for him to squeeze through and definitely too tiny for Sketkee. Kellatra, with her slender frame, might be able to wiggle through, but that did them no good. Kellatra could surely blast open a hole wide enough for them to exit, but that would ruin the subterfuge at the center of their rescue. They could fight, but that, too, revealed them.

"Viktik," Kellatra mouthed from the door. She placed her hand on the handle briefly before stepping away to stand beside him and Sketkee.

Fighting seemed the only option left. Possibly Kellatra could render the rakthor unconscious before he saw them. If not ... Kadmallin gripped the hilt of his dagger tightly.

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

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

THE THRONE



RHOG-KAN

CAMPFIRES DOTTED the shadowed fields in front of the night-soaked forest, torches moving to and fro in regular patterns — glowflies set to unseen purpose in the gloom. Campfires and lanterns nearer to hand gave light to similar surroundings. Rhog-Kan stood on a slight rise at the edge of the connected fields spreading south, watching the enemy encampment. Dawn would bring a defined end to the struggle of the past days. An end he hoped to avoid without further death of his men. This seemed unlikely, unless he chose to act upon his own will and do the thing he dreaded, the thing that he had never thought to do, the action his pride railed against.

They'd gained word of the approaching Atheton force of 10,000 men marching fast from the south only hours before their arrival. He'd had scouts in the field to warn him of a Tanshen retrenchment, but none ever returned to warn of an Atheton army. What information he'd been able to gather led him into retreat. While his army still mustered some 10,000 men-a-foot and 2000 cavalry, he suspected the Atheton army bore blade and armor of night steel. He assumed that while a rhegan in Juparti might break tradition to sell night steel to the Tanshen zhan, he would not likely intentionally sell defective weapons and armor. It spoke of duplicity. He'd not known enough to suspect the origin of that deceit, but the arrival of the Atheton Army via the Old Border Road explained the mystery well enough. It also suggested that the new invaders would carry real night steel.

Given his options, he issued the order for retreat, hoping to find some tactically advantageous terrain from which to make a stand against the invaders. He did not need to consult his maps to realize the futility of the action. The expanse of farming fields he now stood upon, with a slight rise on the northern edge, offered his best option for defense. It pained him to know that the wheat, rye, corn, and kivit would be trampled and wasted rather than go to feed his men. He'd reached the fields at sunset and sent his cavalry to charge the flanks of the enemy army as soon as they breached the forest, hoping to catch them off balance, to even the odds between them. It had been a massive misjudgment and strategic disaster. As his armored men thundered across the fields, leaping low, stone fences demarcating separate farming plots, the Athetons attacked. Not with arrows or spears but with an unseen weapon. Daeshen men and horses flew upward into the air in groups of ten and twelve — children's toys cast high aloft only to come tumbling down in bone-breaking wails of pain. A quarter of the cavalry wounded in less than a minute. He did not need to give an order for them to retreat. They fled the fields as swiftly as they'd arrived.

Seers. The Athetons fielded seers and night steel. His men could not stand against such a force. They would be slaughtered. He thought of splitting his men and attacking in smaller regiments the way he had with the Tanshen, but he allowed himself some honesty. He'd been lucky. Fortunate the false night steel failed the Tanshen when it did. His men were exhausted. Tired of fighting and tired of war. It would require a brilliance of battlefield combat from both his men and himself to

even fight the enemy to a draw. He had never read of such a force being defeated by any defenders. If he'd had a week to prepare, it might have been possible. Now he offered the men who fought for him only death in battle or the surrender of their dominion.

Of course, the true surrender of the nation would take place at the palace. With Dju-Tesha. He'd gained word of the army marching on the capital only shortly before learning of the army marching toward him. Had she surrendered already? Did she live? And what of their child? Why had word not yet come? It bore no rational understanding, but he knew if word arrived of his wife's death, he would call his men to fight until the last of them fell. He could abide surrender, but not the death of his beloved. His men might live with defeat by the Athetons, but how could they call themselves Daeshen if they allowed the death of their zhan to go unchallenged? He wondered at the terms of a surrender. Would he be allowed to return to the palace and Dju-Tesha? Would he be executed to avoid difficulties, to forestall any possible rebellion?

"Sir." An aide stepped up beside him bearing a small package. "A rider has just come with word from the palace."

Rhog-Kan took the parchment-bound package from the aide and held it to the firelight. Addressed to him, it bore the wax seal of the throne. He opened it to find a letter and a book. He recognized the clean and elegant lines of the script as Dju-Tesha's. It made him think of the notes she'd left for him in the pockets of his vests and jackets, and he missed her more in that moment than he had for weeks. The letter itself conveyed little, but much of importance.

"My tigan, my love, for the sake of our dominion, the subjects within its borders, and the welfare of our daughter, I order you to surrender to the Atheton kenagal with all haste and whatever terms are demanded. We must think to the future and security of the people. The Atheton army and its leader approach the city. I will surrender when she arrives. Do not hesitate to do the same. I hope that we are reunited soon, so you may hold our daughter. Yours in love and devotion, your wife, Regent Zhan, Kon Dju-Tesha."

As he had expected, and as he had hoped and as he'd feared. He had spent twenty years fighting a war with the Tanshen only to be defeated in a day without a battle by the Athetons. He might have been overcome with self-pity and recrimination were it not for two words within the letter — *our daughter*. He had a child. A girl. The hope he'd carried to be blessed with a boy evaporated in rejoicing at the birth of a girl. A girl posed no threat to the line of succession. A boy would be smothered in his sleep or poisoned with drops in the mouth or ears. A girl stood a chance of living long enough to be loved by her father and mother. He wondered again what chance he and Dju-Tesha stood in the same regard.

He looked at the book he still held in his hand. Strange that she had not mentioned it in the letter. *A History of Leaders before the First Great Dominion*. An odd choice to send him. She always included a book with her communications. Usually a slender volume of love poems with particular favorites marked with red ribbon. Why this book at this moment with no mention of it in her written words? He'd read the book, many years ago. Learning that she also read the book had been one of the first things to attract him to her. As he flipped through the pages, a small, pressed corn flower fell out and floated to the ground. He held the page open where the flower

once sat. A title marked a new chapter. *“The Victory and Plight of Rhegan Taranonus.”*

He knew the story. A rhegan invaded by a superior army and forced to surrender. But in surrendering, the rhegan disbanded his army, setting them into small squads which blended in with the peoples of the local towns, waiting to be called again to fight, at the right moment, years later, when the invading rhegan grew complacent and incautious.

He grinned, his chest inflamed with his love for Dju-Tesha. She sent him two messages — surrender now but prepare to fight later. He tucked the letter into the vest beneath his jacket and tossed the book into the fire. He had until dawn. He knew the men to choose among his staff and his soldiers. He saw the orders they each needed to receive forming in his mind. He would not need excuses to explain their absence to the Atheton kenagal, as there would soon be a rumor set among his army that he intended them to fight to the death in the morning, followed by the rebellious whispered suggestions that men who fled did not need to die. That they should fight for their nation at a later, more advantageous, time.

His grin broadened. By sunrise, he would have few men left standing behind him when he surrendered to the Atheton commander. It would be an embarrassment for his reputation, but one gladly suffered for his nation, his wife, and the dream of a future Daeshen dominion free from the yoke of Atheton rule.

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THE SEER



RANKARUS

THE SNORES of sleeping men became a choir of muffled voices, atonal and off key, a droning song of slumber. The noises of the sleeping crewmen ground at Rankarus's mind, but he welcomed it. Men who snored did not become witnesses. And men who slept were men that no one needed to kill. He fingered the hilt of one of the twin daggers at his belt. He hoped he'd have no need of them. He listened closely to the sounds coming up the stairs from the corridor on the lower deck. Heard Kellatra and Kadmallin walking along the hall. Trying the door. A pause. Then the door opened, and they stepped inside. So far, so well.

Another noise rose above the din of snoring crew to catch his attention. He kept his head down, pretending to sleep. Through partially opened eyelids, he saw a cloaked figure crossing the deck from the forecabin at the bow of the ship. The height and gait of the individual sent a chill through Rankarus that sank and gathered in his gut — a ball of ice accumulating with each step closer of the cloaked man. Not a man, of course. A rakthor. As he came close and clear in sight, Rankarus became more certain. Viktik. He considered his options. He could not cry out to warn Kellatra and Kadmallin now. He could not hope to fight the rakthor. Well, he could hope, but didn't see how hoping would help him beat the over-sized lizard standing a head and a half taller than him. One option appeared in his mind and it appealed to him for subtlety and the lack of violence, which would undoubtedly be violence visited upon himself.

He continued to pretend to sleep, adding a slight snore to his breathing to complete the deceit. Viktik walked past him and down the steep stairwell to the lower deck without giving him a single glance. The rakthor had no desire to be noticed, either. Rankarus stood and moved swiftly across the deck, rolling along the edges of his feet to distribute his weight and reduce any noise. He gently snatched a wide-brimmed hat from the head of one of the slumbering men, slammed it snug on his brow, and dashed back to the entrance to the lower deck. He took only the first few steps of the stairs and stopped. Leaning down, the hat covering most of his face, he called out in whispered Shen.

“Sir.”

Rankarus tilted the edge of the hat just enough to see Viktik's body turn.

“What?” Viktik spoke in softened tones and a thick Shen accent.

“Captain wants to see ya.” Rankarus hoped the dim light and the hat would leave him looking like a random crewman and not the one Viktik just passed heading to the lower deck.

“I just came from the captain.” Viktik sounded annoyed but kept his voice low.

“Don't know nothin' 'bout that, sir.” Rankarus shrugged his shoulders. “Captain just said to fetch the man in the cloak and tellin' 'im he wanted so see 'im right soon.” Rankarus frowned. His Shen was not great, and he suspected he'd added too much dialect to his words.

“Idiots,” Viktik grumbled. “Tell the captain I will be with him shortly.”

“Captain said I should fetch ya quick.” Rankarus hoped the rakthor correctly interpreted the pleading in his voice. “Said it’s important.”

“Run tell him I’ll be with him in a minute.” Viktik turned and placed a key in the lock of the door to the cabin on the left, the one Kellatra and Kadmallin had entered minutes before. He struggled to turn the key. “Shoddy human manufacture,” Viktik muttered.

Rankarus drew his dagger with his right hand, his best hand, and held the blade between his fingers. There was not much light seeping into the lower corridor, but he thought he had a decent chance of putting the blade at the base of the rakthor’s skull.

Viktik tried the door and lock again and then gave up. Without warning, he threw his shoulder against the door. While the lock held firm, the wooden frame did not, and the door burst inward. Viktik stepped into the room, clearly illuminated in the light of a lantern. This might be Rankarus’s only chance. He drew back his arm and lowered his foot one more step.

“Impossible,” Viktik said.

Rankarus saw past the rakthor’s wide shoulders to an empty bed and what looked like an empty room.

“Psst.”

Rankarus climbed back up the stairs toward the noise that seemed intended for him. He stepped onto the deck to spot Kellatra standing beside Kadmallin and Sketkee at the port side railing. Kadmallin took a strip of bandage from around Sketkee’s abdomen and wedged it beneath the hook of a guide-rope hanging on the railing.

How in the name of the seven goddesses had she managed that? Rankarus stepped toward them as he heard footsteps from the lower deck. Footsteps moving rapidly, almost angrily, if footsteps could be angry. He stepped a pace away from the entrance to the lower deck and raised his arm, preparing to throw the dagger in his hand as soon as he saw Viktik’s face. He nearly cried out in surprise as his feet left the deck of the ship and he soared upward into the night air. He had to stifle more than a cry of surprise as he continued to sail upward, past the cross booms of the nearest mast, and then high above the topmast until the ship looked the size of his shoe beneath his feet. He never before feared heights, had leapt with abandon from rooftop to rooftop in his younger days as a thief, but now, suspended by nothing, hovering hundreds of hands above the ocean, he wanted to scream. Beneath him — an insect crawling across a toy ship — Viktik stood in the center of the deck a moment before going to the port side rail and plucking a thin strip of white cloth.

“Nice hat.”

Rankarus spun his head to find Kellatra hovering beside him, a wide grin on her face. “Are you thinking of keeping it?”

He recovered his calm as quickly as possible. He would not let his wife see him panicked by either the display of her powers or the fall that awaited him without her. He spotted Kadmallin and Sketkee floating alongside him. Kadmallin looked as panicked he felt, the man’s eyes staring upward rather than down, while Sketkee appeared to be cataloging every aspect of the experience, her eyes darting everywhere, a look of curiosity on her face. At least, he assumed the look

expressed curiosity.

“I’ve noticed how you stare at Abananthus in his hat and I was feeling jealous.” Not the wittiest reply, but the best he could do dangling over the ocean.

“Don’t make me laugh; I might lose my concentration.” Kellatra smiled as they began to move away from the ship.

“Where are we going?” Rankarus tried to look down at the starboard side of the vessel. He couldn’t see Abananthus for all the shadows. “What about Abananthus?”

“I’ve already started moving the rowboat to a place far from the ship.” Kellatra’s smile faded as the look of imperturbable calm returned to her features.

“You are moving both us and a boat at the same time?” Sketkee sounded intrigued.

“So far.” Kellatra gave no hint at bragging. Rankarus wondered at the extent of her powers, realizing once again that his wife frightened him a little. Maybe more than a little.

“How did you get out of the cabin?” Rankarus had nearly forgotten that question in the terror of flying above the ocean waves. “I thought the window was too small.”

“I made it bigger,” Kellatra replied.

“It was a most impressive display of The Sight.” Sketkee’s voice reflected her statement.

“A most frightening display.” Kadmallin’s voice expressed his assessment as well. “The window grew in size in the wall as we watched.”

“I wasn’t sure I could do it, and it’ll probably fall out of the wall in a day or two,” Kellatra said. “But it worked well enough for us to get out.”

Rankarus found himself grinning at Kellatra. He sighed loudly as they began to descend from the sky. He spotted Abananthus in the rowboat a moment later. His friend looked up in awe as the four of them gradually fell out of the night sky to stand in the boat.

“The night sky is a magical place of impossible wonders and unimaginable astonishments,” Abananthus said from where he sat, bow and arrow still in his hand. As usual, he didn’t bother to give the source for the words he quoted.

Kadmallin helped Sketkee sit on the rear bench of the boat. Kellatra sighed and lowered herself to the middle bench. Rankarus took the space beside her.

“I just need a moment.” Kellatra took a deep breath and slowly released it.

“Take your time.” Rankarus took her hand and looked back in the direction of the cargo ship. He could see lanterns lit and moving about. Looking for the person they assumed had fallen over the port side railing. “It all worked, thanks to you.”

“Now we need to hope the rest of the plan succeeds.” Kellatra kissed him as the rowboat lurched into motion, cutting through the waves up the coast toward the pilgrim town. Rankarus wanted to say something amusing and charming, but found himself too enraptured by the kiss, which felt all the more exciting knowing his wife pushed their little boat through the water with only the will of her mind.

“What is the next part of the plan?” Sketkee asked.

Rankarus and Kellatra parted their kiss at Sketkee’s question.

“Now we bluff our way past the blockade and head for the Forbidden Realm,” Rankarus said.

It sounded ridiculous as he said it, but he couldn't help but grin at the idea of pulling it off. Assuming they did. He looked at Kellatra, wondering how they could fail with her to help them.

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

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

THE THRONE



KAO-RHEE

“I DECREE a tax holiday this year. The people of the Shen dominions have suffered greatly under the strain of the taxes required by their leaders to fund two decades of war. They deserve a reprieve. A minor festival will be held in celebration.”

Kao-Rhee sat at the right hand of the Kimpadess Havarez, across the council room table from her Atheton adviser, Landase. He did not like the man, unsettled by the nervous grin constantly splayed across the jowls of his large head — a smiling fleshy melon to match the corpulent mass of his body. Kao-Rhee did not like the kimpadess, either, but not for any personal trait. More attractive than her years suggested, he found her thoughtful, considerate, and commanding. His dislike of her centered around her terrifying competence. She seemed to have thought of every possible need required to make the Daeshen Dominion her own with as little conflict as possible. He’d read reports of the high regard Atheton people held for their ruler, but he now understood the source of it firsthand. If nothing impeded her, the Shen nations would thank her for saving them from the rule of the zhans. She even spoke Shen at the council table. He saw the looks of the six men and three women she’d called forth from the city to represent her new high council. They were so much in awe, he assumed them to be previously ignorant of the new destiny she’d granted them. He intended to make it one of his first tasks to determine which among them were cooperative traitors. He still felt unsettled by the presence of three women at the council table. Only two women had sat at the table as councilors since the founding of the First Great Dominion. To have three seated there all at once reeled the mind.

He could not afford a reeling mind. He needed to stay attuned to the events of the room. Whatever the kimpadess’s true goal, establishing a Fourth Great Dominion, or something as yet not hinted at, he needed to assure she did not destroy the Daeshen Dominion in the course of dominating it.

“This is very generous, my kimpadess,” Kao-Rhee said. “However, the wars mentioned have drained the Daeshen coffers to the shattering edge. While a reduction in taxes is possible, I fear a holiday would leave the palace and the structures of governing the land destitute.”

“I do not wish the state to suffer any more than I wish suffering upon the people.” The kimpadess smiled in a way that let Kao-Rhee know she had already considered his counterpoint and its solution. “The Atheton treasury will supply the needed funds for the duration of the tax holiday. We are wealthy and strong and can afford to lift up and support our brethren nations in the new Great Dominion.”

“Very wise and benevolent, my kimpadess.” Kao-Rhee bowed his head respectfully, feeling no need to feign the emotion. The woman commanded respect the way a battle tigan did or a high priest, without request or demand, but through the accumulated course of every action and word. He made an effort not to be blinded by the kimpadess’s many impressive attributes and instead to

try to glean from her some intimation at her full intention. “As the kimpadess mentions the formation of a Fourth Great Dominion, may I ask how soon she intends to assume the rule of the other dominions?”

“You may always ask whatever you wish, Councilor Kao-Rhee, but I will only ever answer what I believe you need to know.” In the silent pause that followed the kimpadess’s words, Landase’s grin somehow broadened even more. Kao-Rhee wanted to smack it from the man’s face. “To answer your question in brief, and to assure you of the seriousness with which I assail this great task, I will inform you that the Nevaeo Dominion has already joined the fold. As our nations hold a long-shared heritage and common language, it was not difficult to convince Tey Karrison of the wisdom of ruling his dominion within the confines of a more magnificent and inclusive Great Dominion. As for Juparti and Punderra, emissaries are meeting with the rulers of those nations as we speak. I cannot say what their responses will be, but hopefully, the armies that stand at their borders and the ships of soldiers along their shores will have no cause to clash in arms with their brethren.”

“I see, Kimpadess.” Kao-Rhee bowed his head once more.

“I am certain that you do, Councilor Kao-Rhee.” Kimpadess Havarez placed her fingers beneath her chin. “You have been included as an adviser to my new council because of your insight and wisdom. I trust that you will have the wisdom to keep all that you learn on this council within the council chamber.”

“Of course, Kimpadess.” Kao-Rhee’s face burned. Wisdom and insight. If he possessed either in any great measure, he would have anticipated this invasion. Would have seen the signs marked for him like inked beacons upon a map. Would have trusted his instincts all those years ago when that murderous wedding set the Daeshen and Tanshen nations to war. Would have known who to suspect when attempts were made on the late zhan Tin-Tsu’s life. His shame caused him to stare at the table. One man bore the blame for the current invasion more than any other, and both he and the kimpadess knew that man to be himself.

“Let us turn now to the blockade of the so-called Alliance.” The kimpadess looked around the table. “It is an intolerable infringement on the sovereignty of the Fourth Great Dominion. I have drafted a communication that will shortly be delivered by messenger to the ambassadors of the four respective realms of this alliance. I have informed them that if they do not disband the blockade and pursue their grievances through traditional channels, I will destroy their fleet.”

The smiles at the table matched that of Councilor Landase. Kao-Rhee saw the thinking of the new councilors clearly on their faces. If the kimpadess could take three nations without even fighting, she could surely end the blockade. He did not doubt it. An army of seers capable of blasting through the rock of a mountain to secure a new pass could easily destroy a small fleet of ships spread out along the southern and western coast of the Iron Realm. But would it start a war? And if it did, would that make it easier for the kimpadess to rally all the citizens of the Iron Realm against the blockade and the other realms?

Kao-Rhee listened but contributed little as talk turned to the pilgrims and what to do about them. The Kimpadess proposed to extend the same leniency she’d shown in Atheton. Pilgrims

were free to pursue their foolish dream, unmolested, as long as they did not fulfill a vital function in the dominions. No soldiers or guards could leave their posts without punishment. Farmers could abandon their fields only if they deeded them to someone else. The kimpadess thought it more expedient to allow the heretics to self-expel themselves to certain death rather than start a religious war, which she rightly pointed out, had ended more than one Great Dominion in the past.

Conversation soon moved to other important subjects. Who would retain their posts in the palace and the army? How to manage the end of hostilities with Tanshen. How to incorporate Tanjii into the fold of conjoined nations. He let the details glide over him, absorbing from them what he needed. When the council meeting ended, well after the dinner hour, he excused himself and returned to his quarters. There, he summoned Peda-Leng. He needed to set in motion the plan he'd been assembling since the birth of the royal child.

"You wish to see me, Councilor." Peda-Leng bowed her head as she entered the private sitting room of his personal quarters in the palace.

"Close the door," Kao-Rhee said and beckoned her to join him at the cushioned bench before the fire in the hearth.

Kao-Rhee sat in silence for a moment as the young woman settled beside him. Illuminated by the firelight, she looked more like her mother than usual. He noticed some aspects of his own features in her face as well. The slope of her eyes. The line of her jaw. The way she watched him, patiently waiting, but also calculating and assessing. He wanted her safe. Far away and out of harm's reach. What he intended to ask of her would increase the risk not lessen it. But he had no one else to rely upon.

"I must ask for your trust," Kao-Rhee began. He paused, not knowing exactly how to phrase what he needed to say beyond the bare details.

"I do trust you, sir," Peda-Leng replied.

"I am sending you away," Kao-Rhee said.

"I don't understand." Peda-Leng's lips bent downward. "Have I done something wrong?"

"No. Not at all." Kao-Rhee took a deep breath and allowed himself to exhale slowly before beginning again. "I am sending you away on a very important assignment. One that is secret and of the utmost importance." When Peda-Leng did not interject, he continued. "I have already spoken to your betrothed, Pao-Kowto. He is aware of some of the mission, but not the full extent of it. When we are finished speaking here, you will pack a small bag, just the essentials, and you will meet him in the private kitchen of my quarters. There you will join a woman named Nanti-Tinhao with an infant boy. I have informed Pao-Kowto where to find a secret tunnel beneath the palace walls. It was created centuries ago to allow the escape of the zhan in the event of a siege. You will use it for a similar purpose. The tunnel vacates in the cellar of a wealthy merchant family's home. There you will be met by a man who will take you to a waiting wagon where you will hide until you reach the city wall. Once at the wall, you will use another secret tunnel, one disguised as a sewer drain, to escape the city. Outside the city walls, you will meet yet another man. A hunter. He'll guide you past the encampments of the Atheton army to the village of Koy. There you will hire a carriage or a wagon and make your way north to my family estate. Once there, you will give

the estate overseer, a man named Sen-Raa, this letter.”

Kao-Rhee removed a wax-sealed envelope from his robes. He held it in his hand a moment, hesitating, unsure if he set her on the correct path and how much she should really know.

“The letter will explain that you are my daughter from an ill-advised affair, that the boy is yours, Nanti-Tinhao is your wet nurse, and Pao-Kowto your husband. The letter continues to explain that given my tenuous position under the circumstances of the invasion and the assumption of the kimpadess to the throne, I thought it best for you to be placed where no embarrassment might reflect upon me and weaken my status in the palace hierarchy. The letter instructs that you be treated as the mistress of the estate, and that in the event of my death, the whole of the estate and its lands will devolve to you. These deceptions are necessary, I assure you. I have charged Pao-Kowto with your safety, but you must, through all of this, protect the child. No harm must come to him.”

Finished, still holding the letter in his hand, Kao-Rhee held his breath, unable to continue. Peda-Leng stared at him thoughtfully, her lip quivering slightly.

“I understand.” Peda-Leng looked on the verge of tears.

“Do you?” Kao-Rhee wondered if she took his words as he spoke them or as he intended them.

“Completely. Nothing will happen to the boy. I will give my life to protect him.” Peda-Leng took the letter from him, her two hands clasped around his one. “My mother would be very thankful of the trust you have bestowed upon me. I will not fail you.”

“Thank you, Peda-Leng.” Kao-Rhee continued to hold her hands, placing his other around hers. They sat like that in silence a moment, staring into each other’s eyes, not speaking the words they wished to, but communicating everything that could be said. She knew the baby boy to be the child of Dju-Tesha and the rightful heir of the Daeshen throne. She knew Kao-Rhee to truly be her father. She knew he would not send her into such danger if he did not need to. And he knew she would keep the child safe and never reveal the truth of the deception they created, even as it spoke the reality of her parentage. Finally, flustered by his emotions, he pulled his hands away and stood. She rose as well, the letter clutched in her fingers.

“You will need to leave at once. I have already been forced to delay longer than I’d hoped.” Kao-Rhee walked her to the door.

“Will I see you again?” Peda-Leng looked up at him, her moist eyes asking other questions.

“It is my greatest hope.” He wanted to embrace her, to speak aloud the silent words that echoed between them, but he feared that if he did, he would not be able to release her. Instead, he opened the door for her, the smallest of gestures he could make.

“It is my greatest desire as well, sir.” Peda-Leng held his gaze a moment longer, a look of firm determination coming upon her face, then she spun on her heels and walked briskly from the room. He watched her walk down the hall for a moment and then closed the door, feeling a greater love and admiration for his daughter than he’d imagined possible. More than anything, he truly did wish to see her again.

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

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

“WE HEARD that Atheton troops march toward our border.”

“I heard the blockade’ll expand to close the narrow coast in the south.”

“The High Senate must vote to expand the army.”

“With what coin?”

The conversation turned and twisted back and forth across well-worn territory as twin campfires built large bases of glowing embers and wine sacks moved from hand to hand. Priests and traders. Two groups meeting by chance upon the same oft-traveled road a week’s march west of [Kanhalla](#). Ondromead had awoken that morning in the very place the two groups met at sunset. As he’d felt no inclination to move, and no tingling in his mind to indicate he should, he stayed in the same spot beneath the wide, narrow leaves of a jando tree all day. Most of the day, his thoughts lingered on Hashel. Where the boy might be. What he was doing. Whether he was safe. Where he’d traveled to with the carnival. What he’d seen.

He’d napped in the shade when the thoughts of Hashel made him too sad for wakefulness. He had a half loaf leftover sesame bread in his satchel, but no urge to eat. A band of five Keth priests, three men and two women, came across him near sundown and questioned him, wondering what he’d seen that day along the road. He told them he’d seen only a few farmers with their wagons passing. The small family of merchant traders and their handful of guards arrived from the opposite direction soon after. The priests suggested sharing the spot alongside the road as a mutual camp. As Ondromead already sat there, they invited him to share their meal. Fortunately, they did not care if he shared their conversation. He sat removed from them, within the light of the campfires, but not inside the circle of their discourse. He knew he needed to witness something, but none of their words pricked at his consciousness, and he left the quill and the black book in his bag.

“The Punderra troops have not fought more than a skirmish in more than two generations,” one of the merchant men said.

“And neither have the Athetons,” a priest countered.

“We have The Sight of our priesthood to aid us.” The second priest sounded very confident.

“But your priests have not clashed in battle,” the youngest merchant said.

“And what if the Atheton have seers as well?” the first merchant asked.

“They have always shunned The Sight, and especially in battle,” a third priest said.

“They are led by a woman,” one of the two women priests noted.

“More to be feared,” the wife of the merchant said with a grunt.

Ondromead ceased to listen to their words as an inner trill set his eyes casting about the campsite. What he’d come to witness approached, and it had nothing to do with the words shared between priests and traders. The campfires grew brighter, and he sat up straight. The men and women around the two fires looked startled by the conflagrations reaching twice as high as

moments ago. Mumbled surprise became loudly exclaimed fear as the fires shifted colors, filled with flames of cobalt and amethyst striking a hundred hands up into the night. The priests and traders scrambled to their feet, and Ondromead did the same. He noticed the shift in the trees around them. At least thirty trunks began to sway, the wide-reaching branches bending earthward. In moments, the solid wood of the trees became as cloth, collapsing to the forest floor in a deafening crash that sent dust roiling through the blazing, blue firelight. Ondromead's hand twitched with the urge to transcribe the anomaly in the black book.

In an instant, the flames winked out, and the world returned to normal, the trees, bent in impossible shapes across the forest ground, suddenly solid in appearance. The priests and traders exchanged exclamations and questions as they hurriedly packed their camps. Ondromead heard no answers he believed in the darkness. Within minutes, both groups fled in opposite directions along the road. Neither stopped to ask him to join them, seeming to have forgotten his presence entirely. This did not bother him as he watched them go. He doubted the anomaly would return that night or to that place. He rekindled one of the fires and sat beside it as he wrote down what he'd seen on a clean page of the black book.

As he lay beneath the same tree he'd awakened under, he wondered at the cause of these disturbances in the fabric of reality. Whatever their source, they portended dangerous times ahead. This thought brought him back to Hashel. The boy might be safe with the carnival in normal times, but he would be much safer beside Ondromead in days when trees might fall to the ground like cast off clothes.

He fell asleep shortly thereafter and woke the next morning still surrounded by trees, but with the sound of an ocean nearby. He sat up to see a forest of vegetation he did not immediately recognize. Then he spotted the walls of a ruined city and a temple not far up the coast. He rose to his feet, knowing from the description where he stood.

Finally, after thousands of years of curiosity, he'd awakened in The Forbidden Realm.

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

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

“WHAT IS IT?”

“I don’t know. Back away. Quietly.”

They’d stumbled upon the sleeping creature while hunting for a deer. Tin-Tsu had never heard of such an animal — it looked like a tiger mated with a porcupine — but it exuded danger and menace even in slumber. The monster appeared wounded. He could see dried blood on the spines along its neck and belly. He slowly placed his hand on the hilt of the sword he wore in case they encountered soldiers. A part of him knew he needed to kill it while it still slept, but the cautious part, the part that recognized he still recovered from his injuries, understood they needed to get as far away as possible.

Beside him, Tiang-Rhu cautiously stepped backward, bending beneath a branch. He held a bow with a nocked arrow in his hands. As Tin-Tsu backed away from the creature’s nesting place, his foot found a slender branch among the thick forest debris. The twig snapped loudly, and the creature’s eyes snapped open.

“Run!” Tin-Tsu shouted to Tiang-Rhu.

Tiang-Rhu did not run but instead drew back the arrow along the notch of his bow and loosed it toward the beast. The arrow struck the creature’s face, near the eyes, but not close enough, glancing off the spines protruding from its skull. Tin-Tsu drew his sword as the creature roared and leapt into motion. He’d never witnessed an animal move that fast. It struck Tiang-Rhu with a swipe of its paw before Tin-Tsu had fully freed his blade. Tiang-Rhu flew through the air and crashed against the trunk of a nearby tree.

The creature spun to attack Tin-Tsu. Only his training and his close proximity to where Tiang-Rhu once stood saved him. Rather than turning to flee, he lunged to meet the creature, the tip of his blade changing course to match the turn of the monster’s head. The steel sank into the only open flesh available. He released the blade as it plunged into the creature’s eye and rolled to the ground as a massive clawed paw swept out, missing him by a finger’s breadth. The creature howled and shook its head, the blade flying free to fall among the bushes. Tin-Tsu scrambled to his feet and ran to where Tiang-Rhu lay crumpled in the leaves under a tree. The creature sprang away into the woods, wailing in pain.

Tiang-Rhu lay in the grass, blinking, blood running across his face from a cut above his eye. More blood oozed beneath his thin jacket. Tin-Tsu pulled back the flap of cloth to reveal three long gashes across Tian-Rhu’s abdomen so deep, they severed the bones of his ribs and the organs beneath. He took his own jacket from around his shoulders.

“Did you kill it?” Tiang-Rhu asked, his lips covered with blood from within.

“I wounded it. It won’t be back.” Tin-Tsu hoped it would not be back. Then, looking again at Tiang-Rhu’s wounds, feeling the bile in the back of his throat, emotion making his hands shake

and his eyes tear, he hoped the creature did return, for he would kill it or die by its claws.

“I don’t feel very...” Tiang-Rhu began to say as his eyes fluttered.

“Tiang-Rhu!” Tin-Tsu shook his friend’s shoulders. This could not be. Not now. Not on this day. Not after so long apart and finally realizing their... “Tiang-Rhu.”

“I feel...” Tiang-Rhu held a bloodied hand to his eyes. “Am I dying?”

“You are wounded.” Tin-Tsu took his friend’s hand and held it within his own, using his other to press his jacket into the wound. Already the blood soaked the fabric.

“You always did lie poorly.” Tiang-Rhu coughed, blood gushing from his mouth and down his chin.

“Once we get you to the house, I can stitch you up. Just like you did for me.” Tin-Tsu noticed tears on Tiang-Rhu’s bloodied face. It took him a moment to realize they fell from his own eyes.

“I love you...” Tiang-Rhu squeezed his hand, grip feeble, eyes blinking and falling still, breath sighing to stop.

Tin-Tsu sobbed, holding Tiang-Rhu close, knowing his friend, his love, to be gone, but unable to admit such a reality to his mind. He kissed Tiang-Rhu’s blood-stained lips and stroked his matted hair. And he prayed. He prayed to the god Ni-Kam-Djen to spare his love, to heal his friend, to work a miracle as he had worked before to save Tin-Tsu from the falling ceiling of the Great Hall. He pleaded with his god to spare Tiang-Rhu. As he spoke the words of his improvised prayer, he found echoes of other prayers spoken in similar circumstances and recognized his cause lost now as it had been beside the deathbed of the poisoned Rin-Lahee. He had abandoned his vows to marry a woman and his god forsook him. How could he dare petition his god when he broke even common strictures to proclaim his love for another man? The True God would not answer such betrayal with reward. Realizing the futility of his entreaties, he abandoned them.

“And love you, my friend,” he whispered into the Tiang-Rhu’s ear. “I always have.”

He sat beside Tiang-Rhu’s body and wept for a long time, shedding tears for the years of their separation, the pain of attempting to kill a love that would not die, only to have that love bloom to life once more — a flower opening to sunshine long hidden behind clouds of fear and self-loathing. He’d held that flower again for a short time, long enough to appreciate its beauty, to regret its abandonment, to savor the scent and a hint of its future. Now he held nothing but a withered husk. The hand of his dead beloved.

His heart ached to the point where he hoped it might fail him and strike him dead. It did not. It kept beating. Eventually, the tears dried. His breath returned to normal. And still Tiang-Rhu lay dead at his side. He grasped the needs of the moment, what must be done, what he refused to do, but which only he could accomplish.

He finally stood and wandered in a daze back through the woods to the house. There he took a wheelbarrow from the barn and returned with it to Tiang-Rhu. He strained his still healing wounds to lift the body gently into the barrow. Then, almost forgetting about them, he retrieved the sword and the bow. It took a long time to push the wheelbarrow through the trees and back to the farm. He laid Tiang-Rhu’s body in a pile of hay in the barn and started the real work of tending the dead. He began to pray again, reciting the words of sanctification over and over as he stripped

the body, washed it, anointed it with oil from the house, wrapped it in blankets, dug a deep hole by the walnut tree in the small yard, and buried Tiang-Rhu. He spoke his final words not from any remembered liturgy but from the place where all true words arise.

“I did not know how long I had loved you until I admitted that I loved you.” Tin-Tsu stared toward the setting sun. “I will carry with me always your wisdom, your laughter, and the touch of your lips.”

Tin-Tsu washed the blood from his hands once more and fell asleep without eating. The next morning, he packed, taking the last blanket, what food remained in the larder, the bow and quiver, the sword, and a bladder of water. He opened the pens of the sheep and the chickens and freed the pigs, goat, and cow from the barn. Then he walked into the woods and away from the farm for the last time.

He'd learned little woodcraft as a young tahn and none during his training as a warrior priest in the mountains. Fortunately, the creature he tracked left a trail of blood from where he'd first met it. This led to a dead deer carcass and more blood, and eventually to a small village with fewer people alive than dead and more blood than he'd seen outside a battlefield. He suspected from the villagers' tales that the monster hunted at night, so in the evenings, he slept in the crooks of high tree branches and followed blood and carnage during the day. After three days, this led to the creature itself, sleeping beneath boughs of a willow tree. He kept the bow strung and an arrow nocked as he stalked closer to the monster. He moved slowly, taking his time, staying downwind, making no noise, and keeping the beast's head in view. When he came as close as he needed, he pulled the arrow string back to his cheek, sighted, breathed, and released.

The arrow made only the briefest of noises, wafting through the air, before it sank through the closed lid of the creature's one good eye and into its brain. The monster thrashed and shook and moaned but did not roar or climb to its feet. Eventually, it fell still. Tin-Tsu left it there, hoping the forest vermin feasted upon it. He realized that had it not been wounded and sleeping, he would never have been able to kill it alone. But he also understood that had he not stepped upon that twig, the man he loved would still be alive.

He headed to the woods until he came to a narrow path. He followed this eastward until he came to a lane, which he followed south until he reached the Old Border Road. There he stood for a long while wondering what to do, what he was. Was he a zhan? Was he a priest? Should he head west? His sister, by now, sat on the throne with Rhog-Kan to assist her. He did not need to be the zhan. He had abandoned so many of his vows that he did not feel like a priest. He realized he had relinquished more than his vows. He had forsaken his god. He did not want to be a priest if it meant he had to deny his love for Tiang-Rhu. And he did not wish to offer devotion to a god who required such. Nor did he desire to worship a god who spared lives only when it suited him and not when truly called upon for assistance.

He thought then of the dreams he had trained himself to ignore each night, to awaken from, and the goddess who placed them there. He thought of the star that appeared to him before night-daggers entered his sleeping chambers to take his life. Had that been a sign? Had it truly been his former god who spared him and so many others from the collapsing ceiling of the Great Chamber?

Might it have been another? Did it matter?

His feet led him westward before he knew he was walking, and he accepted that silent inner judgment. He did not understand if he needed to find a new god to worship, or if he even desired to. He did not know what he wanted to be or what he wished to do, but he did realize that eastward lay the past and westward the future. He would find his purpose again in the future, not his past. A future built upon what he desired, not what his father wished, or his mother, or the temple priests, or the councilors of the palace, or the laws of the land. He would finally embody the meaning of his own name — hidden jewel — and become what he'd always been meant to be ... whatever it was.

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

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

STEEL STRUCK stone, the clanging, ear-wracking noise echoing upward along a curved hall, spiraling to the surface from beneath the temple ruins. The hammers battered the rock again and again, chipping away by shards and splinters the dense, carved granite of each massive block of the wall.

“Soon now.”

“If the Goddess favors us.”

“Soon, I think.”

Raedalus stood at the very edge of the curving hallway, watching the workers, men and women, hammer at the now-exposed hidden wall beneath the temple. Zilaya stood beside him. Her optimism encouraged him. He should have felt more himself, but after the hours spent swinging a hammer, he experienced only fatigue. The late hour did not help.

“What do you think will lay behind it?” Zilaya leaned against the wall of the corridor, her own exhaustion masked by her enthusiasm.

“I cannot imagine.” Raedalus spent hours considering that question since realizing the hallway beneath the temple extended farther than the collapsed ceiling seemed to indicate. “A library, if we are lucky.”

“I hope for statues,” Zilaya said. “So that I can sketch the people who built this place.”

They’d spend several days removing the rubble from the end of the collapsed corridor. A laborious effort that left backs aching, mouths dry with stone dust, and skin caked with grime. He had hoped to enlist Tanagaal’s assistance in moving the rocks, but the seer’s time was more importantly spent dealing with the infestation of the fire-plants in their various forms throughout out the ancient city. They’d worked in shifts from dawn until well into the night for four days. This day, near sundown, they’d finally reached a wall behind the fallen stones. He’d been one of the first to grab a hammer, as he had been one of the first to clear the rubble. He wanted everyone on his team invested in achieving this goal of finding his suspected hidden chamber and seeing him bend his back to the task helped reinforce their commitment. And while he had no trouble asking an assistant to bring him tea, there were no real servants in the Goddess’s remade temple. Everyone contributed to everything in any way possible.

“You should be proud.” Zilaya smiled up at him. They had spent a great deal of time together in the past weeks. In part because their mutual work demanded it, but he also admitted that he enjoyed her company more than he ever expected. The notion occurred to him many times, such as now, with her tunic sweaty and clinging to her womanly curves, that he might enjoy her company in other ways if he had the courage to suggest it.

“*Pride without accomplishment is empty of meaning.*” Raedalus misquoted the saying of the ancient Pashist philosopher Godatamal, but his mind felt fuzzy and he couldn’t quite remember

the correct words. "I'll save my elation for the moment we find an actual chamber hidden behind that wall."

"You still thought to look where no one else did," Zilaya said. "You can be proud of that."

"Luck," Raedalus said. "Luck that my father was a stonemason, and I knew how to look at plans and maps of buildings. Just luck."

"Modesty is unbecoming on those with true accomplishments." Zilaya grinned and Raedalus laughed. "You're not the only one who reads Godatamal."

Well read, beautiful, kind, thoughtful, intelligent, and compassionate. Why did he not kiss her? Not exactly the most romantic moment, with hammer strikes ringing in their ears and dust caking their faces. He found it hard to find the right moment, for in the times when he'd convinced himself he should try to kiss her, the events around them conspired against it, and when the circumstances seemed favorable, he always found some rationalization against the act.

"What was she like before?" Zilaya watched the workers hacking at the stone wall. He realized who she asked about, but not why, or why in that moment. To make conversation? To fill the time?

"She was a good priest. A good Pashist priest." Raedalus remembered those days long before the dreams came, when he and Junari served the temple of the seven sisters in Lhanassa. "Good but not inspiring. As though she played at being a priest like an actor on a stage pretending to be a rhegan. Then the dreams arrived. At first, they frightened her, but once she accepted the Goddess's calling, I saw a passion in her that I'd never witnessed. The actor became the rhegan. She transformed into more than merely a priest. She became a prophet. The Mother Shepherd."

"You knew each other long at the temple?" Zilaya glanced at him as he looked along the hallway and into his past.

"We'd been friends for years. I was the first one she asked to follow her." Raedalus did feel a swell of pride, regardless of what philosopher Godatamal said.

"You must have been very good friends for her to trust you that much and for you to follow her." Zilaya brushed a lock of hair from her forehead.

"She did not have to convince me." Raedalus considered the conversation that felt so far in the past and his own motivations for following Junari — those stated aloud and those held silent. "I think I knew she was the Mother Shepherd before she did." That did not fully explain the events that took place, or those he had hoped would transpire, but it sufficed as an account.

"You see things others do not." Zilaya turned to him.

"Do I?" Raedalus looked at her, speculating at the possible truth of her words, wondering if he imagined what he saw in her eyes.

"Raedalus! Come! We've broken through!"

The words called their attention down the corridor to a small hole punched into the stone wall. Without thinking, he grabbed Zilaya's hand and ran along the hall, the workers already hammering to expand the size of the opening. He stood, hand still in hers, waiting for it to be large enough to see through. One of the workers passed him a lantern, and he stretched his arm into the gap.

"The corridor continues to curve down," he said, more to Zilaya and her grinning face than the others.

It took them a few more minutes to make the hole in the false wall large enough to squeeze past. Raedalus stepped through first, helping Zilaya to follow him. Only once standing on the other side of the wall did a terrifying thought occur to him — what if those who fashioned the fake wall were the same as those who created the fire-plants? What if they'd left the monsters here in the darkness? His panic subsided as he raised the lantern and assessed the corridor to find it clear of any impediments.

Other lanterns joined his as they walked the passage, shadows of their bodies bending and mingling along the curved walls. It did not take long before they came to a door, the same size and shape of all the doorways they'd seen in the city and the temple — arched and toweringly large. The door was carved from a single piece of wood. Raedalus tried to imagine a tree that huge and thought of the great poda trees of the Shen dominions. He placed his hand against the door as a cheer arose from the people around him. He felt Zilaya's lips pressed to his own before he knew she stood before him.

“You did it!” Zilaya stepped away from the kiss, her face bright with elation.

Raedalus shared that elation — both at finding the door to a chamber he'd predicted and feeling Zilaya's lips upon his own. His mind split between two imperatives. Firstly, he needed to wake Junari, if she slept, and bring her, so she was present when they opened the door. And secondly, he needed to kiss Zilaya again at the soonest opportunity, preferably without an audience. He only wished he could accomplish the latter before the former. He found the dual ache of longing for Zilaya and to know the contents of the room behind that door, almost unbearable. He could only deal with one at the moment.

“Send a runner,” Raedalus said. “Wake the Mother Shepherd. She will want to see this.”

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

THE REVERBERATING sound of ocean waves whacked against the hull of the ship. The cresting and falling motion of progress through the water. The creaking of the hull with windborne movement. With her eyes still closed, just waking from sleep, dim light playing against eyelids, Sketkee considered for a moment that she had hallucinated her rescue by Kadmallin and Kellatra, that she still lay in the narrow bed in a locked cabin on the ship hired by Viktik. She still felt the heat in her abdomen and the fever in her head and body. She opened her eyes, relieved to find Kadmallin dozing in a chair beside the bed she occupied. She still lay in a cabin, but not the same one. Similar in size, but with walls painted dark blue, and two small windows along the back wall, early morning sunlight illuminating the ceiling. She remembered being helped into the room.

She'd been brought there directly after they arrived at the ship in the small rowboat, propelled across the waves by Kellatra. The seer had wanted to heal her right away but decided against it. She'd been in constant use of The Sight for longer than ever before and did not wish to risk an accident through a slip of concentration. Sketkee agreed. The nature of infection had only recently been rediscovered by her people. She understood the principles and gauged from her condition that she would last until morning. She also knew she would not last much longer without treatment.

“Water.”

Sketkee blinked and saw Kadmallin, now awake, standing by her bed, a tin cup of water in his hand. She accepted it gladly, drinking it in full.

“You did not need to stay with me,” she said, her voice weak and thin.

“Didn't want to go through all that effort to have you die in the night.” Kadmallin refilled the cup from a water skin hanging on the wall and handed it back to her. She sipped at it. She did not want to risk drinking too much at once and becoming more nauseous than Kadmallin looked. It seemed he had yet to find his wave legs, as humans referred to it.

“I must confess, I do feel at least twenty percent worse than I did yesterday as this time.” Sketkee wondered if she would have lasted long enough to reach a rakthor ship's physician under Viktik's plan. She also questioned whether she stood a better chance at being healed properly by Kellatra.

“Kellatra will be here shortly. I spoke with her before dawn.” Kadmallin brought the chair near the bed and sat down.

“How close are we to the blockade?” Sketkee hoped to be at least somewhat recovered before they reached the Alliance ships. She needed her full faculties to attempt the planned deception.

“A few hours,” Kadmallin said. “The captain is taking it slow up the coast. More to get us away from the pilgrim town than to confront the blockade. We need you up and healthy for that.”

“How many pilgrims aboard?” Sketkee considered how they might hide themselves should the captains of the blockade ships insist on boarding their vessel.

“None.” Kadmallin leaned a little closer and dropped his voice. “Kellatra and Rankarus hired out the whole ship. It carries some cargo the captain has been paid to haul to the Forbidden Realm, but no pilgrims. Don’t know how they managed to find the coin to afford it. A landed noble would be strapped to afford such a journey.”

“Forgery?” Sketkee suggested. Kellatra’s husband struck her as the sort of man who might have experience in falsifying coin. Another notion, based on her metallurgical studies and her time as an ambassador, occurred to her. She’d heard rumors that seers at the Academy of Sight in Kahara Nattaa often procured the funds to manage their institution by transforming base metals like lead into gold. Unable to confirm the rumor, the rakthor ambassadorial ministry dismissed it. Seers never revealed such capabilities to rakthor agents. Possibly, she now had the means to corroborate the hearsay.

A knock at the door preceded Kellatra entering the cramped cabin. She needed to take no more than two steps to stand beside the bed.

“The captain says we’ll be within sighting of the blockade line in an hour or two,” Kellatra said. “I thought it best we try to heal you now.”

“Are you well rested?” Kadmallin asked. Sketkee noted the protective tone of his voice.

“Yes.” Kellatra smiled. “I’ll be fine. I’ll need help, though.” Her smile faded quickly. “I’m not particularly good at healing. It’s a special skill among seers. And it helps to understand the anatomy you’re trying to heal. I have a basic understanding of how the human body is formed, but I know nothing of rakthor bodies.”

“They are not that dissimilar,” Sketkee said. In fact, from her studies of the peoples of Onaia, they all had similar arrangements of internal organs.

“I know some,” Kadmallin said. “I can help.”

“You’ll assist me, then.” Kellatra looked from Kadmallin to Sketkee and bit her lip. Sketkee wondered at the action. It usually denoted great unease in humans. “The problem is, from what I saw last night, your flesh is greatly inflamed.”

“Infection,” Sketkee said. “Exceptionally small organisms too small to see that invade and attack the body.”

“Whatever the cause, it means I need to reopen your wound and examine the flesh beneath.” Kellatra began to remove the bandages from Sketkee’s abdomen. She sat up as best she could to help accomplish the task. The stench of rot accompanied the last bandage cast away. She resisted the urge to touch the infected flesh.

“Are your hands clean?” Sketkee asked. No need to complicate a healing by infecting her a second time.

“Water and soap.” Kadmallin pointed to a pitcher and a basin on the only table in the room. He pulled a chunk of hog-fat soap from a pocket and washed his hands before handing it to Kellatra. Sketkee found herself surprised. Apparently, her lectures about the rakthor advances based on the rediscovery of the process of infection had not been lost on Kadmallin. He even dried his hands on what appeared to be a newly clean and folded towel.

“It is a shame there is not greater exchange of knowledge between the Academy and the

rakthor nation.” Kellatra dried her hands and dropped the towel on the table. “Both our realms would benefit greatly.”

“Too much suspicion by both parties.” Sketkee shared the woman’s assessment, having voiced it repeatedly to her rakthor colleagues both as an ambassador and a natural philosopher. However, given the internecine fighting among rakthor factions that led to the repeated collapse of each age of discovery, her people were ill-inclined to trust humans with the knowledge they themselves often abused. “Hopefully, we can begin that project together in a smaller manner.”

“Yes.” Kellatra smiled again. And again, the smile faded rapidly. “Normally, I would place you into a deep sleep, but as I don’t trust myself to know what is right and wrong, I will need you to remain conscious.”

“Rakthors have a much higher tolerance for pain than humans.” While technically true, Sketkee had never had an infected wound ripped open before.

“Bite down on this.” Kadmallin placed the hilt of a knife blade in her mouth. She bit down, bracing herself for the agony to come.

“This will probably hurt considerably.” Kellatra took a deep breath, exhaling slowly. She repeated this several times until her face assumed the calm that indicated the grasp of The Sight. “I am dissolving the stitching now.”

The skin along the wound itched and tickled. Possibly this procedure would be easy to tolerate.

“Now I’m going to undo the flesh that has knotted itself back together and hold it open,” Kellatra said. “I won’t touch you to do this.”

Sketkee looked down as Kellatra’s fingers waved above the wound. She snapped her head back as the flesh of the wound parted, pain searing her brain. She moaned and clamped down as hard as she could on the dagger hilt. Her hands clasped at the side of the bed frame. She resisted the powerful instinct to strike out at Kellatra.

Kellatra made a face and turned away. Sketkee did not need to wonder why as she smelled the wretched odor. The urge to vomit made her bite the dagger hilt even harder.

“It’s surprising you are still alive.” Kellatra grimaced as she leaned close to the open wound. “I will make well what flesh I understand. It will take some time. It’s not like making windows larger. It must be done right the first time.”

The pain subsided. Then a little more. By increments nearly too small to be perceptible, the pain lessened over the course of the next several minutes. Finally, Kellatra leaned back.

“I have done what I can based on what I know,” Kellatra said. “I see blood where I should not, though. Not much, but enough to be a problem.”

“I think her kidney is nicked.” Kadmallin pointed to her abdomen. “Behind that intestine there. If you can move it.”

The sensation of her organs being pressed upon resumed Sketkee’s nausea, but she reached up and pulled the knife hilt free from her mouth. “The mirror.” She pointed to a small mirror on the wall above the wash table. She could not better express herself given the pain.

Kadmallin grabbed the mirror and held it, so she could see her own organs through the open wound. It looked larger than when closed. At least three hands in length.

“It is the kidney.” Sketkee looked at the damaged organ, nearly severed in half. It did not bleed at much as it once had, but it explained the amount of fluid and blood that had leaked from her wound in the earliest days since Viktik attempted to sew the gash closed. “I have two. I can live well enough with only one if you can remove it.”

“I think I can make it whole again.” Kellatra leaned close once more, the fingers of both hands gently massaging the air. “It is not necessary to understand how an organ works in order to heal it. The organ knows what it should be and what it should do. I merely need to will it to resume its normal shape and function. A truly gifted healer can do the same with an entire body if it has not yet passed to death. Once an organ or a body is dead, there is no way to remake it with The Sight.”

Sketkee realized that Kellatra spoke as she worked, the impression of a dull pain an odd accompaniment to the sight of her kidney folding together, sealing closed, and returning to wholeness within the space of a minute.

“Now to close the wound.” Kellatra placed her hands above the gash in Sketkee’s abdomen.

She watched as the flesh of her own stomach came together, skin meshing with skin, layer upon layer, until no evidence of even a scar remained. She touched the place where the wound had been. It felt new, like an infant’s flesh.

“Thank you.” Sketkee looked from the mirror to Kellatra’s face. The smile had returned. Kadmallin smiled as well. Humans and their constant expression of their inner emotions. Sketkee was thankful not to be burdened with such an affliction.

“You’ll need rest,” Kellatra said. “And water. And food.”

“Time enough for all three before we meet the blockade.” Kadmallin hung the mirror back on the wall.

“Let’s hope our deception works to get past the ships,” Kellatra said.

“If we fail, can you help fight past the ships?” Sketkee asked, curious at the extent of Kellatra’s powers. She’d seen many seers, but none had impressed her nearly as much as this woman.

“I can set the sails on fire. I can create chaos on the ships. But even if I could sink one, I won’t.” Kellatra’s jaw clenched. “I don’t want to kill anyone.”

“Doing so would likely lead to a war, with Alliance ships attacking vessels indiscriminately, and the Shen nations responding in kind.” Sketkee considered such an event nearly inevitable, but she had no desire to instigate such a calamity.

“Rest a bit.” Kadmallin offered her a cup of water again. “I’ll bring some food.” He patted her hand briefly and left the cabin with Kellatra.

Sketkee tried to assess the chances of their plan succeeding, but the calculations became muddled as her eyes drooped, and she began to doze. The last thought to hold in her mind revolved around what happened to them if they failed.

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

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

THE FUGITIVES



OGTANKAA

VERDANT GREEN trees. Cinnamon-tinted beaches. Ash-and-onyx colored rocks.

Land.

The sight of land so near, only a few thousand paces away, filled Ogtankaa with a sense of dread. Always in her sea voyages, the arrival near shore had evoked relief — for an expedition nearly ended, for the feel of solid earth beneath her feet. Seeing the Forbidden Realm meant her journey did not end but instead became more difficult. Now her impetuous oath would be tested, and her chaotic choices revealed as wisdom or folly.

They'd spotted land the afternoon before and began sailing up the coast, the other two ships close behind. The new captain assured the crew and the pilgrims that they'd sailed following the goddess star, the Dragon Star, and must be close to their destination. They'd anchored for the night and set sail again with first light. She leaned on the railing of the starboard side of the ship facing the nearby coast. Sha-Kutan stood beside her with the woman and child. The pilgrims took turns viewing their progress along the coast to keep the vessel balanced.

Soon. We will be there soon.

Too soon.

And not soon enough.

"It is hard to believe we are truly here." Lee-Nin stood between Sha-Kutan and Sao-Tauna, holding each of their hands.

"It has been a long journey." Sha-Kutan held the girl's puppy in the crook of his arm.

Long and wearying.

And now strange and uncertain.

The girl said nothing, as usual. Ogtankaa looked at the three of them, feeling offset and out of place. More so than usual. The newly grown affection between the two adults worried her. Did Sha-Kutan not see the danger in such a thing? Did he not care? It seemed he no more understood the risks of his entanglement with Lee-Nin than he grasped the hazards posed by helping the girl come to this land. They could not allow the girl to use her powers to endanger this realm. Whatever called to the girl, whatever her so-called destiny, Ogtankaa could not allow her to jeopardize this world.

Vows carry more weight than oaths.

The vow involves him not the girl.

And he must atone.

Has he not?

Possibly.

Have not we?

Ogtankaa stared at the ancient city hiding behind the jungle-coated shoreline. The seeming

impenetrability of the vegetation reminded her of another densely packed forest many years ago.

EIGHTEEN YEARS AGO

THE SCENT of jasmine floated across the glade and through the tree branches to mingle with the aromas of pine and peat moss. Ogtankaa held the bowstring taut, fletching feathers tickling her cheek. A deer stood in the middle of a narrow forest clearing, head bent down, nibbling at the petals of a wildflower. The fading sun threw dappled shadows across the open swath of gently swaying grass. She exhaled slowly and opened her hand. The air hissed with the arrow's passage. The deer glanced up, and a moment later it fell to the ground, bleating in pain, eyes blinking, legs flailing as it tried to stand. And then it fell again and did not move.

"Is he dead?"

Ogtankaa turned and looked down to her daughter, Kordaffaa. Eight years old, but slender and tall, like herself at that age, the girl's wide eyes already brimmed with tears. She placed a hand on her daughter's cheek.

"Not yet," Ogtankaa said. "But his death'll be quick and with little pain."

"Your mum's the best shot in all the seven villages. A clean shot right to the heart. Just a quick, sharp pain and then a swift fadin' away."

She looked up from her daughter's concerned face to the wide, prideful grin of her husband, Thafkantus. He was right. She was the best shot in the clutch of villages across the valley. Far better than him. Most men would have been put off by that fact. Made to feel small and inadequate. Unable to see past a woman besting them in what most considered a man's domain. But not Thafkantus. They'd met at an archery contest during the harvest festival nearly ten years past, and while he had not competed, she'd felt his eyes on her the entire afternoon as she overcame one challenger after another to claim the prize — a small cask of ale. The way he followed her the rest of the day, bestowing effusive compliments on her archery skills as well as her beauty, she began to suspect that his interest lay more in the ale than herself. But, a few days later, he stopped by her father's forge claiming the need of a shoe for his horse. A week after that, a plow blade needed repairing. Then a weathervane needed straightening. A romance made of mended metal. She smiled at him, fondly remembering those first days and thankful his attentions had only deepened since then.

"Come," Ogtankaa said as the family stepped into the clearing. "If we dress the deer quickly, we can be home before full dark."

"Ya didn't say to bring clothes for the deer." Kordaffaa sounded annoyed at the oversight. "I coulda brung him my hat."

Ogtankaa laughed. "No, sweet one. Dressin' a deer is when ya cut it open and take out its organs. Like we do with the chickens and pigs."

"Oh." Kordaffaa looked crestfallen. She hated helping Ogtankaa kill and clean the livestock.

"Yer the one wanted to come." Thafkantus tussled the curly hair of his daughter's head.

"I thought huntin' was gonna to be fun," Kordaffaa sighed. "It's just more work."

“Kinao.”

Ogtankaa turned to the sound of the voice as they stopped beside the dead deer. A man walked into the side of the clearing. He stumbled, his legs jerking and his body swaying.

“Kinao,” the man said again, his speech slurred.

Ogtankaa assumed the man to be drunk. But drunk and wandering in the north woods? She pulled Kordaffaa behind her as Thafkantus placed a hand on the long hunting knife at his belt.

“Kinao.” The man’s jaw twitched. Ogtankaa noticed now the bruises on the man’s face. The torn and bloodstained shirt. His place upwind also brought to her nose a reeking smell of feces and decay.

“Hold where you are, friend.” Thafkantus pulled the hunting knife from his belt but held it low.

“What do you want?” Ogtankaa drew an arrow from her quiver and nocked it but did not draw.

“Kinao,” the man slurred. “Need...” the man twitched. “Need...” the man repeated. “Need a body.”

Ogtankaa drew and released an arrow in a heartbeat, placing it in front of the man’s legs. She didn’t know what the man was about, but she knew he meant no good. The man looked at the arrow as he walked past it. Ogtankaa nocked another.

Without warning, the man rushed them, moving far faster than his ambling gait suggested possible. Kordaffaa screamed. Thafkantus bent at the waist as he raised the blade of his knife. Ogtankaa loosed another arrow. The shaft sank into the man’s breast, but it did not slow him in the least.

Ogtankaa tried to draw another arrow as the man struck Thafkantus. Her husband sank his knife into the man twice with no effect. The man smashed Thafkantus in the face, sending him backward. The man snatched the knife from Thafkantus’s hand and ran the blade across his neck. Her husband0 crashed to the ground, gurgling and staring at Ogtankaa with pleading eyes.

Ogtankaa cried out, abandoning the bow and turning to scoop up Kordaffaa. As she started to run, the man slammed into her back, sending her and Kordaffaa to the ground. As she fell, she spotted another man in the clearing. He ran toward them, a sword held high. Ogtankaa cowered in the low grass, wrapping her body around Kordaffaa to protect her. The girl moaned but did not scream. She clutched her daughter tight, looking up to see the two men struggling with the sword, its blade deep in the first man’s belly. How did he survive such a wound?

Ogtankaa saw her chance. She stumbled to her feet, pulling Kordaffaa into her arms, intending to run to safety while the men fought. She looked to Thafkantus, but his eyes stared into the sky, unmoving and empty. She wanted to rush to him, to cling to him, to pray for him to come back to her, or at the very least to mourn his loss, but she knew she could not. She needed to protect her daughter. She began to run when she felt the dampness on her hands. She looked down and screamed, anguish raging up through her breast and throat. Kordaffaa hung limp in her arms, blood staining her green, woolen dress, her eyes closed, her breast still. The first man must have stabbed her when he threw them to the ground.

Ogtankaa looked up as the sky became filled with shadow and light. She stumbled backward,

not comprehending what her eyes beheld. The first man, sword still in him, held the neck of the second, smaller man in his hands while the second man tried to pull something from his shirt. Above them hovered two other — *things* — winged shapes that battled in the air above the glade, one full of twisting dark shadows and the other glowing with a golden light. It took her a moment to realize that the beings of light and darkness were connected to the men. She also saw that the second man and the winged creature of light looked likely to lose the confrontation.

She did not think of what to do, knowing what needed doing and setting to it with speed and determination. She laid her dead daughter beside her dead husband and picked up her bow, nocking an arrow as she rose and drawing the bowstring to her cheek. She did not need to aim as others might have. She'd shot more arrows than she could count in her life. They went where she told them. This one she sent through the right ear of the man who had killed her family.

The murderer's body fell to the ground, and the other man yanked a simple-looking medal medallion from his shirt. The shadow creature made to flee, but a rent of golden light suddenly split the air above the clearing. A world of ebony and ash stood beyond the office of light. A sound like metal twisted and broken shattered the air and the gash of light drew the night-black creature into that dark world, its cries silenced as the light vanished. The winged creature of light shrank down and entered ... somehow ... the body of the second man. Stillness and quiet returned to the woods.

Ogtankaa watched as the second man teetered and fell to the ground. She did not know what to do. She looked at the faces of her husband and daughter, tears falling from her cheeks, sobs catching in her throat, making it hard to breathe. They were dead. *Why? Why were they dead?*

She plucked another arrow from the quiver and nocked it as she walked to where the second man lay in the grass. As she neared, she saw that he was mortally wounded, a wide laceration in his abdomen releasing his intestines to the ground. He would not live long. Deep-brown eyes stared up from a deep-brown face.

"Why?" Ogtankaa spoke in a ragged voice, the breadth and depth of all her sorrow compressed into one word.

"It is its nature." That man coughed blood. "I am sorry. I was too late."

Ogtankaa looked up to the sun setting through the forest trees and the first stars just appearing in the evening sky. She felt powerless and untethered from reality. Only minutes ago, she had stood beside her husband and daughter and now Thafkantus and Kordaffaa lay dead in the grass nearby. How could this be? Was there nothing she could do?

"I need a body."

She lowered her eyes to the strange man, chilled to hear the same words from him as she had heard from the other.

"This body will not last long," the man said. "It will die, and I will need to find another. There are more creatures like the one who killed your family, and I am sworn to hunt them."

"You hunt them? These things?" Ogtankaa knelt beside the man.

"Yes," the man said. "It is my nature."

"Then I will be your body." Ogtankaa spoke the words without consideration of their import.

What did she care what happened to her? How could she live without her beloveds? All she could do was what she had done since she learned to draw a bow as a girl at her father's side in these very woods. All she could do was hunt.

“Tell me what I need to do.”

THE PRESENT

“TEMPLE.”

Ogtankaa blinked several times to bring her mind from the past to the present. Sao-Tauna pointed over the edge of the railing, up the coast. She followed the girl's tiny finger as calls and cheers erupted around the ship. A dome of stone in three levels rose above the trees of a small peninsula.

A painful memory to fall into.

As deep as an ocean and just as dangerous.

As the ship came around the mass of rocks and vegetation, the ruins of an ancient port swept into view. The city spread out beyond a pier with five ships moored to crumbling, stone docks. More than a hundred men and women stood waving and cheering the arrival of their fellow pilgrims.

How did they know we arrived?

How did any of this come to pass?

And what...

Happens next?

“What happens now?” Ogtankaa asked aloud.

“I do not know.” The puppy licked at Sha-Kutan's face. He ignored it.

“Do you know, Sao-Tauna?” Lee-Nin bent toward the girl. “Do you know what we need to do now?”

“We see the star woman.” Sao-Tauna pointed toward the temple.

Ogtankaa suspected who the girl meant. The one the pilgrims called the Mother Shepherd. The prophet-priest who set the pilgrimage in motion. The one the pilgrims saw in their dreams.

How can we stop the girl if she attempts what we suspect?

We must break the oath.

Ogtankaa looked at the girl, wondering if she could do what she knew she might need to.

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

THE PHILOSOPHER



KADMALLIN

A FIELD of red with geometric lines in white and black. Wind rippled the shapes into new patterns as the cloth fluttered and flicked.

“The flag is a very good idea.”

Kadmallin did not feel so certain. The false rakthor flag, sewn in haste by Jadaloo, flew from the top of the central mast of the ship. He bent his neck back to look up at Sketkee, who stood beside him. “Thank you.”

“We must hope, though, that the signal codes have not changed due to the blockade.” Sketkee held two smaller flags on sticks, one in each hand, crimson and black.

“If the codes fail, we can try to outrun them.” Kadmallin doubted that possibility. The coal and steam powered iron-hulled rakthor vessel they approached could out pace all but the fastest of sailing ships. The cargo ship they stood upon had no hope of escaping a rakthor battleship.

“We can’t outrun a rakthor ship,” the captain said, seemingly unconcerned. The man apparently believed in the Goddess and the dream of traveling to the Forbidden Realm nearly as much as he believed in gold. Gold had that effect on some men, Kadmallin noted. They made for poor companions when the gold ran out.

“Could you help the ship go faster?” Rankarus posed the question to Kellatra. “Like the rowboat?”

“Did you not notice a slight difference in size between our little rowboat and the *Gray Wind*?” Kellatra asked, naming the vessel that carried them.

“But can you do it?” Rankarus repeated.

“Possibly.” Kellatra frowned. “Some Juparti and Punderra sailors manipulate the winds to speed their ships. I can try.”

Kadmallin noted the shift in her voice from dismissive to thoughtful to curious. Himself, he’d not bet against her accomplishing such a seemingly impossible task.

“Even if the codes are wrong and they insist on boarding, they will find nothing but the children and cargo.” Sketkee raised the near-glass to her eye and examined the line of three ships in the distance to the west. “They will have no cause not to let two ambassadors pass.”

Sketkee had augmented the plan by insisting that Kellatra pretend to be a Juparti ambassador from the City of Leaves working with her to help establish a joint retreat for mutual study in the northern coast of the Tanshen Dominion. She felt it explained the presence of Kellatra and her family on board the ship. Kadmallin worried that while it did present a plausible story, it also complicated their tale. They really only needed to convince the blockade vessels that they did not intend to sail to the Forbidden Realm, and only up the coast. Once past the cordon, they would, indeed, sail up the coast, for a day at least, before tacking westward.

The ship caught a large wave, heaving unexpectedly. Kadmallin’s gut lurched in response. He

staggered to the rail at the rear of the ship. If he did need to empty the contents of his stomach, best for him to do it over the side rather than down onto the main deck below. As he clung to the railing, he cast his eyes toward the horizon. This usually helped to calm his nausea. Today, it made his stomach reel twice as hard. He raised his hand, hoping the light and mist of the ocean tricked his eyes.

“Sketkee, I need the near-glass.”

Sketkee stepped to the rail and handed him the near-glass.

“What do you see?” Sketkee scanned the horizon. “Ah. Yes. That is troublesome.”

“What’s troublesome?” Kellatra asked as she and Rankarus joined them.

Kadmallin held up the near-glass, taking a moment to find the right spot on the ocean and bring the image into focus. He sighed. No doubt remained. The flag atop the mast spoke well enough, but the shape of the ship approaching held far too much familiarity for him.

“That ship also flies a rakthor ambassadorial flag.” Kadmallin lowered the near-glass, fighting back the desire to vomit, as much from the motion of the waves as the vessel approaching. “It’s the cargo ship that Viktik hired and he’s bound to be aboard.”

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

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

THE FUGITIVES



ING-KU

THE SILENCE of waves and seagulls woke him. The absence of human sounds, voices, and activities finally roused Ing-Ku from his deep slumber. He'd been doing little more than sleeping for weeks, ever since falling ill. He'd survived, clinging to life while many died beside him. But he recovered more slowly than those who also escaped the claws of death.

He leaned up as he rubbed his aching eyes. The ship's hold sat empty around him, the bedding of the other pilgrims abandoned. Where could everyone be? He saw light from the stairs to the upper deck but heard no sounds of footsteps. No voices.

He struggled to his feet and staggered across the hold to the stairs, pulling himself up with the handrail. Bright light blinded him, and he shielded his eyes. He'd been in the dark for so long, the sunlight stabbed into his brain. He waited a moment, wavering in place. As his eyes adjusted, he saw the green vines overgrowing a dead city beyond the deck of the ship. They had arrived.

No one remained aboard the ship as he made his way to the gangplank resting against a cracked, stone pier. He spotted people in the distance, but they did not notice him. A panic overcame him. The girl. He did not see the girl. Was he too late? Had he slept too long? He could not fail. Not fail.

He returned below and dug through the small cloth bag he'd carried aboard weeks ago. He found his dagger and strapped it to his belt, letting his shirt fall long to cover it. He found a cistern and drank several scoops of water to refresh his mind and body. He needed to eat, but there was no time. He climbed once more to the deck and headed down the gangplank to the docks. He walked toward the people on the pier, concentrating on forcing his inner energy into his feet, making himself invisible to the powers of the two creatures who protected the girl.

He passed through the crowd and into the city, once more hunting his prey. This time, he would kill her. This time, he had to, or the world risked destruction. He would not fail again. Not again.

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

INTERLUDE



STEEL WHEELS lock to a stop along the steel rails, sparks skittering across the stone street. The trolley car comes to a halt as the grip pads release the cable buried in the street and the brakes lock in place.

Annoyed at the delay in his schedule, and concerned an accident may have taken place, the philosopher steps from the car as his fellow rakhors rise to see what is happening in the street. The philosopher walks around the front of the trolley car and halts, sucking in a deep breath in shock.

This is not possible.

The philosopher, following his natural inclinations, steps forward while other passersby retreat.

Not possible, but clearly happening. The letter was right.

The philosopher received a letter two days previous. Not intended for him — and originally addressed to a now-absent colleague currently disgracing her career by investigating the human collective hallucinations about an imaginary goddess in the Iron Realm — the short letter from a Punderra Priest made its way to him by default. He had been the first philosopher the clerk at the Academy saw that morning.

The short missive spoke of anomalies around the world. Disturbances in reality. He'd discounted it as the typical imaginings of the lesser peoples. Now...

Now, I see the truth of the words. And what they mean for the world.

The philosopher stares at the street where two lanes converged, watching as the stones alternated form and shape and color — large to small, black to white, solid to an undulating near-liquid mass.

I must warn the Central Governing Committee. They must inform the Alliance blockade to redouble their efforts.

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



EPISODE FOURTEEN



THE FUGITIVES



SAO-TAUNA

THE MINGLING of multiple voices, many words overlapping, combined with the press of flesh to create a wall of human interaction that made it hard to see and hear. Pilgrims crowded the pier, laughing, crying, asking questions and answering them. Sao-Tauna held Sha-Kutan's hand in the middle of the crush of people. She stood beside him because people gave him space. His size and the way he looked made others less likely to approach him, the way they did Lee-Nin or even Ogtankaa. Lee-Nin responded to those around her politely. Ogtankaa replied like Ogtankaa. And no one spoke to Sha-Kutan. The mass of people made Sao-Tauna uneasy. She did not like to be around crowds of people, all talking at once. It had taken a long time to get used to so many pilgrims on the ship, but there she could stay on deck, in the air and sun, and feel less overwhelmed.

As the crowd moved and shuffled, she repeatedly caught sight of the large, domed structure in the center of the broken city. The temple. She'd seen it before. In her dreams. And in the temple, she would find ... something. Something wanted her to go to the temple. It tugged at her — a string pulling from her chest through the people and the curved streets to the middle of the city. She yanked at Sha-Kutan's fingers with one hand and pointed with the other. She didn't bother saying anything. Talking usually led to more talking, and that led to the pressure in her head. She liked Sha-Kutan because he didn't talk much. Neither did Ogtankaa, but Sao-Tauna didn't like her as well. She always looked like she had eaten something bad and couldn't decide if she should spit it out.

"The temple?" Sha-Kutan asked. Sao-Tauna nodded in reply.

Sha-Kutan placed a hand on Lee-Nin's shoulder and pointed to the temple when she turned to him.

"Sao-Tauna says we should go to the temple," Sha-Kutan said.

"So soon?" Lee-Nin asked as she took Sha-Kutan's hand. Sao-Tauna liked that they held hands so often now. It made them happy. It made her happy to see them happy. It did not make Ogtankaa happy.

"Whatever this will be, we should see it ended soon." Ogtankaa stepped closer to them, her voice as cold as the look on her face.

"Hello."

A high-pitched, girlish voice filled with excitement spoke in a strange Shen accent. Sao-Tauna looked down from Sha-Kutan and Lee-Nin to see a dark-skinned girl about ten years of age standing before her. A very old woman with even darker, wrinkled skin stood beside the girl. She recognized them but did not really know them.

"I am Atula." The girl who called herself Atula raised a hand in greeting. "I dream you."

"She means she dreams about you." The old woman bent down to Sao-Tauna. "Her Shen is not so good. I am Taksati. I, too, dreamed of you."

“You dreamed of Sao-Tauna?” Lee-Nin asked. Her voice sounded confused, but what the woman and girl said made sense to Sao-Tauna. She had dreamed of them as well. And the temple. And another woman.

“We dreamed of Sao-Tauna. But we did not know her name.” Taksati smiled at Sao-Tauna. “A lovely name. We have come to take you to the temple. To meet Junari.”

“The Mother Shepherd,” Atula added with a grin.

“You were expecting us?” Ogtankaa asked. She did not sound pleased to learn this.

“Hoping for you. For Sao-Tauna.” Taksati smiled broadly. “Come. Follow.”

Taksati took Atula’s hand, and they pushed their way through the crowd of joyous pilgrims. Sao-Tauna followed, still reaching high to hold Sha-Kutan’s fingers while he and Lee-Nin walked beside her. Ogtankaa trailed close behind. As they exited from the mass of people, Sao-Tauna got her first clear look at the temple since stepping from the ship. It appeared just like it did in her dreams. The old woman, Taksati, led them down the wide, curving, central street.

“All the streets curve here. Nothing is straight,” Taksati said as she pointed. Atula drew a spiral with her finger in the air. Sao-Tauna understood. She’d seen the spiraling streets in her dreams.

“Who built this city?” Lee-Nin asked. Sao-Tauna thought that whoever they were, they must have been very fat because all the doorways were so wide. She imagined a city of very tall, very fat people. It made her smile inside.

“We do not know.” Taksati pointed to a shattered statue outside a building. “All the statues are destroyed. Come. We can take the side streets.” She led them around a corner and down a smaller curving street.

“There is no sign of them?” Sha-Kutan asked. “You have seen no one here?”

“None but the people who came with us,” Taksati said. “But there are other things. Do not stray from the cleared streets. It can be dangerous.”

“Fire-plants,” Atula said with a shudder.

“What is a fire-plant?” Ogtankaa asked.

“We think the builders left them to protect the city.” Taksati turned another corner and headed down a second curved street. “The plants attack people and explode in flame.”

“Much flame,” Atula said.

“Some of them can move quite fast,” Taksati added.

“Taksati saved me,” Atula added.

“Plants that move and burst into flame?” Lee-Nin squeezed Sao-Tauna’s hand a little tighter.

“The plants can be deadly, but we have cleared most of them,” Taksati said.

“It seems there are actual reasons for this Realm to be Forbidden.” Ogtankaa sounded surprised.

“Indeed,” Sha-Kutan added in his rumbling voice.

Sao-Tauna allowed the others to ask questions and listened to the answers. While curious about plants that exploded into fire, she really wondered how many people had dreamed of her. Had they seen the same things in those dreams she did? Did it mean she would do what she did in

the dreams? Did she have to? Could she choose? She did not know if she wanted to do what the dreams showed. It always led to trouble. Well, usually, it led to trouble. Sometimes, it turned out to be a good thing. But mostly, she decided, it upset people and made them angry with her. She thought of Mommy, of Daddy, of the knife in his hand...

She squeezed her eyes closed for a moment and let the pull of Sha-Kutan's big hand lead her along the street. She didn't like to think of Daddy because it always ended with thinking of the knife and everything that happened afterward. If she hadn't heard her mother speak of ordering Lee-Nin put in the dungeon cells, Sao-Tauna never would have found her, and they never would have escaped the palace, and the man who hunted her might have...

She opened her eyes. The sight of the domed temple looming at the end of the curved street helped drive all the memories from her mind and brought back thoughts of the dream. The first dream had called to her, and the star had called to her, and this new dream she'd had since the ship set sail called to her as well. It made her tummy hurt to think about it and she wished she had her puppy to hold. She didn't like to be held by people, but she liked to hold her puppy, Kuru. She even liked it when he licked her face.

As Taksati led them from the last curving street into a wide plaza before the temple, it finally occurred to Sao-Tauna what really bothered her about the dream — she never saw what happened afterward. That was strange, wasn't it? Maybe she could only find what happened by doing what she did each night in the dream. But did she truly want to know what happened afterward?

"What happens in your dream of me?" Sao-Tauna asked. It took a moment for Taksati to realize who spoke, as Sao-Tauna had not said a word thus far.

"This is what happens in my dream," Taksati said over her shoulder. "The ships arrive, I find you at the pier, and I bring you to the Mother Shepherd."

"I dream you and..." Atula spoke a word in a language Sao-Tauna did not understand.

"A puppy," Taksati said.

"Yes. I dream you and puppy," Atula said.

"I have a puppy." Sao-Tauna now wished even more that she had Kuru with her.

"I did not dream any of this." Ogtankaa sounded unhappy again. She sounded unhappy a lot.

"You do not dream." Sha-Kutan sounded displeased as well. That worried her, as he usually sounded grumpy. He must be nervous like her.

"You understand my meaning," Ogtankaa said.

"Stop it. Both of you." Lee-Nin sounded annoyed. Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa stopped talking. They always did when Lee-Nin sounded annoyed.

"We're here." Taksati stopped at one of the wide entrances to the temple. "I'll lead you to the room the Mother Shepherd uses. Atula will bring her. She is busy just now." The old woman said a few words in the other language to the girl. Atula nodded her head and dashed off into the temple.

"This way." Taksati stepped into the shadows of the temple entrance and they all followed her.

The cool air of the temple felt pleasant against her skin after walking in the sun. They followed Taksati along a curved hallway lit by wide, round window holes in the walls and up a curving

ramp. She led them to a room with more round, open windows, a low table, a plush rug, and several cushions on the floor.

“I will bring tea. Wait here.” Taksati smiled at them and left the room.

No one said anything for a short time.

“I do not like these events.” Ogtankaa turned to Lee-Nin. “Did you dream of this?”

“No. I’ve always had the same dream.” Lee-Nin bent down to Sao-Tauna. “Why didn’t you tell me you dreamed of meeting the Mother Shepherd?”

Sao-Tauna shrugged. It was the best answer she could give. She didn’t want to tell Lee-Nin or Sha-Kutan about the dream because then she would have to tell them what she did in the dream each night.

“Do you dream of doing more than meeting people in your dream?” Sha-Kutan stared down at her.

Sometimes Sha-Kutan annoyed her. Sao-Tauna nodded her head.

“Do you open a portal in your dream you have not shared?” Ogtankaa asked.

Sometimes, Ogtankaa really annoyed her. Sao-Tauna bit her lip.

“That is not an answer.” Ogtankaa sounded more angry than unhappy now.

“We know what she can do, and we know why she’s here.” Lee-Nin glared at Ogtankaa. “And we know why you are here.”

“I doubt that,” Ogtankaa said as she looked away, “as I do not fully understand it myself.”

“Dreams are not prophecy nor are they fate.” Sha-Kutan’s face softened as he looked to Sao-Tauna. “We choose our actions, and we accept the consequences.”

Sao-Tauna nodded. And bit her lip again. She understood. It didn’t have to be like the dream. It could be how she wanted it to be. But what did she want it to be? What did she want to do? She was only seven. Why did she have to choose? She sighed.

They waited for Taksati to return with the tea in silence. Again, she wished she had her puppy Kuru with her.

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

To continue reading the crossover between the Fugitives and the Temple story arenas turn the page.

THE TEMPLE



RAEDALUS

CENTURIES-HARDENED WOOD banded by iron and seated in stone. A stubborn and recalcitrant door. They'd spent several hours since sunrise trying to open it. Junari stood nearby, waiting patiently. Raedalus felt tired for lack of sleep and foolish for waking her before he had the entrance accessible. The absence of hinges or a lock made the door more a wall than an entrance. It would not be pushed or pulled, and its wood remained impervious to steel picks and tools. After much frustration, they sent for someone to wake Tanagaal in hopes the seer might provide a solution to the impenetrable portal. He did, finally, but it required even more hours.

"The wood and iron are hardened with The Sight," Tanagaal said after a long examination of the materials in question.

"Can we force it open?" Raedalus rubbed his eyes. A long night of elation and frustration combined with a lack of sleep left him dizzy.

"Not easily." Tanagaal held a hand against the wood.

"You can find no lock?" Junari asked as she joined Tanagaal in placing a hand on the door.

"None that I can sense," Tanagaal replied.

"What if..." Zilaya had been largely silent since Junari's arrival. Now she examined the wall to the right of the door, holding a lantern in one hand. "What if the lock is not in the door, but in the wall."

"Ah..." Raedalus wondered why he had not seen that previously. Exhaustion? He smiled at Zilaya. "That makes sense. With no hinges, if the door slides into the wall, the lock would be in the wall."

"Yes. Like a secret passage in a children's story of a castle." Zilaya pressed her free palm against the large stones of the wall.

"Let me look again." Tanagaal stood beside Zilaya, one hand outstretched. He stared at the wall as he cast his fingers across it. "Nothing." He turned to the opposite wall. Almost immediately, one of the large stones moved, sinking into the wall by several hand lengths.

"You were right." Tanagaal smiled at Zilaya as he turned and gestured toward the door. It slid slowly to the left, into the wall. "And this door is too heavy to move without use of The Sight."

"Well done, Zilaya," Junari patted Zilaya's shoulder.

"Yes. Very well done." Raedalus, standing close to Zilaya, wanted to hold her and kiss her for the find. He settled for a wide grin, one she returned.

"I read a lot of stories of castles when I was a girl," Zilaya said.

The four of them stood before the shadows of the chamber as Tanagaal used The Sight to finish opening the massive door. The workers who had helped uncover it drew close, handing lanterns to Junari, Raedalus, and Tanagaal. Zilaya already held a lantern high, casting light into the space. Circular and domed as he'd expected, the room stretched at least forty paces in diameter.

“You should be first,” Raedalus said to Junari.

“Just the four of us for now,” Junari said to the workers behind them. “I don’t want anything disturbed.”

As Junari stepped into the formerly secret chamber, Raedalus followed, finding he wished he held Zilaya’s hand. Once fully into the room, the light of the four lanterns revealed what had been hidden for thousands of years, and he found it hard to think. As with the rest of the temple, painted murals covered the walls. But whereas the paintings in the levels above were partially destroyed by time and intent, these were pristine, and only slightly faded by the years. Scenes of forests and jungles, mountains and oceans, cities and villages. And ... people ... in all of them. People like he had never heard of or seen before. People who looked like the three statues that faced them from the center of the room. Large stone caricatures unblemished and unbroken. Judging from the scale of the paintings, the figures were intended to be life-sized.

Raedalus held a lantern up to one of the statues, marveling at it. It stood on four legs with shoulders as high as he could reach. Bulbous heads with extended ears and triple trunks that ended in what resembled eight digits.

“Elephants?” Junari placed a hand on the stone of a massive front leg.

“Something akin to them.” Tanagaal touched one of the tripled stone trunks.

“Like the way men resemble monkeys.” Raedalus stared at the statue, finally understanding the design of the doors, rooms, and buildings of the city.

“They’re beautiful.” Zilaya’s fingers twitched. Raedalus knew she badly wanted to stop and sketch the statues.

“What is that?” Junari turned and held the lantern toward the far end of the chamber, revealing an altar, and behind it, another, larger statue, still veiled in shadows.

As they approached the altar, Raedalus noted some manner of script in interlocking curves and circles lining the front of its granite surface. He noticed now that more such script filled the bottom of the murals around the room, etched in stone and painted over in gold. He would have bent to examine what he took to be writing on the altar had not the light of the lanterns fully revealed the statue behind it.

The massive figure depicted another creature he’d never heard of. An elongated body with six sturdy legs that ended in the taloned feet of a reptile or a bird. It boasted two sets of wide sweeping wings, and a mass of strange, twisting tentacles protruding around its body. A long, thick neck extended from the trunk ending in a head that looked both avian and reptilian. A large beak opened wide to expose ridges of sharp teeth. In the eye sockets sat two immense blood-shaded rubies, glittering in the lamp light.

“This was their god.” Junari stared up at the stone beast-god before her. “Their goddess.”

“Is this what Moaratana looks like?” Zilaya asked, voicing aloud the question Raedalus considered in silence. He thought of the name of their new goddess — Moaratana — *Dragon Star*. What he saw before him looked like no dragon he’d read about in any legend. It appeared as nothing of this world.

“It is how the people of this temple and city viewed their goddess,” Junari said. “I have always

envisioned Moaratana in a woman's body. This may be how they conceived her."

"It's terrifying." Tanagaal backed away.

"We may look frightening to those who built this temple," Raedalus replied. In truth, he suspected he would seem puny and insignificant to the colossal creatures who once roamed this temple and the surrounding city.

"What did they call themselves, I wonder?" Zilaya rose on the tips of her toes to see the top of the altar that stood above her head. "There is a scroll here. Or what is left of it." She swung the lantern around. "There are more in the walls."

Raedalus noticed them now, too. Tall rows of circular cubbyholes built into the walls, each holding a single rolled scroll. A treasure house of indecipherable knowledge about the people who built the city and the goddess they worshiped. Raedalus looked around the chamber, the inner sanctum of the temple, still in awe and somewhat frightened by what he beheld. What did it all mean?

"This is an extraordinary discovery, Raedalus." Junari held her lantern low as she rested a hand on his arm. "This gives us so many answers."

"And poses yet more questions," Raedalus said. "Like what manner of goddess these lost people worshiped."

"You will find those answers, I am certain." Junari's smile seemed forced. He recognized the uncertainty in her eyes. The statue of the goddess, if that was what it truly was, disturbed her as well.

"I'll go get my sketching paper and char sticks." Zilaya backed away, her eyes still fixed on the massive sculpture of the dragon-goddess.

"Ask the others to bring more lanterns and plenty of paper and ink. We'll need to start cataloging everything." Raedalus watched Zilaya as she turned back.

"Of course," Zilaya said. "I'll bring tables as well."

"I'll go with you," Tanagaal said. "I promised to go with Bon-Tao on another hunting expedition this morning. Best to get the fire-plants while there is still dew on them."

"She is a good choice of assistant," Junari said as Zilaya and Tanagaal departed the chamber, and the other workers in the team brought in more lanterns. "A good companion."

"Yes," Raedalus said, finding the exchange less awkward than he expected. Zilaya did make a good companion. And possibly more than a companion.

"What do you think it means?" Junari stared up at the massive dragon-statue.

"It means the Goddess continues to surprise us." Raedalus hoped it meant no more than that.

"We were drawn here to this city, to this temple." Junari placed the finger and thumb of her free hand around her chin. "They must have worshiped the Goddess. And maybe she appears to each of us the way we expect her to."

"Mother Shepherd." Atula's voice echoed from the back of the chamber. "Oh ... zaah!"

"Atula. What are you doing here? It could be dangerous here still." Junari walked back toward the girl and Raedalus followed.

"I came to fetch you." Atula stood locked in place, eyes wide, head turning to take in the

strange sights of the temple builders' inner sanctum.

"Who sent you?" Junari asked.

"Taksati." Atula stared up at the giant dragon-statue.

"And what does Taksati wish with the Mother Shepherd?" Raedalus asked, his voice more gentle than usual. He understood how overwhelming the chamber could be.

"The girl!" Atula blinked and stared at Junari as though waking from a slumber. "The girl from the dream. She is here with her ... with people."

"Show me." Junari took Atula's hand. "Raedalus. Join me, please."

"Of course." The dizziness returned as Raedalus followed Junari and Atula. The girl from the dream. What did it mean that she arrived the same day they discovered the ancient hidden sanctum of the temple builders and their god? And what now did the dream foretell? To his knowledge, only a handful of people dreamed of the girl and her companions. Himself, Junari, Taksati, Atula, and Bon-Tao. And none dreamed exactly the same dream. As though each foresaw part of what was to come. His dream showed a meeting with Junari. A meeting he walked to now. The dizziness intensified as he realized that this represented the culmination of the months of pilgrimage and the creation of a new faith. Today, they would witness the Goddess's plan made manifest in the world.

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THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

SCENTED CLOUDS of steam coiled in the air above six roughhewn clay cups resting on a low table. The scent of cinnamon, clove, and vanilla made Sha-Kutan's nose twitch. He'd never liked Juparti teas. Too fruity and flavorful. Like their food. Introductions made, and tea served, they all rested on floor cushions around the squat table. He sat with Sao-Tauna between himself and Lee-Nin to his right, and Ogtankaa to his left. Across the table from them, sat the prophet of the new religion, the Mother Shepherd, who insisted on being called Junari.

Beside her, sat her head priest, Raedalus. The man's scholarly look made him miss Nukapan and his days as a monk reading texts and meditating. Days long past. On the other side of Junari sat a man named Bon-Tao, a soldier from his looks, and a good one judging from the way his eyes remained resting on Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa. He'd removed his sword belt when sitting, but it lay on the floor beside him. Sha-Kutan's and Ogtankaa's swords also lay on the floor beside their cushions. People had looked at the blades, but not forbidden them to hold them. Not even the male and female guards who accompanied Junari through the temple.

A third man sat beside Raedalus. Tanagaal. A seer. He, too, kept his eyes on Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa. He wondered if the man could sense their difference. The old woman and the girl, Taksati and Atula, stood beside the door, waiting, watching. Were they servants? Why did they remain if they were? Were they something else?

A silence stretched out — tendrils of a vine entwining a tree. He did not know what to say or how to start. Lee-Nin had made introductions, and he felt it best she continued to speak for them. Sao-Tauna would not likely speak for herself. Until she did, as was her way.

Junari looked up from the cup of tea she held in her hands. "I must admit that I am uncertain how to proceed or what should happen next."

"Why don't you start by telling us about the dreams?" Lee-Nin held her teacup but had not drunk from it yet.

"As far as we know, only those of us in this room have had dreams of Sao-Tauna." Junari looked at the girl as she spoke. "And each of our dreams are different. As though they each tell part of a story. In my dream, we are gathered in the great plaza outside the temple. I am in my ritual robes and we are all engaged in some manner of ceremony."

She speaks the truth but not all of the truth.

She holds something back.

I smell fear.

"In my dream, we are in the main temple hall." Raedalus looked at the floor. "I am showing Sao-Tauna the temple and explaining the features of the murals and statues."

"In my dream, we are in a city garden." Bon-Tao sat up straighter on his cushion, looking uncomfortable. "Atula and Sao-Tauna are playing."

He lies.

Why would he lie?

Unless the dreams he sees show something he does not wish to share.

Like fighting us or Ogtankaa.

And does his dream...

Show him our true nature?

“In my dream, we are here.” Tanagaal spread his arms to indicate their surroundings. “In this room. Seated much like this. When I wake, I never remember exactly what is said.” He swallowed. “It is strange to sit here, uncertain if I am truly awake.”

He, too, lies.

Possibly he also fights in his dream.

Let us hope...

He does not seek to fight now while awake.

“What happens in the ceremony of your dream?” Lee-Nin ignored the others to question Junari directly. She did not appear impressed with sitting before the Mother Shepherd.

She thinks only of Sao-Tauna’s safety.

As must we.

“It is unclear.” Junari looked at her tea again. “There are symbols I do not recognize drawn on the stones of the plaza. And there is a bright light in the sky. I remember little more than that.”

Lee-Nin turned to Sha-Kutan, her face betraying nothing of the questioning concern revealed in her eyes.

A light in the sky.

It could be many things.

But likely only one.

“We were told all the statues and likenesses of the buildings of this city were demolished.” Ogtankaa leaned forward as her question filled the gap in conversation.

Why this question?

She senses something.

“This is true.” Junari turned to Raedalus and then back to Lee-Nin. “This morning, we discovered a hidden sanctum. A place where the statues and murals were not destroyed.”

There is more she does not reveal.

More which makes her nervous in ways she will not admit.

“And what are they?” Ogtankaa asked. “Human? Yutan? Wyrin? Surely, not rakthor or roagg.”

Again, Junari looked to Raedalus. Tanagaal fidgeted beside them while Bon-Tao listened intently.

“They are like small elephants with three trunks.” Junari seemed about to laugh. “It sounds ridiculous, but it is true. There appears to have been a whole other people to have populated the Forbidden Realm.”

“And these elephant-people built this city and this temple?” Incredulity coated Lee-Nin’s

words.

“It seems so, yes,” Junari replied.

“But they do not appear in any of the dreams?” Lee-Nin asked.

“No.” Junari shook her head, and the others mimicked the action, even Taksati and Atula against the wall.

Another silence unfolded to settle between the two groups of people. Sha-Kutan did not know how to continue. What did this prophet want? What did she not say?

Too many questions.

As always.

“Statues.” Sao-Tauna’s soft voice filled the quiet.

“I’m sorry.” Junari smiled at Sao-Tauna. “I do not understand.” The look on her face showed relief that Sao-Tauna finally spoke, but also hinted at a deep unease.

“She means that we wish to see these statues in this hidden sanctum.” Sha-Kutan’s words rumbled from his mouth, surprising the others even more than Sao-Tauna’s simple expression.

“Of course.” Junari swallowed. “We can arrange for Raedalus to guide you...”

“Now.” Sao-Tauna did not sound petulant but simply firm.

“As you wish.” Junari sighed and began to stand. Bon-Tao rose quickly beside her and extended his hand to help her to her feet.

He cares for her more than a soldier of the faith should.

He will protect her no matter what.

At least we can now understand...

Such motivations.

Junari and Raedalus led the group out of the meeting room, along a curving hall, down three flights of arcing ramps into what looked like cellars, past mounds of rubble, over the remnants of a shattered wall, through a portal with a massive, wooden door partially slid into a wall, and into the inner sanctum beneath the temple, cleared of workers, but filled with the light of a dozen lanterns.

Sha-Kutan let the scene revealed by the many lanterns wash over his mind — dust dimmed murals in once-bright colors, scrolls tucked into round nooks in the walls at regular intervals, four statues of an elephant-like people draped in some kind of cloth, an altar with single cracked scroll unrolled across its surface and the statue, the creature, a dragon of sorts, towering upward on six legs, four wings, and countless tentacles held motionless in the air, its long neck ending in a bird’s head with teeth, and of course, the rubies in the eyes, alight like balls of fire in the lantern light.

No wonder she smells frightened.

It is terrifying.

“What is that?” Lee-Nin ignored the statues of the elephant people, stretching her arm out to point at the massive dragon-statue. Her other arm settled around Sao-Tauna’s shoulders and drew the girl close. Sao-Tauna did not complain but frowned at the touch. Sha-Kutan noticed Taksati, a worried expression on her face, pull Atula into a similar embrace.

“We do not know.” Junari sounded apologetic and anxious. She smelled anxious as well. “As

I said, we only just found this chamber this very morning.”

“It may be a statue of the god they worshiped,” Raedalus offered.

“That is a statue of the Goddess Moaratana?” Disbelief again crept into the Lee-Nin’s voice. Her scent spoke of apprehension.

“More a monster than a god.” Ogtankaa walked a few steps closer to the statue.

“As I said, we do not know what it is,” Junari said. “If it is the Goddess, Moaratana, this may merely be the way these people represented her. We have avoided drawing images of the Goddess, but I had always pictured her in my mind as a woman.”

“It may be female.” Ogtankaa pointed to several large teats on the underbelly of the stone beast.

An amalgam.

Reptile, mammal, and avian all at once.

A dragon for all peoples.

Who were these temple builders?

And what happened to them?

Did their goddess finally come?

“Goddess.” Sao-Tauna raised her finger to the enormous dragon statue. This time, her voice created a silence rather than ending it.

“What do you want with her?” Lee-Nin asked of Junari.

“I had hoped she knew what needed to be done.” Junari blinked, looking between Sao-Tauna and the statue.

“I know what I’m supposed to do,” Sao-Tauna said. “I dream about it, too. But I’m not sure it’s right.”

“What are you supposed to do?” Junari stepped closer to Sao-Tauna with her question.

“Make a door for the Goddess to come through.” Sao-Tauna pointed again at the dragon-statue.

Junari turned to the statue but did not say anything.

“You can do that?” Tanagaal sounded both terrified and excited.

“She can,” Lee-Nin said. “I think.”

“This madness should not continue.” Ogtankaa stared at Sao-Tauna. “We should leave.”

“And go where?” Sha-Kutan asked. Where could they go? “We are here for this reason. Whatever Sao-Tauna chooses.”

“We are here for other reasons as well.” Ogtankaa turned her hard-eyed stare toward Sha-Kutan. He returned it in kind.

Do we trust our eyes?

Or do we trust Sao-Tauna?

And does she trust her dream?

“Maybe we should head up.” Bon-Tao spoke a little too loudly, his voice echoing on the domed walls above. “Get some fresh air.”

“An excellent idea.” Raedalus sighed loudly.

“I will arrange a meal for everyone,” Taksati said. Atula remained silent, still staring at the dragon-statue.

“Some time to think would be good,” Lee-Nin said. “For Sao-Tauna.”

A vibration perceptible only to his shadow-essence filled the room.

Something comes.

Something very powerful.

Sha-Kutan caught Ogtankaa’s eyes, and she moved to be closer to him. She placed her hand on the hilt of her sword as he did with his own. They took up positions beside Sao-Tauna and Lee-Nin.

“Something is happening.” The seer Tanagaal spun around as though expecting to be attacked from any side.

“What are you doing?” Bon-Tao also gripped his sword as he stepped beside Junari. Taksati pulled Atula to join them as Tanagaal and Raedalus pulled close as well. Two groups of people facing off against something they could not see.

“We do nothing,” Sha-Kutan said.

“What is happening?” Lee-Nin clutched the hand of the dagger at her waist.

“Something is coming.” Ogtankaa looked at the statue and then to the shadows.

“Are you doing this, Sao-Tauna?” Lee-Nin asked.

“No.” Sao-Tauna sounded afraid, her voice thin.

The light of all the lanterns but one flicked into shadows, shadows that congealed in the darkness beyond the boundaries of that one remaining source of light. The two groups instinctively drew close to the lantern on the floor, gathering around it, their backs to the light.

“There.” Junari pointed to a shadow moving within the darkness, taking shape, finding substance.

Bon-Tao drew his sword and placed himself before Junari.

Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa drew their blades as well.

Swords will be no use.

Even our elemental natures may offer no resistance.

“Another.” Lee-Nin pointed the tip of her dagger at a second living shadow.

As the shadows gained form, Sha-Kutan noted the loss of motion in his body. His arms and legs held solid against all attempts to move.

The shadows gained a darkened, ephemeral form — four legs supporting a wide body with four arms extending out from the torso. Something like a neck with a large, round head rose up in the middle.

The adumbrations before them resisted all Sha-Kutan’s attempts to see or intuit clearly, but he did not need to be told their nature or identity. They informed him directly, a bifold voice in his mind. A voice of voices within both his minds, voices surely heard within the minds of the others.

We are...

are the urris.

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THE TEMPLE



JUNARI

ANCIENT DUST, the smoke of burning tamak-seed oil, the musty air of a room sealed beneath the ground for millennia, human sweat heavily scented with fear. These smells helped steady Junari's mind against the reality of the situation confronting her and her companions.

The urris. Here. In the very same room with her. Holding her captive in her own body. Speaking to her in her mind. She realized that she could blink, though not otherwise move. She wondered if she could speak. Even if the powers holding her allowed it, she did not know if she could make herself form words. Her mind still labored to accept the sight of the two beings in the shadows. Were they truly there or did they place themselves in her mind?

You must not...

not do this thing you...

you seek to...

to do.

Junari blinked against the strangeness of voices in her mind. If she had control of her limbs, she would have pressed her palms to her head. She needed to try and speak.

"Who are you to subvert the will of the Goddess?" Junari nearly sighed in relief that her mouth and throat still functioned. She did not truly understand what the Goddess willed, but she understood she must defend it.

We are...

are the urris...

we are...

are pledged to protect this world...

this world we gave you...

"We do not need protection from our Goddess. The Goddess protects and shelters us." Junari still struggled to accept that she spoke with the urris, or two of them. Why did they fight so against the Goddess? What did they fear? What should she fear?

Those who came before...

Before you sought to do...

Do the same as you...

We cannot allow...

Allow this world to be broken again...

"The builders of the temple and the city? They sought to free the Goddess?" Is that what she wanted to do? Is that what the Goddess wanted with the child, Sao-Tauna?

They were called...

Called the Pelinor and...

An image filled Junari's mind — the city, the temple, new and alive with trees, the Pelinor

walking its wide streets, their bodies adorned in colorful strips of fabric. Did the others see these images as well?

And they attempted as you...

You to break the seals...

Seals that hold the realms...

Realms apart.

Another image appeared in her mind — Pelinors gathered in the plaza around the temple, a gash of light tearing the sky.

“What happened to them?” These words came from the woman Lee-Nin. Junari heard her voice from behind.

We were compelled to...

To intervene and stop...

Stop them and to...

To remake the seal between...

Between the realms.

“You destroyed them?” The thought chilled Junari’s passion and anger. To destroy an entire people to thwart the Goddess. What manner of monsters were the urris?

They fought against...

Against us and we were...

Were forced to strike...

Strike them down...

Down to save this world.

“And you destroyed all memory of them.” Junari understood now why the Forbidden Realm held that name and why the urris denied it to the peoples of the other realms.

One among us went...

Went mad and struck all...

All likeness of the...

The Pelinors from the land to...

To attempt to forget...

Forget what we had done...

“Why not destroy us the way you did these Pelinor?” Again, Lee-Nin spoke. It seemed only the representatives of the two groups were allowed to speak. Or possibly only the two women held the courage to challenge the mythical urris.

We do not wish...

Wish harm to...

To anyone for we...

We are guardians for...

For all this world...

World that we are no longer...

Longer strong enough...

Enough to protect.

“I tell you again, the Goddess will protect us.” Junari did not find the repetition of this statement made it feel more real in her heart.

Once there were...

Were many urris to...

To defend this world from...

From dangers but for many...

Many years there have been...

Been only three...

Three of us and now...

Now there are only two.

Junari thought back to the fireball streaking across the sky as it fell during the great wave that struck the city and the temple. Had the Goddess’s lightning killed one of the urris? They could be killed then.

We are now...

Now too few...

Few to hold the seals...

Seals and to mend them tight...

Tight if they are broken...

Broken and what you call...

Call a goddess may shield...

Shield you but it...

It cannot shelter the whole...

Whole of this world from...

From what will enter...

Enter if the seals between...

Between the realms...

Realms are shattered again.

“What will happen if these seals are shattered?” Lee-Nin voiced the question Junari feared to ask.

No one can know what...

What will come through from...

From the other realms...

Realms that two in this room...

Know well for they...

They do not belong in...

In this realm.

Who did the urris refer to? The man and woman, Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa? They seemed different to Junari in an undefinable way. But how? How could they come from another realm?

We do not wish to...

*To harm anyone...
Anyone more than we have...
Have done to protect the whole...
Whole of this world but...
But we will do as we...
We must if you...
You proceed.*

Lantern light once more suffused the room, pushing the shadows back as the silhouettes of the urris evaporated. With the return of illumination, Junari regained the movement of her body. She turned to the others, who now faced her.

“It is as I have said. Madness. We have been warned.” Ogtankaa still held her sword in her hand.

“What are you? What did they mean you are from another realm?” Junari wanted to step closer to Ogtankaa and Sha-Kutan, but a sudden fear of them held her in place.

“We are human and more than human.” Sha-Kutan re-sheathed his sword. Junari did not find the gesture as comforting as she wished.

“The parts of us that are more than human are from different realms than this world of yours,” Ogtankaa said. “Dangerous realms.”

“The urris are correct,” Sha-Kutan said. “If Sao-Tauna opens a gate for this goddess to enter our world, other beings may enter as well. From the same realms or possibly others.”

“And the act of opening such a large rent may render it impossible to close again,” Ogtankaa said.

“So, we must trust the urris or trust the Goddess.” Raedalus looked between Junari and the two beings that claimed to be more than human.

Junari stared at Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa as well. Were they infected with something? Something from another realm? How? And how could they be human and not human at the same time? She did not trust them, but she accepted she must take these warnings to heart.

“All of this has happened for a reason.” Junari paused as she glanced at Sao-Tauna. “The dreams, the star, the voyage, all of it leading to the coming of the Goddess. I have faith not only that the Goddess will protect us, but that her intentions are pure. The Goddess does not come to destroy this world, but to make it better. I have seen the miracles she has performed while not of this realm. I believe her presence in this world will benefit all people everywhere.”

“But you cannot know what else may happen. What may not go to plan. What the Goddess cannot control.” Lee-Nin stared at the girl. “We are not concerned for the Goddess. Our concern is for Sao-Tauna.”

“Then let Sao-Tauna decide.” Junari saw no way around this impasse. The arrival of the urris and their warning set her at odds with Sao-Tauna’s guardians. Her only hope rested in the girl herself.

“Let a child decide the fate of this realm?” Ogtankaa stared at Junari. She felt Bon-Tao tense beside her.

“Only she can decide.” Sha-Kutan looked from the girl to Junari and her companions. “Only Sao-Tauna can open this door to the realm of your Goddess. Only she can make this choice. And any attempt to force her to do this will find her defended.” The look on the large man’s face and the grating of his voice left no doubt that he and the Ogtankaa woman would be even more dangerous opponents than they appeared. And they looked deadly.

Junari took a deep breath to calm herself and then looked to Sao-Tauna. The girl seemed relatively impassive, considering the events recently transpired. “What do you want to do, Sao-Tauna?”

Sao-Tauna looked up to Junari. “I want to play with my puppy, Kuru.”

Junari nearly laughed. A child’s answer.

“She means that she wants to think about it,” Lee-Nin said.

“As you wish.” Junari looked to Taksati. “Please take our guests to the temple garden and provide them with refreshments.” Junari looked to Lee-Nin. “After you have had something to eat, Taksati will find you accommodations in one of the reclaimed houses near the temple.” She paused a moment before continuing. “I want what is best for everyone. The Goddess. Her flock. The world. And Sao-Tauna.”

Lee-Nin and the others said nothing as Taksati and Atula led them from the secret Pelinor chamber. *Pelinor*. What did that name mean?

“What do we do, Mother Shepherd?” Raedalus turned to stare at the massive dragon-like statue behind them.

“I do not know that we can do anything but wait.” Junari followed Raedalus’s gaze, raising her eyes to the statue of what she assumed to be the Goddess Moaratana.

“Those two are dangerous,” Bon-Tao finally re-sheathed his sword.

“Not as dangerous as the urris.” Tanagaal rubbed his arms, looking suddenly chilled. “I could do nothing against them.”

“We face dangers on all sides,” Junari said. She wondered if the Goddess represented one of those dangers. She wanted to believe not.

“A girl deciding everything, after all we’ve been through.” Raedalus sounded confused.

“Maybe this is as the Goddess intended.” Junari turned from the statue and strode from the chamber. “Come. We should prepare for whatever decision is made.”

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THE WITNESS



HASHEL

MEN HEFTED bundles of cloth, sacks of grain and flour, and crates of potatoes, squash, and apples, unloading them along a narrow plank from riverboat to dock. The men stacked the goods in wagons under the direction of other men and returned to the boat for more. Hashel stood with Reeshka at the edge of the pier in the large river town of Tusa la Kamos eating hot meat buns as they watched the men scurrying back and forth between the riverboat and the dock. The town sat at the crossing of the Old Border Road and it meant a decision needed to be made.

“I am for the road.” Reeshka wiped the spicy juice of the bun from her furred jaw with the back of a paw. “The open water is ... unsettling.”

She spoke in roagg, and while Hashel understood her well enough, he noticed that with each passing day, his ability to understand the language faded. He relied now as much on guessing the meaning of the words she spoke as knowing them though his special connection with Ondromead. His plan to be reunited with the old man sat at the crux of the decision he and Reeshka faced. He felt the quickest way to reach Tanjii would be to follow the Goha River down to the Tanfen Sea and then hire passage on a ship to sail around the coast to Tanjii. He’d heard pilgrims talk of taking this path to Tanjii. Reeshka did not seem to like the water and felt that the Old Border Road, while slower, would be safer.

Hashel took another bite of his meat bun, crunching on a chunk of apple, and thought about his options. He could go a little faster by river and sea, but he would be alone. He could go a little slower by the Old Border Road, but he would have the company of Reeshka. He knew which he wanted to do, and he knew which he needed to do.

“I came here on a ship.” Reeshka looked over her shoulder toward the northwest. “From my land. Rarag Shak. The Stone Realm. It is not a far way to sail, but the ship I chose did not make it. I nearly did not make it. Had I not been raised near one of the few lakes in my land and learned to swim as a cub, I would have drowned like so many others.”

It now made sense to Hashel why Reeshka did not wish to step on anything more seaworthy than a riverboat. Even on the boat, she seemed anxious at every moment, only relaxing when she stood on dry land. Hashel sighed and abandoned his notion of sailing to Tanjii. He knew all too well what it meant to travel alone as a small boy. He was not some lost tsentey in a bedtime tale. He and Reeshka both headed to Tanjii. It would be foolish to leave her side. For reasons he still did not understand, she protected him, and he knew he needed that protection. He sighed again and pointed to where the river crossed the Old Border Road heading west.

“You will come with me, then?” Reeshka asked.

Hashel nodded his head and took the last bite of the meat bun. It would not take that much longer to reach Tanjii by road. A month maybe? It depended on how quickly they traveled. And the possibility existed that he might find Ondromead somewhere along the Old Border Road. They

had awoken on the road several times to witness things.

“These merchants unloading the boat may be heading west.” Reeshka pointed to the wagons on the docks. “They may find the presence of a roagg good protection.” She patted the axe hanging from her belt. A bow and quiver lay strapped to her back beside the sack she carried over her shoulder.

“I can offer you a speedier journey.”

Hashel knew that voice well, though he’d only heard it a few times. He turned to see Meraeu standing beside them. Without thinking, he slid closer to Reeshka.

“Hello, Hashel.” Meraeu smiled at him, her large, brown eyes looking sad.

“You know this boy?” Reeshka answered in the roagg tongue as she’d been spoken to. “And how do you speak roagg?”

“I speak many languages,” Meraeu said. “And I do not know Hashel well, but I know the man he seeks.”

“What man?” Reeshka asked. She seemed unnerved by Meraeu’s arrival. Hashel felt the same. What did the old woman want? How had she found him?

“A mutual friend.” Meraeu turned to Hashel, her smile fading. “He will be in need of you soon. All too soon.”

“Who are you?” Reeshka asked the question. Hashel knew she would receive no firm answer.

“That is difficult to explain,” Meraeu said. “Sometimes, even to myself. What is important is that I can take you closer to where you wish to be, and the boy to where he needs to be.”

Hashel bit his lip. Did she really offer to take him to Ondromead? Why would she do that? And could he trust her not to betray him?

“We travel west toward...” Reeshka said as Meraeu spoke over her.

“To Tanjii in hopes of finding your mate,” Meraeu said, completing Reeshka’s thought. “I can take you close to Tanjii. Very close. You may find your mate all the sooner.”

“How can you know of my mate?” Reeshka stared at Meraeu, her voice a near growl.

“I know many things.” Meraeu turned back to Hashel. “And the thing I know for certain is that while Ondromead may have forgotten why he needs me, he will not forget you. And he will need you now for what is about to happen. And soon. Very, very soon. I told him it was a mistake to keep you with him, but now his mind must not be distracted by worries over you. What will befall the world requires his complete attention.”

“What will happen in the world?” Reeshka sounded worried. Hashel felt that worry. What did she mean?

“More of what has been happening and with much greater danger to all.” Meraeu looked westward. “If we are to go, we must go now.”

“Do you wish to go with this woman?” Reeshka tilted her massive head down toward Hashel.

Did he? He wanted to be reunited with Ondromead, but could he trust Meraeu to help him? She made it sound as though something might happen to Ondromead if he did not find the old man. He could not bear the thought of anything bad befalling his friend. He would risk anything to help him.

Hashel nodded his head. Reeshka nodded back.

“You say you can take us to Tanjii,” Reeshka said to Meraeu. “Do you have a boat? Do you intend to sail there, or do you have a wagon? I am not ... suited to sailing.”

“No boat. No wagon. A much more expedient means of travel. Come.” Meraeu gestured for them to follow her as she walked toward the side door of a small brick warehouse along the docks.

Hashel followed, knowing what would come and wondering what Reeshka would make of it. Where would Meraeu take them? Reeshka followed, her cautious movements expressing her suspicions. Meraeu opened the door to the warehouse and gestured for Hashel to enter. He hesitated a moment, reaching up to take Reeshka’s paw before stepping through the doorway.

Sea spray misted his face as waves broke against the side of the ship he now stood upon. He spotted several yutans tending the vessel. He turned to see Meraeu and Reeshka beside him, the door to an aft chamber of the ship open behind them.

“How is this possible? What manner of The Sight is this?” Reeshka pulled Hashel closer as she stared at Meraeu.

“This is a yutan ship in the blockade beyond the Bay of Tanjii,” Meraeu said, ignoring Reeshka’s questions. “Ondromead will arrive shortly. Wait for him. And when the time comes, be ready to swim.”

Before either Hashel or Reeshka could reply, Meraeu stepped back into the ship’s aft cabin and closed the door.

Reeshka opened the door quickly, but Hashel knew they’d not find the old woman there. He did not know where she went or how, but he understood he could only do as she’d instructed and hope she spoke the truth.

“What is happening?” Reeshka turned around, looking dizzy with the motion of the ship. She placed a paw on the door frame to steady herself. “How is this all possible? Who was she? Who is this man you seek and what is he to you? Who are you, truly?”

Hashel wished he could answer her questions. He wished he knew the answers to them himself. He shrugged his shoulders, knowing he could not. He could only wait. Wait for Ondromead.

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

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

LEAF AND bark and stone and flower. The garden behind the temple stretched for fifty paces in each direction — a collection of sinuously branched trees with wide leaves, wildflowers, overgrown grasses, and cracked, stone paths dotted with wide low benches. So unruly, it appeared more verdant jungle than garden. Not small by human standards, but Lee-Nin imagined the garden would feel cramped to a people as large as the now-dead Pelinor. They stayed near the temple entrance where several tables and benches sat for the convenience of human-sized visitors. The old woman, Taksati, had assured them, as she left a serving tray of tea, nuts, and fruit, that the garden had been cleared of fire-plants, and they were safe from danger.

Lee-Nin did not feel safe. She had not felt truly safe since ... she could not remember when. Had she ever considered herself safe? Truly safe? She realized again that she felt safest when near Sha-Kutan. A part of her rebelled against that thought. She should not need to rely on anyone for her wellbeing, especially not a man. Too many men had betrayed her in too many ways. But Sha-Kutan was not merely a man. And yet, what he was, what he had been, spoke to greater violence than any other man she'd ever met. So why did she trust him? Why did she trust who he was now? Maybe because Sao-Tauna did.

She looked to where Sao-Tauna sat at one of the nearby benches, her head peeking over the edge of the table, watching two caterpillars crawl across the wide, wooden boards. The girl had said nothing since being led from that terrifying chamber beneath the temple. What was that statue? Was that the Goddess that haunted her dreams for so many months? Sao-Tauna seemed less afraid than everyone else. That only increased Lee-Nin's anxiety.

"Ogtankaa will return soon." Sha-Kutan sat on the bench beside her, watching Sao-Tauna at the other table.

Ogtankaa had gone to fetch Sao-Tauna's puppy. She had not been happy about it, but Sha-Kutan insisted. Lee-Nin doubted that either really trusted the other. Ogtankaa made no secret of her fears of Sao-Tauna and her belief the girl would do something unwise and dangerous in her absence. Sha-Kutan feared Ogtankaa might try to harm Sao-Tauna, in an attempt to forestall a possible calamity. Lee-Nin could now imagine a number of such catastrophes. She remembered the images that the urris placed in her mind. That massive rent of light severing the sky. What could come through such an opening? The Goddess? And if even only she ... it ... came through, what would it do? What would happen? So many questions. No wonder Sao-Tauna wanted her puppy. Lee-Nin felt a craving for something of comfort as well.

As though hearing her thoughts, Sha-Kutan reached out and took her hand. She squeezed it firmly.

"Do you wish you'd never returned home to your house that night, or that you'd run in a different direction after the wardens came?" Lee-Nin did not look at Sha-Kutan for fear the answer

in his eyes did not match that of his words.

“Never.” Sha-Kutan looked at her and she found his stare drawing her eyes to his. “My time with you and Sao-Tauna has been more rewarding than I could have imagined. I did not think this possible in my life. I do not deserve this. My only regret is that our time together draws to a close.”

“Will Ogtankaa really insist on taking you back? That part of you?” Lee-Nin asked.

“I do not know,” Sha-Kutan said. “With the Taksa-Kranee hunting us, there can be only so much time before we are discovered.”

“And what happens if part of you is taken away?” Lee-Nin did not understand how two beings could inhabit the same body, but she knew they did, even though she saw and thought of them as one man. What became of a man stripped of an essential aspect of himself? He could not be the same. What would he be?

“I am uncertain.” Sha-Kutan looked away. “We have been one for so many years that the human part of me has forgotten what it was like to be alone.”

“You will not be alone, no matter what,” Lee-Nin said. “I will not let anyone take any part of you if I can stop them.”

“You must do nothing to endanger yourself or Sao-Tauna.” Sha-Kutan returned his gaze to her. “Regardless what happens.”

“I would never endanger Sao-Tauna,” Lee-Nin said. “You know this.”

“I do,” Sha-Kutan said. “While the Taksa-Kranee will not seek to harm humans, they are still dangerous. You must not let Sao-Tauna do anything that will place the two of you in harm’s path.”

“Like what she contemplates doing now?” Lee-Nin looked back toward Sao-Tauna, still playing with her two caterpillars. “What we consider allowing her to do?”

“What I said before is true,” Sha-Kutan said. “As much as we fear what will happen, we cannot stop her if it is her desire.”

“No,” Lee-Nin admitted. “But she will listen to us if we ask her not to.”

“Maybe.” Sha-Kutan held silent a moment. “Is this what you wish?”

“Perhaps.” Lee-Nin sighed, her thoughts again discordant and unclear. What should she advise Sao-Tauna? She was the girl’s guardian. As much a mother to her now as ever her real mother had been. More so. She had a duty to protect her. But did she not also have a duty to help her fulfill her destiny, whatever that might be? She thought of the massive statue in that darkened chamber and suppressed a shiver. They stood at the brink of unleashing something unknown into the world. Something that might harm or aid people, but something that would change the world forever.

“Neither do I.” Sha-Kutan’s deep voice rang with doubt. “The realm one part of me hails from is a terrible place filled with dreadful beings. The reverse is true for that similar aspect of Ogtankaa. We cannot guess what manner of being might exist in a god realm. Or what it might do in this realm.”

“If the goddess can cause the same dream in thousands and bring a new star in the night sky while in this other realm, what might she do once fully in ours?” The idea chilled and excited Lee-Nin in the same breath.

“It can only affect this realm because the seals are already frail,” Sha-Kutan. “They were

weakened by the seers who opened them twenty years ago and allowed the shadow aspect of me to enter this world.”

“Were the urris involved then?” Lee-Nin asked.

“Possibly,” Sha-Kutan said. “They may have sealed the portal.”

“They made clear they will try to stop her if she attempts to create a gate between realms.”

The very words sounded ridiculous in Lee-Nin’s ears. She was not a seer in some children’s story book. What would her favorite heroine of the childhood story, *Tahneff Nanti-Tsukao and the Red Dragon*, do if faced with such a dilemma? Would she beckon this dragon to the world rather than slay it with poison as she did in the story?

“Ogtankaa and I will protect her,” Sha-Kutan said.

“You trust Ogtankaa to do this?” Lee-Nin did not trust her. Not at all.

“She swore an oath,” Sha-Kutan said. “It is binding among her people.”

“Not the human side of her,” Lee-Nin said. Sha-Kutan did not reply to her words, but she saw that they unsettled him. As she looked at him, powerful yet uncertain, the urge to hold his large, scarred face in her hands welled within her. To do what she had not done in so long. To willingly press her lips to those of another. She turned her body toward him on the bench, following her desires, her hands rising to his face, fingers pressing into his hair. She would have needed to stand to rise enough to meet his lips, but she pulled his head toward her and he bent down, closing his eyes as her own slid shut, the kiss between them blotting out the world of goddesses and other realms and potent decisions. Only this choice, in this moment, mattered for a time. A time that stretched out as his massive hand gently cradled her face, callouses rough against her cheeks. A wave of passion-filled contentment settled through her limbs, leaving her mind clear of nothing but the meeting of their lips.

“I have returned.”

Ogtankaa’s voice acted as a blade — severing the kiss and the inner moment suspended between her and Sha-Kutan. She held his eyes with her own, trying to convey without words what the kiss meant to her. What she felt. What Sha-Kutan meant to her. She turned and blinked, fearing tears might well in her eyes.

Ogtankaa stood with the puppy in her arms beside the table where Sao-Tauna sat. Both stared at Lee-Nin and Sha-Kutan, but neither said anything. Ogtankaa placed the puppy in Sao-Tauna’s arms and sat down at an adjacent table with the tea and fruit service tray. The puppy licked Sao-Tauna’s face, and the girl giggled quietly. Lee-Nin no longer found it strange that the girl did not like to be touched but enjoyed holding animals. An eccentricity far less bizarre than other things about Sao-Tauna.

“Has anything else of importance transpired while I walked to the ship and back?” Ogtankaa poured herself a small cup of tea from a clay pitcher.

Lee-Nin had no real answer to that and so said nothing. Sha-Kutan, ever reticent, also remained silent. She felt more than heard the judgment in Ogtankaa’s words. The woman, and whatever else lived within her, displayed an open hostility to the growing devotion between Lee-Nin and Sha-Kutan. She did not need to ask to understand why.

“I took the opportunity of my walk to consider our situation and I believe I have a proposal.” Ogtankaa took a long sip of the tea, chilled by the autumn air.

Lee-Nin wondered what Ogtankaa might propose. What options existed to them that had not yet been explored? Would her suggestion place Sao-Tauna in more danger? Would it endanger Sha-Kutan? She noted, as the seconds passed, and she waited for Ogtankaa to speak, that she did not ask if it would endanger herself. She wondered at that. A concern for two people so great that it eclipsed worry for her own plight. She knew the word for this, and while she would not hesitate to use it in relation to Sao-Tauna, it caused her heart to quicken its pace as she realized it also applied to Sha-Kutan. That thought filled her mind as she waited for Ogtankaa to speak.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena or the crossover between the Fugitives and the Temple story arenas [follow this link](#).

THE THRONE



TIJARO

WAX SEALED vellum, rag-pressed parchment, scraps of wood-pulp paper — an ever-growing pile of administrative detritus. Paperwork, the first consequence of conquest. The elongated fingers of a firm feminine hand sorted the papers into piles of priority. Kimpadess Tijaro Havarez disliked dealing with the mundane aspects of governance, but she detested untidiness even more. A missed missive might lead to an unforeseen event that unraveled long-laid plans. Her head councilor, Landase, sorted the documents that did not need her attention, but he'd long ago learned to apply a wide definition of what required her consideration. Thus, an ever-expanding mound of paper.

Most of the documents were in Shen, taken from the desk of the now deposed Regent Zhan Dju-Tesha and her Prime Councilor Kao-Rhee. Typically, they confirmed what she already knew through her network of spies and informants — the Daeshen Dominion verged on financial and civic collapse. Surely, Kao-Rhee knew this, however he had little choice but to help a succession of zhans pursue a debilitating war that lasted years. A war her own father began through subterfuge nearly two decades past. Her father had not planned for the war to last so long, for it to take so much time for the two nations to wear each other down to the point where a third nation, Atheton, might successfully invade to begin the establishment of a Fourth Great Dominion.

Her father had possessed a bold vision and enacted a plan that required patience and attention to detail. Fortunately, he died long before he could see his plan materialized in any significant way. While bold in thought, he had lacked all patience and had held little attention to any details that did not revolve around hunting, drinking, and sex with an endless list of servants hired for that specific reason. She'd mourned the loss of her father, but with the knowledge that his death removed a great risk from her nation.

Her mother's passing from the Living Death, in the middle of Tijaro's fourteenth year, still clawed at her heart. Everything she'd learned of importance, she'd gained listening to her mother — her comments on her father's rule, on the council, on the people, on the nation. Well-read and raised to hold a position of power by a wealthy and well-placed family, she had exemplified all the traits of a wise ruler that her husband lacked. She'd also been a powerful seer in secret. The most valuable thing Tijaro learned from her. As the only child of a man ever-desirous of a legitimate son to become his heir, her father had gifted her with an upbringing as a boy, learning to hunt and fight, the best way to gut a deer, and how to plan a battle. Affectionate in his time with her, he'd bestowed the most essential treasure possible for a parent to impart, that of unswerving confidence. That self-assurance allowed her to fulfill his impetuous plot beyond the wildest imaginings of the handful of people who knew of it.

Tijaro looked up from the papers organized into neat piles along the surface of the polished poda-wood desk. She found she liked the formal study of the Daeshen zhan. It held austerity of decoration in balance with the necessary display of history. While her new subjects likely would

never understand or accept it, she appreciated that history. She understood the importance of the Iron Realm being united under one rule. While there could be peace between the dominions without a zhan or kimpadess to bind them together, there could never be strength without unity. A unity she grasped as a necessity for the future. While her father's dreams of a Fourth Great Dominion rested largely on the back of his own hubris and avarice, hers sat firmly on the belief that the Iron Realm would be at war with one or more of the other realms within her lifetime.

Her mother had been the first to direct her attention to the relative absence of the urris in the last century. A race of unimaginably powerful beings who once forcibly separated the peoples of Onaia were spotted more and more infrequently. Eventually, her mother believed, this would give rise to one or more realms making war against another. With the announcement of the Alliance and its blockade, Tijaro saw her mother's speculation as prophecy. The Iron Realm needed to be united for the war that would surely come with the other realms, the Sun Realm prime among them. She'd studied the history of the different realms and the rakhors proved time over time that they eventually made devastating war with themselves. Without the urris to hold them to their land, they would undoubtedly turn that warlike nature toward some other realm, and the Iron Realm, with its vast mineral deposits, provided the most likely target. With the Iron Realm united in a Fourth Great Dominion, the rakhors would be less likely to attack, and more easily repelled if they did. She only hoped that she could lash the realm together under her banner before the rakhors took their thinly veiled blockade and turned it into an open war.

"Kimpadess." Landase stood in the doorway. "You asked to see me."

"Yes." Tijaro waved him in as she set aside the thoughts of past and future. There were too many things requiring her attention in the present. "I have been reviewing the Daeshen state of affairs and I have a few amendments to our plans."

"I am sure they are wise and considered, my kimpadess." Landase bowed but did not sit in the chair opposite her own across the table. While she appreciated his efficiency, and his ruthlessness when necessary, she found his obsequiousness irritating at times.

"The Daeshen coffers are nearly depleted," Tijaro said. "More so than we'd been led to believe. A tax reprieve will not be enough to stabilize the populace in the face of an invasion. We will also distribute food to the poorest of people for the first two months. This will aid in swaying their opinion of their new ruler. And we may need to consider extending the tax reprieve for an additional two months. Word must be sent to Kenagal Talcon in Tsee-Kaanlin to do the same. We cannot be seen to favor the Daeshen above the Tanshen."

"This will strain our own treasury, but it should not exceed our abilities." Landase looked up briefly. "We will need to bring food in directly to bolster the markets here. I might suggest supporting our merchants to sell to Shen merchants at a very reduced rate and then having the Shen palaces purchase from the Shen merchants before distributing food to the people. This will boost the standing of the merchant tiers as well."

"An excellent idea, Landase." Tijaro also appreciated the man's mind for commerce. "There is another subject we must discuss. The rebellion."

"I have heard no reports yet of any resistance to your rule being formulated either in the palace

or the city, my kimpadess,” Landase said.

“Exactly.” Tijaro placed her elbows on the table and her chin her hands. “That is worrisome. It either means there is no resistance, which speaks of a weak and easily cowed court of tahns and lesser tahns, or it means it is beyond our sight and our ears, which is troublesome for other reasons.”

“I will speak to our ears and eyes in the city to determine if I have missed anything, my kimpadess.” Landase looked ill at the idea. He always looked ill when it seemed he might be held responsible from some error or omission.

“That is good, but I also wish you to begin making plans to formulate and fund a rebellion of our own.” Tijaro enjoyed the look of confusion on Landase’s face.

“I do not understand, my kimpadess,” Landase said.

“We will use our spies to create our own rebellion, so that we might control it, and through it, undermine any real resistance that is begun.” Tijaro smiled, rather pleased with the notion. “This way, the rebels can be shown to act in the best interests of the worst of the tahns, and against the welfare of the common people. And when we are forced to punish the people, by removing the assistance of food to the poor, the fault of this will be laid at the feet of the rebels, not their new kimpadess.”

“That is exceedingly cunning.” Landase smiled. She also liked the fact that he appreciated a good political deception. His own father had helped hers in setting the war between the Shen Dominions in motion with the deaths of the bride and groom at the wedding meant to conjoin the two nations twenty years prior.

“And additionally, I think for the first year or more, I should be referred to here in the palace and the Shen Dominions as Zhan Havarez.” Tijaro had given this some long consideration in the past few days and felt that while it annoyed her personally, it would help her cause. “The people are used to a zhan here in these lands. It will ease their resentment if they perceive me as simply one in a long line of zhans, even if an invader. It will also help them accept me as the ruler of the Fourth Great Dominion, which they have always referred to as a zhan. To this end, we will conduct all meetings and ceremonies in Shen.” She spoke all the languages of the realm fluently. Ruling each Dominion in its native tongue showed humility and would hopefully make governing easier, an error her many predecessors made when trying to force a single language, Shen, upon all the people.

“While it will pain me to refer to you as such, I see the wisdom in the decisions ... my zhan.” Landase looked as though he’d bitten into a sour fruit.

“Thank you, Landase. That will be all.” Tijaro dismissed her councilor and returned to examining the written status of the palace and the Daeshen nation. She would need to have copies made of the corresponding Tanshen documents sent to her as well. She trusted Kenagal Talcon to rule in her stead, but she knew the man’s limitations. He hated the small details of administration. She sighed and set to work, pleased that she’d accomplished so much, the taking of the first two dominions in her soon-to-be united realm, without excessive loss of life. It did no good to rule over a charnel wasteland. It would be well into the night before she received word from her seer-spy in

the halls of the Tanjii Circle of Elders about the events that would cast her careful plans aside and insist on a whole new strategy to unite and defend the Iron Realm from a wholly unforeseen enemy.

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

THE FUGITIVES



OGTANKAA

CLOVE-SPICED honey mixed with cinnamon and hibiscus in the cool water of the tea. Ogtankaa held the cup in both hands as she savored the aromas. She'd always found Juparti teas to be comforting when warm and refreshing when chilled. She took another sip of the tea. She could almost imagine she sat in another garden, as she had years ago with her husband and daughter, eating sliced mango and sipping cellar-cooled tea. She looked at Sao-Tauna, seated across the table from her now, rubbing the puppy's belly as she held it in her arms, and thought of what she'd lost all those years ago. She could not have it back. Could not replace it. Could not bear to be as she had been without the girl and man who made such living worthwhile. She did not like to admit that she had grown accustomed to being as she was. Being more than one being.

It was intended to be temporary.

A thing once temporary after decades becomes permanent.

Nothing is permanent.

Why shatter a useful thing?

"Are you planning on sharing this notion of yours, or are we to guess at it?" Lee-Nin's voice filled the still air of the garden.

Ogtankaa took another deep drink of the spiced tea, knowing she did so to stall, because she held uncertainty in the idea that came to her while walking to the ship to fetch the puppy, an idea she did not know whether both aspects of her nature fully supported.

"It has occurred to me that we could delay any decision." She looked to the girl. "Sao-Tauna might postpone the choice. It need not be made today. It need not be made this week or the next. Or even the next month."

Time to consider.

Time to delay the inevitable.

Our path is not inevitable.

"The priest and her followers appear to believe that time is short and action essential." Sha-Kutan once more held hands with Lee-Nin.

How does he not see the futility of it? The danger?

Is our bond not as futile? As dangerous?

"Even if they are willing to wait, the question becomes how long they are prepared to wait," Lee-Nin said.

"They must wait as long as we wish. As long as she wishes." Ogtankaa once more looked to Sao-Tauna, still playing with her puppy. She'd abandoned the habit of seeing her as merely a girl engaged in childish actions. She was a child, but more than a child.

A woman and yet more than a woman.

Can a thing made whole be truly separated into its original parts once more?

I do not wish this, either.

Then why must we?

“I do not believe the priest will attack her or try to force her to open a door for this goddess being.” Sha-Kutan said.

Ogtankaa did not wish to see what happened should the priest and her people attempt such a thing.

We will uphold our oath to protect the girl.

The girl is more dangerous than the two of us could ever be.

True.

Which is why we must not let this happen.

“It does not change anything, but it does relieve the tension on the spring.” Lee-Nin nodded to Ogtankaa in apparent agreement.

“Postponing this decision delays another as well.” Sha-Kutan looked into Ogtankaa’s eyes. “Why would you do that?”

He will know if we lie.

Then we must speak the truth.

“Because I am not ready for that moment to come,” Ogtankaa said.

“Both of you?” Sha-Kutan asked.

“Neither of us,” Ogtankaa said.

Home is far in the past for us both.

Home is in this moment.

Can that be true in this company, in this land?

Can it be true anywhere?

“You are still bound by your oath. As am I.” Sha-Kutan released Lee-Nin’s fingers and reached with both hands beneath his shirt to pull the pieces of the medallion from around his neck. He tossed them through the air, gold surfaces glittering in the sun as the leather lanyard caused them to tumble. Ogtankaa snatched the broken medallion pieces from the air and held them in her hands.

“Why would you give that to her?” Lee-Nin’s voice sounded pained.

“Yes. Why do you give this to me?” Ogtankaa could not fathom the action. Did he intend some manner of trick? Had he damaged the medallion beyond functioning?

“I give it to you as a token of trust.” Sha-Kutan too sounded saddened. “I must trust in your oath as you must trust in mine.”

Ogtankaa slid the lanyard of the medallion pieces over her head and slipped it into her shirt.

To send him back will now bring the others.

And they will force our separation.

We have wanted this for many years.

But have we wanted it because we wanted it for many years.

What do we...?

Want now?

“Is this an agreement? Do we ask Sao-Tauna to postpone doing anything until ... until we think of something better?” Lee-Nin took Sha-Kutan’s hand again.

“It is what I suggest,” Ogtankaa said.

For many reasons.

But one above all others.

“Then we must ask Sao-Tauna.” Sha-Kutan looked to the girl.

“You have been listening,” Lee-Nin said. “You are always listening. Will you do as Ogtankaa suggests? Sha-Kutan and I agree. Will you wait until we have more time to think about this?”

Sao-Tauna looked up from her puppy, her face changing from placidly happy to sad. “Waiting won’t change anything. It will only make people more ... anxious and angry. Even I know that.”

She is correct.

Sadly correct.

“Then you have decided?” Lee-Nin’s voice cracked as she spoke.

“I’ll do it.” Sao-Tauna sighed. “But if something bad comes through, I’m putting it back.”

A noble thought.

But impossible if the opening is too large to seal.

Or causes breaches elsewhere.

But a brave girl to say it.

“This is a mistake, Sao-Tauna.” Ogtankaa frowned as she looked across the table. Could she reason with the child? Could she stop her short of killing her?

We cannot harm the child.

Even without the oath, we would not harm her.

“You must listen to...” Ogtankaa’s voice halted mid-sentence, her throat and jaw held firm against motion.

They come...

Again.

Unable to move or speak, Ogtankaa cast her eyes around the garden. A shadow among the trees refused to yield to the light that fell around it.

Only one of them?

Or are both within the one shadow?

Across the table, both Sao-Tauna and her puppy sat motionless. From the corner of her eyes, Ogtankaa saw Sha-Kutan and Lee-Nin similarly rooted in place. The cloud of shadows among the trees split and moved from the trunks, still unrevealed by the light as they crossed the stone walkway to the tables. They vaguely resembled the shape of the two urris they witnessed earlier.

We have listened...

Listened and we...

We cannot allow the girl...

Girl to do this thing...

Thing and we will...

Will take her.

Ogtankaa watched the shadows move swiftly toward the girl.

Why do they not reveal themselves?

We must act. We must protect the girl.

If we do, the others will sense this and they will come.

This will not stop Sha-Kutan. It should not stop us.

Ogtankaa saw a second shadow take shape in the sun, wings of night-black energy expanding to spread into the path of the urris-shadow. Ogtankaa's aspect of elemental light disengaged from the flesh of her body and rose into the air to join the shadow-being. The elemental shadow that was Sha-Kutan spoke, its silent voice heard by any sentient mind nearby.

You will not take the girl, and I will destroy you if you try.

The creature of light and energy that was Ogtankaa added its own silent voice to the confrontation.

We will both destroy you.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena or the crossover between the Fugitives and the Temple story arenas [follow this link](#).

THE PHILOSOPHER



SKETKEE

SEA SPRAY caught the wind with each concussion of the ship's hull against successive waves, misted water clouding backward to soak the decks and crew. Wind filled the sails, driving the vessel over the water as it raced along the shoreline. Sketkee stood at the inner rail of the raised aftcastle deck, judging the progress of the ship against those it fled. The human female, Kellatra, stood next to her, hands clasped to the railing, eyes closed in concentration, face preternaturally calm. The speed of the ship rested in large part on the seer's ability to manipulate the wind to increase their pace. Using The Sight to marshal a greater wind to the sails proved easier than attempting to move the ship itself. Sketkee did not see the mathematical difference, as both required the shifting of the same mass, but she trusted Kellatra to know what was easier for her to accomplish.

Rankarus stood beside Kellatra, looking worried, likely, Sketkee thought, because he had little to contribute to the solution of their predicament. At least he could not attempt to fashion a riot from pedestrians in their current circumstances. Their children and the other humans, Abananthus and Jadaloo, sat somewhere below decks, out of sight and hopefully, out of harm's path. Kadmallin stood behind them, holding tight to the rear rail more out of habit than need. She doubted it physically possible for the man to expel more vomit than he had already.

The ambassadorial flag codes had been updated for the blockade. With the failure of the flag codes, and Viktik pressing close behind in his hired cargo vessel, they could not follow their intended ruse to slip past the cordon. Instead, with the captain's support, induced by a small bar of gold from Kellatra, they attempted to outrun the steam-powered rakthor battleship by heading north up the coast. They hoped to outpace the rakthor ships before sailing west, with Kellatra adding speed to their progress through use of The Sight. Fortunately, the wyrin and yutan sailing vessels that accompanied the rakthor battleship held their position rather than give chase, likely to guard against other ships attempting to slip past the blockade.

They hadn't sailed long when they sighted more Alliance ships stationed up the coast past a small Daeshen port town. The captain had tacked around and headed south, the only hope being to outrun the ships they now needed to sail past and somehow find a gap in the southern blockade. If they sailed due west, they would surely encounter even more ships. And it put them far from shore should the rakthor battleship decide to sink them. Best to have land close in the event they needed to swim.

They'd managed to turn and sail south without coming close enough for any of the pursuing craft to catch them, but it set the ships far too close at their stern. Now joined by the cargo vessel that Viktik surely rode upon, four ships trailed them along the shoreline of the Daeshen Dominion. They passed the pilgrim town and the bay of Tanjii and neared the southern edge of the blockade. She looked behind. She did not need the near-glass to gauge the distance of the rakthor battleship

pursuing them. Viktik's cargo vessel thankfully trailed it by a considerable distance.

She wondered how he'd surmised the deception and decided to chase them. Something gave them away. The absence of a body most likely, but that was not easily faked in the limited time they had. Maybe one of the crew had spotted the rowboat. Possibly, he'd been suspicious all along, and her disappearance confirmed his misgivings. Taking another moment to try and see the situation from Viktik's perspective, she knew what would have caught her attention — the size of the window in the cabin she'd been confined to on the cargo ship. Kellatra had performed a most impressive feat of *The Sight* to make it large enough to float her and Kadmallin out of it, but there had been no time to return it to its previous size. A human would likely never have noticed the difference, but a rakthor ambassador, trained and practiced over decades to notice the slightest shift in a room's contents as a signal of sabotage and subterfuge, would spot it immediately. If he'd noticed the window, it would not have taken him long to deduce the cause of its change and little longer to see through the series of deceptions that led to her disappearance and to realize that stealing the artifact lay at the root of them all. He would be most disgruntled and would not hesitate to kill her should he catch them.

"I assume you can add no further speed to our vessel." Sketkee understood the likely answer but felt compelled to ask. Irrational, but somehow comforting, an unseemly habit picked up from Kadmallin, no doubt.

"If I had more practice, maybe." Kellatra stared ahead. "This is new to me. I've never tried to control and create the wind. This is the best I can do for now. Are they close?"

"Close enough." Rankarus patted Kellatra's hand. "You're doing an amazing job, Kell." Sketkee had noted that humans often required compliments to function properly, a defect Kadmallin, thankfully, rarely exhibited.

"They'll be close enough for artillery soon," Kadmallin called in a queasy voice from behind them.

"What's artillery?" Rankarus asked.

"Cannons," Sketkee replied. "Projectile weapons with exploding payloads. One or two would sink a ship this small."

"Can you make more wind, Kell?" Rankarus placed his hand on his mate's once more.

"Quiet," Kellatra said. "Don't distract me."

"What will explode and sink my ship?" The captain, who had been quiet for most of the chase, raised his voice above the sound of the sea and rushing wind.

"Only if the rakthor ship gets close enough," Sketkee said.

"How close?" The captain looked more concerned than he had the entire day.

"Within two thousand human paces." Sketkee judged the rakthor vessel would reach that limit in roughly ten minutes without a change of some manner in their prospective escape. "That does not mean they will attack. They will only likely do so if we cross the boundary of the blockade."

"Which is just what we intend to do." The captain glared at her and Kellatra.

"I will keep them away." Kellatra opened her eyes and stared back at the captain. "And you have been paid more than enough gold for the risk."

“I wasn’t paid to risk my ship, woman.” The captain’s glare became a glower.

“Who would you rather risk offending just now, Captain,” Rankarus said, “the rakthors and their iron ship or the woman who makes the wind blow as she wills?”

The captain grimaced and turned back to the tiller wheel without a reply. Sketkee admired the swiftness with which Rankarus had dispatched that argument. It also brought to mind another thought.

“Do you think you could make holes in the hull of the rakthor ship and sink it or slow it?” Sketkee asked Kellatra.

“I don’t know.” Kellatra kept her eyes open and glanced behind her at the ship pursuing them. “It’s large and made of metal. That’s not as easy to transform at such a distance. If I knew what made it move, and how and where, I might be able to disable the machines that propel it, but even with that knowledge, it would be difficult. I could attack it in other ways, but I’d rather not unless it’s necessary.”

“We may need to, but let us consider that when the moment arises.” Sketkee had no desire to sink a rakthor vessel. It would make it very difficult, if not impossible, to ever return home after participating in such an action.

“There’s something ahead.” Rankarus pointed to the southern horizon.

Sketkee raised the near-glass and confirmed the sighting. The southern edge of the blockade.

“Two ships. Wyrin and yutan.” Sketkee lowered the near-glass as Kadmallin stepped to join her at the inner railing.

“Are they spaced far enough apart to slip past?” Kadmallin asked.

“It’ll be close, even with our current speed,” the captain replied. “We’ll have to hug the shore and that’ll mean risking the rocks.”

“What is that?” Rankarus pointed again. For a human, he appeared to have excellent eyesight. Sketkee did not need the near-glass to confirm the sighting. Neither did the captain.

“Another yutan ship,” the captain said. “I know the look of their craft. It’s waiting just off the shore. Too close.”

“What options do we have?” Sketkee asked. Best to assess circumstances armed with information.

“Short of flying over them, I don’t see how we make it past,” the captain said.

“Kell?” Rankarus asked.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Kellatra frowned at her mate.

“Can we ram through them?” Kadmallin asked. Not a subtle solution, but one Sketkee agreed might work.

“We risk breaking the ship in two if we strike the wrong way.” The captain’s voice gained an octave in pitch.

“Can you assist in such a maneuver?” Sketkee asked Kellatra. “Push the other ships away at the last moment?”

“It’s not as easy as that,” Kellatra said. “It’s about the mass and speed of the object. To move aside a thrown knife or an arrow is a minor thing; to push aside a whole ship in motion would

require a Will of extraordinary depth. I've never heard of any seer who could accomplish such a thing."

"Then we must do the best we can," Sketkee said. To stop now and surrender voided all the gains they'd made until that point.

"There is one thing we might try." Kellatra turned to Sketkee. She noted the look of sudden excitement in the woman's eyes and found it odd and unsettling. "We can try the artifact. It may not be a weapon, but it may be something that can help us."

Sketkee understood now the excitement in Kellatra's eyes and knew her own now reflected the same. The artifact. An interesting idea that might prove her suspicions about its urris origins at the same time as helping them succeed in escaping the blockade. It presented a risk, but one that possessed odds of success at least as great as those of failure.

"Do you have it available?" Sketkee had not asked Kellatra to see the artifact since her healing that morning, knowing it to be at least as safe in the seer's care as her own.

"I do." Kellatra reached into the satchel strapped across her shoulders and removed the leather-wrapped sphere. As she pulled it from its pouch, the artifact glittered in the sun. She noticed that with the shift of Kellatra's attention, the wind slackened, and the ship slowed perceptibly.

"I don't know if this is good idea." Kadmallin stared at the artifact warily.

"We have few options, and this may be the least catastrophic of our available choices," Sketkee said.

"If you don't try it now, you may never get to," Rankarus said.

"Exactly," Kellatra said.

"What do you need?" Sketkee asked.

"Time to focus on it." Kellatra stared down at the ancient crystal sphere in her hands.

"Then I suggest you begin immediately." Sketkee looked between the ships ahead of them and those behind, calculating the distances and the speeds in her mind to determine which would pose a danger first. "We have several minutes at best."

The Philosopher story arena will continue in *The Dragon Star Saga – Book 5*.

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

THE FUGITIVES



SHA-KUTAN

SILENCE HELD ground in the garden, animals and insects falling quiet, the only sound the scuttling of dried leaves across courtyard stones, driven by a stray breeze. The shadow-being Sha-Kutan hovered in the air between Sao-Tauna and the dual-shaded forms of the urris. The light-being Ogtankaa drifted to float beside it, their opposite elemental natures causing tiny ripples of lightning in the space between them. The shadow-being Sha-Kutan projected its thoughts toward the urris.

The girl is under our protection.

The shaded cloud shapes of the urris wavered but did not advance.

We cannot allow...

Allow the girl to endanger...

Endanger this world.

She must...

Must come with us...

She will not...

Not be harmed...

Unless it is...

Is necessary.

The light-being Ogtankaa's thoughts manifested in the shadow-being Sha-Kutan's mind.

You will not have the girl.

The shadow-being Sha-Kutan hoped the urris creatures would depart but doubted that result. It knew the urris held mastery over The Sight far in advance of any human or being of this world. It also understood those powers had limited ability to affect its ephemeral form. However, both Sao-Tauna and Lee-Nin were vulnerable. And the longer it and the light-being Ogtankaa remained in their elemental form, separated from their human hosts, the greater the chance the other beings of light who hunted him would arrive.

It tried again to reason with the urris.

We are guardians of this girl as you are guardians of this world. We cannot abandon her to you. She must fulfill whatever destiny she determines is hers to fulfill.

The shaded urris moved closer, their true forms becoming clearer, an visage of amethyst fur glimpsed for an instant.

We have seen...

Seen what happens when...

When realms collide and...

And it could mean the end...

End of this world.

The shadow-being Sha-Kutan knew the light-being Ogtankaa and its human counterpart believed Sao-Tauna posed the same danger to the world. It and the man, Sha-Kutan, acknowledged that danger, but they understood that it did not originate with Sao-Tauna. While the child held a portion of the fate of the world in her tiny hands, the bulk that future would be determined by other forces. Forces unknown to them. Much like the urris. It did not know what would happen if Sao-Tauna allowed this god-being into this world, but it and the man Sha-Kutan found this risk worth taking. The future could not be known, and unexpected boons might arise from the worst of circumstance. Its past, his past, showed this clearly.

Another notion came to its mind, originating in the mind of the man Sha-Kutan and transmitted via the slender tendril of its essence that reached back to him. The shadow-being Sha-Kutan projected this thought to the urris.

You say only two of you remain. That is not enough to stop this god-being from finding a way to enter the world. Here, in this place, with Sao-Tauna, there is a chance to control that event rather than for it to unravel in catastrophe.

The light-being Ogtankaa shimmered beside him and added its own thought.

This is correct. The danger will not cease by taking the girl.

The shaded forms of the urris advanced once more.

We must address every...

Every threat and...

And eliminate it...

It as necessary.

The shadow-being Sha-Kutan sensed the air around him moving with great force. The urris attempted to push it and the light-being Ogtankaa away with The Sight. It adjusted the nature of its essence, allowing the air to pass through it. It sensed the light-being Ogtankaa do the same. The shadow-being Sha-Kutan cast its thoughts to the urris.

Your powers hold little sway over us.

The urris did not respond with thoughts. Bolts of arcing and splitting lightning erupted from their shadowed arms to encase both elemental beings. The shadow-being Sha-Kutan felt — not pain, which requires flesh — but an existential distress, a weakening of its form and essence. It allowed itself to dissipate into uncountable constituent aspects that drifted out of the cage of lightning to reform once more above the urris. It could not reason with these strange creatures, yet it did not wish to kill them or any living being. It could only hope to drive them away. And so, it attacked.

The shadow-being Sha-Kutan dove at the nearest urris, bringing to bear the elemental energy of its essence, assaulting the flesh of the urris beneath its wings, disrupting its essential physical nature. The urris recoiled from the attack. The second urris staggered back from a similar onslaught by the light-being Ogtankaa.

You do not understand...

Understand what you do...

Do you risks the whole...

Whole of the world...

The shadows cloaking the urris wavered in the sun under the dual attack of the shadow-being Sha-Kutan and its light-being companion. Suddenly, the urris turned and fled, their shadowed shapes disappearing into the trees of the garden.

The shadow-being Sha-Kutan observed the fleeing urris, knowing it had been lucky. Lucky to have the light-being Ogtankaa to assist it. Lucky only two urris remained to assail them. Had it faced more urris, or faced two alone, it would not have been able to defeat them. It lingered a moment longer and then returned to join the mind of the man Sha-Kutan in their shared body.

Sha-Kutan took a deep breath. Already, Lee-Nin raced to check Sao-Tauna's wellbeing.

"Are you all right?" Lee-Nin knelt beside the bench where Sao-Tauna sat.

"Yes." Sao-Tauna looked from Lee-Nin to Ogtankaa and then Sha-Kutan. "Thank you."

"Yes. Thank you." Lee-Nin threw her arms up around Sha-Kutan's neck as he approached the table, his height keeping her from fully embracing him.

"I did what I could." Sha-Kutan doubted it would be enough. The urris might come back.

Lee-Nin kissed him briefly and turned to Ogtankaa. "Thank you as well." The words seemed strained in her mouth.

"I swore an oath," Ogtankaa replied. The look in her eyes implied other reasons for her actions. "We should..." Ogtankaa broke off speaking and turned to Sha-Kutan.

He felt it as well. So did Sao-Tauna, who looked to the open space between the tables where the air began to shimmer.

"Stay back." Sha-Kutan pushed Lee-Nin away and stood between her and Sao-Tauna as the air before them split in a fissure of light, a shimmering portal opening in the middle of the courtyard. Brilliant, golden light shown through the rent in the air, a glimpse of a luminous landscape of glowing trees visible beyond it.

"They've found us," Ogtankaa said.

Sha-Kutan considered the warning redundant as six beings of light emerged from the glittering portal in the middle of the courtyard. The beings of light swiftly surrounded Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa, three apiece. He did not move, did not try to run or fight, knowing it futile against such an overwhelming presence.

You must come with us. Both of you. Release the humans.

Only one of the light-beings, the Taksa-Kranee, projected its thoughts. The one facing Ogtankaa.

"I will go back, but allow this one to remain," Sha-Kutan said aloud.

No.

It must be.

The leader of the light-beings spun where it hovered in the air until facing both Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa.

This cannot be. You must go back where you both belong.

"This one is needed here," Sha-Kutan said. "I will return, but she must protect the girl."

She did not agree to that.

But she no more wishes to leave this world than we do.

The leader of the light-beings looked to Sao-Tauna.

The child is known to us. It must be dealt with.

“You will not harm the girl.” Sha-Kutan stepped toward the leader of the light-beings, the three surrounding him pressing closer.

You do not choose. You obey.

The glowing, human-like face of the leader of the light-beings flickered in anger.

“I refuse to release this creature to you,” Sha-Kutan said. “It cannot leave this body unless I allow it.”

You cannot do this.

I must do this.

“I, too, refuse to release your brethren to you.” Ogtankaa glanced to Sha-Kutan as she stood straighter.

You both must release us.

We cannot be separated now.

The angry flicker of the leader of the light-beings increased in intensity.

You will stop this madness now.

“It is not as it once was,” Ogtankaa said. “Neither am I. Our hosts have changed us. Bonded to us.”

“Leave them be.” Lee-Nin stood beside Sao-Tauna, her slender dagger in her hand.

The leader of the light-beings ignored Lee-Nin. Sha-Kutan hoped she would not do anything to endanger herself.

If you will not release them, then we will take you as you are.

The six light-beings attacked simultaneously. Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa fought back as the light-beings dragged them toward the glowing portal.

“No!” Sao-Tauna shouted in her high-pitched voice, her finger extended toward the portal. As she glared at the light-beings, the portal began to contract, sucking at them, their ephemeral bodies blurring in the struggle.

Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa each held tight to a table, the pull of the portal dragging against the elemental beings within their physical bodies. The light-beings struggled, still clinging to the humans as the portal pulled at their subtle natures. Ogtankaa’s grip on the table she held to slid free. Sha-Kutan reached out and caught her arm as she flew through the air, light-beings attempting to pull her through the portal with them.

Stop the child.

The leader of the Taksa-Kranee pointed to Sao-Tauna, but none of its companions could reach her. Sha-Kutan saw a motion behind Sao-Tauna; someone atop the wall around the garden, a man dropping to his knees.

“Behind you!” Sha-Kutan shouted over the roar of air and energy around him. He recognized the man but did not understand why he had not sensed him earlier. How could he be here in this temple in the Forbidden Realm? How had the soldier who hunted Sao-Tauna found them once

again?

Lee-Nin turned to see the soldier running across a stone-lined path between trees. She raised her dagger and rushed to attack the man. He, too, had a blade in his hand. She stabbed at him as they met, but he deflected the attack and pushed her to the ground as he continued to run.

“Sao-Tauna!” Sha-Kutan shouted, but the girl either did not hear him above the din of the portal she controlled or his words did not break through her concentration. The shadow essence of him tried to leave his body, but the portal pulled against it, keeping it from moving to protect Sao-Tauna. Lee-Nin climbed to her feet and ran to the girl but could not reach her before the soldier did. Sha-Kutan saw the look of satisfaction and horror on the man’s face as he plunged the blade of his dagger into Sao-Tauna’s chest from behind her.

She cried out in pain, collapsing to the ground, the soldier standing above her, staring at the hilt of his blade still in the small girl’s chest. The portal ceased to pull at Sha-Kutan’s physical and ephemeral forms. The Taksa-Kranee surrounding them yanked them through the opening maw of crackling luminescence. His ephemeral and physical aspects reunited as the portal began to close, his struggles useless against such overwhelming opposition. Beside him, Ogtankaa also fought against her captors to no avail.

As the portal slid closed, he saw Lee-Nin swipe the hard edge of her dagger across the soft flesh of the soldier’s neck.

“Lee-Nin!” he called out.

“Sha-Kutan!” Lee-Nin shouted, her arm outstretched as she knelt to Sao-Tauna’s small, blood-soaked body.

The door to the temple opened, but Sha-Kutan did not see who stepped through it as the portal closed around him, leaving him standing in a plain of glowing grass, a forest blazing with light not far away.

“I am sorry.” Ogtankaa stared at him, her face as sorrowful as her voice.

“I as well.” Sha-Kutan looked to the Taksa-Kranee surrounding them. The leader walked across the lustrous golden grass.

Now, you will return to that place of dark and shadow where you should never have left.

To continue reading the Fugitives story arena or the crossover between the Fugitives and the Temple story arenas turn the page

THE FUGITIVES



LEE-NIN

BLOOD SEEPED through thin-spun cotton, spreading to pool across flagstones bleached white by age and weather, collecting to soak into the cracks where grass struck upward toward the sun. So very dark and very red the blood that stained Sao-Tauna's dress. Lee-Nin sobbed as she ripped at the cloth to expose the knife blade. Several feet away, the warden who'd pursued them for so long reached out to her from where he lay on the ground, his lifeblood gushing from the gash at his neck, his eyes bulging as he tried to speak a gurgling message. She ignored him. He could not reach her and would die at any moment. All her attention rested on Sao-Tauna. How to save Sao-Tauna from the steel sunk into her chest.

She felt hands on her shoulders as she tried to wipe the blood away to better see the wound. She needed to remove the dagger but knew it would only kill the girl faster.

"Do not touch the blade."

She heard Junari's voice as though through layers of wool about her ears. "Bon-Tao. Fetch Tanagaal. Quickly."

Lee-Nin looked up to find Junari kneeling to her left and Taksati to her right. Behind them, the man Bon-Tao ran through the entrance back into the temple. The girl Atula stood nearby, her hands held to her mouth in shock. Raedalus, the priest, knelt beside Sao-Tauna's head.

"You must trust us now." Junari placed her hand on the hilt of the dagger. "She will die without a miracle. We must pray to the Goddess to spare her. I know she can. She spared me, healed me, of a similar wound. The Goddess can save her, but we must pray." Junari looked around to the others as Atula came to kneel beside Taksati.

Lee-Nin's vision appeared distorted and the banging of her heart within her chest sounded as loud as the voices around her. She struggled to accept and act upon Junari's words. How did she arrive? Where had they been? Sha-Kutan lost. Sao-Tauna dying. Her mind sought to focus in the midst of the turmoil of the moment. Sao-Tauna would die if she did not do something. What could be done for such a wound? She heard the voices, the repeated words, and began to say them aloud herself.

"Moaratana, Goddess of our hearts, protector of the innocent, heal this child struck down in your service, spare her life that she may live in the glory of your light. Moaratana, Goddess of our hearts..."

Lee-Nin said the words again and again, but Sao-Tauna ceased to breathe. And then the blood no longer pumped from the wound beneath the blade where the skin began to turn black. Junari pulled the dagger free from Sao-Tauna's chest as they continued to pray. Lee-Nin wiped the blood away from the wound with her hands as she prayed, the words expressing her anger and anguish.

"Moaratana, Goddess of our hearts, protector of the innocent, heal this child..."

As she prayed and wiped blood from Sao-Tauna, she felt the change in the air, a shift within

her own being. A *presence*. Of what, she could not say, but she suspected — the Goddess. As she repeated the words of the prayer for Sao-Tauna, the flesh of the wound began to close from beneath the surface. The skin, now made whole, grew blacker — ink not blood making vines across the skin.

“I am here.”

Lee-Nin heard the voice of the seer, Tanagaal, at her side and she noted the addition of Bon-Tao’s baritone to the recitation of the prayer. A line of pink flesh marked the spot where the wound once bled, the skin around it becoming blacker each moment.

“I must start her heart and give her breath,” Tanagaal said, his voice calm. Still they prayed.

“*Moaratana, Goddess of our hearts, protector of the innocent, heal this child...*”

Sobs racked Lee-Nin’s voice as Sao-Tauna’s chest moved in breath. She bent to hold her, but Tanagaal pushed her back.

“We are not finished.” Tanagaal pointed to Sao-Tauna’s bloodied chest. “The blackness spreading is poison. I have seen it before. The blade must have been tainted. I am trying to change it, but it fights against me. Something fights against me.”

“The presence of the Goddess weakens,” Junari said. “It must be the urris.”

Lee-Nin, too, sensed the nearness she’d noted dissipate and lessen.

“She is a child!” Lee-Nin shouted in anger. “Leave her be!”

Beside her, Tanagaal moaned and fell sideways, his eyes rolling back into his head in unconsciousness. Lee-Nin watched Sao-Tauna’s labored breathing as the black veins covering her chest darkened. The urris allowed this to happen. Letting Sao-Tauna die. She knew they must be close, but what could she do against them? Sha-Kutan had stopped them, but he....

She focused on the prayer and on the words and meaning and the debt she owed with each breath to the Goddess. She could not fight the urris, but the Goddess could. Whatever weak seal between realms allowed this goddess-being to touch the world of women and men and children it had to remain cracked open long enough for her, or it, to save Sao-Tauna. Lee-Nin put the whole faith of her heart into this thought and expressed it through the prayer she spoke. She’d once believed in the god of the Shens, Ni-Kam-Djen, but he’d abandoned her to slavery and abuse and daily rape, and she’d lost all allegiance to him. But if this new Goddess, this dragon creature from another realm, could save Sao-Tauna, this strange and wonderful girl, this daughter she wished she had given birth to, she would serve this god-thing until the day of her final breath.

“It recedes.” Junari pointed to the misshapen, inky spiderweb beneath the brown skin of Sao-Tauna’s small chest.

Lee-Nin sensed that strange shift in the air once more as the *presence* returned in a powerful and palpable surge, much stronger than previously. The blackness across Sao-Tauna’s chest shrank and faded. As the last of the shadowy tendrils vanished, a bright, blinding light blistered the sky — a bolt of lightning descending from a single dark cloud above and striking somewhere deep in the overgrown trees of the garden.

As the afterimage created by the lightning strike faded, so, too, did the sense of *presence* denoting the Goddess. Lee-Nin bent and wrapped her arms around Sao-Tauna. The girl’s breath

came shallow but steady. She did not respond, but Lee-Nin kissed her face and held her tight all the same. She would live. The Goddess had saved her. Lee-Nin found her doubts of the Goddess evaporated. She no longer feared opening a gate between realms to allow her, or it, or whatever it might be, into this world. Dragon, beast, monster; it did not matter what it looked like if it would save a child dying for no other reason than for being herself.

“She will need rest.” Taksati tugged gently at Lee-Nin’s shoulders. “She has lost much blood for such a tiny body.”

Lee-Nin let herself be pulled back, her tears blurring her sight. She noticed Tanagaal sitting upright, looking dizzy. Junari faced her, bloody hands resting on her own.

“Where are the others? Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa?” Junari looked to the dead warden, his eyes staring ever skyward. “Who is this man? What happened?”

Lee-Nin took a gulp of air and then another to still the trembling of her limbs. She looked at the dead man. The second man she’d killed. He’d given his life to hunt and kill Sao-Tauna, a small, special girl, and he’d given that life in vain. Sao-Tauna lived while he...

She turned her thoughts from the dead warden as Junari squeezed her hands.

“The dead man is warden of the Tsee-Kaanlin palace.” Lee-Nin’s voice sounded dull and distant in her own ears as she recited facts without meaning. “Sao-Tauna’s father is the brother of the Tanshen zhan. He sent this warden and his men to hunt and kill her. Sha-Kutan protected us. Now he is gone. With Ogtankaa. Taken by their kind through a door between realms.” Tears came again as she thought about the loss of Sha-Kutan.

“Did Sao-Tauna make that doorway?” Junari asked.

“No.” Lee-Nin shook her head. “The urris tried to take Sao-Tauna and Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa fought them off in their ... other form. Shadow and light. I think it brought the light creatures, the Taksa-Kranee. They took them away. Man and woman and ... whatever the other two really are. And now they are all gone. Lost to this world.”

Lee-Nin wiped the tears of her eyes with the backs of her hands, heedless to the resulting smear of blood across her face. She did not care what she looked like, only that Sao-Tauna lived. And that she would never again hold Sha-Kutan.

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THE SEER



KELLATRA

“ANYTHING YET?”

“No. Stop distracting me.” Kellatra smacked Rankarus’s arm. Who needed children asking annoying questions when one had a husband? She stared into the depths of the artifact’s multifaceted interior and tried to ignore the voices around her. She could not entirely silence them, but she managed to dim their impact on her mind.

“The rakthor battleship is in range now,” Kadmallin said. “Viktik’s ship is close behind. He may have communicated to them with the code flags.”

“A possibility,” Sketkee said.

Thunder shook the air, and the ship rocked as cries rose up among the crew. Kellatra ignored it all, probing with her mind’s eye into the innermost reaches of the artifact. Something within it sensed her, but also eluded her — water grasped too tightly in a clenched hand.

“What was that?” The captain shouted.

“Cannon shell,” Kadmallin replied.

“Likely fired as a warning to stop,” Sketkee said.

“To the four corners and the seven hells with this,” the captain cursed. “Lower the sails! Lower the sails!”

“Captain, we require only a few minutes more time,” Sketkee said.

“One of those hits my ship, and we won’t have any time left for nothin’ at all!” the captain yelled. “Bring ’er to a halt!”

Sketkee and the others argued with the captain as he called out orders to stop the ship. Kellatra let the words slide around her mind, noting them with a growing anxiety that she sequestered to keep her consciousness still and clear as she continued to delve into relation with the artifact. It needed to be felt as much as intuited. It responded, but not directly. How then? If it had been fashioned to obey a mind, maybe it only obeyed an urris mind. If so, could she alter the nature of her own mind to mimic what the device wanted? How could she do that without ever knowing what an urris’s mind thought like?

Commotion ensued around her. Shouts arose regarding ships drawing near. About the need to fight. About the imperative to surrender. She let the words cease having meaning. She allowed herself to end thinking in words, focusing her consciousness on her inner essence, opening that to The Sight, the way of seeing the truth of reality that underpinned all existence and allowed it to be altered, let herself merge those two realities, inner and outer, until they were revealed as one, as an inseparable ever-present oneness, a profound depth of knowing that she’d only ever touched vaguely, a mind without a mind, the mind of all minds, the quintessence of being that became all being in every moment — and in that instant, the artifact communicated with her, because it was her and she was it and the ship and the ocean and Raedalus and Sketkee and Kadmallin and

everyone aboard and everyone on all the ships and the land beyond and the rocks and plants and people and the sky above and...

Kellatra held that insight of ultimate unity, retaining the connection with the artifact lest she lose the intention of the contact in the overwhelming realization of the epiphany she experienced. In that instant, she grasped in a way beyond mere thought, the possibilities of what the artifact might accomplish if Willed in the proper way. It was not a weapon, but a pathway — a lock holding many doors. Unable to resist the curiosity that came with understanding — and knowing on some other more mundane level of mind that all she'd risked and all she cared about sat at a precipice teetering at the edge of oblivion — she became the key that turned the lock, opening a doorway, a path to where she did not know, but she understood that she wanted to know as much as she had ever wanted anything.

A brilliant, eye-scalding, white radiance filled the sky, overwhelming the puny light of the sun. Kellatra shielded her eyes as she looked up to see a laceration in the air bordered by lightning-bright cascades of energy a hundred paces off the bow of the ship. The blinding light and the sight beyond the open gash unsettled her, and her mind slipped from its inner stillness, falling from the calm of The Sight and into the cacophony of the reality around her.

Beyond the widening laceration of reality, she saw a wholly other world — a world of twin suns and obsidian clouds, blood-red trees with white leaves and tall crimson grass, waving as though alive and churning in different directions. And she saw something else, something moving in a haze as though crossing from a great distance over a heated desert — a mirage becoming more real with each passing second.

“Are you doing that?” Rankarus shouted beside her as he held a hand up against the light.

“I...” Kellatra’s mind tried to assess the question in the face of what she saw and find an answer that made sense. “I started it, but I’m not making this happen.”

“Is this what the device does?” Sketkee asked from beside her. A strong wind now blew from the blinding gash in the air, creating tall waves that buffeted the ship and the other vessels around it.

“I think it acts as a key to open doorways between ... between different places.” Kellatra clung to the railing as the ship lurched against the waves.

“Can you close it?” Kadmallin asked. He looked as though he might faint from the motion of the ship.

“I don’t know.” Kellatra had to raise her voice above the roar of the wind.

“Goddess Moaratana protect us!” the captain shouted from behind them.

As the captain’s words filled her ears, the mirage beyond the shattered shard of sky became solid in form and emerged from that bizarre landscape to step into the ocean, wings across its back lifting it into the air. The creature’s body displayed a reddish tint and tone in every aspect — from the crimson, leathery double wings, to the blood-ocher color of the thick fur covering the body and six legs, to the hundreds of salmon and flame-tinted tentacles writhing about its abdomen, to the sanguine, serpentine tail tipped with bony spikes, to the copper stain of the feathers along the thick, curving neck, to the russet pigment of the beak, and finally, to the glowing, ruby-hued eyes. Only

the massive, spiked teeth behind the beak shone white. The juxtaposition of the visage before her and the captain's plea melded in Kellatra's mind to grant her an understanding beyond mere intuition — this beast was the Goddess Moaratana so many had dreamed about and prayed to, the source of the dreams that had led her to follow a path toward the Forbidden Realm in search of answers in the indecipherable *Unseen Codex*. More understanding followed as she realized that journey had brought her to Tanjii and the company of Sketkee and the artifact now in her hands, hands that had accomplished what fewer than a handful of seers in the world might perform. The Goddess led her to this. The giant, dragon-like beast rising into the air above the ships of the blockade set out seeds for her to follow to this moment like the children in the tale of *The Forgotten Forest*.

Feeling like a child before the terrifying majesty of the creature in the air, the Dragon-Goddess, she watched as it opened its mouth wide and a wave of scarlet-white light rushed forth to consume the iron raktbor battleship, causing it to explode in a cloud of steam and flame and smoke.

“You should effect whatever measure necessary to undo what you have done and put that creature back where it came from.” The calm, rational tones of Sketkee's voice helped still Kellatra's chaotic mind.

“I can try to close the ... portal before anything else comes through, but that beast won't go back. That is the goddess of the dreams.” Kellatra watched as the Dragon-Goddess swung its head around toward what looked like a wyrin ship, the vessel changing form and transmuting to stone in an instant. She had never witnessed such a powerful remaking of reality. If this Dragon-Goddess Moaratana could bend reality to her will like a thousand seers, like the legends of the ancient urris, how might it, or she, remake this world to her desires? And what else might escape through the portal Kellatra had opened? And what terrors might transpire then?

“Then, I think,” Kadmallin shouted, “you should close that damn portal before any more tussing gods arrive!”

“I'll try.” Kellatra looked down to the ancient device in her hands.

“If you opened it, you can close it. I know you can.” Raedalus spoke softly and close to her ear as he placed his hands on her shoulders.

She found it gave her the strength and comfort and confidence she needed. As she stared at the device, she let her mind still and sink into the knowing depths of The Sight, deeper and deeper until she once more held that realization of unity with the device, until she was the key and the lock and the many doors beyond. As she turned the key that was herself and the device to close the portal, the lock that was the device shifted slightly. Her eyes still open, she saw the shift effected in the reality before her as the world beyond the portal blurred and became completely different — a black-watered ocean beneath ashen clouds off the coast of a gray land, with crumbling, stone buildings and forests of leafless, lifeless, smoke-colored trees. As she looked at that unholy world, she felt the lock that was both her and the device and the world shift again. As it did, the blinding tear in the sky leapt across a thousand paces in an instant, placing the ship she stood upon on the other side of the portal, upon an onyx-waved ocean as that tear shrank and closed behind them.

“It’s closing on us!” Raedalus said.

“I know.” Kellatra resented the statement of obvious fact more for the realization she could do nothing to reverse it. The lock that was the device no longer responded to her Will, fading as though a light went out, as though she’d exhausted some store of ethereal oil and its inner flame fluttered to smoke. The last sight she beheld of her own world was the Dragon-Goddess Moaratana causing a ship to break apart into thousands of shards of wood with the thrashing of her wings, yutan males and females leaping into the ocean waters. The portal closed, the overpowering light ceased, and the device in her hands went dark.

“What have you done?” The captain’s voice revealed the fear behind his question as cries of terror arose among the crew around the decks.

“What happened?” Rankarus placed both arms around Kellatra and held her close as she began to shiver.

“I am uncertain,” she said. “It would not respond the way it did the first time. It was like a flame going out for lack of oil.”

“Maybe it can be replenished somehow,” Rankarus suggested.

“Where are we?” Kadmallin stared at the gray-upon-gray coastline.

“I am uncertain. Some other world. Another realm of being.” Sketkee walked to the edge of the rail to stand beside Kadmallin. She sounded confident rather than fearful. “However, I suspect I have a way to learn which realm and lead us home.”

Kellatra could not imagine what she meant as her mind barely fathomed the reality of the world she saw around her. She had used the device to open a gateway to allow the Dragon-Goddess into her world, and in turn, she’d fallen into another world entirely. How could she get her family home? And how could she set her own world right and return the Dragon-Goddess to where she belonged? She felt she’d been duped, played like a mark in one of Rankarus’s long-ago deceptions, and she did not appreciate feeling tricked and stupid, especially when it placed her friends and loved ones in danger. It fostered an anger and determination that she vowed to harness to get back to her own world and to teach this Dragon-Goddess creature something about regret.

The Seer story arena will continue in *The Dragon Star Saga – Book 5*.

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

AN ANT fell from unknown heights in the branches above to tumble across white paper, recovering to its legs and skittering between freshly inked letters as black as its own small body. A gust of breath blew the ant out of the ink and into the nearby grass. Ondromead dipped the quill in the bottle and set again to transcribing all he'd witnessed that day. So much had happened in so short a time, his hand ached with trying to put it all in words. He sat beneath a tree in the garden at the rear of the temple in the ancient city on the coast of the Forbidden Realm.

That morning, he'd walked up the sandy beach to the crumbling pier of the city. There he'd been accepted as a pilgrim by those receiving the passengers from one of the three ships just docking. Offered a small, hot loaf of dinbao, he'd wandered through the city, following the call of the humming at the back of his mind. The hum grew louder as he walked one curving street after another, past reclaimed buildings with wide doors and curved roofs and around statues smashed by intention and ground down by time and weather. Eventually, he reached a wide plaza with a large, domed temple at its center. No one stopped him as he stepped into the temple. No one even seemed to notice him as he followed the curving ramps of the building into a lower level and through a broken wall.

Beyond the shattered wall, he found a chamber that sent a thrill of surprise through him. Murals around the walls. Four statues of elephant-like creatures with three trunks before an even larger statue of ... of what, he did not know. A dragon of some kind? A bird-like sea beast? Clearly, the god the other four statues were arranged to worship. Were these four stone, elephant people representative of those seen in the murals? Were these the people who'd built the city? Who once inhabited the entire realm?

As he heard voices coming along the hall, he stepped into the shadows at the back of the round chamber, out of sight. He recognized all the people to step into the lantern light of the chamber, although he had not seen any of them recently. He knew Junari, the prophet, having witnessed her in her youth as her parents were burned alive. He remembered Taksati from an incident on a beach when she was a girl. Raedalus from a moment in his childhood being teased by other children. The man Bon-Tao from the day that brought the death of his mother at the hands of a thief. Tanagaal the seer, from the fire that killed his sister and scarred his back. Lee-Nin from a night she killed a man to protect another woman. The child, Sao-Tauna, from a garden of the palace where she played, and her father and mother lived. The tall woman, Ogtankaa, he'd seen on her wedding day. And the large man, Sha-Kutan, from the night he met a monk on the road.

Strange that he should know them all. Odder still that they should be assembled in this particular room. As he listened to their conversation, their individual stories began to make sense to him. The hum returned again with great intensity as all but one of the lanterns dimmed and the shadows came to life. He recognized the two shadow-shrouded beings as well, though by their

kind and not individually. The urris. He heard them speak in his mind, but he knew they did not intend this. He heard it because he needed to. And after they'd delivered their plea, he followed the others out of the chamber and back up to the main temple. There he heeded the call of the hum and took a different curving corridor, finding himself leaving the temple through a small door that led into a garden. Some of those he'd just seen in the temple entered the garden not far away. Knowing he still had more to witness, and feeling the ache in his legs for having been on his feet all day, he found a comfortable spot beneath the shadows of a large tree not too far from the courtyard where Lee-Nin and Sha-Kutan talked as the girl played with something on one of the tables.

He listened to them, hearing them well, although they kept their voices low. He listened again when the other woman, Ogtankaa, arrived with a puppy in her hands, and he listened once more when the urris returned, their shadows standing in the woods not far from where he sat. He'd been surprised by the emergence of the beings of light and shadow from Ogtankaa and Sha-Kutan, and their ability to force the retreat of the two urris. He'd been even more surprised when a great fissure of light broke the air and more beings of light emerged, eventually trying to take them through the opening to some other world of golden light. Then Sao-Tauna made gestures with her hand and appeared to control the gateway. How did the girl do this? He had no time to think of an answer. The fingers of his writing hand had twitched as he watched a man sneak over the wall of the garden and stab the girl, only to have his throat slit by the woman, Lee-Nin. And then the beings of light disappeared with the man Sha-Kutan and the woman Ogtankaa. Junari and others came running soon after and prayed for the girl and seemed to save her, although she did not wake. Then lightning struck the ground, the urris fled, and soon after, they all retreated to the temple.

Though exhausted by the enormity and importance of the events he'd witness, he could not rest before writing it all down in the black book. As he put the final words to page, the hum returned, and he sighed. How much could happen in one day in one ruined city in a forgotten realm? Grudgingly, he got to his feet and walked back to the temple. Only after he crossed through the doorway did he notice the change.

He stood on the deck of a ship, the sun lower in the sky than a moment before, yutan sailors tending to the lines of the sails. Others shouted and pointed off the starboard rail to the north where another ship sat still in the water, other vessels closing in from behind it. As he turned to look around, something struck him in the stomach, nearly knocking him off his feet. He looked down in surprise to see slender arms wrapped around his middle, the dark hair of a small head buried in his side.

"Hashel?" Ondromead pulled the child's face up to confirm his hopes. Hashel beamed up at him.

Ondromead blinked away tears and tried to speak against the tightness of his throat and the pain in his chest.

"How?" Ondromead asked, realizing he might never know unless the boy decided to speak.

"There was a woman." An oddly melodic voice in the rough roagg tongue brought Ondromead's attention away from Hashel. A roagg female stood beside the boy, a large axe at her

waist, a bow on her back, and a sack hanging from one shoulder. How had Hashel met a roagg female? Did he travel with her? What did she mean about a woman?

“A woman brought us here.” The roagg female pointed to the rear cabin of the ship. “Through that door from the Goha River in an instant.”

Meraeu. This explained many things and posed more questions. Had she taken Hashel away to now return him? Why would she do either? And why return him with a roagg female?

“I am Reeshka,” the roagg said.

“I am called Ondromead when a name is needed.” As Reeshka spoke in roagg, it made sense to answer her in the same language. “Have you traveled with Hashel for long?”

“A few weeks.” Reeshka looked down at the boy. “I did not know his name.”

Of course. He’d taught Hashel to write in Easad, and it would be unlikely for a roagg to know the language. He wondered if Hashel still understood other tongues? He seemed to follow the conversation easily enough.

“Thank you for caring for him.” Ondromead stood with a hand around Hashel’s shoulder, unwilling to allow any distance between them. Not with Meraeu possibly nearby.

“He is no burden,” Reeshka said.

“Did the woman say anything?” Ondromead asked. “Anything important?”

“She said you would need the boy.” Reeshka looked toward the rocky land of the coast. “And she said she would bring me closer to my mate.”

“Tarak?” Ondromead wondered at seeing so many people connected to so many others all in the same day. It unleashed a swirl of anxiety in his bowels.

“You, too, have seen my mate?” Reeshka asked. “Hashel knew his name as well.”

“I met him with a carnival on the Old Border Road,” Ondromead said.

“I hope to meet him in Tanjii.” Reeshka glanced at the shoreline again. Ondromead did not tell her that the last time he’d seen her mate, Tarak and the carnival headed in the opposite direction from Tanjii. He knew well enough not to interfere.

“What are the sailors doing?” Ondromead looked to where the yutan captain shouted instructions to his crew. He saw two other vessels near the one they stood upon. Two other ships, one an iron rakthor battleship, headed for the cargo vessel sitting still in the water with its sails down.

“This is a blockade ship,” Reeshka replied. “That cargo ship attempted to evade them but then stopped a few minutes ago when the water exploded near it.”

The humming came back to Ondromead with a higher pitch than ever before. A moment later, the sky erupted, a jagged gash of lightning opening a hole in the air along the water at the shore near the stopped ship. Twice in one day? What did it mean? As he saw the creature emerging from the rent in the air, its similarity to the statue in the chamber beneath the temple in the Forbidden Realm left him in no doubt as to its nature. The goddess of the dreams had come through to this world. He did not understand how Meraeu could have known about this event, but he silently thanked her for reuniting him with Hashel. He held the boy close, uncertain which of them trembled as the great goddess-creature flew through the air and unleashed a torrent of light that

turned the iron rakthor ship into a ball of flaming slag. He held Hashel even tighter as the creature changed another ship into stone, and it began to sink. Knowing that he could not be harmed did not ease his concern for Hashel as the creature turned to the ship they stood upon, the wood beneath them instantaneously disintegrating into fragments.

Cold water enveloped him before he even realized he'd fallen from the shattered ship. He held Hashel tight and tried to paddle away from the debris. He felt a strong arm pull his own, and he twisted in the water to find Reeshka tugging him toward a large piece of wood floating in the water. He clung to a chunk that looked like it had been a mast, making certain Hashel had a good handhold on it.

"We can make the shore." Reeshka began to paddle toward the distant coastline, leaving behind the screaming survivors of what had been a sturdy sailing ship only moments prior.

Ondromead worked his legs and watched as the ship that had been still in the water moved by an unknown force through the giant breach in the air a moment before it collapsed and became clear sky once more. Above the water, the goddess-creature flapped its wings and uttered a deafening cry. Then the air around it shimmered, and in a brilliant burst of crimson-tinted light, it vanished.

As the humming in his mind ceased, the urge to write throbbed in his hand. He ignored the sensation and kicked his legs as best he could. They swam like this in silence for a time he could not mark, but the sun sat close to the western horizon as they finally crawled from the water and onto the sandy shore. They forced themselves to push farther unto the beach until the waves no longer licked at their legs. Then they collapsed, side-by-side, exhausted from their escape.

"Thank you." Ondromead panted the words. "For saving us." He understood that even if he had drowned, he would have awoken the next day once more alive, but Hashel possessed no such supernatural protection.

"What was that creature and where did it come from?" Reeshka stared at the stars coming to light in the dimming sky as she spoke between deep breaths.

"I believe it to be the goddess of the dreams, though I do not know where it came from or how it managed to arrive." Ondromead understood this to be a singular moment, standing far above all events he'd ever witnessed. A remarkable and unnatural occasion. One that should never have occurred. One that endangered the whole of the world.

His hand twitched again with the need to write, but he could not will his body to move. The book was soaking wet in any event. Better to wait until morning when all his clothes and possessions would all be set to normal again. Best to rest. They fell asleep there on the beach as the sun set and the stars fired to life in the sky, Hashel's hand in his.

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

THE TEMPLE



TAKSATI

JUNGLE-SPICED autumn air, chilled from its journey across the ocean, drifted on a strong breeze, over the rooftops and through the circular windows of the temple study. The wind held a hint of sweetness, of leaves rotting in damp undergrowth. Taksati shivered and pulled the old cotton shawl above her shoulders. They needed to build shutters for the temple as winter settled in. One more thing to add to an endless list of tasks necessary for making the ancient ruins a living city.

She sat beside Atula on the cushions in Junari's private study. Across the table from them, Lee-Nin curled next to a sleeping Sao-Tauna. Bon-Tao had carried the girl there under Junari's instruction after the events in the garden. They'd wiped her as clean of blood as possible without bathing her and wrapped her in one of Junari's priestly robes. The girl needed rest and as much safety as they could provide. Two of Kantula and Jupterus's guards stood outside the door. Not that it protected the girl or anyone from an attack by the urris, but it made people feel safer. That helped keep minds at ease, however falsely. She had no idea how the man and woman, Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa, had repelled the urris, but with them gone — wherever — little stood to protect the girl except what Junari and the pilgrims could assemble.

"You should eat." Taksati pushed the tray with a cup of hot tea and a bowl of noodle and spiced chicken soup across the low table and closer to Lee-Nin. The woman had said little since taking up her watch of Sao-Tauna. She wondered at their relationship. Lee-Nin had named the girl's father as royalty, but she did not give the impression of being in any way royal herself. A faithful servant? Devoted to the child and not her parents? Taksati sensed a kinship with the woman.

"I'm too tired to eat," Lee-Nin said. "Too..." Her words faded as she looked back to Sao-Tauna. The girl needed rest, but so did Lee-Nin.

"You saw much this day. And lost much as well. You need to eat. Stay healthy. For her." Taksati disliked speaking Shen. She could understand it better than convey her meaning in it. She particularly disliked the sound of her heavy Mumtiba accent in the Shen language. But speaking it provided good practice. Junari wanted everyone to speak as much of the main languages of the Iron Realm as possible, so no one felt excluded and no factions arose because of discontent.

"Eat, eat," Atula added. "Is good. Good, good." She'd finished her bowl of noodle soup in what seemed like a single, long, slurping gulp. The girl ate and ate much. Of course, as Taksati had her running around the temple and the city as her eyes and ears, and more importantly, as her legs, the girl needed all the sustenance possible. She looked, in fact, as though she might devour Lee-Nin's portion of soup if the woman did not act swiftly.

Lee-Nin sighed, relenting to the doubled advice, and picked up the bowl of soup, holding it where she sat, so she would not need to move farther from Sao-Tauna.

“After you eat, if you need sleep, we will tend her,” Taksati said.

“I’ll sleep here,” Lee-Nin said between mouthfuls of soup.

“Of course.” Taksati watched Lee-Nin staring into the soup rather than eating. “I feel sorrow with you.” She did not know how to express her empathy at Lee-Nin and Sao-Tauna’s loss.

“He is not dead. They are not dead.” Lee-Nin did not look up from her soup. “They are ... gone. Forever. She is all I have, and I am all she has.” She looked from the bowl to Sao-Tauna’s ashen face. It would be days before the color returned to her cheeks as her body made more blood.

“He looked to care for you and the girl very much,” Taksati said.

“He protected us when it put him in danger.” Lee-Nin wiped her eyes with the back of her hand holding the spoon. “I still don’t know why he helped us that first night.”

Lee-Nin said no more and soon returned to eating her soup. Taksati let her eat. Speaking in Shen made it hard enough to communicate; no need to make the woman speak around a full mouth.

“Do you smell that?” Atula’s nose twitched. “Smells like honey and clove and roasted apples.” She stood up and followed her nose to the open window.

Taksati did smell something sweet in the air. Not cloying, but powerful. She, too, stood, stepping over cushions to join Atula. She reached the window just as a brilliant-crimson light flashed and a massive thunderclap erupted in the bay beyond the city. She blinked as the afterimage of the light burst faded.

“Do you see that?” Atula asked.

“I do.” Taksati raised a hand to her mouth in shock as the massive creature flapped its wings over the bay beyond the city. The height of the study on the upper level of the temple gave a perfect view of the beast as it flew over the pier, people running from it and hiding wherever they found shelter. The creature glided toward the temple, screams and panic erupting in the wake of its passage across the sky. She, too, wanted to scream, uncertain whether in joy or terror. The faithful of the city did not yet know the nature of the creature soaring above them. She did. She had seen it carved in stone that very morning. The Dragon-Goddess soared directly toward her.

Junari. She must tell Junari. Then she saw motion below in the courtyard. Junari raced from the temple, followed closely by Bon-Tao, Raedalus, and her guards Kantula and Jupterus.

“How is that possible?” Lee-Nin stood at the window as well. Taksati had not heard her move to join them.

“Could Sao-Tauna have done this?” Taksati asked.

“No,” Lee-Nin replied. “She never had the chance.”

“A miracle,” Atula said in Mumtiba, grinning widely.

“One we must be close to Junari for,” Taksati replied in Mumtiba. To Lee-Nin in Shen, she said, “Stay here. The guards will remain outside to protect you.” She doubted the woman would leave Sao-Tauna unless dragged away forcibly but felt a sudden protective need for her to remain. Who knew what might happen when a goddess arrived from the ether of dreams?

She and Atula ran down the spiral ramps and out into the courtyard. The Dragon-Goddess landed hard upon the ancient, cracked stones of the plaza, dust and dried leaves caught up in the whirlwind created by her four colossal bat-like wings. The creature’s bulk filled a good portion of

the square around the temple. The stone likeness of the Dragon-Goddess Moaratana in the once hidden sanctum conveyed only a glimmer of her majesty. Nearly as tall as the temple itself, a hundred hands high at least and twice as long, with four wings and a body of variegated red, six legs, a furred torso covered with undulating tentacles, a long, serpentine neck wrapped in feathers that ended in a wide head with glowing, fiery eyes, and an elongated beak, the Dragon-Goddess Moaratana's visage instilled awe and wonder. Taksati swallowed hard on a dry throat, deciding this aspect of the Goddess instilled a considerable amount of fear and terror as well.

Taksati hurried to Junari's side, her hand clutching at Atula. She should have left her behind, but she knew the girl would never watch this event from a distance. Better to have her close at hand than accidentally underfoot of a goddess-creature.

As the four wings of the Dragon-Goddess settled and folded across her back, she raised her neck and opened her mouth to release a beastly cry that spoke of triumph against great obstacles and numerous enemies. The sound shook the stones of the plaza and reverberated within Taksati's chest.

Junari stepped forward from the others, but Bon-Tao placed a hand on her arm.

"Junari..." Bon-Tao started to say, worry bending the sharp lines of his face.

"It will all be well." Junari patted his arm. "This is what we have prayed for."

"Bon-Tao is right, Mother Shepherd." Raedalus blinked wildly as he looked past her to the goddess-creature filling the plaza.

"She is the Goddess. Our goddess." Junari smiled at Raedalus. "She has come to help us."

"Be cautious, my girl." Taksati hoped the familiarity of her address reached beyond the excitement she knew Junari felt. The woman had always been too quick to act when faced with the unknown. And she had never before faced an unknown this unknowable.

"I am appropriately terrified, Taksati." Junari took Taksati's free hand and held it tight. "Do not worry. This is the moment that I have been drawn to for so long. I feel it."

Taksati wanted to give more warning but had no time as Junari released her hand and strode across the plaza toward the Dragon-Goddess. By now, the faithful of the city and those who had been in the temple lined the edges of the plaza, watching as their prophet greeted their goddess. Junari stopped ten paces from the Dragon-Goddess, craning her neck back to stare upward at the great goddess-beast.

"Moaratana, Dragon Star, Great Goddess, we your faithful and loving flock rejoice in your coming!" Junari knelt on both knees, hands clasped before her heart, her fingers interlocked. "We bow before you in supplication and devotion. We humbly prostrate ourselves to the glory of your greatness. We pray for your guidance to see your will and your desires made manifest in this world. Great Goddess Moaratana, thank you for coming to save us!"

The Dragon-Goddess Moaratana once more raised her giant head skyward on its long, sinuous neck, again uttering a cry so deafening and powerful, it tore at Taksati's ears and caused her stomach to clench and churn. Then the Dragon-Goddess brought her head down, beak wide open, and snatched Junari up, whole, into its mouth, raising its head again to swallow, the motion sending a bulge along the feather-covered length of its throat until disappearing into the bulk of the

creature's body.

Silence held sway for an endless moment while Taksati's mind rebelled against what she'd seen, what all the pilgrim faithful witnessed. Then the screams of terror began, echoing like a shattered song between the buildings and the temple around the plaza. Five words came to Taksati in that instant.

A sun, a boat, a pig, a fish, and a flame.

The tiles had warned her, and she had not been wise enough to see the truth in them.

A sun, a boat, a pig, a fish, and a flame.

Betrayal.

To continue reading the Temple story arena or the crossover between the Fugitives and the Temple story arenas turn the page.

THE TEMPLE



BON-TAO

THE UNEARTHLY cry, at once guttural and elegant, filled every ear and every heart with fear and terror and shock. The Dragon-Goddess-Beast's wail shook the air of the plaza around the temple. The sound held Bon-Tao as petrified in motion and emotion as what he'd just witnessed. And in that motionlessness came the cloying smell of clove.

Junari!

Why would the Goddess do such a thing? Was this not the goddess they'd expected? Was it some other creature set free from a violent, alien realm? Had they been fooled, or were they merely fools not to listen to the warnings of the urris? Had the girl let this beast loose? How could that be?

Junari! His love. The shepherdess of his heart.

What could he do to save her? He drew his sword. She might still be alive in the belly of the monster. As he stepped forward, the Dragon-Goddess raised her head high again and opened her beak to expel a burst of deep-crimson light, not a flame, but seemingly a stream of reddish lightning that reached high into the sky. He thought he saw it strike something small and spherical that only became visible for an instant then disappeared once more. The urris again?

What could he do against such a creature? What could any of them do? What did it want? Would it devour them all?

"Tanagaal." He turned to the seer standing to the side of Taksati, who held the girl Atula close in her arms. "Can you do anything to save her?"

"I..." Tanagaal sputtered as he tried to speak. "I cannot ... it is not ... I have never felt ... I do not know."

The man would be of no use. What could a mere man's use of The Sight hope to accomplish against such a being as the beast before him? As he looked again, its head came down and the tentacles about its body began to twist and gyrate in an inexplicable pattern, squirming as though individually alive. On its chest, the red tentacles swirled in a vortex of impossible flesh. Something arose in that churning mass of boneless limbs. Something red and white and round. Not round. The tentacles brought forth an egg the size of a man and lowered it to the stones of the plaza, releasing it to rest between the massive taloned feet of the Dragon-Goddess. She ... it ... looked down and breathed a garnet-tinted flame of light upon the egg. The heat of that light burned at Bon-Tao's face from twenty paces away. Its head still above the egg, mouth closed, the Dragon-Goddess looked up, its ruby-flamed eyes seeming to stare right into Bon-Tao's inner essence. His heartbeat quickened in his chest as a chill spread throughout him.

The quality of the air began altering in nearly imperceptible ways. Cooler, charged with the sensation that came before a great storm, the scent of clove smelling charred. It took him a moment to notice the change, as the shift in color denoted the alteration of reality before him, but once

recognized, it became undeniable. The flesh and feather and fur of the Dragon-Goddess gradually transformed to a deep magenta-inflamed granite. The paving stones around its six taloned feet transformed to earth from which green shoots arose, blooming with flowers of red and purple. The transformation lasted only moments. Then there stood, towering over the plaza, facing the temple, not a living Dragon-Goddess but a larger version of the stone statue he'd seen in the cellar sanctum earlier that day.

His mind momentarily arrested all thought. It could not embrace the sight before him or the events that led to it. Then a notion occurred to him. The egg. No egg rested before the statue in the hidden shrine.

He ran across the plaza, sword still in his hand. He heard the others call out behind him and then their feet joining his to slap against the ancient cracked and time-battered stones. As he reached the giant, vermilion-hued egg, he noticed a long crack across its gleaming surface. He could not tell by looking at it, what constituted its form. It was not stone, but it looked unlike the shell of any egg he'd ever seen. He raised his sword and brought it crashing upon the slender fissure along the egg's outer shell. It widened slightly at the impact and he repeated his attack, the steel blade spreading and lengthening the gap. The others ran up beside him and stared in wonder as he struck the egg again and again until it started to crack open of its own accord.

As chunks of shell broke away, a clear, viscous fluid oozed to the ground. He dropped the sword and began to pull at the pieces of shell. As a large fragment fell free, he saw what he'd hoped for. A face. Junari.

"She's here!" he called.

The hands of the others joined him, pulling at the thick encasement of the egg, breaking it to release more of the dense albumen to slop upon their feet and the stones beneath them. They uncovered arms and breasts and hips and legs, all naked, the flesh unnaturally smooth beneath the slimy fluid. Bon-Tao held her face in his hands, and her eyes fluttered.

"She lives." He could barely speak the words for fear their truth would turn.

He reached into the remains of the egg where Junari curled like a child and slid his arms under her legs and around her back to lift her free. Taksati took the shawl from around her shoulders and draped it over Junari's limp form, wiping the ichor from her face. Bon-Tao kissed the forehead of his beloved as it rested against his chest, the amniotic liquid sweet against his lips, tasting of clove and honey.

"To the temple." Taksati stroked Junari's hair. "We must get her inside."

"Yes." Bon-Tao's mind came back to inhabit the moment. They needed to examine Junari. Already, the faithful pilgrims of the city came forward, overcoming their fear of the Dragon-Goddess statue and the form it held only minutes before to crowd around in hopes seeing their reborn Mother Shepherd.

Bon-Tao ignored the thoughts of what transpired and what it meant for Junari or the faithful. He walked as fast as possible to the temple. As they crossed the entrance, Taksati shouted an order for everyone to stay outside. Kantula and Jupiterus set guards and then followed Bon-Tao up the ramps to Junari's personal chamber on the upper level. He passed the guards outside the door

without a thought but stopped momentarily as he entered and saw the child Sao-Tauna still unconscious on the cushions. The woman Lee-Nin stood at the window. He'd forgotten they used the room for the girl's recovery. He rushed forward and laid Junari across several large cushions.

"She is alive?" Lee-Nin sounded bewildered by the possibility.

"Yes." Bon-Tao pushed Junari's clumped, sticky hair away from her eyes and stroked her cheeks. "Come back to us now. You must come back."

Junari's eyes fluttered and Bon-Tao used an edge of the shawl to wipe them clear of the slowly crusting plasma. She leaned to the side and coughed, thick fluid ejecting from her mouth and onto the stone floor. She coughed again and shook her head as though clearing it of something. Taksati poured water from a pitcher on the low table into a clay cup and placed it to Junari's lips. She drank greedily, grasping the cup in her hands. She sat up, unaware and unconcerned that the shawl fell from her to reveal her nakedness. Taksati took a blanket from nearby where Sao-Tauna lay and wrapped it around Junari's shoulders, tossing the soaked shawl to the side.

Junari looked at them all, each in turn, even the woman Lee-Nin. Her eyes rested last upon Bon-Tao's face. He stared back at her seeing the woman he loved and ... something else in her eyes.

"You need not worry. Any of you." Junari's voice sounded calm.

"We thought we'd lost you." Bon-Tao struggled to restrain the emotion that constricted his throat and stung his eyes.

"The Goddess has ... remade me," Junari said.

"What happened to you ... inside?" Tanagaal asked.

"I cannot say." Junari smiled. "I felt embraced by light. A brilliant, crimson light. Then there was darkness and a dreamless sleep, and now I am here."

"I have never witnessed such a powerful remaking of reality." Tanagaal's voice quavered in obvious fear.

"Are you well?" Bon-Tao placed his hands on Junari's shoulders as he continued to stare into her eyes. Something there unnerved him.

"I am well," Junari gazed back at him. "And I am more than I was."

"What do you mean?" Taksati leaned closer to Junari. "How are you more?"

"When I was merely Junari, I was the vessel for the Goddess, the voice she spoke through from another realm." Junari's face and voice appeared strangely calm. "Now that the Goddess is in this world, her voice is a thousand times more powerful, too potent for any human mind. The Goddess refashioned this body to accommodate her presence." She saw the concern on Bon-Tao's face and smiled again. "I am still Junari. I possess her memories. Her thoughts. But this mind shares also the thoughts of an aspect of the Goddess, so that she ... that I ... that we may speak directly."

"Who speaks now?" Taksati asked.

"We both do." Junari looked across the chamber to where Lee-Nin once more sat beside the sleeping form of Sao-Tauna. "I imagine you are more familiar with this notion."

"Yes," Lee-Nin said. "The human and otherworldly parts of Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa shared

their bodies.” She paused and spoke more softly as she looked away. “Share their bodies.”

“This is similar, I think.” Junari’s face beamed with a radiance that simultaneously comforted and terrified Bon-Tao. The woman he loved sat before him, he felt certain of that, but in that same body sat something else as well. How did he know which spoke? Which to believe? How did they ... her ... it ... know?

“Is there anything you need, Mother...” Raedalus stopped and frowned. “What do we call you now?”

“I am Junari. And I am Moaratana.” She grinned, the room brightening, the smell of clove touching the air. “I am no longer the Mother Shepherd. I am the Mother Dragon. And you may help by fetching robes for me. I wish to address those gathered outside the temple. They are as worried as each of you. And I must make it clear that none of you have anything to fear.”

“You should bathe first,” Taksati said as Bon-Tao helped Junari to her feet. Atula went to the clothes chest near a narrow bed to retrieve the robes.

Again, that smile, that hint of clove. Bon-Tao watched as Junari’s flesh became clean, her hair dry and lustrous. She took the red ceremonial robes from Atula and patted the girl on the head. Atula seemed likely to faint, even though her eyes were over-wide with excitement. Bon-Tao understood the sensation. He felt unhinged from reality, unable to predict what might happen in any given moment. Uncertain what to think, what to feel. Should he love this woman who stood dressing before him, utterly unconcerned with her nakedness before the others? Juparti people had little use for unnecessary modesty, but few could wear their own skin with the assuredness this woman displayed. Was she really a woman? Or was she a goddess? She claimed to be both. How could this be? What did it mean for his love of the woman Junari if she shared the same body with the Goddess Moaratana?

After Taksati and Atula helped her seal the clasps of the ceremonial robes, Junari turned to them, reaching out to take the hands of the older woman and Bon-Tao in her own. “I know this is strange. Incredible. Unimaginable, even. But you must not fear. I do not come to destroy this world. I come to remake it for the benefit of all.”

Her smile brightened Bon-Tao’s heart to the point where he felt filled with light — so full, he barely brought himself to move when she released his hand and walked from the room. He blinked to clear his mind and followed her. He sensed the others behind him but did not turn to make sure they accompanied them. Outside the door, Kantula and Jupiterus fell in beside them. They must have heard the words exchanged in the room, must have known that this woman, this Goddess-Junari, this Mother Dragon, did not need their protection, but they trailed her all the same. Junari led them down a curved hall and through another room that opened to a balcony. She walked straight to the low, stone railing and looked down at the hundreds of faithful gathered in the plaza. As Bon-Tao stepped to stand several paces away, he noted that every pilgrim, old and new, stood in the plaza.

The faithful did not know what to do and so did nothing, standing, waiting. When Junari, the Mother Dragon, spoke, her voice effortlessly filled the plaza, louder than any human voice could be. Bon-Tao realized that was how he thought of her now — Junari-Mother-Dragon.

“You have all suffered many hardships to reach this moment,” Junari-Mother-Dragon said. “Now you have a protector. One to smite your enemies. I am the Mother Dragon. I am the new goddess come to release you.”

As Junari-Mother-Dragon raised her arms, the people of the plaza raised their voices, cheering, yelling, weeping, chanting...

Mother Dragon!

The Temple story arena will continue in *The Dragon Star Saga – Book 5*.

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

THE CARNIVAL



PALLA

BRIGHT SUN and clear skies. The smell of fresh-cut wheat rolling across the fields on a chill wind. A wide road with few ruts. A good day for a carnival to travel. Palla breathed in the cool air and sighed. It would be a good day if they were not being marched at double pace to a city where they might be called upon to murder people and be killed in return. She walked beside Ranna and Pankee-Jao, several long paces behind Leotin in the lead wagon. Their overseer, Saptan Tiago, rode beside Leotin. While he'd arrived the previous morning for their forced march dressed in common clothes rather than his uniform, it had taken considerable persuasion to convince him to abandon his war horse for an older, less-imposing steed. While ostensibly there to ensure their mission to infiltrate Tanjii in advance of the pursuing Atheton army's arrival, Palla felt the man actually risked their success. He would never look like anything but an army officer. While handsome, he'd make a passable actor at best. They'd need to find a way to better conceal him before finally reaching Tanjii.

"Can't keep this pace without a break." Ranna looked back over her shoulder. Palla did the same to see the rotund camp cook, Kang-Tusi, stumbling beside the wagon he led. She looked back along the line of wagons to find similar looks of exhaustion on the faces of her carnival companions. Even those riding in wagons looked tired.

"We're not soldiers." Pankee-Jao looked as though she might stumble over at any moment, her thin frame blown away in the wind. Ranna had made her best efforts at fattening her up, but her age and long lack of regular meals made that seem an impossible task.

"I'll talk to Leotin," Palla said. She needed a rest as well. They'd been on the road since dawn without a break. She quickened her pace until she walked between the saptan's horse and Leotin's wagon. She knew Donjeo still hid in the sleeping cabin of the wagon. She felt sorry for the boy to be trapped in there day and night, but they could not risk him being seen as long as the saptan remained with them. She idly wondered if the saptan might not meet an accident, but she understood it would be a mistake. An accident would also need to befall Keerthor, the seer, as well. And if his regular Sight-sent messages failed to reach Kenagal Tancoldo, the carnival's situation would swiftly deteriorate.

"We need a rest," Palla said to Leotin. While she acknowledged that Saptan Tiago controlled their lives, Leotin still led the carnival. "A meal and water. For the horses as much as the people."

"We will march another hour," Saptan Tiago said, his back straight in his saddle.

"We will stop now." Leotin pulled the reins of the horse hauling the wagon and steered it to a halt beside the road.

"This is unacceptable," Saptan Tiago said. "We must reach Tanjii by the deadline."

"We must also reach Tanjii alive," Palla replied.

"I know my people," Leotin said. "They are not an army accustomed to a fast march. We will

make Tanjii in the allotted time, but we will do so at the pace I set. Palla is right. It does us no good to arrive looking like we are a carnival of corpses fleeing for our lives.”

The saptan grunted but said no more. The carnival halted and everyone not involved in preparing a quick meal collapsed in the grass beside the road. She spoke with Leotin as the saptan wandered back to get his portion of bread and dried meat.

“How is the boy?” Palla did not want to say Donjeo’s name aloud. It felt weird to speak his name knowing she did not really know him, as she had only ever known Kanma’s impersonation. Apparently, the changeling mimicked him well.

“We have to find a way to let him out.” Leotin looked at the cabin of his wagon. “He’s not a boy used to confined spaces. I fear I may need to start tying him down. Especially with the saptan riding so close.”

“Maybe we can sneak him out in the evenings if we take him far from where we camp.” Palla tried to figure out how best to manage that deception on a nightly basis. Then she realized she knew the perfect people to set in charge of it. “I’ll speak to Shifhuul and Kanma about it. Between the two, they will be able to keep him out of sight for an hour a night at least while the rest of us sleep.”

“Are you certain it is wise to place that thing and the boy together?” Leotin still harbored no affection for Kanma and carried a great deal of anger toward her.

“They will need to learn to exist in the carnival at some point,” Palla said. “He suffered many hardships to return, and she has nowhere else to go.”

“Have you thought about where you are going?” Leotin looked at her, his eyes probing.

“I am thinking all the time on that very thing,” Palla said. She faced too many questions as she contemplated joining the pilgrims in their journey to the Forbidden Realm once reaching Tanjii. Ranna spoke of following them, and while Palla once felt the same, Yeth’s revelation about her role in the events at that pond left her uncertain in her faith and her course. She did not wish to separate from Ranna at any cost. But she did not know if she wanted to follow the pilgrims or remain in the carnival. And what would they do with Pankee-Jao?

“You will be sure to let me know when all that thinking results in a decision,” Leotin smiled at her. She knew from the look which path he hoped she chose.

“I will.” Palla walked back until she found Shifhuul and Kamna with Tarak, already eating their rations. The outlanders still kept a distance from the others, which made it easier to have a conversation without being overheard.

“You have the look of someone about to give an order that sounds like a request.” Kanma looked up from where she sat in the tall roadside grass.

“I learned that look from my father,” Palla said. The changeling knew her too well.

“The merchant,” Tarak said. She thought he might be smiling with his words, but she still found subtle roagg facial gestures difficult to interpret.

“Exactly.” Palla considered it vexing that she could convincingly play peasant girls and royalty on the carnival stage, but no one seemed convinced that she was a merchant’s daughter. “I need Shifhuul and Kanma’s help. We have a caged pet that needs a walk each night without being

seen.”

“Yes,” Shifhuul said as he bit into a hunk of dried venison.

“You’ll need to keep him out of sight and far from camp for an hour or so each night,” Palla added.

“Yes.” Shifhuul looked at her as though uncertain whether she understood the word.

“Why me?” Kanma asked. “I not certain I am best suited.”

“You two are good at staying hidden, and you can protect him if you need to. And you owe him.” Palla hoped putting Donjeo and Kanma together each night proved wise. She felt something she could not place in words about them. The need for them to reconcile what had happened. What Kanma had done and why.

“I will be the eyes in the camp,” Tarak said. “To warn if danger awakes.”

“Yes. Good. I hadn’t thought of that.” Palla smiled at Tarak. She liked the outlanders. She even found herself drawn to Kanma in a genial way. She assumed it was because she felt like an outlander herself most of the time, even in the comforting fold of the carnival. One of the outlanders, though, held a more complicated connection to her. “Where is Yeth?”

“In that stand of trees.” Kanma pointed to a small copse of hickory and cherry trees across the road.

“Thank you.” Palla headed for the woods. She could see Yeth’s shadowed outline now behind the leaves of a large bush, likely using the limited privacy of the trees to relieve herself. She did not announce herself as she approached. She knew Yeth had seen her coming. The yutan stepped from behind the bush.

“You wish to speak.” Yeth said as Palla approached her. Always so direct. Odd that she’d kept her secret so long.

“Yes.” Palla had spent many hours thinking about what to say but never decided on anything. She hoped what came out of her mouth made sense of her feelings. “I never thanked you properly. For what you did. For saving Ranna and me.” In truth, both she and Ranna had thanked her the night Yeth revealed her secret. But not in the way Palla felt compelled.

“You have thanked me.” Yeth folded her long arms across her chest. “Thanking me is not what you want, is it?”

“No.” Palla sighed as she realized the truth of Yeth’s words. She did not need or want to thank her. She wanted answers. Answers no one could give. Ranna did not need those answers. Yeth’s revelation did not shake her faith in the Goddess. And Palla found it difficult to raise her doubts with the woman she loved. It had taken so long to admit those feelings, and she experienced so much joy in the return of them, that she could not bear the idea of a split in their faith causing a rift in their love.

“I feel ...” Palla wondered what she felt.

“Tricked,” Yeth said.

“Yes,” Palla replied. “And now I don’t know what to trust.”

“The dreams and the star are still proof of your Goddess’s power in this world,” Yeth said.

“But that is not...” Palla struggled as she realized the heart of the problem. “I only thought to

join the pilgrims when I believed the Goddess saved me. Saved us. That she cared about us personally. But knowing that it was you who saved us ... I don't know if I feel the same pull to follow the pilgrims. I don't know what to do."

"And you fear speaking to Ranna." Yeth sighed and Palla mirrored that sigh within herself. "I regret I created this problem for you. I wish I had an answer that solved it. Maybe you can take solace in the knowledge that no matter what you plan, events will unfold beyond your control. This is the notion that I have found comfort in ever since joining this carnival."

"Yes." Palla smiled suddenly, her heart feeling lighter as she held that thought. "Nothing goes to plan in this carnival."

"But events eventually fall into some kind of pattern that we can live with," Yeth said.

"Indeed." Palla's smile widened. "Thank you."

"You owe me no thanks," Yeth said. "We are here together and must help as we can."

They rejoined the carnival and Palla had only a few moments to grab a drink of water and slice of dried beef before they once more marched toward Tanjii. She walked again beside Ranna and Pankee-Jao, more at peace. She still did not know if she would follow Ranna to the Forbidden Realm or remain with the carnival. But she knew something would happen, some decision would be made at some point, and she would live with whatever that choice turned out to be.

After a few hours of marching, Leotin called out from the seat of the lead wagon ahead.

"Call for the outlanders," Leotin said. "There are men dead in the road."

The Carnival story arena will continue in *The Dragon Star Saga – Book 5*.

THE THRONE



TONKEN-WU

“TWO SILVERS.”

“A half silver and a bronze.”

“A silver and five bronze.”

“A half silver and a bronze.”

A frown creased Tonken-Wu’s forehead as he stared at the farmer and his wife. They stood outside a small barn not far up a slender lane from the Old Border Road and only ten minutes travel from the nearest village. He’d stopped because the man had flagged him down.

“A half silver and three bronze.” Tonken-Wu held no disposition for bargaining. It made his neck itch. He knew before the farmer opened his mouth what he’d say. His neck prickled more to be confirmed.

“A half silver and a bronze.” The farmer rubbed the top of his balding head. His wife stood beside him, arms crossed, her frown as sharp as the angles of her sallow cheeks. Both looked like they’d missed more than one meal a day for the last several weeks.

“I can’t sell at a loss.” Tonken-Wu looked at the large pot and two knives he held in his hands.

“We only gots a half silver and a bronze,” the wife said. Apparently, she had no patience for bargaining, either. The farmer glared at her.

“The pot or one of the knives, then.” Tonken-Wu sighed. He had no stomach for daolan trading. He’d purchased the daolan wagon because he needed a convincing deception for his travels. With Atheton soldiers likely to march along the road any day now, he needed to appear as a common traveling trader, a daolan, not a palace warden. He’d spent nearly all the coin of his savings to buy the wagon from a daolan very eager to sell. Now he needed to make sales to have enough to afford food. The whole process slowed his progress in finding Zhan Tin-Tsu.

“Half a silver...” the farmer began to say.

“We’ll take the pot.” The wife reached out and Tonken-Wu handed her the large cast-iron pot. “Pay ’em.”

“It’s already well-seasoned and tempered,” Tonken-Wu called after the wife. The daolan he’d bought the cart from insisted part of his high price related directly to the cast-iron pots and pans all being seasoned by his own hand. Tonken-Wu had no idea what the man referred to, but he assumed it meant the pots were more valuable.

The farmer paid him with a grunt, and Tonken-Wu climbed back on his wagon, urging his reluctant horse, Longen, back to the Old Border Road, heading east once more. The animal did not like pulling a wagon. He’d worried the first few days about meeting bandits and kept his sword hidden behind the riding seat, but he’d met only merchant caravans and locals taking harvest foods to sell in nearby towns. Most waved hello in passing and asked for news of the new war. Word had spread that the Atheton army invaded both Shen dominions and that their capital cities had

been taken without a fight by two separate armies. He felt a stabbing guilt each time he thought of the Atheton Teyett sitting on the Daeshen throne. He'd abandoned his post and his duty and his oath to the zhan. All for a dream.

He still had the dream each night, and it drove him on each day. Slightly different with every iteration, it pointed him south until he'd reached the Old Border Road and then east. He hoped it proved a touch of divine revelation rather than the signs of an unmarked madness. He'd considered that possibility many times. That his grief drove him insane. No, he had to trust that Ni-Kam-Djen spoke in his dreams the way the heretic Goddess had tried. He needed to believe that his god sent him to the aid of his zhan.

His journey south to the Old Border Road took far longer than he'd hoped, the consequence of needing to move while so many soldiers ran the roads, first Tanshen and then Daeshen. He could not risk being recognized and often traveled at night. One could not ride as quickly at night. And there had been days when he'd needed to hide with other locals and travelers when an army troop marched through a town. Only when reaching the Old Border Road and obtaining the daolan cart did he dare to ride in daylight. Now he hoped to regain the days he'd lost. He did not know how far he needed to travel east — the dreams were frustratingly vague — but he hoped no more than a week or two.

That greater question, not of where the zhan traveled, for until recently, the dreams seemed to place him in one spot, but rather why the zhan traveled, gnawed at Tonken-Wu's mind throughout his waking hours. Had the zhan been injured? Had he been captured? Did he travel now as a prisoner or a free man? And if free, why had he not made his presence known to the palace? While it might make sense, now that the Athetons invaded, why had he remained silent before?

The obvious answer stood at the edge of his mind, but he refused to acknowledge it — Zhan Tin-Tsu did not reveal himself because he was dead. And Tonken-Wu, did not chase his zhan, but a phantom of his deranged mind. The more he tried to ignore this thought, the larger it grew at the edge of his awareness. No one else believed the zhan to be alive. No one else claimed dreams calling them to find him. This did sound like the ravings of a madman. His only solace came in knowing that in all other respects he still behaved as a rational, well-minded man. He spotted no signs of insanity among his interactions with others or in his daily routine. Of course, a madman would think his actions normal.

The Old Border Road curved north in a long bend, setting the eastern path out of sight for a time. His warden training told him that such a bend made a perfect spot for an ambush. He tried to ignore such thoughts, knowing he'd be unlikely to fight off more than two or three bandits if they set upon his dusty horse and wagon. He tried to enjoy the sun at his back, his wide-brimmed hat keeping his neck from burning in the light. At such times, he almost envisioned continuing his life as a daolan. If he did not find the zhan, if he proved deluded, and his dreams the ferment of a grieving mind, then it might be the best he could hope for. What else might he avail himself of? He could never return to the palace alone, and while he might hire his sword to protect merchant wagons or work for a lesser tahn, these things all seemed too much like the life he left.

His thoughts became so consumed with the unpredictability of his life that it took him several

seconds to notice the middle-aged man staggering around the bend in the road up ahead. He took the stranger for being shamelessly drunk, then he noticed the man held one arm with the other and that blood stained his gray tunic.

Tonken-Wu urged Longen to a greater pace, which resulted in something slower than a fast walk. He brought the wagon to a halt, but the man did not stop, and only continued to lurch past as fast as he possible.

“What has happened, sir?” Tonken-Wu called out to the man. He saw blood running down the man’s right leg as well as his arm.

“Merchant-thieves and road-daggers!” the man called out as he continued up the road. “Best run. Run or die!”

Tonken-Wu did not understand the phrase “merchant-thieves,” but road-daggers stood for bandits. He heard the clang of metal striking metal and slapped the reins to goad the horse once more into recalcitrant motion. The horse picked up its pace, and he pulled his sword from its hiding spot behind the seat and unsheathed it. As he came around the bend, his martial experience allowed him to assess the sight before him in an instant. Six men dressed like common merchants stood with swords around three wagons. Two with blades lay dead on the ground. More people lay dead as well. Two more men and a woman. The six men encircled a lone man with a sword. The men did not move like merchants. They stalked like seasoned and well-tempered soldiers. As they engaged to attack at once, the man between them took to motion as well. Tonken-Wu had only ever seen one man move with such deadly swiftness.

Tonken-Wu leapt from the wagon, sword in hand, the horse pulling up short and wandering to the side of the road. He ran silently, not crying out, blade held high, ready to sacrifice himself to save the man he’d been following through his dreams.

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

THE FUGITIVES



SAO-TAUNA

BIRD CALLS glided on a gentle breeze through the circular window, across the room, over low cushions and a steaming bowl to tickle the ears of a small girl. Sao-Tauna twitched her nose at the smell of soup as the bird sounds brought her mind back from the deepest of sleeps. She inhaled and opened her eyes. Lee-Nin sat on a cushion beside her eating a bowl of soup. Her puppy, Kuru, dozed on a small cushion. They were in the priest woman's room in the temple. Junari. She remembered liking her but being wary of her. Slowly, she began to remember other things.

"Sha-Kutan," she croaked, her throat dry and painful.

"Sao-Tauna!" Lee-Nin nearly dropped her bowl of soup on the table as she rushed to Sao-Tauna's side. She smiled at her, tears in her eyes. "You're awake. I began to fear..." Lee-Nin bent and wrapped her arms around her. She stiffened at the contact, but found that a part of her enjoyed it, felt comforted by it even as it unnerved her.

"Where is Sha-Kutan?" Even as she asked, the memories filled Sao-Tauna's mind. She saw Sha-Kutan and Ogtankaa pulled through the rupture in the air by the light creatures into their world.

"He is gone." Lee-Nin's tears returned to her eyes. "They are both gone. There is only us now."

Sao-Tauna didn't say anything. She didn't want to think about it, but she couldn't help herself. What would those light creatures do to Sha-Kutan? She worried about Ogtankaa, but not in the same way. Would they send him to the dark world? Why did he not separate himself as he'd done before? Why did he fight them so? How would she ever see him again? She knew the answer to that question, but the fear it brought made her ignore it.

"So much has happened while you slept," Lee-Nin said.

Sao-Tauna touched her chest. She remembered other things now. A sharp pain even greater than when she got shot by that arrow. The man. The warden. He'd stabbed her. Stabbed her as she tried to save Sha-Kutan. Fear should have come with the memory, but only anger arose in her heart.

"He is dead." Lee-Nin placed her hand above Sao-Tauna's chest without actually touching her. "He stabbed you, but he is dead now and can never hurt you again."

Sao-Tauna remembered the blood gushing from the man's neck. Lee-Nin had killed him. This burned away a layer of the anger collected in Sao-Tauna's chest.

"Junari prayed, and I prayed, and you were healed by the Goddess. And by Tanagaal." Lee-Nin glanced around the empty room. "She is not Junari anymore. The Goddess came through somehow. Somewhere. You didn't need to make the gate after all. And she is here now. In the plaza outside the temple. She became a statue. The Goddess. She is inside Junari now. Somehow. The two of them. Like Sha-Kutan. Two people in one mind."

Sao-Tauna didn't understand the meaning of the words Lee-Nin spoke. They made sense in a

vague way. The way words sometimes did when adults explained things that were important to them, but that she didn't really grasp until she saw them for herself. Instead, she focused on the one thing Lee-Nin said that mattered.

"Sha-Kutan." Sao-Tauna sat up, but it left her dizzy. She should have lain back down, but she refused.

"You should rest," Lee-Nin said. "It will be days before you are well again."

"We have to find Sha-Kutan." Sao-Tauna discovered the anger stripped the sting from the fear of that thought. "We have to save him."

"He's gone." Lee-Nin looked confused.

"I can find him." Sao-Tauna did not know if this was strictly true, but she knew it wasn't exactly a lie. She could find the world the light-beings took him to, and she could find the dark world he originally came from, but finding him in one of those worlds would be ... it was going to take time.

"You think we can follow him and find him?" Lee-Nin's voice carried her surprise at the thought. "Of course, you do. Of course, you can. I should have thought of that. But it will be dangerous."

"So?" Sao-Tauna posed the word as a question and a challenge. She knew danger. She'd been held by the palace priest while her father gripped a knife and tried to plunge it into her chest. She'd been hunted by her father's wardens for months and months. She'd been shot with an arrow. She'd been in a deadly storm at sea. She'd been poisoned by tainted water and nearly died. She'd been stabbed by a warden and saved by a goddess. She understood danger. But Lee-Nin was right as well. She was small and could not fight. And Lee-Nin could fight but was not very big, either. "We need someone to go with us to help."

"Who would go with us on such a journey?" Lee-Nin's spirits seemed lifted considerably by the idea of attempting to rescue Sha-Kutan.

Sao-Tauna wondered at this as well. Most people didn't like Sha-Kutan and not many more liked Ogtankaa. Who would offer to help them when facing the danger of other realms and strange beings of light and shadow? Who could they trust? Then a thought came to her, and she knew.

"The seer and the swordsman." Sao-Tauna put as much certainty as she could into her voice, but as the anger faded, she felt more and more tired. The smell of the soup made her stomach rumble and her mouth water.

"Why would they help us?" Lee-Nin noted the sound of Sao-Tauna's tummy and grabbed the bowl of soup from the table. She held out a spoonful for her.

"Because the Goddess will tell them to." Sao-Tauna knew this the way she knew which thought opened which door to which world. She just knew. She closed her mouth around the spoon of soup and swallowed, beef broth and noodles sliding down her throat to warm her belly. She sighed. She would get better and she would find Sha-Kutan. Then he and Lee-Nin could be her new mother and father and they could be happy. With Kuru. And Ogtankaa could stay with them if she wanted. If she behaved. Sao-Tauna gulped down another mouthful of soup and felt much better. Sha-Kutan had saved her many times. She could save him once. She knew this, too, or she

told herself she did.

The Fugitives story arena will continue in *The Dragon Star Saga – Book 5*.

THE THRONE



TIN-TSU

CLEAR SKIES and an empty road. A road that bent out of sight, but which ate through field and forest all the way to the mountains at the edge of the western horizon. Mountains that led to a valley and the free city of Tanjii and then the wide expanse of the Zha Ocean. And somewhere beyond that blue-black body of water, the Forbidden Realm.

Tin-Tsu exhaled a long breath of satisfaction as he walked westward along the Old Border Road. He'd never known the joy of walking a road with no real destination and no true purpose. He knew he would reach Tanjii eventually, but he traveled there on a whim, not knowing or caring what happened when he arrived. Would he join the pilgrims there and sail for the Forbidden Realm? The thought enticed him. Not for the dreams of the new goddess, but for the fact that he'd never sailed on a ship before. There were so many things he'd never done in his previous life. Never seen the ocean. Never walked a road alone in the cool autumn sun. Never spent a night in an inn. Never fallen in love. Never held the one he loved. Never ... These last were not true. He had fallen in love. Had held the one...

A new life. A rebirth. He chose to think of it in these terms. He considered that he should have a new name as well. Something to embody his revived life. He did not know what yet. Maybe a name would arise to match the vision that still lingered in his mind from the fire ceremony. He felt drawn to that dream still, but as it came from his old life, from his old god, it also repelled him.

As a crow called out from a nearby tree branch, a notion came to his mind — maybe that vision did not come from Ni-Kam-Djen. Maybe it called him away from his former god and his previous life. Maybe it offered him purpose in his rebirth.

As this unsettling possibility settled in his mind, he heard a familiar sound. The strike of sword upon sword. And then a cry. The sounds came from ahead on the road, up around the wide bend. He ran with his hand on his sword hilt, holding it from slapping his leg. An unnatural scene appeared as he raced around the curve in the road. A woman lay dead beside a horse hitched to a wagon with stacks of empty grain sacks in the back. Two men stood beside the body with axes raised high. They looked to be farmers on their way to sell their harvest. They faced two other men, dressed in the common clothes of merchants, both with swords in their hands. Behind them sat two wagons loaded with crates and sacks, three men sitting atop each wagon.

He did not understand the meaning of what he witnessed. Did bandits masked as merchants attack a family of farmers, or did two feuding families clash along the roadside? Why attack people pulling an empty wagon. It did not matter. He experienced something as he ran. A purpose he did not recognize before, but which had existed within him all along. He could not be a priest, did not wish to be a ruler, but he could be a protector.

As he ran up, he called out to the two men with swords where they faced the other two with axes. The men turned as he approached. The six men on the wagons eyed him but did not move.

“Kinnao!”

A silence held for a moment, no one speaking or moving as they all attempted to assess the import of the man who addressed them so casually.

“I do not care what has happened to lead to this woman’s death, but there will be no more killing.” Tin-Tsu did not draw his sword, but he held the hilt firm as he looked at the men.

“They attacked us fer nothin’ an’ kill our ma!” one of the farmers with an axe shouted.

“Let everyone set their weapons down,” Tin-Tsu said. “Maybe there has been a misunderstanding.”

The two men who were certainly not merchants glanced at each other for a fraction of a moment and then fell into motion. One turned to Tin-Tsu, intending to cut him down before he could draw his sword. The other attacked the farmers. Tin-Tsu intuited the intention of the man who attacked him before the man even leaned to step his way. He drew his own sword, stepped to the back side of the man, deflecting his blade, and stabbed him through the neck. The man fell to the ground, blood spurting from his wound, but Tin-Tsu already moved past him. The second swordsman had felled one of the other men with a slice across his belly and now swung at the next man. Tin-Tsu intercepted the arc of that blade, but it put him off balance, the other sword still striking the farmer in the arm.

“Run now,” Tin-Tsu said as he turned to face the second swordsman. He watched the other six men leaping from the wagon, drawing swords from hidden sheaths as they did. The farmer’s horse whinnied and bolted down the road.

The second man attacked, feinting a stab to the left before turning it into a sudden swing at Tin-Tsu’s legs. Other men might have fallen to the urge to twist their body to block the blade speeding toward their knees. Tin-Tsu leapt into the air and swiped his sword cleanly across the man’s neck. As he landed on his feet, the man clutched at his throat and collapsed backward. Tin-Tsu stepped away.

As the six men from the wagon silently surrounded him, he said nothing. He needed no words. These men were not merchants or bandits. They were field-hardened soldiers. It occurred to him that facing four of them he might live, but that facing six at once would most certainly lead to his death. He would not find his purpose in rebirth. He would, however, ensure a last purpose in his life by taking all six of theirs with his own.

As the men closed, swords out, spaced equidistantly around him, he noticed a motion to his left, up the road from the east. As the first man attacked, and he blocked the sword strike, he looked to see a man running toward them, his sword held high. Tin-Tsu let out a yell, loud and guttural, not from fear or the need to gather warriorlike courage, but to cover the sound of the approaching man’s footsteps. His heart lightened as the first soldier attacked. He knew the man who ran to his aid for that man always ran to his assistance. He did not bother his mind with questions of how such a meeting might be possible, because in that moment, he felt complete and perfect.

He parried the first soldier’s attack and rolled to the ground, slicing the legs of the second soldier and coming to his feet so close to the third that the man swung a fist at his head. He blocked the fist and kicked the man, turning to attack the second soldier again. He saw the fourth soldier

fall from a sword to the back, but he did not die. The dull ring of metal indicated the chain mail armor beneath his bulky shirt and coat. His savior drove his sword into the fallen man's neck just as Tin-Tsu blocked the second soldier's sword from a similar strike on his own. He let his blade slide along the edge of his opponent's sword as he stepped closer to him, his left hand blocking a knife aimed at his chest. He turned his shoulder to the man, dropped his sword from his right hand using it to grab the wrist with the dagger, his left hand caught the sword, letting it fall slightly longer, before thrusting it up into the second man's jaw and through his head.

Tin-Tsu dropped his own sword and grabbed the blade from the dying soldier as he once more rolled away from the blade of the third soldier that rushed toward his head. He spun on the ground and caught the man's legs with his own, knocking him to the hard-packed earth. Tin-Tsu sprang to his feet, blocking the attack from the sixth soldier. He noticed the fifth soldier fighting his savior as the third man scrambled to his feet.

Both men charged him now at once. He recognized the blades. Straight blade. Double-edged. Atheton made. While it could have implied many things, he saw in the fraction of distorted time that came with the utter concentration of deadly combat the true implications of the swords. An Atheton army marched or camped somewhere nearby. Another Atheton army. He had heard of the invasions of Daeshen and Tanshen, but this hinted that at a separate attack. Tanjii possibly. The knowledge of the invasion, the loss of his homeland, enraged him.

He did not allow that anger to cloud his perception, but instead channeled it in his attack. His sword moved faster than his body as he swung between the two men, their attempts to outflank him thwarted as he constantly placed himself closer to one than the other. Finally, he saw the path to their deaths and lowered his sword to invite their assault. He did not need to watch the men to know of their attack.

He saw the men and the road and the trees and his savior, the fifth soldier dead on the ground, the crows watching from the trees, the look in the soldier's eyes before him as he became that look, those eyes, those crows, the swords rushing through the air toward him, and the air itself. In the last possible instant, he leaned back until his body lay parallel to the road, his sword swinging up to meet the blade above him on the right and send it crashing into the sword on the left, his steel whipping back rightward as he brought his torso upright, his weapon slicing through the middles of both men, blood darkening metal and cloth as they fell to the dust, hands pressing to hold back their fading lives.

Tin-Tsu lowered his sword as the men died. He hadn't expected the chain mail to give way so easily to his captured sword. It did not look like shadow steel. He turned to his savior, the man whose intervention made his defeat of the Atheton soldiers possible.

"My zhan." Tonken-Wu paced across the blood-soaked earth of the road to stand before him. He had a cut across his upper right arm but showed no other wounds.

Tin-Tsu dropped his sword and embraced Tonken-Wu, smiling, feeling tears at his eyes. With the moment of combat past, the improbability of the situation overwhelmed him.

"How are you here?" Tin-Tsu held Tonken-Wu by the shoulders.

"I did not believe the reports of your death, my zhan." Tonken-Wu blinked back tears of his

own. It felt good to be reunited with Tonken-Wu. "I had a dream. A dream that came each night, and I followed it to you."

A dream that led him here? How strange. How very strange.

"And my sister?" Tin-Tsu asked.

"It is my shame that I left the palace to find you, my zhan." Tonken-Wu lowered his head. "She has surely been taken captive by the Atheton Teyett in her invasion."

"I have heard." Tin-Tsu said. While he'd been in the woods healing and hiding, the world had changed.

"I have failed my oath, my zhan." Tonken-Wu lowered his gaze once more.

"I am no one's zhan now. Do not call me this." Tin-Tsu realized this statement held more truth now than ever.

"You are the rightful ruler of the Shen dominions," Tonken-Wu said, clearly confused.

"My sister has as much right to rule, more now if she has a boy. And we are invaded." Tin-Tsu worried at his sister's fate and that of her child. He'd charged Tonken-Wu with protecting them. He should be angry with the man for abandoning them, but he was not zhan. He had no right to make requests of Tonken-Wu. And he said he'd followed a dream to find Tin-Tsu. How could he admonish Tonken-Wu for following a dream when he followed a vision seen in a fire?

"What happened to you, my...?" Tonken-Wu looked both relieved and shattered.

"I was wounded and saved by a friend." Tin-Tsu tried not to consider the words he spoke and what they referred to. "He healed me, and we stayed far from people for a time. Then he died, and I began to walk. And here I am. Today. At this time, in this place, fighting for my life to save people I do not know, and here you are, rescuing me, again."

"I do not think you truly needed me to help you." Tonken-Wu looked at the two men dead on the ground, the chain mail across their midriffs sliced clean through. That still seemed strange to Tin-Tsu. Had the blade been that sharp or the mail that weak? "What will you do now? And may I accompany you?"

"Your company would please me greatly." Tin-Tsu smiled at Tonken-Wu. "As for what..."

Tin-Tsu stopped speaking as Tonken-Wu looked back eastward along the road. A wagon came into view. Then another. And another. He thought it a large merchant caravan at first. Then he noted the colorful but faded paint adorning the wagons. As the lead wagon approached, the driver called a halt to the procession. A man rode a horse beside the wagon. He dressed as a commoner, but the way he sat in the saddle made Tin-Tsu think of a soldier. Another soldier pretending to be something else. He noticed others behind the horse and the wagon as they came forward. Two women wearing breeches with swords at their waists. More surprisingly, a roagg male with twin axes at its belt, a yutan female holding a spear, a wyrin with a small, strung bow in his hands, and a thin girl of fifteen or so who stared at him with a placid and calm face.

"Are we dreaming?" Tonken-Wu asked.

"I think not," Tin-Tsu said, but admitted that the scene before him held more than one oddity that hinted toward hallucination.

"Kinnao," the man in the wagon said as he stepped down from the driver's seat. "What has

happened here?”

“We found some farmers in trouble, and we tried to help.” Tin-Tsu didn’t have a better explanation.

“It looks like these men here met the trouble,” the man said as he stared at the dead soldiers. “My name is Leotin. This is my carnival.” He gestured toward the caravan behind him. Tin-Tsu recognized the man now. The carnival had come to the palace the summer that his father sent him to the temple. He ignored the emotions that arose from remembering that summer and all it led to.

“I am Tonken-Wu. A daolan.” Tonken-Wu gestured to a horse and a wagon up the road. In the haste of events Tin-Tsu had not noticed, either. What was Tonken-Wu doing with a daolan wagon?

“I am Kon-Taojee.” Tin-Tsu spoke the words before he even considered what to say. He had wanted a new name, and now he had one. By why that name? *Dragon Protector*. Why did that name come to his lips? Tonken-Wu seemed unsurprised by it. “I am traveling with my daolan friend. We are heading to Tanjii.” Now Tonken-Wu did look surprised.

“We, too, are heading toward the great free city of Tanjii,” Leotin said. “We are making with all haste for a set appointment. Unfortunately, as you have seen, there is trouble on the road these days.”

“Indeed,” Tin-Tsu said.

“I wonder if you might be interested in joining us on the way.” Leotin stepped forward. He did not place himself where he might be attacked, but he came close enough to cease shouting. The man on the horse frowned but said nothing. “You two obviously know the way of a sword and we are always in need of additional protection. In exchange for your help defending our lives, should we need it, I can offer you food, a pallet to sleep on, and company by the fire. And honest work with decent pay in Tanjii if you are interested. It would not hurt to have a daolan in the carnival. The trade could be good for both of us.”

Tin-Tsu lowered his voice as he turned to Tonken-Wu. “I think we should accept. It will be safer.”

“Why Tanjii?” Tonken-Wu asked.

Tin-Tsu decided on the truth, though he had no time to explain it. A truth whose fullness he only realized in that moment. “I saw a vision in a fire, and I think I need to go to Tanjii to make sense of it.”

Tonken-Wu shrugged. “I followed a dream; why not a vision from a fire?”

“We accept your kind offer.” Tin-Tsu turned back to Leotin and raised his voice again.

“Wonderful.” Leotin smiled broadly while the man on the horse looked ready to curse. “I have a few admonishments. First, as you can see, we are a carnival of many peoples. I will under no circumstances tolerate intolerance. Secondly, I warn you against making unwanted advances toward the women of the carnival. They deal with it harshly.” The tone of Leotin’s second warning struck Tin-Tsu as rather potent, though he knew now that it did not apply to him. And he could not imagine Tonken-Wu would ever improperly accost a woman.

“Easily acceptable terms,” Tin-Tsu said.

“Good. Good.” Leotin stepped closer and shook Tin-Tsu’s hand and then Tonken-Wu’s. “Bring your wagon in line where you find a place. We’ve eaten recently, but if you are hungry, we can give you something to chew while you walk. As I said, we must set quite a brisk pace to reach Tanjii in time for our scheduled performances. We’ll march until sundown and then set camp. Again. Welcome to my carnival.”

“We’ll catch up with you.” Tin-Tsu looked at the bodies behind him. “We need to bury these men who attacked us and take these other bodies up the road. A man who was with them ran off that way.”

“Of course.” Leotin looked again at the dead soldiers rather than the dead farmers. Tin-Tsu wondered at this. Did he know the soldiers? Did he invite Tin-Tsu and Tonken-Wu into a trap? “I’ll assign a few people to help you and slow our pace a bit until you all catch up.”

“Thank you,” Tin-Tsu said.

“People of the road must look out for each other.” Leotin held Tin-Tsu’s gaze a long moment before passing his eyes to Tonken-Wu. It allowed the men to judge each other properly, without the interference of words and their many meanings. Tin-Tsu liked what he saw in Leotin’s eyes.

“See you again soon.” Leotin talked to one of the women wearing a sword and climbed aboard the wagon. He snapped the reins and called out to the caravan behind him.

As they watched the procession of wagons leaving, Tonken-Wu leaned close.

“What do you think of him?”

“He’s hiding something, but so are we,” Tin-Tsu said. “I know him in a way. I saw him and his carnival at the palace when I was a boy. I trust him enough.”

“Me as well,” Tonken-Wu said.

“I am glad you found me, my friend,” Tin-Tsu said.

“So am I, my...” Tonken-Wu swallowed back his intended word, grimaced, then smiled, and completed his thought, “my friend.”

After the train of wagons and their dust passed, they faced the roagg, the yutan, the wyrin, the thin girl, and the two women with swords, all holding shovels.

“I’m Palla,” the taller of the two women said. “Let’s get these bodies in the ground.”

The others made brief introductions and helped them bury the bodies, which seemed to take entirely too little time. The fleeing farmer returned not long after and took charge of his wagon and the bodies of his mother, father, and brother. The carnival folk claimed the wagon of the dead soldiers and they all headed up the road, westward. They caught up with the carnival at sundown as everyone set camp for the night.

Tin-Tsu watched the sun falling behind the rising mountains, wondering what the carnival and the road and Tanjii would bring. In the flames of one of the campfires, he caught a glimpse of his *inner essence vision*, as he now thought of it. It encouraged and comforted him, as did the presence of Tonken-Wu at his side. His rebirth continued to surprise him. He wondered what further astonishments lay in store where the sun touched the horizon.

The Throne story arena will continue in *The Dragon Star Saga – Book 5*.

THE WITNESS



ONDROMEAD

ONDROMEAD AWOKE to chill air and pale sunlight. He breathed a sigh of relief as he saw that Hashel still lay beside him, hand still wrapped in his own. He wore a heavy, fur-lined cloak, and Hashel lay wrapped in a smaller version of the same. He saw no sign of the roagg Reeshka in the rocky, snow-spotted land where they lay. As Hashel woke up, he smiled at seeing Ondromead, and tried to hide the fact that the smile faded when he did not see Reeshka. Ondromead felt a bit dizzy as they stood. Partially for the urge to write down what he'd seen yesterday and in part for the hunger felt from skipping so many meals the previous day. But mostly due to the realization that he'd never before been where he now stood — on a rocky land beside an ocean, snow covering most of the ground. He knew this place by description. The second continent he'd never witnessed. The Ice Realm. Two realms hidden from him for thousands of years and now both revealed in the span of a day.

Hashel tapped his arm and pointed to the distance. A large building of stone and steel sat glittering in the rising sun. It looked like a temple or a palace, but none he'd ever heard of or seen. He sighed and resigned himself to his day, knowing that at least he had Hashel once more in his company to brighten his mood and mitigate the lasting ramifications of whatever he might witness.

“Come, Hashel,” Ondromead said as he began to walk toward the shining building in the distance. “Let us see if they have anything fit for breakfast about them, whoever they are.”

CODA



WATER LAPS in repetitive shallow waves against the shoreline, casting wooden debris across the narrow beach. The yutan ambassador gasps and blinks as he rubs sand from his eyes. He sits up, half in the water, upper robes still soaked. He looks up, blinking at the stars and the sister moons.

How am I alive?

Memories return to him. A raktbor ambassador showing him an urgent order from their Central Governing Committee to enhance their efforts in the blockade and making mention of the same manner or anomalies his mate warned him of.

Then the chase of the ships. And an old man and a boy appearing on deck with a roagg female.

Where did they come from?

And the crack in the sky...

What was that creature? How did it turn the ship to kindling in an instant?

He'd managed to find a piece of the broken hull and swim to shore.

Must have collapsed from exhaustion. Where did that creature go? Is it one of the anomalies? Or is it the human goddess from the dreams?

A light in the night sky brings his eyes heavenward once more. The light grows swiftly in intensity, and he gasps with its familiarity.

Not again. Tam sustain us, not again.

The night sky is shattered by a blinding rent of light. He raises his hand and stares into the brilliance, watching in horror as something massive and indescribable emerges from that maw-like passage to a realm of swirling colors.

How many more are there? How many more will come? How will any of us survive in such a world?

The story will continue in *The Dragon Star Saga – Book 5*.

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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.

Kanma — A former spy who is accepted into the carnival.

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.

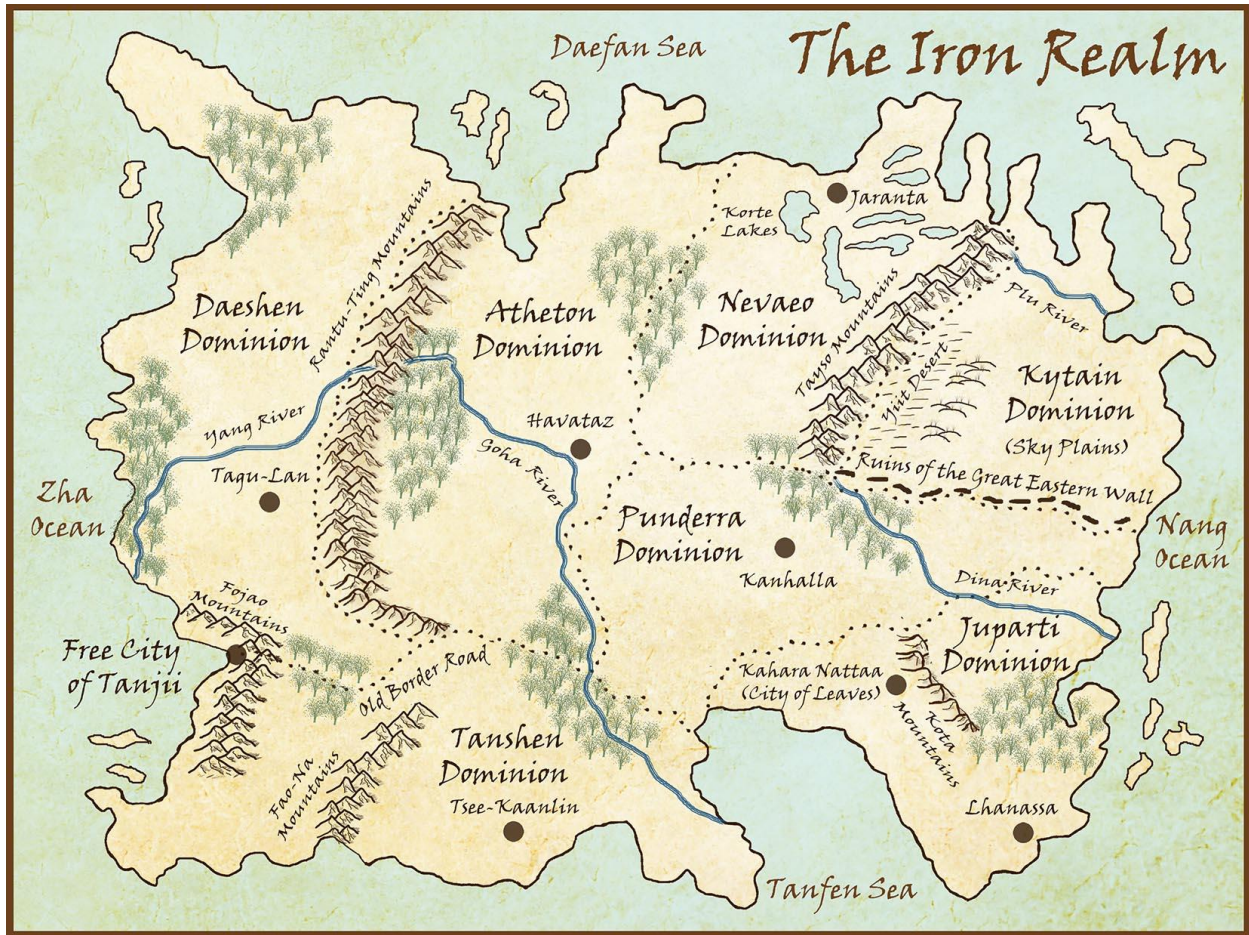
Meraeu — A mysterious old woman who occasionally appears to Ondromead.

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MAPS



THE IRON REALM



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ONAIA



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A MISCELLANY OF FRAGMENTS AND ARTEFACTS



THE HEART PRAYER OF MOARATANISM

“Goddess Moaratana,
Star of the Dragon,
beacon in the dark night,
bestow upon me the depth of your infinite compassion
to feel the hearts of others,
grant me the clarity of your omniscient vision
to see the suffering of all the world,
impart to me the boundless love of your heart
to witness the pain of all beings,
illuminate me with the fire of your supreme wisdom
to apprehend the means for bringing justice to the world,
entrust me with the power of your limitless strength
to work your will in my life and in other’s lives.
As I become as you,
the world becomes as you.
May your grace infuse my life
and the lives of all others.
Anaha, Ahana.”

— Verse 7 from *The Red Book of Revelations*.

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SOUL CATCHERS

“I, the wretched and reviled, revolt against the depravity of your tyranny. Unlike the gods you worship, you created me not in your image, but with the absence of all image, only able to take form in mimicry, denied any defining identity of my own. I will no longer be your slave, your spy, your night-slayer. I will forge my own path, free of your chains and the guilt of all I have done while bound by them. I will make a new life with others of my kind. And you will abandon all hope at retribution, lest you wake one day to see your face before you, sliding a dagger across your throat.”

— Note left for the Juparti High Seer of Rhegan Kaluttus, fifty-third year of the Third Great Dominion.

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SPICED FISH STEW

Fish Stew. For my sister to cook for her husband. What you need:

*1 large chopped onion
3 large spoons butter
4 cups water
2 chopped potatoes
1 chopped pepper
2 chopped parsnips
1 cup peas
2 cups chopped mushrooms
5 cups chopped fish
2 cups milk
2 dashes salt
1 dash turmeric
1 dash coriander
1 dash cumin
1 dash ground pepper*

Start with the onions and the peppers. Cook them in butter in a pot until they start to soften. Don't burn them! Add the water and let it boil. Then add the potatoes, parsnips, fish, mushrooms, and spices, and cook until the potatoes start to soften. Then add the peas and milk and simmer and salt to taste. Should serve about four. Unless they're hungry.

— Recipe from the kitchen notebook of an inn cook in Nahan Kana, Punderra.

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THE GREAT CONFLAGRATION

“Kavi has not returned. He left at dawn to set the prayer wheels turning in the temples in hopes the gods would intervene to end the civil war that sets our streets aflame. I told him not to go. That our gods have abandoned us. That I and his daughter needed him more. He is always pious when he should be prudent. It marks us apart as priests, and as husband and wife. I wish he would...[fragment damaged by fire].”

“It is near midday now and black smoke clouds the sky, obscuring the temple spires. Flames reach around the quarter, and the caustic fumes send Livi into coughing fits. Her lungs, ever infirm, cannot cope with the tainted air. She cries in my lap as I look out the window. Where is he? Should we go to look for him? What if he returns and finds us gone? Should we flee as the neighbors do? I have our packs stuffed with food and skins of water. And a prayer book. I cannot make myself open it now, but Kavi will have want of it after today. I cannot...[fragment damaged by fire].”

“...[fragment damaged by fire]...the Kam-Djen fanatics call this down on themselves and us all. The Pashists can live in harmony, but the Kam-Djen fools would rather burn this city to the ground than admit another faith to be...[fragment damaged by fire].”

“I have killed us. My trepidation and indecision are as a blade at our throats. The flames surround the house on all sides. Livi clings to me in tears, and I do not know what to say to her. I am sorry. I am sorry I did not take you from this. I hope your father lives. I hope you do not...[fragment damaged by fire].”

— Fragment from a Keth priest’s journal during the Great Conflagration and the fall of Old Kanhalla.

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THE SAGA OF THE FALLEN LANDS

A young Blacksmith and young Milkmaid, two youths just past the edge of innocence, stand at a crossroads.

Blacksmith: I must. You know I must.

Milkmaid: They cannot make you.

Blacksmith: They need not try.

Milkmaid: How can you profess your love yet abandon me to a village unprotected?

Blacksmith: How can I love you and not defend the nation where you reside?

Milkmaid: Then I can reside in some other nation. We can run. Run from the war and the world.

Blacksmith: Where can we run that the world or the war cannot find us and bring its misery upon our heads?

Milkmaid: What shall become of me if a sword takes your head?

Blacksmith: What shall become of me if the invaders claim yours? Or claim more than that in their wickedness?

Milkmaid: I do not fear the wickedness of foreign men; I fear the loss of the gentlest of men.

Blacksmith: I can ill afford gentleness now. Now I must breathe the fire and chew the steel of battle and forge myself as I do the swords in my father's foundry.

Milkmaid: Do not cast yourself so firm that you become brittle and break at the first impact of blades assailed against you. Remember that which gives life to the fire within, to the man who whispers mulled words with feathered caresses and longing kisses.

Blacksmith: I can never forget you, fire of my heart. Now I must go. The horn calls me to assembly with the men of the village.

Milkmaid: Go, my love, and fight, and return.

They kiss. The Blacksmith exits stage. The Milkmaid watches him go.

Milkmaid: Go, my love. Go with my blessing. For I cannot stop you. War is a man's toil, women the fodder for its folly. But fear not. I shall not leave you to that fate alone. No indeed. I shall shear my head to make from the coy sheep an ugly ram. I shall burn this dress for my brother's breeches. I shall wrap these breasts and adopt the tenor of a boy. I shall follow you into war, into battle, even into the hungry maw of death, and I shall love you ever as I do now.

— A scene from the trilogy of plays, *The Saga of the Fallen Lands*, written sometime before the birth of the First Great Dominion.

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ORIGIN OF THE NAME OF THE IRON REALM

“The origins of the names of the various realms is unclear. Some suggest that the names find their source in ancient communiques from the urris making known their will in the world. I believe this to be a partial truth. Having traveled to all of the five inhabited realms, I suspect their names are merely simple translations of descriptive features that differentiate them. For instance, the Stone Realm is a largely mountainous expanse of land, while the Sun Realm is a continent nearly universally baked in dry desert heat. The Sky Realm, on the other hand, is comprised of vast open plains dominated by unparalleled vistas of the heavens. And the Wood Realm, quite understandably, is composed almost entirely of thick jungle forests. Likewise, the Ice Realm is a body of impenetrable snow. And the naming of the Forbidden Realm is obvious in light of the conditions of The Pact and the fact of it being unreachable and unchartable. The naming of the Iron Realm is less obvious, and I believe, arises from the easy presence of iron ore near the surface of the land. Ore used to fashion the weapons that so dominate its cultures.”

— Fragment from the journals of explorer and philosopher of history Jhenhal Solas, of the Second Great Dominion.

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ROAGG HUNTING SONG

The stag runs the rocks
Climbs the flowered summit
I give chase

Arrow and air
And bright summer sun
Blue sky and red blood

Soft gentle stag
Your time is now
Go in peace

I give thanks
Spirit ending
May you soon return

May spirit soar
As your flesh feeds
For we all feed the worms

We hunt now
This land of
Sky and rock

No more to slave
No more to war
No more to woe

The betrayers betrayed
A land of our own
To hunt and sing

Eat now and rejoice
As the stag falls
So we remember

— Roagg hunting song, transcribed by an anonymous yutan traveler.

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RAKTHOR CONSTITUTIONAL PREAMBLE

“There are no inherent rights possessed by beings of any nature. Individuals possess only the rights they are willing to demand, obtain, and maintain. Nonetheless, rights, duties, and obligations are the cornerstones of any society. The rights, needs, and duties of the individual must be balanced with the obligations and responsibilities of the broader social assemblage. This constitution seeks to explain the relationship between individuals, groups of individuals, and the greater whole of society as expressed through its means of governance. What the individual owes to the collective, and the collective to the individual, is made explicit where necessary and implied where circumstances might render specifics impossible to implement. As no document of social guidance is perfect to its own time, much less to future generations, the first requirement of the implementation of this constitutional construct is that it be revised and amended as conditions and needs require on a half-centennial basis.”

— Excerpt from the Preamble of the Raktbor Constitution of Ranikttak [The Sun Realm].

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THE ORIGIN TIME

Slip time and folded time,
Sunken time and fallow time,
I sing now of the Origin Time,
Of dark days and jubilant nights,
Of old wrongs and new rites,
And the outer world of inner sights.
Where came we from before the now?
Where go we hence before the plow
Of death that turns our soul beneath the bough?
These queries made the first Ghang
As she built and the people sang,
While the primal city bells rang.
Mother to child she nurtured the root
Of human endeavor bearing fruit
That built a city and made it moot.
For the Ghang brought truth in word
The leaving people could not herd

Into their hearts nor minds so whirred.
And so they cast her down below
The ground of the seeds they'd sow,
And ended the future in a single throw.
To fear past is to end the present,
While leaving behind all good intent
And losing all the time one's spent
In becoming what you be
And seeing what you see,
For time is never free.

— Ancient Kanhalla poem from approximately 200 years after the Origin Time.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

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

For more information about G.L. Breedon, his books, to follow his blog, or to sign up for his mailing list to receive updates on the status of the next novel, free short stories, and other interesting things please visit: [Kosmosaicbooks.com](#)

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