

Tad Williams

Shadowheart

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## PRELUDE

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He was named after the tualum, small antelope that ran in the dry desert hills. As a girl his mother had often watched the herd come down to the river to drink, so lean, so bright of eye, so brave; when she first saw her son, she saw all those things in him. “Tulim,” she gasped. “Call him Tulim.” It was duly noted down as he was taken away from her and given to a royal wet nurse.

The first things the boy remembered were the sunset-colored hangings of the Seclusion where he lived among the women for the earliest years of his life, where kind, sweet-smelling nurses held him, sang to him, and rubbed his tiny brown limbs with expensive unguents. The child’s only moments of sadness came when he was placed back in his cot and another of the monarch’s youngest children was lifted out to be cosseted and caressed in turn. The unfairness of it, that the attention which should have been for him alone was also given to others, burned inside little Tulim like the flame of the lamp he stared at each night before he fell asleep -- a flame that he watched so carefully he could sometimes see it in his mind’s eye at midday, so bright that it pushed everything real into shadow.

When he was scarcely three years old, as a sort of experiment, Tulim drowned one of the other young princes in the bath they shared. He waited until the nurses were turned away to comfort another child who had been splashed and was crying, then he reached for his brother Kirgaz's head, shoved it under the blossom-strewn water and held it down. The three or four other children in the bath were so busy splashing and playing that they didn't notice.

It was strange to feel his brother's desperate struggles and to know that only inches away ordinary things went on without him. People made so much of life, Tulim realized, but he could take it away whenever he chose. He saw the lamp's flame again in his mind's eye, but this time it was as though he himself had become the fire, burning so brightly that the rest of creation fell into darkness. It was ecstasy.

By the time the nurses turned around Kirgaz was floating lazily, his hair swirling on the surface like seaweed, pale flower petals tangled in it. They screamed and dragged him out but it was too late to save him. Many princes lived in the Orchard Palace – the Autarch had many wives and was a prolific father-- so the loss of one was no great tragedy, but both nurses were of course immediately executed. Tulim was sad about that. One of them had been in the habit of smuggling him a honey-milk sweet out of the Seclusion's kitchen each night. Now he would have to go to bed without it.

Tulim soon grew too old to live in the Seclusion so he was moved to the Cedar Court, the part of the mighty, sprawling Orchard Palace where the young sons of nobles were raised until manhood in fortunate proximity to the royal sons of Tulim's father, the glorious god-king Parnad. There for the first time Tulim lived with true men – only the Favored were allowed in the Seclusion – and learned manly things, how to hunt and fight

and sing a war-song. With his long-legged good looks and his sharp wits, he also for the first time came to the attention of the men of the Orchard Palace, including, most surprisingly, his own father.

Most of Parnad's sons hoped to remain unnoticed by their father. True, one of them would one day become his heir, but the Autarch was a vigorous, powerful man in his fifties so that day was far away, and Xixian heirs had a way of suffering accidents. Parnad himself had found a few of his sons too popular with the soldiers or the common people. One such young man had been the sole casualty of a battle with pirates in the western islands. Another had died, purple and choking, after apparently being bitten by a snake in the Yenidos Mountains in midwinter -- a most unusual season for snakebites. Thus, none of the other princes felt too jealous when their father noticed Tulim and began to speak to him occasionally.

"Who was your mother?" Parnad asked him the first time. The Autarch was a big man, tall but also broad as an old crocodile. It was strange for Tulim to think that this heavysset man with his thick beard was the source of his own slender limbs. "Ah, yes, I remember her. Like a cat, she was. You have her eyes."

Tulim wasn't sure whether this way of talking meant his mother was no longer alive but he did not want to ask, which might seem sentimental and womanish. If he had inherited her eyes, though, she must have been exceptional indeed, for that was the thing that people noticed first about Tulim, the strange, golden eyes like holes filled with molten metal. It was one of the reasons he had long known he was not like any of the others -- that same bright, all-devouring flame did not burn within his brothers or the other children as it did in him.

He and his father the Autarch had other conversations, although Tulim never said much, and after a while Tulim was taken from the sleeping room he shared several of the other young princes and given his own room where the Autarch could visit him at whatever time of the day or night he thought best without disturbing Tulim's brothers. Parnad also began to perform various odd cruelties and unwholesome practices on him, all the while explaining to him about the terrifying responsibility of being the Bishakh -- the chief of the falcon line that had come out of the desert to trample down the thrones of the world's cities.

"The gods hold us dear," Parnad would explain as he held Tulim's mouth closed, silencing his cries of pain. "It is given by them that the falcon soars higher than any other -- that he can look down on all creation. The very sun itself is only the great falcon's eye."

Tulim could not always make sense of what his father said, but as a whole the lessons, coupled with the pain and other strange feelings, made it clear that the way of the flame and the way of the falcon were more or less the same: Everything belongs to the man who can reach and grasp without fear. That man the gods love.

Still, although the visits went on for years, Prince Tulim made a vow the first night that he would kill his father one day. It was not so much the pain that had to be revenged as the helplessness -- the flame should never be smothered by the shadow of another, not even the Autarch himself.

As he approached the age at which boyhood would be set aside and manhood put on like a new garment, Tulim began to spend time with another grown man, this one much more deferential toward his feelings. It was the man he called Uncle Gorhan, one

of the Autarch's older half-brothers. Gorhan had been sired by Parnad's father on a woman of extremely common blood, and so was no threat to take the throne. He had used this sullied nobility to his advantage, becoming one of the Autarch's most trusted councilors, a man of storied wisdom and ingenuity. His attraction to Tulim was both less physical and less metaphysical than that of the boy's father: he saw in the youth a mind like his own, one that could, with proper training, roam not just beyond the walls of the Orchard Palace or the boundaries of Xis but through all the endless corridors of the gods' creation. Gorhan it was who taught Tulim to read properly. Not simply to recognize characters printed on vellum or reed paper and glean their sense – all princes learned that – but to read as a way of harnessing new wisdom to one's own like draft oxen, or adding new ideas to one's own like soldiers, so that the reader's power grew ever greater.

Gorhan introduced Tulim to the works of famous tacticians like Kersus and Hereddin, and historians like the great Pirilab. Tulim learned that the thoughts of men could be saved in books for a thousand years – that the great and learned men of other ages could speak as if to his own ear. Even more important, he learned that the gods and their closest followers could also speak across the great abyss of time and the greater abyss that gaped between earth and Heaven, sharing the secrets of creation itself. In the words of the warrior-poet Hereddin, which Gorhan quoted to him, “He who reaches only for a throne will never grasp the stars.” Tulim understood that and felt that his uncle also must have a wisdom beyond other men, a wisdom only a little less than the gods: Gorhan had clearly sensed that Tulim was like no other, that he was greater even than the blood of his father that rushed through his veins. Gorhan understood that Tulim was a child, not of a man, but of Heaven itself.

Over the years, as Tulim grew older and his boyish limbs gained the supple sinews of young manhood, his father the Autarch lost interest in him, which only confirmed him in his hatred. The Autarch had only wished to use him, and not even for that which made him unique, but for those qualities he shared with any other handsome boy. If Tulim could have killed Parnad he would have, but the Autarch was not only constantly attended by his fierce Leopard guards but was himself a man of astounding strength and practiced, unflagging attention, even while engaged in activities which would leave a lesser man distracted or drowsy. In any case, generations of Xixian Autarchs had been protected by the existence of the Scotarchs, the special, temporary heirs who were not of the Autarch's direct line, men who would take the throne in the event of any Autarch's suspicious death and mete out justice before handing the throne over to the true heir – providing that heir had not been the former Autarch's murderer. It was a strange old custom, one with many twists and turns, but it had kept centuries of Autarchs safer from intrigue than almost any other nation's monarchs.

So Tulim could do nothing except wait, and study, and plan...and dream.

At last came the day when the rectangular gongs in the Sycamore Tower and the Temple of Nushash sounded the royal death-knell. Parnad, only a little more than three-score years old, had died in the Seclusion, in the bed of one of his wives. Although there was no sign of foul play his Scotarch promptly had the wife and her maids tortured to make sure they had no guilty knowledge, then executed them, which served as a reminder to other palace dwellers of how unsafe it was to be involved, even innocently, in the death of an Autarch. The period of mourning began, after which Dordom, the oldest son,

already a general in the army and a warrior of renowned skill and cruelty, would ascend to the throne.

But Dordom died choking the night of Parnad's death and it was whispered throughout the Orchard Palace that he had been poisoned. That began to seem even more likely when three more of Parnad's brothers (and a few of their friends, servants, and mistresses who happened to share the wrong plate or goblet) also died from some strange poison that could not be tasted or smelled, did not act at once, but then ate the victim away from inside like spirit of vitriol.

One by one the other heirs fell, poisoned like Dordom, stabbed in their sleep by servants thought incorruptible, strangled by assassins while in the throes of love, with guards waiting outside who, apparently, heard nothing. Several of Parnad's less ambitious sons and daughters, seeing which way the winds of change were blowing, took their families and left Xis altogether to avoid their own deaths (which, nevertheless, eventually found them.) Others fell into the spirit of the game and for a year ancient Xis was like a single huge shanat board, with every move by a surviving member of the royal family considered and countered. Tulim, who was twenty-third in the line of succession, was not even considered as a possible culprit in the early deaths – many people believed that Parnad's death had set off a long-prepared, murderous rivalry between many of the aspirants to the throne. In fact, during the Scotarch's Year (as it was afterward called) most inhabitants of Xis, and certainly the wisest minds in the Orchard Palace, believed that the struggle for supremacy was between Dordom's younger brothers, the princes Ultin and Mehnad, who survived as other heirs fell or fled until only they, Tulim, and a demi-handful of others remained alive in Xis.

Most of the wisest courtiers felt certain that Tulum's survival was a mark of how little a threat he was to anyone. The few who knew him better, who might have had suspicions that things were not as they seemed, also knew him well enough not to gossip about him. Many of these truly wise ones survived to serve him.

Wisest of all, of course, was Uncle Gorhan, who had recognized a certain implacability in young Tulum – perhaps the reflection of his inner flame – and cast his own fate with the obscure princeling, so far from the throne. This was a genuine gamble on Gorhan's part because he was the sort of wise, unthreatening elder most likely to survive the accession of a new monarch, most likely to carry his service through another reign or even two, to die at last peacefully and in dignity and then be interred along with as many as a thousand living slaves, a mark of the royal family's great favor. Instead he was risking everything on one unlikely throw of the dice...or so it would have seemed to anyone who had not looked deeply into Tulum's disquieting golden eyes.

“I could do nothing else, Blessed Highness,” Gorhan told him. “Because I knew what you would be when I first saw you and nothing could make me betray you. You and I, we are like this.” The older man lifted his hand, index and middle fingers raised and pressed tight together to show the completeness of his connection to Tulum. “Like this.”

“Like this, Uncle,” echoed the prince, raising his own hand, fingers twinned. “I hear you.”

As it happened, it was not long until their partnership bore its final fruits. One of the lesser princes was having an uncomfortable dinner with Mehnad, one of the two main rivals for the throne. In the midst of the meal the lesser princeling began to breathe like a

man who had an entire duck egg stuck in his throat. He turned black, lurched to his feet and walked through the sumptuous meal set on the floor without seeing it, and fell into a crowd of servants bearing finger bowls and wine jugs, making such a clatter that for long moments it obscured the fact that his young wife had also died of a similar, although quieter, apoplexy.

Prince Mehnad, furious, shouted that this was nothing to do with him, that it was a plot to make him look petty (because what else was one to think of someone who poisons guests in his own house, and not only men but a woman as well?) Certain that his brother Ultin was behind it, Mehnad took a squadron of guards and went to Ultin's apartments in the city's Blue Lamp Quarter, but news of the murder had gone before them and Ultin was waiting with a squadron of his own guards. Both brothers were so tired of the months of plot and counterplot, of murder and mistrust, that they needed no excuse to settle their differences now once and for all. As the guards brawled among themselves Ultin and Mehnad singled each other out and, like the fierce soldiers they were, fought each other without mercy.

It was only when Ultin had finally cut down his brother and stood over his body in triumph, bloodied by a few wounds but largely unhurt, that the nature of Tulin's plan became obvious. Even as he crowed in victory, Ultin suddenly began to choke as the unfortunate princeling had choked -- as if a duck egg were lodged in his throat. Blood passed from his nose and mouth, then Ultin fell down on top of his dead brother. Both men's swords, it was later discovered, had been poisoned by some third party, but Mehnad had not lived long enough to suffer the effects.

And as the two princes' household guards stood around the bodies in a cloud of confusion and rage, Tulim and Gorhan stepped out from the place they had been watching. They had only a few of Gorhan's own guards with them, a much smaller number than either Ultin's or Mehnad's forces, but those who had so recently fought for the two older brothers recognized quickly that if they fought Tulim the best they could hope for was to be in search of new employment afterward -- for what is a prince's guard with no prince? After all, Tulim was one of Parnad's heirs, and although he had begun as a very unimportant one he had managed to outlast nearly two dozen others -- that in itself was enough to convince them his candidacy was worth considering; Gorhan's small but firmly committed bodyguard and their sharp spears were enough to make the argument convincing.

So it was that Prince Tulim, whom few had even noticed and none had particularly feared, walked across the bodies of dozens to achieve the Falcon Throne of Xis, taking for himself the Autarchical name Sulepis am Bishakh. In days to come Sulepis would reassert the historical right of Xis to rule over all the continent of Xand, walking across the bodies of hundreds of thousands more to do so, covering most of the land south of the Osteian Sea with his bloody footprints. And if he then set his sights on conquering the northern continent of Eion, who could blame him? He clearly had destiny on his side: his flame had indeed proved to burn brighter than all others.

And, like a god, Tulim-who-became-Sulepis didn't only mete out justice at the scale of continents: he could be personal as well. Within a few days of taking the throne he found himself in disagreement with his uncle Gorhan over some minor matter of

statecraft, at which point Gorhan gave the new Autarch a look calculated to make him feel, if not shame, at least discomfort at his own ingratitude.

“I am disappointed, my lord,” Gorhan told his nephew. “I thought we were to be like this,” he held up his fingers, index and middle pressed together. “I thought you cared enough to heed my advice. You are like a son to me, Tulim. I had hoped to be like a father to you.”

“Like a father?” Sulepis raised one eyebrow, fixing Gorhan with a stare as remorseless and golden as that of a hunting hawk. “So be it.” He turned to the captain of his Leopard guard. “Take the old man away,” he said. “Flay the skin from his body – but slowly, so that he may feel it. Not all at once, either, but in a single strip winding the length of his body, starting at his feet and continuing to the top of his head. I would like him to live until then, this new ‘father’ of mine.”

Even the hardened captain hesitated as old Gorhan fell to his knees, weeping and begging for mercy. “A single strip, Golden One?” the soldier asked. “How wide?”

Sulepis smiled and lifted two fingers. “Like this.”

## Chapter One

### A Cold Fever

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"THIS Book is for all children of gentle birth, to give them instruction of the good example of the Orphan, holiest of mortals, beloved of the gods..."  
- from "A Child's Book of the Orphan, and His Life and Death and Reward in Heaven"

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The distant mountains were black, as were the rocky beach and the pounding sea, and the sky was like wet gray stone; the only bright things he could see were the crests of the waves that ran ahead of the stiff breeze and the gleaming white foam that leaped toward the sky each time a wave died against the rocks.

Barrick could scarcely take it all in. Overwhelmed with the clamor of the Fireflower voices, the inside of his head felt louder and more dangerous than the crashing surf, as though at any moment this storm of foreign thoughts, ideas, and memories might sweep him away, batter him and push him under, drown him utterly...

...Not since Mawra the Breathless walked the world...

...But they came not by sea as Khors had expected, but from the air...

...She was never after seen, although her lover and his pack searched the hills until the winter snows...

It was all he could do not to scream at the unending storm of thoughts. He clenched his teeth and curled his hands into fists as he struggled to hold onto the Barrick Eddon at the center of it all. He had hoped the confusion in his thoughts would ease when the king's funeral ended, but instead the silence that followed had seemed to make it worse.

The queen of the fairies was walking with him -- or rather Saqri walked a little ahead, dressed all in billowing white so that she seemed hardly more substantial than sea foam herself. Ynnir's widow had not spoken a word to him since she had summoned him with a single imperious gesture to follow her, then led him out of the halls of Qul-na-Qar and down a winding path to the restless, dark ocean.

They were alone, Barrick and Saqri, or as alone as they could be: three armored, manlike figures stood at the foot of the path watching every step their queen took. These were Ice Ettins, Barrick could not help knowing, part of a clan called The Whitewound, from Bluedeeps in the north. He knew their names, too, or at least the gestures they made for their names – despite all their potential for violence, the Ice Ettins were a quiet and secretive race. He knew that their dully shining armor was nothing a smith had forged, but a part of their skins as nerveless as nails or hair; he also knew that though none stood much taller than a mortal man, each Ice Ettin with his heavy bones and horny plates would weigh at least as much as three large men. These creatures were bound to the Fireflower by their clan oath, and each had earned a place in the queen's guard through victory in one of the murderous ceremonial games that The Whitewound always conducted in icy darkness.

Barrick knew all this as well as he knew his own name and the names of those who had raised him through childhood -- but in a completely different way: all this new knowledge, countless histories and namings and connections and even more subtle things that could not be

named but simply were, all these delicate understandings shouted and muttered in his head – shouted, but without noise. Barrick could not look at anything, even his own hand, without a thousand intricately foreign Qar ideas battering his thoughts like a sudden hailstorm -- bits of poetry, scholarly associations, and countless far more meaningless and mundane memories. But these storms of knowledge were as the balmiest spring weather compared to the swelling of imagination and memory that crashed over him when he looked at anything significant – the towers of Qul-na-Qar or the distant peak of Ma’arenol, or, worst of all, at Queen Saqri herself.

...When she first as a child stood in snow, laughing...

...The night her mother died and she took the Fireflower, and her sense of what should be would not let her weep...

...Her eye, knowing...

...Her lips, warm and forgiving after that terrible fight...

The associations went on and on, unstoppable, and Barrick Eddon was terrified by how little he could do beyond holding onto those parts of himself he could still recognize.

I was a fool to agree to this, he thought. It is like the story of the greedy merchant – I will get everything I wanted, but it will fill me until I swell like a toad and then burst like a bubble.

Saqri suddenly stopped and turned toward him -- a graceful transition from motion to absolute stillness. She used words to speak out loud but he heard them in his thoughts as well, where the meanings were subtly different. “I have thought all the day and I still do not know whether to embrace you or destroy you, manchild,” Saqri told him. “I cannot understand what my beloved great-aunt thought she was doing.” A tiny shift of the mouth betokened a scowl. “I stopped wondering at my late husband’s actions long ago.”

Her thoughts came with a sting even sharper than the wind off the booming black sea. “It isn’t...” He fought to keep his concentration through the flurry of foreign recollections and impulses. “It doesn’t matter anyway. What she wanted. She sent me and...and then your husband gave me the Fireflower.”

She looked at him with an expression that did not quite reach compassion. “Is it painful, then, child?”

“Yes.” It was hard to think. “No, not painful. But it...I think it is too much for me. That soon it will...drown me...”

She took a few steps toward him, her head tilted a little to one side as if she listened. “I cannot feel you the way I could always feel him – but nevertheless, you are there. How strange! You are truly shih-shen’aq.” It was a thought that did not become a word in his language, but still blew toward him with its meaning trailing – flowered, enbloomed, blossom-hearted: it meant to blaze with the inner complexity and responsibility of the Fireflower.

“But what does that mean?” he begged her. “Is there no way my thoughts can be quieted? I’ll go mad. The noise, it’s getting...stronger!” And had been since Ynnir had passed it to him, a fever in his blood just as terrible and mortal as the illness that had nearly killed him back in Southmarch, but a fever without heat, something altogether different than any earthly malady. “Please...Saqri...help me.”

Something moved in her face. “But there is nothing I can do, manchild. It is like asking me to save you from your blood or your own bones. It is in you now – the Fireflower is you.” She turned away to look toward the ocean. “And it is more than that. It is all of my family – all we have learned and all that we are. One half of it is in you. It may kill you.” She lifted her hands in a deceptively small gesture, whose meanings rippled out in every direction –

Defeat is Ours was one meaning, a strange mixture of resignation, terror, and pride. “And the other half is in me and will certainly die with me.” She looked up, and for the first time he thought he saw something like pity in her hard, perfect face. “Take courage, mortal. The ocean has beat at this black shore since the gods lived and fought here, but it has not devoured the land yet. Someday it will, but that day has not come yet.”

Everything she said set off ripples in Barrick’s head like stones cast into a pond, each ripple intersecting with a dozen more and filling him with half-glimpsed memories and ideas for which the language of his thoughts had no proper words.

Black shore...

The first ships foundered here, but the second fleet survived.

The ones who sing beneath the waves...Listen!

It was like standing in a temple bell tower while the great bronze bells thundered the call to prayer. The voices seemed to shake him to his bones -- but at the same time the attack was as silent as a subtle poison. “Oh, gods. I can’t...stand it.”

“But why did she do it?” Saqri scarcely seemed to hear him, looking up to the cloud-painted sky as if the answer might be swirling there. “I can understand Ynnir giving the Fireflower to a mortal, mad as it is – my husband would have taken any gamble, no matter the danger, to try to craft peace. But why would Yasammez mock him with that which she herself holds most dear? Why would she send you to him in the first instance?”

Her great age, voices suggested. Even the mightiest can decay...

Hatred, said others, full of anger themselves. Yasammez has built her great house on the rock of her hatred...

Barrick couldn't understand why none of them, not Saqri, not the even the Fireflower voices, suggested that which was so obvious to him. Did they really understand so little of despair, these people who should have understood it better than any – who saw their lives as an inevitable defeat lasting thousands of years?

“She wasn't...mocking the king,” he said, struggling to make words out of the cacophony of his thoughts and senses. “She was mocking...herself.”

Saqri whirled to stare at him. For a moment, by the weird, stony look on her face, Barrick thought she would strike him, or call her Ice Ettins to take off his head. Instead she tilted her head back and laughed, a throaty burst of anger and amusement that caught him utterly by surprise.

“Oh! Oh, manchild!” she said. “You have taught me something. We must not let such a rarity end too quickly! I will honor my great-grandmother's wishes, no matter how obscure their origin, and we will try to find a way to mute the Fireflower, at least until you have learned to live with it.”

“Can...can such a thing be done?”

She laughed again, but sadly. “It never has been. It was never necessary. But there has never been a scion of the Fireflower quite like you, either.”

Like a walking white flame, she led him back over the black sands to the foot of the stone stairs where her armor-skinned warriors stood waiting, their eyes only glints deep beneath plated brows. The row of huge creatures parted with surprising grace to let her lead Barrick past, then fell in behind and followed them back up the winding hill-steps to Qul-na-Qar.

It was worse for him inside the castle: the ancient walls and passages put so many thoughts into his head that the voices in his skull swooped and chattered like bats startled from their roosts; it was all he could do to follow Saqri. A few times he stumbled, but felt the broad, stone-hard hand of one of the queen's escort close on his arm and hold him up until he found his feet again.

The Ice Ettins were not the only ones following them now. As soon as Saqri had entered the castle a flock of shapes had appeared almost as suddenly as the Fireflower voices -- Qar of every shape and appearance -- but they seemed hardly even to notice Barrick. It was Saqri they surrounded, their voices full of worry and even fear for her health, and those who could not speak through the heavy air found other ways to make their unhappiness known, so that a cloud of dismay followed Barrick and the queen across the great central halls and down the Weeping Staircase. It felt as though the jabber of their thoughts and the whirl of Fireflower memories were pounding away at his wits like a hailstorm.

Barrick stumbled again. He was no longer certain how to make his legs work properly.

"I...can't..." he tried to say, then stopped to stare at Saqri, her guards and supplicants. They were all changing, stretching, shredding like shapes made of smoke under the barrage of so much noise, so much life, so much memory. He couldn't remember what it was he had been about to say. Their now-unrecognizable forms curled into a dwindling whirlpool of color in the midst of the blackness and the clamor in his head suddenly went quiet. As the spin of light gurgled away he fell into nothing, but he accepted the darkness with gratitude.

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"Come back," the voice whispered. "Step out and join me, manchild. The light is good here."

He did not know who he was or who spoke to him. He did not know where he was, or why the darkness that surrounded him felt so immense -- a place where you could fall for a thousand years before you even realized you were falling...

“Come back.” A minute flicker of light, the faintest possible glimmer, appeared before him. “Come here. Come and run in these green fields with me, child. Where you were going is too cold.”

He opened his eyes, or at least that was how it seemed: the blur of light spread and deepened. Green and blue and white, the colors burst out and he felt like he drank them down as a thirsty man gulps water. The clouds, the grass, the distant hills...and what was this new thing? Something white skimming toward him down the gray sky, a great bird with wings so wide they seemed as if they would brush a cloud with each tip: it was Saqri, of course, wearing a dream-form -- or perhaps he was learning something deep and true about her that could only be experienced here.

“Run with me!” the swan called to him in a gentle, musical voice that he recognized but could not name. “Run! I will follow you.”

Fixed on the beautiful white bird, his senses swimming with delight, he spread his own wings to leap toward her, only to realize he was not a winged thing at all but a creature of hooves and strong legs and long strides. As he bolted out over the green meadows there seemed little difference between what he did now and what he would have done with wings. It was a wonderful freedom – it felt right.

“Where is this place?” he called.

“It is not a matter of ‘where’ but of something different...’how’, perhaps...”

He found he did not care. It was enough simply to run, to feel the wind making his mane and tail snap, to thrill to the thunder of his own hooves as they tore the grass beneath his feet into flying clods.

She skimmed past him and for a moment was content to fly just a little way ahead, matching his pace so that she seemed to float, rowing herself through the air with her vast pinions, black-beaked head on a neck long as a spear. “Are you weary, child?” she called. “Would you like to stop?”

“Never!” He laughed. “I could do this forever.” And it seemed like he had never said anything more true -- that there would be no greater heaven than to run here forever, fit and strong and free of everything.

But what is this place? His stride faltered a little. Where am I? I was...I’m not... He felt his powerful body carrying him across the face of the world in four striding legs. But I’m not a horse...I’m a man...!

Heaven. Is this heaven? Does that mean I’m dead?

And suddenly he shuddered to a stop, the hills suddenly high and close, the sky darker, everything near and threatening. “Where am I?” he said again. “What have you done to me?”

The swan banked and circled. “Done to you? Those are hard words, Barrick Eddon. I brought you back when I could have let you go. I brought you back.”

“From where?”

“From what is next.”

“I was...dying?” A chill stabbed him deep in his center. Even through this fevered excitement he could suddenly feel how close he had come.

“Do not fear it. It is a road all of us must tread one day...all of us except the gods, that is.”

“What do you mean?” He was trying to look down at his curious body but his head and neck were not well-shaped to do so. It felt unfamiliar – but also strangely familiar. “You mean everybody dies? But you don’t. You and the king and all your ancestors...you don’t.”

“We will see. If the Fireflower leads you to share our fate, you will be able to judge for yourself what kind of immortality our gift gives to us.”

The great bowl of meadow surrounded by hills seemed to grow darker still, as if a storm rushed in overhead, but in truth the mixed skies had not changed. “And this place? If I’m not dead, this isn’t Heaven.”

The swan stretched her beautiful neck. “It is not -- although names are at best troublesome in these lands. It is another place. One that I could not be certain you would cross, or even reach, as you began to slip away from the places of the living – there is much I do not know about your people. But it was the only place I could have found you before it was too late, and the only place where I could be strong enough to hold you until you could make your own choice to return to the world or not.”

Suddenly, as if a door had been thrown open, letting light in, he remembered. “It was the voices – all the...the things I knew. The Fireflower. And it felt like I was knowing more every moment...!” He felt his four feet restless beneath him suddenly, his entire body tensed to run.

“Of course,” she said, and for the first time since he had first heard it he found her voice soothing. “Of course. It is difficult enough for one of our kind – how much stranger and more painful for one of your folk. That is why we are seeking help for you.” A flicker of

spread wing, a sunbeam of white blazing before his eyes, and she was off again. “So follow! We will go where mortals do not venture, except for those rare few that can dream a path. Those travelers pay for their journey with their happiness and their rest. Who knows what those like us, we who have neither rest nor happiness, will be asked to pay?”

## LI#

Up into the hills he ran, following the dim form of the swan as it darted low over the grass ahead of him. The trees snapped past him like arrows and his legs drove him tirelessly as he ran from twilight into true darkness.

He ran so fast he could not feel the air, but nevertheless the cold grew in him, crystals of ice forming in his blood as they might on the surface of a slow-moving river as winter settled in. And as the cold and darkness grew he crossed into a land where the hills grew naked of grass and great piles of stones loomed, each one somber and alone despite the thousands of others that surrounded it. The light now was as pale as that which fell from a waning moon, but there was no moon, only a black sky and a glow that painted the standing heaps of stone as though they were not whole things with weight and breadth but only spirits of stones gleaming in an unending midnight.

And as they passed farther and farther into this quiet, disheartening realm, the swan flickering low on the horizon was the only thing that reminded him of what daylight had been. A little of who he was and what he was doing came back to him.

Barrick Eddon. Son of the king of Southmarch. Brother of Briony...and of Kendrick.

He had fought all the way to the heart of Faerie because Lady Yasammez had commanded it. He had carried a mirror containing part of a god’s essence all the way to Qul-na-Qar because Gyir the Storm Lantern, Yasammez’ servant, had begged him to. And now he

was carrying within himself the painful gift of the Fireflower, the life and thought and memory of all the kings of the Qar since the god Kupilas had fathered the line.

My blood comes from a god's blood. No surprise I have this dreadful storm in my head...!

But he didn't, and that was what finally struck him: since he had crossed over into this land he had felt nothing in his head but his own thoughts: the Fireflower voices and memories had gone still. He had fallen back into the familiar glory of this solitude without even realizing how strange it now was.

“Saqri! Saqri, where have the voices gone?”

“If you mean the Fireflower ancestors, you cannot hear them now but you will again. Here you are no longer in your own land, where they can speak only into the ears of Crooked's children. We have crossed over into lands you have only glimpsed in the deepest and strangest of dreams. We are with the dead...and the slumbering gods.”

And she flew on with Barrick running behind her, the dream of a man in the dream of a horse, chasing the queen of the fairies across the endless, empty lands.

LI#

The darkness was almost complete but Barrick was not frightened. He could see only what was in front of him, and that barely. Nothing spoke in his head but his own thoughts. Occasionally Saqri broke her long silences to give him encouragement or make some cryptic remark. At last they had gone so far into the valley that the barren hills climbed high on either side and the darkness became a sort of tunnel, with Saqri's whiteness the only thing he could see. “Where are we going?”

“We are there...I believe.” Her thoughts were strangely hesitant. “The Valley of the Ancestors. I hope it is so, anyway...”

“Hope so? What do you mean? You’ve been here before, haven’t you?”

She actually laughed. It had an edge of wildness. “How could I? These are the lands beyond – where the dead go. And I am still alive...!”

“But you...we’re...” Suddenly the darkness and the deep-shadowed hills twisted, becoming something even deeper and strange than before: Barrick felt as though instead of running on a broad greensward he now was galloping across an impossibly narrow bridge with nothingness yawning on either side.

The dead lands. The Valley of the Ancestors. The fear was growing so thick he could scarcely breathe. What has happened to my life?

“Quiet now.” Saqri’s voice was music in a haunting minor key. “We are close. We must not frighten them.”

“They’re frightened?”

“Only of life. Of too much care. Of the pull and grasp of memory.” He could feel deep sadness in her words. “But I must bring all that and more to my brother.”

Things moved around him now in the inconstant darkness, forms with some kind of independent existence from the grass and the hills. He could not see them, exactly, could only sense them as a man can feel when someone stands close behind him. These new forms seemed distant, almost empty, little more than wind and the impression of existence.

“These are the long dead, or perhaps the impressions those left behind when they moved on to other places.” Saqri’s voice seemed distant, her light scarcely more visible than the empty shapes around him. “Do not fear them – they hold no harm for you.”

But he did fear them, not because they menaced him, but because they did not even seem to notice him or anything else. Were they simply shadows left behind, as Saqri said, or were they sunk so deep in death that they could not even be understood anymore by the living? It terrified him even to imagine becoming such a thing some day.

“There.” Saqri had moved a little closer, her swan-form faint as foxfire. “I see them – they are in the glade.”

She led him into a murk of shadows that stood like trees. They were silvered ever so faintly by a radiance from above, though no source was visible, as though the moon had let some of its light fall like dew before disappearing from the sky.

He saw them, then -- a cluster of smeared, dully gleaming shapes that wavered as if seen through deep water or ancient glass. They were deer, or at least each bore a shining filigree upon his brow that might have been antlers. They moved restlessly as Barrick approached, but did not run.

“Do not go closer,” Saqri told him. “They can smell the life on you. They may not remember it but they know it is foreign to this place.”

Now he could see something brighter in the wavering light – eyes. The deer-shapes were watching him. “What do we do?”

“You? Nothing...yet. This first task is set only for me.” And he felt her voice stretch out as her wings had, gently enfolding the herd before them with her words. “Listen to me, all you lords of winds and thought. I seek the one who in life was Ynnir, my brother. I am Saqri, the last daughter of the First Flower.”

Barrick heard a voice, or felt it sighing like the wind in a tangle of branches. “What do you want? You do not belong here. Do the black hellebores still bloom in the Dawnflower’s garden, or has the Defeat finally come?”

“It has not come yet, but it may be upon us with the next breath, my fathers. I have no time to waste, even in this timeless place. Send me Ynnir.”

“The youngest of us...comes...” The voice was fading even as it spoke.

And then another shape appeared before them, closer and clearer than the others, a great stag whose gleam was far more vibrant than those of its older brethren. A lavender glow hung between its spreading antlers, the warmest thing in all of that cold, dark valley.

“Saqri?” it said after a long silence. “Beloved? How have you come here?”

“By roads I should not have traveled, and on which I may not find my way back, even if you help us.” Her voice was as calm as ever, but some tight-drawn note in it told Barrick that this was not a happy meeting. “If there is to be any chance at all we must be swift. Come back with us, Brother. Your manchild is overwhelmed by what you have given him – his blood boils with it. Come back and help him to live with the terrible gift of the Fireflower.”

The great stag lowered its head. “I cannot, Sister. Every moment it is harder to think as you think. Every moment the current pulls me farther into the river of forgetfulness. Soon the only part of me that will still touch the world will be that part which is of the Fireflower.”

“But you must...!”

“You do not understand. You do not understand...what it would cost me.”

Saqri was silent for a long moment. “Even to save the manchild, you will not come? You would abandon your own last and greatest gamble?”

The great stag raised his head. His eyes for a moment took on the same lavender gleam as the light that shimmered above his brow. “Very well, my sister...my most beloved enemy. The victory is yours. Every instant I stay in the between-lands, the House of Forever draws away from me...but I will do my best.” The beast lowered its pale head like a prisoner awaiting the headsman’s ax. “I will give what I have. I hope that it is enough.”

## Chapter Two

### A Letter from Erasmias Jino

8\*8\*8\*8

"It is agreed by all men that the holy Orphan was born of lowly sheep herders in the hills of Krace during the reign of the Tyrant Osias."

- from "A Child's Book of the Orphan, and His Life and Death and Reward in Heaven"

8\*8\*8

Briony thought that traveling with even a small army – and Eneas kept reminding her that his Temple Dogs made an extremely small army, scarcely even a battalion – was like living in a movable city, one that had to be taken down every morning and set up again the next evening. Even with a group of men as hardy as Eneas' troops, swift riders who needed little in this spring weather beyond bedrolls and some source of water, they still could travel each day only as far as caution permitted. Few people were on the roads in this strange year, and those who were often had traveled no farther than from one walled town to the next, so information about what lay beyond the Southmarch border was scarce.

Every day took them farther north, winding up King Karal's Road (named after one of Eneas' most famous ancestors) out of Syan and through the lands that lay between it and the March Kingdoms, mostly tiny principalities who offered token allegiance to the throne in Tassis or the throne in Southmarch, but which only existed because the long era of peace had

allowed them to keep their soldiers at home. Now that the north was in chaos they were less happy and less hospitable than they had been in the past.

They had discovered one such county seat near Tyosbridge. The land's master, Viscount Kymon, had refused to let Prince Eneas and his men inside the walls, although it would have brought a great deal of money into the pockets of the town merchants. Eneas and his dozen or so officers (with Briony among them) had been invited to spend the night at the Viscount's hall but Eneas had refused, furious at the implication that his men could not be trusted – or worse, that he himself could not be trusted. They had spent the night instead camped outside with the men, something Briony admired greatly as a gesture. Still, a part of her could not help regretting the lost chance at a night on a decent bed. Between sleeping on the ground with the players and the same now with the Syannese soldiers, she had largely forgotten how it felt to sleep on the soft the beds of Broadhall Palace felt, although she remembered very clearly that she had liked it.

The next day Eneas marched his men back onto the Royal Highway. He scarcely glanced up at the viscount's walled stronghold on the hill, but more than a few of the soldiers gave it a wistful look as it disappeared behind them.

“It's just as well,” Eneas told Briony and his chief lieutenant, a serious young knight named Miron, Lord Helkis, who treated the prince with the respect normally given to a father, though Eneas was only a few years older. “They would only lose their edge in a city, anyway. Cities are terrible places – full of idlers and thieves and wicked women.”

“Truly?” Briony asked. “That seems a strange thing to say. Don't your father and the rest of your family live in Tassis, the grandest city in Eion? Don't you live there yourself?”

Eneas made a sour face. “That is not the same, my lady. I live there because I must, and only when I must, but I prefer to live in camp – or in my hall in the mountains.” His handsome face was serious – a little too serious, Briony thought. “Yes, that is a place you must see, Briony. From the upstairs windows you can see all the way down the valley – not a person in sight but a few shepherds and their flocks in the high meadows.”

“It sounds...very pretty. And I’m sure the shepherds like it, too. But is there nothing good to be said about cities -- or the royal court?”

He looked at her a little mistrustfully, as though she might be trying to trick him. “You saw what a court is like. You heard them whispering about you. You saw what they did to you, because you are from a quieter, smaller place and not used to their ways.”

Briony raised her eyebrow. Her problem in Tessis had been that she had enemies, one of them the king’s mistress, not necessarily that she was an innocent country girl who did not understand how to protect herself. As if no one had ever tried to kill her until she got to Syan! She wondered if that was part of what Eneas liked about her – that he thought of her as little more than a peasant girl, although one who had a stubborn, forward streak.

“In any case, Highness,” she replied, “some of us like thing things that can be found in cities, and even at court – dancing and music, theater, markets full of things from other places...” Just talking about it reminded her of the delight she had felt as a young girl when her father showed her some of the more exotic items to be found in Market Square, the stuffed lizard from Talleno that looked like a tiny dragon, the huge skull of a strange, horned animal from somewhere beyond the Xandian desert, even the chest of spices from that continent’s wet, hot jungles, not a one of them familiar except good Marashi pepper, which always made her nose wrinkle. She could still remember the anxious merchant, a little Kracian who had

bounced up and down on his heels in front of the king, smiling and spreading his hands as if to say, “All this is mine!” Her father had bought the stuffed lizard, which had sat in her room for years until one of the dogs finally chewed it up.

Eneas was not thinking of the same kind of pleasant memories, to judge by the look on his face. “Cities! I despise them. I beg your pardon, Princess, but you cannot guess the kind of trouble they make for a ruler. The ideas that ordinary people get into their heads when they live in a city! All day long they see their neighbors wearing garments too fancy for their station, or they see nobles acting no better than the peasants themselves, until nobody knows where he belongs or what he is supposed to do. And theaters! Briony, I know you have a sentimental attachment to those players with whom you traveled, but you must know that most theaters are little better than...forgive my rough speech, I beg you, but it must be said...little better than brothels when it comes to the morals of the players. They parade in front of drunken men -- some of the players dressed as women! – and frequently hire themselves out like common prostitutes. Again, I beg your pardon, but the truth must be told.”

Briony tried not to smile. It was true that many of the players were a little loose in their morals – the treacherous Feival Ulosian, for one, had kept a string of wealthy admirers up and down the north of Eion – but she just couldn’t see it with the same indignation Eneas felt. If the prince’s beloved shepherds were so much better behaved, it could only be for lack of human companionship out there in the windy hillsides. Then again, they couldn’t be as chaste as all that -- little shepherds had to come from somewhere, didn’t they...?

“And why shouldn’t ordinary people come together at a market or festival?” she said out loud. “Why would the gods have given us festivals if we were not supposed to enjoy them?”

Eneas shook his head. “That’s just it. They didn’t mean for such heedlessness to accompany their celebrations – they couldn’t have! If you had stayed in Tassis longer you would have seen the Great Zosimia, and then you would know the truth. People dancing naked in the streets! Common folk mocking the nobles – and the drunkenness and fornication! Again I beg your pardon, Princess Briony, but it is heartbreaking to see the lawlessness that has become ordinary in the cities. And not just on Great Zosimia but on Gestrimadi, Orphan’s Day, even Kerneia -- you need but name it and you will find another day when the common folk turn their back on honest toil and think of nothing but wine and dancing!”

As grateful as she was to him, Briony was beginning to think that Eneas was in some ways a bit of an old stick. “But the nobles celebrate all these festival days and more besides. Why shouldn’t the common people have the same privilege? They have the same gods.”

Eneas frowned at her jest. “Of course they do. But it is the duty of the nobles to provide an example. The lower classes are like children -- they cannot be allowed to do everything their elders are allowed to do. Would you permit a child to stay up all hours, drinking unwatered wine? Would you let a child go to the theater and see a man dressed up as woman kiss another man?”

Briony wasn’t sure what she thought. She had heard sentiments like the prince’s many times and had generally found herself agreeing – after all, if the common people could truly govern themselves then the gods would not have made kings and queens and priests and judges, would they? But this last year had made her look at things differently. Finn Teodoros, for instance, was one of the wisest people she’d ever met, and yet he was the son of a bricklayer. Nevin Hewney’s father had been a cobbler but Hewney was still agreed to be a great playwright, better than dozens of writers from more noble backgrounds. And even the

people she had met on the road while she was traveling in disguise had seemed little different from the nobles of the Southmarch or Tessian court except in richness of clothing and sophistication of manners. Certainly her own brother Barrick always said that the lords and ladies of Southmarch were only perfumed peasants – wouldn't the opposite be just as true, then, that the peasants themselves were only unbathed nobles...?

“You have gone silent, my lady,” said Eneas with a worried look on his fine face. “I have been too free with talk of rough matters.”

“No,” she said. “No, not at all, Prince Eneas. I am just thinking about the things you've said.”

#### LI#

As they rode into the southeastern corner of Silverside Briony discovered she could barely recognize her own country, her father's and grandfather's kingdom. There was little evidence out here of the siege of Southmarch, or in fact any trace of the fairy army at all – the Qar had passed far to the east when they marched down from beyond the Shadowline -- but even in this relatively undisturbed spot it felt as though Briony and the Syannese had arrived in the middle of an icy winter instead of a fairly mild spring. Fields lay fallow, and those that had been planted were barely half-seeded, as though there had not been enough people to do the work. In other places entire villages lay deserted, clusters of empty cottages like the nests of birds after fledgling season.

“The not knowing, that's what it is.” The weary innkeeper was closing up his roadside hostel in the Argas River Valley and was only too happy to sell most of what he had left to the prince's moving town. “First we were feared the Twilight People were coming this way – people said the fairies were burning all the towns north of the Syannese border. They never

came, but people came through from the east, running away – people whose towns were burned up, and they had terrible tales to tell. That scared away lots of our local folk, right there. After a while, though, hardly anybody using the road did for most of the rest of us. There are still people in these parts, especially the ones up in the hills, or the towns with high walls, but the villages along the road are all but empty.” He shook his head, a man suddenly older than he looked. “And just like that, it all goes. You think it will never change but that’s a lie. Things can change in a day.”

In an hour, thought Briony. In a heartbeat. She was saddened by the innkeeper’s confused, frustrated face, and saddened even more to know it would be a long time if ever before she could give these people any real help.

But here is something that the nobility can offer, she thought. In bad times, a king or a queen can be a rock for the waters to crash against, so those less strong are not washed away.

I will be such a rock. Only give me a chance, sweet Zoria, and I will be a rock for my people.

8\*8\*8

Qinnitan had only been awake a few confused moments when a glimpse of something manlike crawling on the beach drove her up the hills and into the forest. The thick morning fog hid the thing’s full shape but the look of it frightened her badly: either it was Vo, crippled by the poison, or something demonic, an affir out of old nursery tales lurching crablike along the gray northern sands. Qinnitan had no urge to find out which.

She made her way up the hillside, trying to stay on grass to protect her feet but often having to clamber through the thick, scratchy shrubs that covered the slope like blotches on the face of a beggar. After a sizable part of an hour had passed and she had put the beach far behind her, Qinnitan began to feel the sharp jab of hunger, a pain she welcomed because it came from a problem she might be able to do something about. The larger matter seemed hopeless: she was lost in an unfamiliar land, and even if she had truly escaped her captor and what she had seen on the beach had been only the last wisps of a dream, Qinnitan knew that there was little chance she would survive in the wilds for a tennight without help.

She stopped to rest near the top of the hill, in the middle of a stand of trees with slender white trunks shaded by delicate leaves. Each stand grew a decorous distance from its fellows so that the hilltop glen seemed a gathering of stout Zoaz-priests saluting the dawn. At first she was merely impressed by the number of trees and the profusion of light-shot greenery, so different than the shaded gardens of the Seclusion, but after climbing higher she reached a place where the trees began to thin and Qinnitan saw the full extent of the woods and the white-capped mountains beyond. She fell to her knees.

It was one thing to see the forests of the Eion coastline from the rail of a ship, their unending dull green spread along the coast like a rumpled blanket, but quite another to be in one and to think about crossing it. Qinnitan was a child of the desert, of streets where, despite the autarch's thousand sweepers, the sand still blew, and of gardens where water was abundant precisely because it was expensive and rare. Here, nature squandered its blessings without discrimination, as if to say, "The way you and your people live is small and sad. See here, how for my own amusement I shower my riches on mere beasts and savages!"

For a long time she could only kneel, shivering, overwhelmed by the frightful vastness and strangeness of this alien world.

LI#

She did not find food that day or the next. She tried chewing on the grass that sprouted between the trees; it was bitter and did not ease the gnawing ache in her stomach, but at least it did not poison her. She heard birds, saw squirrels leaping through the upper branches, and once even saw a deer poised on a rise before her as if hoping to be noticed, but Qinnitan knew nothing of hunting or trapping. Neither had she seen a single residence or any sign of human habitation. While she was a prisoner her only thought had been to get off the boat, to free herself from Daikonas Vo so he could not give her to Sulepis, since she had decided long ago that it would be better to die than to fall into the autarch's hands again. But now that she was free and still alive she wanted to stay alive, but did not know how to do it.

What was this place that Vo had called Brenland? She could not understand how such a place could even exist, endless forest crisscrossed with fern-lined streams, green hills that looked out over more green hills, silent but for the rasping calls of hawks. If such a place existed in Xis people would come by the thousands to enjoy this abundance of greenery and shade -- it would be a byword for luxury, comfort, and beauty! But this wilderness was empty of people, lonely as the cries of its winged hunters.

Qinnitan knew from something Vo had said that Brenland stood east and south of the place they had been headed, which meant there must be some kind of settlements to the west of her, perhaps even cities. She tried to use the sun as a guide but had trouble finding it sometimes and when she found it again she often seemed to have lost as much ground as she had earlier gained. She could drink almost whenever she wanted from clean, cold pools, which

did much to keep her from despair, but her hunger was growing every hour. When the discomfort became too much, or when her legs would not carry her any farther, she piled leafy branches on herself and did her best to sleep.

Once or twice when she had reached a high place out from beneath the trees she thought she saw a dark shape behind her, following her trail. If it was not the murderer Vo it was likely nothing much better, a bear or wolf or forest demon. Each time she saw something that might be that shape slipping along behind her like a lost shadow, her heart felt cold, but each time she hurried on, determined that whatever else might happen, she would never be a prisoner again.

Two days passed, then three, then four. Each night it grew harder to ignore the gripping pain of her stomach long enough to get to sleep, and harder to get up and go forward in the morning when yet another night had brought her no dreams of Barrick Eddon. For all she knew Barrick was dead now, or worse. When she most needed him he had left her alone.

LI#

In the Seclusion Qinnitan had fallen in love with one of Bazu J'ev's poems, called "Lost Upon the Mountain", and as the hours and days of Qinnitan's ordeal passed she recited it to herself over and over again like a magic spell, though it merely gave words to her sadness and added to her growing certainty that she would die here in this unknown waste.

LI#

"Morning has gone.

Midday has gone.

The shadows are in the folds of the deep valleys

And I have lost my path.

LI#

“The wind is trying to tell me something

But I cannot understand the words

How does the sun

Finds his way back through the darkness?

LI#

“Somewhere I hear the call of a mountain goat.

Somewhere I hear the shepherd’s cry.

But though I turn and turn I cannot find the direction home.

How does the moon find his house in blinding day?

LI#

“And yet all come home

All come home again

All come home and find the fires

Lit for their homecoming.

And wine waiting in the cup.

LI#

“I ask you who find me

Only to remember, please remember.

That once I had breath, and on that breath

Was this song.”

LI#

Keeping something familiar and sweet in her mind when the strangeness was crowding in brought her only a small amount of relief, but in this wild, empty country that felt like a great deal to be grateful for.

Despite her year of leisured luxury in the Seclusion, Qinnitan had become considerably tougher long before she staggered out of the water and onto the shore of this strange place. She had worked hard in Hierosol, harder even than when she had been an acolyte in the Hive, and Vo had kept her since in painful and uncomfortable conditions, feeding her only enough to keep her middling healthy; she had also slipped part of her own food to the boy Pigeon while they were still together. So Qinnitan was no hothouse flower, no orchid in the Autarch's greenhouse, like the woman Bazu J'ev described in one poem, "A fragrance of ineffable sweetness, but the first brisk wind will carry it away, never to be tasted again..." But now she was coming to the end of her strength. The fifth day – she thought it was the fifth, but she was no longer certain – and then the likely sixth passed in a smear of dappled forest light, of needles and leaves sliding wetly underfoot, of first one stream to cross and then another, like shining stripes on the back of some giant beast...

Qinnitan fell down at last and could not get up. The shadows of the late afternoon had turned the forest into a single dark place, a great tomb filled with columns to hold the crushing weight of the world and the sky. Her head seemed full of voices, chanting wordlessly, but she thought perhaps it was only the shadows of the trees falling on her, heavy as drumbeats.

She tried to remember the prayers the Hive Sisters had taught her but she doubted Nushash could even hear her in this place so far from the sun and the red desert: a few words came to her, fragile as sand-sculptures, then quickly fell apart again.

Please, she prayed, please do not let me die alone. The noise in her head grew deeper, greater, like the rush of a tremendous wind. Please help me find a way to Barrick...to the red-haired boy who was kind to me. Oh, gods and goddesses, please help me! I am so deep in the forest that I can't think anymore! Please help me! Where am I? Where is he? Please help us...!

LI#

For long moments after Qinnitan awoke she did not even realize that rain was falling on her, though she was shivering hard. Then, before she could do more than rise to a crouch, a nightmare shape lurched out from between two trees and into the clearing before her. He was bent double and walked with a shambling, crablike gait. His hair sprang wild over his head and he had the beginnings of a shaggy beard to match, but what sent a cold knife of fear deep into her gut was the mask of blood that all but covered his dirt-smeared face -- blood from dozens of cuts, blood that had streamed in gouts from his nose and dried there, blood at the corners of his mouth and smeared in his whiskers. And when he opened his mouth to grin at her, there was even blood between his teeth.

“Ah, yes,” said Daikonas Vo as calmly as if they had met in the marketplace. “Here you are.”

8\*8\*8

The messenger from Syan had the look of a man who had nearly killed several horses reaching them: his cloak and breeches were more travel-stains than cloth.

“Forgive me, your Royal Highness,” he said, kneeling before Eneas. “I have left an exhausted mount in every post between here and Tessis but his lordship the marquis wanted you to have this as quickly as was possible.”

Eneas reached out for the oilskin pouch, pulled out the letter and looked briefly but closely at the seal. “My quartermaster will see you are given a meal and a place to sleep,” he told the young courier. Eneas opened the folded letter to read it standing while Briony waited as politely as she could. She guessed the marquis must be Erasmias Jino, a man Prince Eneas trusted despite his profession as spymaster. Briony herself had not particularly liked Jino to begin with, but unlike most of the folk in King Enander’s court he seemed to have done more good for her than bad. So she waited as patiently as she could while Eneas read the letter.

“You should read this too,” he said when he had finished. His face was grim; Briony felt her throat tighten.

“My father...is he...is there anything...?”

“Nothing to say he is not well,” Eneas quickly assured her. “Your pardon, my lady -- I did not mean to frighten you. There is no direct mention of your father at all. But I do not like the other things Jino has to tell me.”

Briony took the letter from him. A frowning moment passed before she could make anything of the Marquis of Athnia’s hand – he had the ornate Tessian style, all filigree and curlicue, so that his words were almost more ornament than information – but after a moment she began to get the feel of it. Also, ornate hand or not, she had to admit that after the customary greetings and salutations Jino did not waste time on needless fripperies.

“Highness, I have done all that you asked me to do.”

she read out,

“In other matters, though, things are not so satisfactory. Many at court do not even acknowledge that we are at war despite the events to the south and the attack on Hierosol. This will change when it is their own lands being snapped up by the Autarch, of course, but by then it will be too late for many of them, if not for all of us.”

“But it is of the Autarch himself I wish to speak, because I am in receipt of many strange pieces of news about him and can make nothing in the way of a larger picture from them. I beg your Highness to set your greater tactical understanding to this task, where my poor wits have failed.”

“Isn't the marquis rather full of himself?” asked Briony. “Even when he’s trying to be unctuous he can’t quite do it.”

“He’s a good man, Princess.” Eneas sounded offended. “He is my right arm at the court – a place I avoid when I can, and where I desperately need men I can trust.”

“Certainly, I didn’t mean...” She turned back to the letter.

“Numerous strange reports have come from Hierosol, and not just from the refugees that clutter our cities along the southern border. Equally surprising rumors are coming from the garrison commanders and even some of the nobles, survivors of the old gentry, who are mostly now in hiding or out of Hierosol. Their stories often conflict, and in many cases are filled with unsupported speculation, but one thing almost all seem

to agree on: the Autarch is no longer in Hierosol. Neither is he back in his capital of Xis – travelers in the south agree that one of his lackeys, a man named Muziren Chah, still holds the viceregal throne. So the question becomes, where is the Autarch?

“Some of the speculation is that he became ill and rushed back to Xis in secret, in order not to give comfort to his enemies or diminish the bravery of his troops. Other tales suggest more sinister reasons -- that he has been assassinated by rivals or his heir, a sickly creature called Prusus, and that the new ruler is keeping it secret until he can take Xis back from the dead autarch’s caretaker.

I have also heard from other sources (although none of them witnesses) that the Autarch and a small army of Xixians attacked King Hesper of Jellon and killed him and many of his subjects, then sailed away again. I have even heard a rumor that he is kidnapping children all across Eion to make some sacrifice to his heathen gods, asking Nushassos and the rest to give him total victory over the north, but I think the source of that one must be the breath of war and fear of the unknown instead of anything based on true events.

“Thus, I do not know what to advise you, Highness. I find it hard to believe that the Autarch would leave his siege of Hierosol except to return to Xis – monarchs too long gone from their homes sometimes begin to fear what they have left behind. But almost all the tales agree that he has left, and almost as many say that no sign of him has been seen in his own kingdom. At the same time, the Xixians’ attempt to break the last resistance in Hierosol has not flagged. If that devil Sulepis has lost interest in conquering that great old city, I can see no sign of it.

“I have little else to tell you, except that your father’s health is unimproved. The great pains still come upon him without warning, and his mood suffers because of it. The physicians attend him, and I have sent for...”

“That’s enough,” said Eneas suddenly. “The rest is only meant for me – small matters of my household. Jino and a few others keep an eye on things for me when I am away from home.”

“Your father is ill...?”

Eneas shook his head, a little too hard. “A distress of the stomach. My uncle has sent a famous Kracian physician to treat him, the best of his kind. My father will be well soon.”

Briony suddenly felt she understood some of what was going on, or at least the cause of Eneas’ brittle mood.

“You are worried, dear Eneas,” she said. “No, don’t say anything. Of course you are. Worse, you fear that something might happen to your father while you are away.” She wanted to say, “And you fear that Lady Ananka and her supporters at court may try to take control of the throne in your absence,” but she knew he would feel obligated to disagree. Sometimes Eneas’ sense of honor forced him through a tiring series of responses that he and everyone else knew were not his true feelings, but simply what he felt as obligations. Instead, Briony continued with, “And you are caught between your oath to me and your loyalty and worry for your father and your country.”

He glanced up at her, startled. Lord Halkis and some of the other nobles in the great tent were beginning to look distinctly uncomfortable. Eneas sent them away, keeping only the young pages as defense of Briony’s modesty.

“You presume much when you presume to know my mind, Princess,” he said when they were more or less alone.

“I’m sorry, Highness, but I believe what I say is true.”

He gave her a stern look. “Still, even if so – and I do not concede it – it is not to be talked about in front of all and sundry.”

“What – you mean Miron? Lord Halkis? He is your best friend and a relative. As are all your other captains friends and relations. Don’t you think they have thought the same thing? Don’t you think they have wondered why you are riding north into unknown dangers and someone else’s war when you have the danger of the autarch at your own country’s southern doorstep and a royal father who is in poor health?”

“It is nothing. My father eats rich food every night. That woman encourages it.” For a moment something of his true feelings about Ananka showed on his face, his jaw tight and his teeth clenched. “But that is not the issue here. Even if what you said were true, I have sworn to accompany you home. That is not something that can be undone...”

For a moment Briony’s admiration for him soured into something else – frustration, perhaps even anger. Why were men so caught up with their honor, their solemn word, their promises? Half the time the promises were never asked of them in the first place! And yet the wars that were fought over such things, the hearts broken and the lands ruined...!

“Very well.” She held up her hand. “Then know this, Eneas. I hereby release you from your promise, if I ever truly held you. I do not think I did. You offered me a great favor from the kindness of your heart. Now I release you from it. You must do as your heart thinks best...but do not let a single promise, uttered in haste and in a kind attempt to atone for the rest

of your family's bad treatment of me, force you to do something you think is foolish. If your family needs you – if your country needs you – go. I of all people will understand.”

Again she seemed to have caught him by surprise, as if he had not thought her capable of thinking and acting this way. For long moments he could only stare at her as though seeing something new and strange.

“You are...a brave woman, Briony Eddon. And in truth I do feel a pull to go home, as any son would – as any heir would. But things are not so simple. Give me this evening to think. Tomorrow morning we will speak again, you and I.”

She thanked him and went out. Their parting was oddly formal, but for the moment Briony would have had it no other way.

#### LI#

She did not sleep well. Lisiya's bird-skull amulet clutched in her hand did not bring her dreams of the demigoddess or any other immortal, only a series of escapes from and near-captures by shadowy things she could not quite see, things that muttered in angry voices as they followed her through tangled woods and over marshy ground where she had to fight to stay upright. When she woke she was as tired as if she had spent the entire night doing what she had dreamed.

Still, she could not bear to sit around waiting for Eneas to summon her, so she bundled up warmly in her hooded travel cloak and went to walk along the edge of the encampment in the first blue light of the morning. The Temple Dogs had selected a small box canyon a short distance off the Royal Highway where the hills were as comfortably close and enfolding as her cloak. Briony walked to the top of the nearest one without ever losing sight of the sentry post, then sat and watched the sun clamber into the sky.

I am no less stubborn than Eneas, she thought to herself. I don't want him coming with me if he is to resent it, even though I am desperate for his soldiers...and happy with his company as well, if I am honest with myself.

But each day spent with Eneas Karallios, the heir to the throne of Syan, was also a sort of lie, or at least so it often seemed. The prince cared for her, he had made that obvious. He would marry her, or at least that was what he seemed to be saying. And there was much to admire about him, as well. Even to hesitate about accepting his affection seemed nearly an act of madness – certainly almost every other woman on the continent of Eion would deem it so. But Briony did not know what she wanted, or even what exactly she thought, and was just stubborn enough not to let good sense rush her into anything.

The sun was tangled in the branches of the trees lining the hillcrest. The dew was almost gone from the grass and the camp below was up and in full preparation for another day on the road – but which direction would they be going? What would the prince decide? And what would she do if he did decide to turn back to Tassis, as she had all but begged him to do?

What I have done all along. I will keep going, she told herself -- and half-believed it. I will follow my heart. And, with the help of Zoria's mercy, I will hope not to be too much of a fool.

Still, there was a small part of her that hoped she hadn't been too forceful in making her points to Eneas.

Thinking about the prince made her think of Guard Captain Vansen, as it usually did. How strange that these two, who did not know each other and likely would never meet, should be so twinned in her mind! She could hardly think of two men less alike except in common kindness and decency. In all other ways, in looks, importance, wealth, power, Eneas of Syan

was Ferras Vansen's clear superior. And Eneas had made his feelings known, whereas Briony had to admit her notion that Vansen cared for her was based on the flimsiest of interpretations, a few looks, a few mumbled words, none of which could not equally be said to represent the ordinary awkwardness of a common soldier in the presence of his monarch. And he was a common soldier, which made it all the greater an idiocy even to think about him in that way. Even were Vansen to throw himself down at her feet and beg her to marry him Briony could no more do that than she could marry one of her horse-grooms or a merchant in Market Square.

Not without giving up my throne...

Briony could not even entertain such a mad idea. With her father and brother gone, who would look after her people? Who would make certain that Hendon Tolly received his due and dreadful reward?

She sighed, plucked up handful of damp grass and flung it high into the air. The wind lifted and carried the grass for a moment and then, like a bored child, let it fall.

LI#

"You sent for me, Highness?" she asked.

Eneas frowned. "Please, Briony. Princess. Do not speak to me as though we have not been friends."

She realized he was right: there was a stiffness in her manner. "I...I'm sorry, Eneas. I meant nothing by it. I did not sleep well."

He showed a rueful smile. "You are not the only one. But now I have decided what I must do – what common sense demands as much as honor." He nodded. "I will stay with you, Briony Eddon. We will continue to Southmarch."

Briony had already begun to tell him she had expected it, and to thank him for all he had done for her; she was even pondering what she could decently ask of him besides the horse and armor he had already given her when she realized what he had said. “What? Stay...with me?”

“I gave my word. And I realized that with Jino and other friends at Broadhall I am not so cut off as I might think. Even should something...the Brothers prevent it, the gods all foreswear it...should something happen to my father, the kingdom is sound...and the throne is safe.” He smiled, although it did not come easily. “If Ananka had given my sire an heir, things might be different.”

As Anissa did with my father, Briony thought but did not say. The thought echoed in her head unpleasantly, but she pushed it away for later consideration. “Your Highness...Eneas... I don’t know what to say!”

“Then say nothing. And don’t assume it is only because of obligation, either. Your company means much to me, Briony – your happiness, too. And I have my own curiosity about what is happening in the north. Now go and make yourself ready, I beg you. We ride out within the hour and I must prepare a letter to be sent back to good Erasmias Jino.”

She left him scratching away at a sheet of parchment and walked back to her tent with the feeling that she had stepped unexpectedly from one road to another, and that because of that much had changed and much more would change in days ahead.

## Chapter Three

### Seal of War

8\*8\*8

"His parents named him Adis, and when he was old enough they sent him out to watch over the flocks. He was pious and good, and he loved his parents nearly as much as he loved the gods themselves..."

- from "A Child's Book of the Orphan, and His Life and Death and Reward in Heaven"

8\*8\*8

Both Chaven and Antimony carried torches, although the young Funderling monk was only carrying his as a favor to the physician. Only a few brands glowed in the whole of the great chamber called Sandsilver's Dancing Room, since the Qar had little more need for light than the Funderlings themselves...or at least that was true for many of them: Chaven had already seen examples of some who needed no light at all because they seemed to have no eyes, as well as huge-eyed folk who blinked and winced at even the dimmest glow. Chaven could not help marveling at the variety.

"How can such things be?" Antimony asked quietly. "The Great God has made men in many shapes and sizes, we know – look at you and me! – but why should he make one kind of creature with so many different shapes?"

Chaven couldn't answer. He would have loved to study every single Qar with a strong lamp and seeing-glass, calipers and folding rule, but at the moment he and Antimony had a more important task, which was seeing to the comfort (and covertly examining the mood) of these new allies. Vansen had asked him to do it, so Chaven had chosen Antimony, the most open-minded of the Metamorphic Brothers, as his companion.

"I was thinking only a moment ago how much we could learn from these folk," Chaven told the Funderling. "Even Phayallos admits that when they lived beside us centuries ago very little proper study was done. Most of the works that purport to describe the Qar in detailed inquiry sadly turn out to be filled with hearsay and superstition."

"It is not superstitious to fear something whose ways and looks are so different," Antimony said, his voice still low, "and I will be frank, Physician Chaven -- I fear these creatures." The cavern seemed filled with roiling shadow, a single moving thing with many parts like something crawling in a tidal pool. "Even if they are sincere in their desire to fight the Autarch, who's to say what will happen if we live through it? Even if we somehow beat the southern king and all his thousands and thousands and thousands of men, what if these Qar decide afterward to return to what they were doing -- which was killing us?"

Chaven was pleased to see the young man exercising his wits so clearly. He had been right -- this one had the makings of a scholar. Pardstone Jasper, the last Funderling who had regularly contributed to the wide conversation of scholars, had died when Chaven was still a young boy. "You ask a good question, Brother Antimony, and Captain Vansen and your Magister Cinnabar are already thinking on it as well. I expect that is all we can do at the moment...think on it. Because even to reach the point of having to deal with that problem will

be an astounding and unexpected triumph.” He shook his head. “Forgive me – I do not mean to be gloomy.”

Despite his earlier admission, Antimony seemed more fascinated than frightened. “Look at that one – he glows like a hot coal! He looks to be nothing but a fire burning inside a suit of armor – or is that suit of armor a part of him, like the shell of a crab?”

“I could not say, but I believe it is one of the Guard of Elementals.”

“How do you know?” asked the monk, impressed.

Chaven shrugged. “Only because Vansen told me – he said they were some of those most likely to cause trouble. Just as not all of our friends are happy with the idea of yoking our fortunes to the Qar, so they have their own disagreements, and apparently these Elementals are among the most...disagreeable.” He fought off a shudder. “Still, all the questions of refraction such a thing raises are fascinating at the very least...!”

They stood and watched as a parade of strange shapes filled the great chamber, some far smaller than any Funderling, others that seemed nothing less than giants. The Qar had so many forms and sizes that it was often hard to tell which creatures were soldiers and which were beasts of burden. Chaven recognized a few from descriptions in Phayallos or from Ximander; others he could only guess at. Occasionally a confusing citation in an old book would suddenly march past him in the flesh, even pause to cast a mistrustful eye in the physician’s direction. He explained what little he knew about them to Antimony, talking more than was his usual wont, in part because of the pleasure of an intelligent audience (so much more satisfactory than talking to that boob Toby, his so-called assistant, who really had been little more than a particularly useless servant) and partly because he did not want to have to listen to his own troubled thoughts.

Chaven fell silent at last, not because the newest arrivals were any less odd and interesting, but because the emptiness of his own knowledge had begun to grieve him. Here he was in the midst of the most fascinating thing a lover of the physical world could imagine, and yet the chances were good that neither he nor these wonderful and frightening Qar would survive the slaughter that was coming.

So I shall play a part in this war that any fool could play while a chance for true scholarship is wasted...

And the violent fate hurrying toward them even now was not his only worry. Chaven had been long troubled by the loss of what seemed an entire day of his recollections, perhaps more. He had been in Funderling Town on a Skyday, he knew, then had set out for the temple on a Windyday, but had not reached the temple until Firesday – an entire day and more missing. In truth, he remembered only a little of his time in Funderling Town well, and could no longer recall even the errand that had taken him there. Chaven knew that it had seemed important when he decided to go, so it was more than strange he should not remember it now. It frightened him.

This was not the first time he had lost track in such a way. For several days before Winter's Eve, the night Princess Briony had fled Southmarch with Shaso, he had been gone from the castle, or at least from his house in the Outer Keep, but he couldn't remember where he had gone that time, either.

Looking again at the cavern before him, at the vast sprawl of huddled, mostly silent shapes, eyes glowing in the shadows like foxfire, he quietly asked Antimony, "If all we are is in our thoughts, how can a man know if he is going mad?"

The young monk was silent for a long time. He was large for one of his folk, but the top of his head was still a hand's breadth below Chert's shoulder; when he spoke his voice seemed to rise up from the stony floor, as if the cavern itself was speaking.

"He cannot know. Nor can a king, I suppose...which is what they say of this Autarch, that he is a madman. In fact, as I think on it, Chaven, even a god might not know whether he had lost his wits, if he lost 'em."

"And thank you, Antimony," the physician said. "You have given me even more to worry on." He hoped he sounded more amused than he felt.

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"I do not mean to be rude," Ferras Vansen began, "but Funderlings – and taller men, too – are not as patient as your people. Your mistress set an hour for the council to take place, and yet not only has she not come, she has not sent word as to why. Hours are passing. People grow worried."

Aesi'uah folded her hands before her mouth, as though to blow life into a tiny flame shielded there. "Please, Captain Vansen, you do not understand..."

"No, your mistress does not understand." He did not like arguing with her. The chief eremite was quiet and graceful, and in her own way, kind; disagreeing with her made him feel clumsy and cruel. "My allies have made a brave concession. They have opened their gates to your people, although only days ago you Qar were killing Funderlings on the doorstep of their own city. Not only that, but they have even given you a place for your army to camp – a place between themselves and their most holy place..."

“That is because of our shared mortal enemy, the Autarch of Xis,” she began, but Vansen was still angry.

“Yes, but we were not in immediate danger from the Autarch. The people of Southmarch were safe inside our castle walls, the Funderlings down here in the rock. It was your people in their camp above who were most at risk.”

She paused, but with the air of someone listening to something he couldn't hear. He suspected she conversed with Yasammez in her head, just as he had once heard the words of Gyir Storm Lantern in the same, silent way, but knowing that did not make him feel any better. It happened to her several times an hour and had been a constant reminder that no matter how courteously she seemed to listen to Vansen, nothing would be done without her mistress' consent.

“Please, Captain,” she said at last. “One thousand years or more of hatred and distrust do not vanish with a wave of the hand.”

“Oh, trust me, my lady, I know that very well.”

“Look there,” Aesi'uah said, gesturing with a slender hand toward the crowd of strange shapes that surrounded them, filling the natural stone gallery to the walls – perhaps a thousand Qar in this chamber alone. “Already we have done something here unseen since the earth was young. Understand that my mistress must deal with problems of her own, many of them of a subtlety that I cannot explain to someone who will live only a century.”

Vansen was surprised to feel pain at her words, although she only told the truth -- he was not like her, not at all. The pain was from what it brought back to his thoughts, the equally unknowable distance between himself and the woman he loved. It was becoming clearer to

Vansen every day that it had been madness even to suppose he and the princess lived in the same world.

“Just give your lady to know,” he said, “that my people are losing patience. That everybody is losing patience. And they are frightened, too.”

“As you said yourself, Captain, trust me.” Aesi’uah smiled – at least, he had always assumed it was a smile, since it seemed in many ways to serve the same function as it would have in an ordinary woman, although not always. “My mistress already knows this.”

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“But, Opal...!”

She fixed him with a stare that could have split granite like a wedge. All the Leekstone women had that eye. “Don’t you dare. There should be women there and there will be women there. By the Elders, their general is a woman.”

“Exactly! And according to Vansen she has the blood of a god running in her veins and a temper like a cornered rat. She’s killed Big Folk by the hundreds...!”

His wife again gave him that shriveling glance. “I’m not planning to take up a sword and fight her, old fool. We’re welcoming them. We are allies now.”

“Not yet.” He knew he was losing, but he could not resist one last attempt to bring some perspective to the conversation. “We’re hoping to be allies. This is a sort of parley, remember? There’s no promise that they won’t change their minds and cut all our throats – which they were trying to do just a few days ago.”

“All the more reason to have a few sensible Funderling women on the spot, then,” she said with satisfaction. “It will mean that much less chance of that Jasper fellow or some other lackwit starting another fight.” She nodded. “Now, I have to go. Vermilion Cinnabar has called all the women to a meeting in the Temple library before the Qar arrive.”

“In the library? Oh, the brothers will love that.”

“The Metamorphic Brothers have had their own way too long, and so has the Guild. That’s one of the reasons we’re in this slide. Imagine, not telling anyone the Qar have been coming here for years!”

“What? How did you hear of that?”

“Vermillion Cinnabar told us. She heard it from her husband, of course.”

“Beat it out of him, more likely.” Chert had to laugh. Clearly, things were going to change whether he wished it or not. Better to be on top of the boulder when it decided to roll than in front of it. He gestured toward the boy, curled sleeping in a feral pile of blankets on the floor. “What about Flint?”

A troubled expression flitted across her face. “I was going to bring him with me, but he declares he will go with you instead.”

Chert felt bad for her. “He’s growing. He wants to be with the men...”

“That’s not what’s bothering me, you old fool. He’s changed. Haven’t you noticed?”

“Of course. But he’s always been...unusual...”

“Not that. He’s changed in some other way...something new. But I can’t...” She made a noise of frustration. “I don’t have the words for it! But I don’t like it.” For the first time he saw how upset and frightened his wife really was. “I don’t like it, Chert.”

He stepped toward her and put his arms around her middle, pulled her close, and kissed her forehead. “I don’t like it either, my love, but we’ll make sense of it. I missed you, did you know that?”

“Missed me picking up after you,” she said gruffly, but did not let go.

“Oh, yes,” he said, smelling her hair, wishing they could simply stay that way, standing together, with everything bad still yet to happen. “That as well.”

8\*8\*8

“How do you see it, Captain?” Sledge Jasper asked Vansen as they seated themselves at the table. “Do they speak our tongue, or is it all barble-barble except for that silver-haired baggage?”

“She is not a ‘baggage’, Jasper, she is a high-ranking advisor to Lady Yasammez and a powerful figure in her own right.”

The bald Funderling gave him a doubting look. “As you say, Captain. I’m just asking if they speak properly or not.”

Vansen thought about Gyir’s voice, something he had never heard with his ears, but which he would never forget. “They have many ways of talking. I do not think they will have any trouble making their wishes known...”

“Oh, shite and slurry!” said Jasper loudly.

Vansen was taken aback – for a moment he thought that the little man was calling him a liar. Then he saw what Jasper had seen – half a dozen Funderling women, led by Cinnabar’s wife and Chert’s wife Opal, making their determined way across the chapel.

“Hold now.” Jasper was almost on his feet, as though he would bodily keep the women from the table. “What are you doing here? The Qar are coming!”

“Sit down, Wardthane Jasper.” Vermillion Cinnabar was a handsome Funderling woman, dressed in a beautifully embroidered blue-green travel robe. “We have just as much right to be here as you and your warders.”

“I beg your pardon, Magistrix,” said the wealthy Funderling Malachite Copper, who had quickly made himself invaluable to the struggle. “Of course your advice is welcomed, but only a few days ago these Qar were trying to kill us...”

“That is neither here nor there, is it?” The magister’s wife directed her companions to seats on either side of her. Unlike Vermillion Cinnabar and Opal Blue Quartz, the other women looked a bit awed to be in such a place at such a time – but then again, Vansen thought, so did the men.

One of the other women leaned forward. “Is there much danger?” she whispered to Opal, who was sitting close enough for Vansen to hear.

“No,” Opal told her, then shot Vansen a look that clearly said, “And please don’t disagree.”

She and the magister’s wife are leading their troops by example, he realized. Like any good commanders they are worried too, but they cannot show that to their forces. “We should be well,” he told the Funderling woman. “We are all under a treaty of peace here and the Qar, whatever else they are, seem to me honorable creatures.” He felt a touch of shame at the understatement – Gyir the Storm Lantern had been more than “honorable.” He had unhesitatingly given his life to carry out his promise to his mistress Yasammez – the sorceress or demigoddess they all awaited today.

Chert and Cinnabar and the physician Chaven came in with several others, including a party of Funderling monks led by Brother Nickel. The monk even nodded courteously toward Vansen as he and his party seated themselves at the long table.

“What’s gotten into him?” Vansen said, half-aloud.

Malachite laughed. “Don’t you know? Cinnabar had a talk with him. Reminded him that the Guild’s highwardens have to approve a new Prior of the temple – and, when it comes to it someday, the new abbot of the temple as well. If Nickel wants to carry the abbot’s holy mattock he’s going to have to dig when the Guild says dig.”

“Ah.” Vansen wasn’t surprised. Even Nickel, with the sacred souls of all the Funderlings supposedly in his protection, saw things differently when ambition called the dance.

“Hello, my darling,” said Chert as he bent to kiss his wife. “I hope you don’t mind – I’m going to be sitting with Cinnabar. It’s his idea.” Chert did his best to look surprised that he had been singled out for this honor, but Vansen knew the little man not only had good sense, he was in the middle of so many of the mysteries here that he was virtually indispensable. “And how very nice to see you, Magistrix!” he said to Vermilion Cinnabar. “You’re looking well.”

“Magistrix, is it?” she said with an amused smile. “I’m not soapstone, Chert, so don’t try to carve me. Your wife has told me all about your adventures. I think my husband wants you around just to take his mind off our boring life at home.”

Chert laughed. “Oh, wouldn’t we all love to be bored these days, Magi...Vermilion.” He gave Opal another squeeze and wandered back to Cinnabar and the others.

“My Chert is a good man,” Opal said fiercely and suddenly, as if someone had might have been about to suggest otherwise. “Everything he’s done has been for others.”

Before Vansen could tell her how much he agreed, a stir ran through the chapel – a sense of wonder and alarm that Vansen felt before he either heard or saw anything, a primal thrill of warning that ran up his spine. He turned and for a moment only saw Aesi’uah in the doorway – a powerful, captivating figure, no doubt, but someone he looked on almost with fondness. Then the others came silently in behind her.

It was not the full, staggering panoply of Qar types, but even this small embassy had enough variety to make those who had never seen them – perhaps three-quarters of those assembled – blanch and blink and mutter to themselves. Most frightening was the immense creature known as Hammerfoot, a war-leader of the Deep Ettins, taller and heavier than even the largest cave bears. His jutting brow overshadowed his face so completely that nothing could be seen of his eyes except two gleaming coals far back in the darkness. He was wrapped in furs and armor made of stone plates held together by massive leather straps, and his two-fingered hands were each as wide as one of the Funderling shields. The giant found his way to the far side of the table and then sat down on the floor, almost knocking the table over when he nudged it with his great chest.

He was the largest of the Qar who came to the table, but not the strangest. Vansen had seen all these shapes before, and others, but he was still far from used to it. Here came the one named Greenjay, who looked like a cross between an exotic bird and a costumed Zosimia fool. Some of the other Qar looked almost human, their origin betrayed only by the shapes of their skulls or their coloring – Vansen knew no ordinary man or woman whose skin was touched with hues of lavender or mossy green. Others like the Elementals were manlike only in

seeming to have a head and four limbs: Vansen had seen them in their fiery, naked forms in the Qar camp, and still saw those shapes in his dreams, but the two present today had been more discreet, wrapping themselves in robes that betrayed nothing of what smoldered beneath.

Bent or straight, small or tall, the Qar filed in to fill the other side of the table, as varied as the bestiaries so carefully painted in the margins of old books. The one thing they all seemed to have in common was the quality of watchfulness: as they took their seats they did not speak to each other, but only looked across at the gathered Funderlings and their guests.

And then, at long last, Yasammez herself came into the chamber, tall and silent, wearing her angular black armor and strange cloak like a cloud of dark fog. She looked neither to one side or the other as she walked slowly to her place at the far side of the table, although she was the lodestone to all eyes. She seated herself in the center of her people.

After a silence Yasammez spoke, her voice as slow and baleful as a funeral bell. “This battle is already lost. You must know that before we begin.”

One voice rose above the flurry of disapproving murmurs – Cinnabar Quicksilver. “With all respect, Lady Yasammez, what does that mean? If there is no chance of victory, why are we here instead of at home making peace with the gods?”

“I cannot speak for you, delver,” she told him. “But this is how I make peace with the gods.”

Ferras Vansen could only stare as the room exploded into confusion. He had worked so hard to bring both sides together and now the Qar leader’s arrogance was going to smash the alliance to pieces before it even started.

“Stop!” He did not realize he had stood until he had already begun to speak. “Funderlings, you are fools to argue with these people, whose suffering is so much greater than

any of us can even imagine.” He turned to the other side of the table. “But you, lady, you are a fool if you think you can make peace while you still treat us as your enemies and inferiors.”

“Make peace?” asked Yassamez in a voice like a cold wind. “I did not come here to make peace, Captain Vansen, I came here to make common cause. The wounds run too deep for peace between my race and yours.”

Vansen pitched his reply above the tumult of unhappy voices. “Then let’s speak of common cause, Lady Yasammez. Enough of the past – for now.”

She stared at him, still and silent as a statue. At last the noise began to subside as the others waited to see what she would say.

“But it is always the past, Captain Vansen,” she said at last. “This room is crowded with the ghosts of those who have gone before, even if you cannot see them. But of course, your delver allies know – they know very well, which is one of the reason they did not want this council to happen.”

“What are you talking about?” Cinnabar did not sound as confident as his words suggested: he sounded like a man prepared to flinch. “What do the Funderlings know?”

“That the blame for the destruction of the Qar is not on the sunlanders alone. Yes, Vansen’s people captured my many-times-great-granddaughter Sanasu and killed her brother, Janniya – but we had been coming back to this place for a thousand years and more to perform the Fireflower ceremonies, always secret except to you delvers, and were never troubled before that day. How did Kellick of the Eddon know we were coming?”

Vansen had been told the story of the prince and princess of the Qar (or so he thought of them, though those were not Qar words) and how their pilgrimage during King Kellick’s

day had resulted in disaster, but what Yasammez was saying now was new to him. “Does it matter, lady? It is two hundred years in the past...”

“Fool!” she said. “There is no past. It is alive this moment, in this rocky chamber. How did the Eddon know that Sanasu and Janniya were coming? Because the treacherous delvers told him.”

Now the uproar was complete, with several of the diminutive Funderlings actually climbing onto the table to shake their fists and declare the innocence of their people. The ruckus became so great that Hammerfoot of Firstdeeps thumped a broad fist down on the table with a noise like a wall falling; his deep, rumbling growl of warning quickly silenced the Funderlings. In the sudden stillness, the only voice was Malachite Copper’s.

“Stop!” the Funderling said. “Enough shouting! She is right. May the Earth Elders forgive us, she is right.”

“What are you talking about, man?” Cinnabar asked, frowning. “Right about what?”

Copper looked around. “You Funderlings know me. All our people know me and my family. My many-times-great-uncle was Stormstone Copper, the draughtsman and chief mover of the Stormstone Roads. It was the great work of his life, meant to make his people safe and secure, to give us ways to come and go from Funderling Town that were not dependent on the moods of the big people in the castle above. But he could not create an entirely new network of tunnels. Some of the most important passages already existed and had for centuries.”

Copper paused for a moment. “This is hard to tell. He brought such honor to our family name – there is not a single child of the Copper clan who has not thought, “I am of Stormstone’s blood,” and walked taller.”

The rest of the Funderlings were clearly confused again. Vansen had learned enough in his time underground to know that they revered the famous Stormstone as his own people did the gods' holy oracles.

“All this is known, friend Malachite,” said Cinnabar, his voice gentle, as though he spoke to someone who had fallen ill. “Tell us what we do not know.”

“He...he feared that as long as the Qar came to Southmarch, one day the upgrinders – the Big Folk, and I beg your pardon for the crudeness, Captain Vansen – would discover the network of tunnels he had created. It was a terrible decision for him, I'm sure...but we are still shamed by what happened. I am sure he meant only for the Southmarch soldiers to frighten the Qar away...”

“You seek to put a kind face on murder,” said Yasammez. “Because that is what happened. The delvers whispered to Kellick the Eddon that the Qar were coming. The Eddon went himself with his soldiers to stop them. He stole Sanasu and killed her brother Janniya and so doomed my people...”

“It was a fight,” Vansen said to her. “You make it sound like a murder!”

Yasammez's look was stony. “Janniya and Sanasu were accompanied only by two warriors and one eremite – a priest, you might call him. The Eddon met them with over two score of armed men, and afterward Sanasu was a prisoner and the rest of the Qar were dead. Call that what you will.”

Vansen looked back at her. Yasammez was the child of a god they said, but she was also a living woman, however strange. She was angry -- a bitterness that he recognized, one that was hard to let go; his father had felt that way toward the other farmers in Little Stell, that because he was of Vuttish blood that they treated him as a stranger even after he had lived

twenty years with them. He had died with that bitterness still on him, refusing on his deathbed to see any visitors not of his own family.

It was odd, Vansen thought, here in the midst of all these other earthshaking events, that he suddenly felt no anger toward the man who had sired him, no sorrow, as if they had finally reconciled, despite Pedar Vansen being years dead. What had changed?

“If all this is true, Lady Yasammez,” he said out loud, ending the long, whisper-scratched silence, “then there is nothing to be said by either Marchman or Funderling except that...we are sorry. We the living did not do these deeds -- most of us did not know of them until now -- but we are still sorry.” He turned to Malachite Copper. “Is that so for you?”

“By the Hot Lord, but certainly!” said Copper, and then covered his mouth at having shouted such a strong oath in the very chapel of the Metamorphic Brothers’ temple. “Ever since I came of age and my father passed this heavy secret to me – it travels thus, to each Copper heir – I have thought of my great-grandsire only with sorrow. I think he meant well but he plainly did wrong. If the rest of my family knew it then I believe they would feel as I do and grieve at this family shame.” He shrugged. “That is all to be said.”

Yasammez looked from him to Vansen, and then paused, staring at nothing, making Vansen wonder to whom she spoke in her silent thoughts. Then she took up the great, dark ruby around her neck, slipped the heavy chain over her head, and let it fall to the refectory table with a loud clatter. As the rest of the assembly stared she drew out her strange sword, pure white in color but its glow as slippery as mother-of-pearl, and set it atop its sheath on the table before her as well.

“This is the Seal of War,” she said, gesturing with a long, thin finger toward the stone, baleful as a dying ember. “Because I bear this, the decisions of life and death I make are a

bond upon the People – the Qar. This is Whitefire, the sword of the sun god himself. I swore that I would not sheathe it again until I had destroyed this mortal hall where our great ancestor, my father Crooked, fell.” She swung her gaze around the table. Even Vansen found it hard to meet those eyes which had looked out at the world since Hierosol itself was young.

Then Yasammez took the hilt of the white sword in her hand and lifted it. Anxious whispers turned to outright cries of alarm before she slid it into the scabbard with a noise like the snap of a door latch.

“Today I swallow my own words. I default upon my oath. The Book of the Fire in the Void will find a way to even my account, I am sure.” Yasammez lowered her head as if a great weariness had just come over her, and for a moment the entire room grew completely still. Then she straightened, her face a mask again, and donned the Seal of War once more. “I decree that my people are still at war...but only with the Autarch. Today I have made myself an oath-breaker, but there is no escaping it – this man’s danger must be faced. For he comes here to wake a god on the night of Midsummer, but down in the place you call the Mysteries there is more than one god waiting to be awakened, and many of them are angry with all the living.”

## Chapter Four

### The Deep Library

8\*8\*8\*8

"He could play his shepherd's flute well, and with it would delight all who heard him, man or beast. He could also understand the speech of the birds and the beasts of the field. Even the lions that lived in Krace in those days did him no harm, and the wolves shunned his flock..."

- from "A Child's Book of the Orphan, and His Life and Death and Reward in Heaven"

8\*8\*8

When he awakened he was still as tired as if he had run for hours. It was impossible to tell how long he had slept: the luminous gray sky outside, the swirling clouds and damp, ancient rooftops seemed unchanged. He sat up on the bed, thoughts blurry and wordless, then put his feet on the floor and had to stop there, dizzy. He remained that way, head in hands, until he heard the queen's voice.

"Manchild."

He opened his eyes to find her standing over him. He was in a room that was plain but comfortable. Beside the bed a window with an open shutter looked down onto an enclosed courtyard and an overgrown garden of white and blue flowers. All of the other windows Barrick could see were shuttered.

"I had a dream..." he began.

“It was not a dream,” Saqri told him. “You were on your way to the fields beyond, almost obliterated by the strength of the Fireflower. But my husband is with you now, helping you. Or a part of him is – the part that your need has prevented from going on.” Saqri’s dark eyes were solemn. “I do not know whether I should hate you for that or not, Barrick Eddon. Ynnir was meant to go on. He chose to go. But now because of the bond of responsibility or shame he feels to you, he lingers.”

“Ynnir is...inside me?”

“They are all inside you, it seems, all the men of the Fireflower, in almost the same way the women are all inside me, my mother and grandmothers and great-grandmothers, our family stretching back entirely to the days of the gods. But though a part of them remains with you, the Ancestors of the Father have in truth gone on to whatever lies beyond...” She shook her head. “No. There are no words that will truly speak it from my thoughts to yours. But my husband...my brother...he cannot...” Her face changed and she fell silent again. He heard a batwing whisper in the dark depths of his own being, but from a voice that was neither hers nor his own – “Sad she is sad she misses me even through the fury oh proud sister you are still beautiful...!”

“I must spend some time in thought about this – about everything,” Saqri told Barrick at last. “I will go. Harsar will attend to you until I call you.”

Shortly after she had left the room the strange little servant Harsar came to him with a tray containing what Barrick could only regard as a feast – bread and salty white cheese and honey and a bowl of the fattest, sweetest, most thin-skinned plums he had ever tasted. Harsar did not leave immediately, but stood watching Barrick eat.

“I have never seen one of your kind, except in dreams,” the manlike creature said to him at last. “You are neither so fearsome nor so strange as I would have expected.”

“Thank you, I suppose. I would say the same for you, except I’m not sure I’ve ever seen your kind even in dreams.”

Harsar gave him a squinting look. “Do you joke? Never seen the Stone Circle People? Your people used to dance with ours by moonlight! We took you down into our towns beneath the hills and showed you wonderful things!”

“Doubtless,” Barrick said, wiping honey off his chin. The excellent meal was improving his mood by the instant. “But I’m young, you must remember. Still, I’m sure my grandfather danced the Torvionos with your grandfather at every festival!”

The squint deepened until Harsar’s eyes had disappeared. “You are jesting. Foolery.”

Barrick laughed. It felt strange – he could not remember the last time he had done it. “You are right, sir. You have caught me.”

Harsar shook his head disapprovingly. “Just like...” He stopped himself with an obvious effort. “To jest is to mock the seriousness of things.”

“No.” Barrick found himself needing to explain. “Jesting is the only way to make sense of some things. Perhaps because your people don’t die...”

“We die,” said Harsar. “Mostly at the hands of men.”

For a moment Barrick faltered. “Perhaps it’s because my people are mortal, but we must jest. Sometimes it is the only way to live with things that cannot be lived with.”

“Not simply because you are mortal.” A sort of frown stretched the fairy-factor’s face; when he spoke again, it was almost as if to himself. “There are those among the People – yes,

even the highest – who do this, who jest and speak meaningless words when they should be acting...”

His anger is at me, a voice in Barrick’s thoughts said. And his frustration. He is not the only one, but he was the closest to me...except for my own sister-wife...

This new voice seemed so clear that Barrick thought against all sense and memory that Ynnir must be standing in the chamber. He looked around, hopefully at first, then increasingly wildly... “Lord? Where are you?”

Harsar stared, but with no more than polite concern, as though this kind of gibbering madness must frequently overtake the residents of Qul-na-Qar.

You told me I could not leave you – not yet. The king’s voice was as clear as if he stood beside Barrick. But now you must rest again. It takes no deathly wisdom to know you will need all your strength for whatever comes next, and you still are not strong enough to withstand the full bloom of the Fireflower. I need your attention. Send Harsar-so away.

Barrick began to mumble excuses, but whatever else he might have been, the exotic Harsar was by training a royal servant: he glimpsed what was wanted and promptly made himself scarce, taking the empty tray with him.

“You said he was angry at you...? Harsar?”

You need not speak aloud, the king’s voice said. And you have no need to stand or sit, either. Lie down, for you are still weary. Rest. What Harsar thinks of me does not matter anymore. He is faithful to the Fireflower.

Barrick stretched out on the bed, found a delicate but surprisingly heavy blanket to pull over himself. Even with the king’s comforting presence so close, he began to feel the

Fireflower voices stirring in him, threatening to pull him down, to drown him in an ocean of alien memories. How would he ever find the strength to reach the shore...!

Do not think of a shore, said the king, startling him with how much of Barrick's mind he had understood. You are not drowning, but neither can you climb safely up from the Fireflower and leave it behind. It is part of you, now and forever.

Instead, think of the light of a single star low on the horizon. Swim toward that light. You will not reach it, but in time you will learn to be content to swim eternally in that endless ocean. In truth, you will never reach that glowing mote, but neither will it ever disappear from your sight...

The king continued to speak these riddling words to him, over and over, his voice as soothing to Barrick's thoughts as the song of summer crickets. He tried to swim toward the light, but instead found himself sinking deeper and deeper into weariness and, at last, back into the oblivion of sleep.

LI#

When the servant wakened him again, it was not with a meal but a summons.

“The queen bids you join her in the Singing Garden.”

Barrick got up and followed Harsar, feeling protected still by Ynnir's help and the king's unfelt but still recognized presence. The Fireflower voices were not gone but at the moment they seemed muffled, as though some layer of protection had been woven between them and Barrick. He followed the small servant out of a side door and beneath the gray sky, down a path of black gravel running through a bed of stones. They passed through one garden after another, concentric walled rings that used colors of flowers and stones, as well as their

shapes, in ways he could not entirely grasp, but their effect was so strong and so varied that it tired him just to pass through them.

At the center was a gateway, an arch of stone wound with clinging white flowers.

“Go quietly,” Harsar said. “For your own sake.” The servant bowed then and left him.

Barrick stepped through the gate, wondering what exactly he was being warned against. Were there animals here that would harm him if they caught him – or even plants? He walked as silently as he could, grateful that the gravel path had been replaced here with a track of pure, deep grass that cushioned every step.

Water dripped quietly beside him, falling from a crack in the outer wall onto a stone, prik, prik, prik. A little farther along a series of slightly larger waterfalls trickled into shallow ponds beside the path with a sound like someone gently tapping a crystal goblet. Behind both these noises he could hear a delicate hooting which might have been the call of some contented bird sitting on its nest, but turned out instead to come from a slender tower of stone scarcely twice his own height, with a hole in its top like a needle’s eye that took in the passing wind and made it into sweet music.

The Singing Garden, Harsar had called it. The Singing Garden. Even the voices in his head fell utterly silent, as if they listened to something they had loved once but had long forgotten.

LI#

He found the queen sitting in an open pavilion surrounded by flowering trees, her eyes closed as though she slept. As he approached Saqri stirred in the depths of her white robes, like petals stirred by the wind, and opened her eyes.

“My husband...my brother...always preferred the Tower of Thinking Clouds,” she told him. “But that place is too stark for me. I like it here. I would have missed this place if I could not have returned.”

“Returned from where?”

“The fields we will all go to someday – the fields from which you nearly did not return only a short while ago.” She nodded. “But even here, in the middle of all this peace, I could not pierce the veil around your home, which we call the Last Hour of the Ancestor.” Saqri’s face took on a troubled shadow. “Something grave and strange is happening there – something I have never known before, that keeps the words of my great-aunt Yasammez from me and mine from her.”

“But if you can’t talk to her, what can we do? We have to stop her – tell her the Fireflower is still alive. She will destroy Southmarch, otherwise.”

“The fact that she has not yet conquered it – that, I can sense – means that things must be more...complicated than we can guess.” Saqri shook her head. “But it is pointless to speak of it any more. Unless things change, I cannot speak to her. She will make up her mind and do what she feels she must, as she always has.”

“Then we should go there. We have to tell Yasammez that the Pact succeeded. The trust of the People demands it!” Fireflower voices and ideas rose in his head like splashing water, but it seemed clear to him he had the gist of it correctly. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You sound more like one of ours than one of yours.” Her lips curled in a faint smile. “Still, go to her, you say? Manchild, hundreds of leagues lie between us and them.”

“But you have these...doors. Gateways. I came here through one!”

Saqri made a strange little hissing sound – she was laughing. “Grandmother Void did not invite everyone in the world to use her roads, child! Just her own great-grandson, Crooked. You came here on one of his, made long ago when the gods still walked the world and my folk and the Dreamless were still allies. It only survives because the lore of making and unmaking such things is lost to us – and it would only lead you back to the city of Sleep.”

“But if we can’t use that one, there must be others!”

“A few. Some had already been discovered by accident before Crooked learned the great secrets from the old woman. In fact the gods built many of their houses so that they could use those which had already been found.”

“Then we can use them too, can’t we? You said that Southmarch is on top of – in front of, whatever you said – the palace of Kernios. That’s what you meant, isn’t it? One of those doors?”

“Any of the roads that served Kernios would be banned to us,” she said. “Even with the dark one deep in his long slumber. It is a good idea, Barrick Manchild, but it will not serve.”

“What am I supposed to do, then, just...pray? My people will be killed! And so will the rest of yours!” He threw himself down on the steps of the pavilion at her feet and slapped the stone in frustration. “I used to think the gods didn’t even exist – now you’re telling me they’re blocking my way every direction I turn. And they’re not even awake!”

Saqri raised one eyebrow at this display but did not speak. After a moment she rose and drifted down the steps past him. She raised her hand as she passed, clearly bidding him to follow her.

“Where are we going now?” Barrick asked.

“There is another source of help that remains to us,” she said without slowing.

Barrick scrambled after her as she made her way back across the chiming, singing garden into timeless halls of Qul-na-Qar.

LI#

There was a point at which the stairs they had been descending for so long became a level floor, but he could not quite remember when that happened; there was another point at which the inconstant, watery light of the palace dwindled and at last died, but he could not exactly remember when that had happened, either. Lastly, even the stone floor beneath his feet had ended; now he felt the give of loam beneath his feet, as though they had gone so deep beneath the castle they had left even the foundations behind. In fact, they had been walking in darkness so long now that it seemed no matter what Saqri might claim of the distance, they must have walked most of the way from Qul-na-Qar to Southmarch.

The silence of this endless dark place was of course not truly silent, at least not in Barrick’s teeming skull, but with the help of what Ynnir had told him and the feeling that the blind king himself was not too far away, Barrick was able to rise above the chaotic knowledge of the Fireflower and concentrate on staying close to Saqri, who led him not like a mother leading a child through an unfamiliar place, but like someone leading another family member through a place in which they had both lived their entire lives.

Is it confidence in me she’s showing, or contempt? It did no good to wonder, of course, because they probably meant the same thing to a Qar, somehow. Still, the voices in his head did not feel nearly as alien as they had before. He almost thought he could live with them.

At last, and only because of the deep, awesome darkness through which they had been traveling, he finally saw the light: it was such a faint change that he would never have

recognized it otherwise -- more the memory of light than light itself. Although it grew steadily stronger as he walked it was still a hundred paces or more before it even brightened his surroundings enough that he could finally make out the silvery outline of Saqri before him, then another hundred more before he could see the sides of the narrow, dirt and stone passage through which they walked, something that looked as if it had been crudely cut from the living earth in a single day's work.

Where...? he wondered, but felt Saqri's thoughts settle gently over his, urging him to silence.

Soon enough.

The dim radiance ahead began to grow until it became a pearly cylinder of light, its base round and shiny as a coin. As they grew closer he saw that the cylinder was a single large beam from a hole in the top of the tunnel, and the circle on the floor was the surface of a circular pool not much larger than a writing table but just wide enough to catch all the beam of light from above. Saqri stopped and he stopped beside her.

The Deep Library, she said.

Barrick had no idea what he was supposed to think. He had heard the name more than a few times from Ynnir. He had supposed it some deep vault in the lower part of the castle, or even a massive hall, filled with old scrolls and decaying volumes, not a little (at least in his mind's eye) like the library in Chaven's observatory or his father's rooms in the Tower of Summer.

The queen reached out without warning and took his hand in hers, then lifted her other hand into the light and gestured for him to do the same. Barrick had to take a step forward to

reach, and as he did so he could see up the vertical tunnel toward the gleam's source, a hole in the darkness that seemed impossibly distant, at its center a single point of white light.

Yes, Saqri told him. It is Yah'stah's Eye, the hopeful star. It always shines above the Deep Library.

Barrick was astonished. But...but I haven't seen a star in months...! The Mantle – the word came to him unbidden, handed up by the Fireflower as if it had been a small object he had dropped – the Mantle covers the whole land...!

But the Deep Library does not see the Mantle, Saqri told him. It sees things as they are, or at least as they were. And the Eye is always above it. Now give me your thoughts and your silence.

It takes both of the heirs to the Fireflower to open the Deep Library, the voices told him – or was it Ynnir's voice somehow braiding all the other voices together into one? That is another reason why losing you or Saqri now would cripple the People forever.

For a long time he only stood, listening to the murmur of the Fireflower, feeling the broad shapes of Saqri's thoughts as she wove the summons, a chain of questions almost like children's riddles:

LI#

“Who is gone but remains?

Who is without but within?

Who will come back to the place they never left...?”

LI#

He began to feel the presences gathering even before he saw the first of the silvery strands start to form in the radiance like bubbles clinging to the weeds in a pond. They came

from nowhere – they came from nothing – but by the time they floated in the beam of light they were something. They lived, at least a little, they thought, they remembered.

“We honor the summoners. We honor Crooked’s House. We honor the Fireflower.”

The voices washed through his head like the sound of water dripping in a dark place. As each voice spoke, though it could be heard only inside Barrick’s thoughts, the pond or well at his feet spawned a little circular ripple. Soon the circles were crisscrossing. “Ask us and we shall give you what is in us to give.”

“The House of the People and the Last Hour of the Ancestor no longer share any of Crooked’s Roads,” Saqri said, her silent words seeming to drift up into the beam of light like motes of dust. “How can the distance be crossed? How can the gap be bridged?”

“In the elder days one of the brightest could ride to the Ancestor in three days – fewer if his mount was not earthbound.”

“Yes,” said Saqri with a touch of asperity in her voice, “and the gods could make scented oils appear from the air then, too, and cause stones to blossom. Those days are gone. The great steeds have broken their traces years ago and fled to far lands. Those who traveled Grandmother Void’s roads can only go where the way is not barred – and the place we wish to go is barred to us.”

It was unutterably strange to stand before the Deep Library, to hear the voices and watch the surface of the pool rippling as if beneath the strike of invisible raindrops. It was different than the way the Fireflower manifested itself in his head, more chaotic and less like the conversation of humans, but with Saqri directing it, it did not pass beyond what he could take in, although he could by no means understand all of it.

“Terrible things are on the wind,” the Deep Library voices murmured. “The forbidding of the old roads, the dying god, the plans of the southern mortal that make even Heaven tremble...”

“And Yasammez has a Fever Egg,” another voice said in mournful singsong. “The end must truly be near. Perhaps even the Dark Lady has finally discovered despair.”

“The roads are still there, if only the gods would open a way for you.” moaned another.

“Stop!” Saqri said, and her voice was like a whipcrack. “The gods themselves are asleep! You know that, because it has been true for half of your existence! And besides, even were they not beyond our reach, with Crooked dying and the rest dreaming, the most powerful of the gods are our enemies! The Three Brothers and all their followers hate us. That is one reason for my great-aunt’s desperation.”

“Then all is lost,” whispered one of the Deep Library; a chorus echoed it, agreeing. The faces formed and disappeared, roiling for their moment of existence like weeds in a swirling river.

“All is lost!” they muttered.

“Almost all,” said one. “Do they hate the mortals, too?”

Saqri abruptly held up her hand.

“May I dismiss them?” she asked. It took Barrick a moment to realize she was asking him. Apparently it took both halves of the Fireflower to dismiss the Deep Library as well as summon it.

He raised his hand into the light and let her do what had to be done.

LI#

They walked back in what Barrick assumed was the silence of defeat.

“So what will we do?” he asked at last. “My people – the people of the castle – your people – they will all be killed!”

“If we cannot stop them, I fear you are right.”

He could not believe her calm. “But we can’t stop them. Everyone agrees! We are on the other side of the world and you heard what the Deep Library said – there are no roads left for us to use.”

“Not exactly.” Saqri’s thoughts were quiet, almost hesitant, as though she was still working out the details of some complicated picture in her head. “They said the gods’ roads are still available to us.”

“But the most powerful gods hate the Qar – you said that yourself! So what good would that do?”

“Ah, yes, the gods may hate the Qar,” Saqri said, an invisible shape in the darkness beside him, “but I cannot help wondering how they feel about your folk?”

## Chapter Five

### Haunters of the Deeps

8\*8\*8

"...But in those days the Kracian hills were a fierce, lawless place. A clan of bandits came into the valley where Adis and his parents lived while he was out with the flock, and they killed his parents and took what little the family had." - from "A Child's Book of the Orphan, and His Life and Death and Reward in Heaven"

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"I am weary and heartsick," said Olin Eddon. "Why must I remain here? I have seen the ships roll in, seen the soldiers in their thousands disembark. Yes, the Autarch has ample might to humble my poor country. What purpose does this serve?"

Pinimmon Vash looked up to the deck of this latest, largest supply ship. The chief of the cargo-men waved a signal, letting the paramount minister know that the show was about to start. Other ships were unloading as well -- the harbor that had once served mainland Southmarch was now the hub of the Autarch's tent-city along the shore of the bay -- but it was this one that was the object of the Autarch's greatest interest.

"It was the Golden One himself who decreed that you must watch from here, King Olin," Vash said as politely as he could. "That is all you need to know."

"Why is no one in Southmarch firing on your ships?" Olin's face was pale and damp with perspiration. "Surely not even Tolly would fail to defend his own castle. What trick has your master played to land here unopposed?"

"Ask the Golden One about such minor matters, King Olin, not me." Couldn't the northerner see that all this had nothing to do with Pinimmon Vash himself, that he was only doing what his master required of him? The foreign king was less of a savage than Vash had expected but his manners were clearly not up to the rigorous standards of a real court. After all, wasn't having to stand here on the sunny waterfront without even a parasol – where were those cursed slave boys, anyway? – much harder on the older, more delicate Vash?

He became uncomfortably aware that King Olin was staring at him. "Yes?"

"You seem like a civilized man, Lord Vash," said Olin, weirdly mirroring Vash's private thoughts. "An intelligent man. How can you do the bidding of someone like the Autarch? He has said -- if he is not completely mad, of course, if what he plans can actually be done – he has said he intends to bind up the power of a true god so that everything that lives on the earth will be his slaves!"

Vash almost smiled at that, but he had not lost all caution: he quickly looked around to make certain they were alone before answering. "And how is that different from what we have now, King Olin? The Golden One already rules absolutely, so what else can I do but comply? No, your question is naïve, I fear. You might just as easily -- and just as fruitfully -- ask me why a stone falls to the ground when dropped or why the stars hang shining in the sky. That is how Creation is ordered. Only a fool would give up his life when there is no hope things will ever be otherwise."

Olin Eddon didn't appear offended, but neither did he seem convinced. "Then no tyrant in history would ever have been overthrown. The Twelve would not have cast down the dictator Skollas and Hierosol would have crushed Xis a thousand and more years ago."

"If the gods willed it, so it would have been," agreed Vash. "But I see no such truth in the world we inhabit here, today. The Autarch rules us, may he live forever – all else is but an airy game of what-might-be."

Olin continued to stare at him, intently enough that Vash began to feel quite put out. Didn't this northern upstart realize what an honor was being done to him, having the paramount minister of all Xis as his attendant? "You really should pay attention to the unloading, King Olin. It was the Golden One's express wish..."

Olin ignored him. "Not all southerners are as fatalistic as you, Lord Vash. I know many of your continent who fought back against the Autarch – one in particular who became my friend."

Pinimmon Vash could not help laughing a little. "And what did it gain him? Not much, I imagine." A thought suddenly came to him. "Hold a moment. Do you talk about the traitor, Shaso dan-Heza? The Tuani general who tried to thwart the rightful claims of Autarch Parnad, the Golden One's father?"

Now it was Olin's turn to smile, a wolfish grin deep in his gray-shot beard. "Rightful claims? Now who is being purposefully naïve? Shaso and his people fought Parnad and Parnad's father, too, and even though I hear a puppet of sorts has been put on the throne in Nyoru, I imagine some in Tuan will continue fighting until one day they drive you Xixians out. The Tuani are no cowards and they clearly do not agree that the Autarch's rule over all the world is inevitable."

Again, Vash was nettled by this upstart king. “And your friend, the traitor Shaso? This mighty bulwark against tyranny? Where is he today?”

Olin’s expression grew dark. “I do not know. Nor would I tell you if I did, of course.”

“Of course. Now, enough of such contentious matters.” Vash shook back his long sleeves and gestured to the gang ramp leading down from one of the larger cargo ships onto the mainland harbor’s biggest loading dock. “Look. This is what the Autarch most particularly wanted you to see.”

Even many of the Xixian sailors on the dock and the soldiers on the beach had wandered over to watch as a group of large, awkward, man-shaped things made their way down the ramp. Each had two arms and two legs, but there the resemblance ended. Their stocky legs and short arms were covered in bony plates, with stiff bristles growing between them and up the creatures’ backs. Their hands looked more like the digging-claws of moles, proportionately large and covered with leathery, warted flesh. But it was their torsos and heads that dragged at the eye: they had strange armored midsections, as if they were upright beetles or tortoises, and these rose up in the front to cover their necks and the bottoms of their heads from below, just as a continuation of their back armor curled down over the tops of their heads, so that all that could be seen of their faces were eyes peering out of the shadows between the unjoined pieces of bony shell, as if they were giant oysters or armored men wearing absurdly large helmets. But for all their defenses, the weird things seemed ill – they halted for no reason, or stumbled as they walked. One fell and could not rise, legs kicking slowly in the bright sunlight.

“These things...” Olin said, blinking, “they are monsters. Did you do this to them?”

“Vash did nothing!” said a voice behind them, floating down from above as if a god had spoken. Which, in a way, one had, since the voice was the Autarch’s, who was coming toward them across the sand on his ceremonial platform carried by slaves, as though he were himself some breed of giant, many-legged creature. “In fact, these splendid creations were first bred in my great-grandfather Aylan’s day.”

“So madness runs in the blood of your family,” said Olin in disgust.

“Something you and I have in common, eh?” Sulepis grinned. “These creatures were of the Yisti once, who are the same blood as your northern Funderlings, although this breed, the Khau-Yisti, were larger and more savage, wild diggers where their Yisti cousins were almost as civilized as men.” He spoke with the air of one who tries to impart an interesting lesson to a dull student. “My great-grandfather’s breeders captured the wild tribes, took the largest and strongest of them and began to shape them to work the mines of the Xan-Horem mountains, dangerous places where the earth often collapses. These Khau-Yisti, though, are strong and stolid, and after a cave-in they can dig their own way out – a most thrifty sort of worker to have.” He frowned, watching the creatures struggling down the gangplank. “Traveling does not seem to agree with them, or perhaps it is your chilly northern air. Many died during the voyage, and these do not look to last much longer...”

"I'm afraid half of them have died already, Golden One," Vash said.

“Your people bred these poor creatures like hounds? Just to work in the mines?” Olin seemed surprised, as if he had learned nothing about the Xixian royal family. If Vash had not felt a little nauseated by the sight of the trudging, subhuman Khau-Yisti filing across the sand, he would have been amused by the northern king’s naivety.

“Oh, not just for that,” said the Autarch cheerfully. “As you will see, they also make the best handlers for the askorabi – with their armored bodies, they are almost impervious to the creatures’ stings. In fact, in our tongue we call these particular Khau-Yisti kalukan -- “the shielded ones”.” He smiled and looked up at the sun, which had appeared from behind the clouds. “The only thing they truly hate is too much light. Hear them murmur in pain! I think you may be right, Paramount Minister Vash. I suppose will have to use the human handlers instead.” He didn't sound particularly bothered.

The creatures were in obvious discomfort, clumsily trying to keep the bright sun out of their tiny eyes with their plated hands, stumbling, halting in confusion in the middle of the ramp, tiny, bleary eyes staring out from the depths of their carapaces. Every time they slowed, though, the handlers were on them, poking at the joints between their armor plating with sharp-tipped iron rods.

“Terrible...” said Olin quietly.

“Ah, you feel the tug of kinship.” The Autarch nodded sagely.

“What are you talking about?”

“All the Yisti are Qar. You have Qar blood yourself. Thus, these poor monsters are your kin, Olin.” The Autarch’s tone was again one of an adult speaking to a slow child. “It demonstrates your good heart that you recognize that, no matter how bestial these relatives might be. Now remain silent and pay attention – wait until you see what comes next!”

The Autarch was not even looking at Olin Eddon as he spoke, but Vash was, and he was surprised by the intensity of the cold hatred on the northern king’s face.

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The sky darkened. The day, which had been warm, suddenly took on an edge that reminded her it was still spring, and a cold one at that: true summer was still far away. The lady Idite dan-Mozan sighed and clutched her bowl of gawa a little tighter. “Just a moment longer, Moseffir,” she called to her grandson, who was digging between the stones of the courtyard with a stick. “Then it’s time to go inside for your supper.”

“Won’t,” the little boy said with the same careless certainty his father had shown at that age – and doubtless his grandfather, too, although of course Idite had not been present to see that. He wouldn’t even look at her because he knew that as soon as he did he couldn’t ignore her anymore, and that was like his grandfather Effir.

The thought of her merchant husband made the suddenly dark day seem darker still. She had lost him only a few short moons ago, and some days that terrible night of fire and blood actually seemed to be receding into the past, like a landmark seen from a barge floating down a river. But then at other times, like now, the hurt was so fierce, so...alive that it might have only just happened. It was moments like this that she had to fight off despair. Only her family gave her reason to go on. Were it not for her son and his daughters and young Moseffir here Idite might have walked out into the cold ocean off Landers Port and let the gods do what they wanted with her.

She did not know how long she had been lost in thought when she became aware of Fanu standing and waiting for her. Why hadn’t the girl said anything? Idite did not have the heart for anger, though. Fanu had always been shy, but she had been so pretty once...! Since the burns, though, she had crawled back inside herself like a desert tortoise retreating into its

shell. Even in the company of the other women, some of whom had scars far worse than hers, there were days that scarcely a dozen words came out of her mouth between sunrise and sunset.

“What is it, Fanu-saya?”

The girl’s attention had wandered to Moseffir, vigorously beheading stems of grass with his little stick. “Oh, mistress! A thousand pardons! You have a visitor.”

Idite was surprised. It was a strange time of the day for it. Still, she smiled and sat up straighter. “Truly? Well, do not keep her waiting – the Great Mother herself sometimes goes disguised, it is said, to see who honors her injunction to hospitality!”

“Oh, but, mistress,” said Fanu, “it is a man. A stranger.” She said this last word as though it described something with claws and sharp teeth.

“Ah. Did he give a name?”

Fanu shook her head. “But...he is handsome!”

Hearing Fanu say something so much like her old self was more surprising than the sex of the visitor. “All the more reason to send him in then,” said Idite, laughing a little. “You may stay if you wish.”

The girl’s eyes widened and she shook her head violently. “I couldn’t, Mistress! I couldn’t!”

“Then have one of the porters come in with him, so that propriety is maintained.”

After Fanu had fled the courtyard Idite straightened her robes. Not that she cared very much what even a handsome young man thought of her, but neither did she wish to look like an old gossip. She had the honor of her son’s house to think of, after all – it was her home, now.

The old porter led the visitor in, then went and sat cross-legged in the corner of the courtyard. Idite examined the newcomer as she gestured for him to sit in the chair across from

her. Fanu had been right: he was easy to look upon, tall and slender, with a trimmed beard just a little longer than what was proper – it gave him a bit of a bandit look – and sumptuous clothes in the northern style, the sort of thing that might ordinarily be seen on a young nobleman of Tessis or Jellon. His skin and dark, almond-shaped eyes, though, showed that his blood from the same place hers did.

“My lady dan-Mozan.” He folded his hands on his breast and bowed his head above them. “You are very kind to see me.”

The courtly gesture startled her. She had not seen it performed with such grace in years, not since she had been a young woman in Nyoru. It brought on a pang of homesickness that she covered by returning the Tuani greeting with one of her own. “I see you are my countryman,” she said. “Or you lived there. What is your name, young man, and what can this useless old woman do for you?”

He smiled and she found herself remembering more of her youth, the hot desert nights and the whispers of the women as the men paraded past in their military finery at the beginning of the Ul-Ushya Festival. “Useless? I think not. Your kindness and wisdom are legendary, Lady dan-Mozan. Again, I thank you for inviting me into your beautiful home and restful garden. I have ridden a long way to see you.”

“I am flattered,” she said, more certain than ever that something strange was afoot. “But you must know this is not my house, but my son’s. He was kind enough to take me in when my own house burned earlier this year. It was a sad time, but at least now I have the chance to see my grandchildren as often as I wish.” She gestured to Moseffir, who had managed to get dirt all over his face. Idite sighed. “Even a grandmother cannot keep that one out of mischief. Moseffir! Come here.”

“The fire, of course,” said the young man, nodding as she wiped at the boy’s face with the heel of her hand. “Please accept my very deepest regrets on the death of your esteemed husband. Effir dan-Mozan was a prince among merchants.”

“Better, I suppose, than being a merchant among princes,” she said, surprising him a little. She freed Moseffir, who waddled back to his excavation. “I do not mock you, but please do this old woman the honor of dispensing with such flowery stuff. Of course I miss my husband more than anyone can ever know. I appreciate your courtesy, but since you did not know him...”

“Ah, but I did,” said her visitor. “And I truly admired him, although I do not think he felt the same way about me.”

She watched him in silence for a long moment. “You still have not told me your name.”

“No, I have not, Lady Dan-Mozan. Because I wished you to have a chance to spend a short time in my company, so you might be prepared to think better of me than my name warrants.” He sat up, fastidiously smoothing out the sleeves of his jacket. “I am Dawet dan-Faar.”

It was as though he had thrown a pan of cold water over her. If Idite’s entire body had not suddenly felt as limp and helpless as a trampled reed, she would have run to snatch up her grandson and flee the courtyard. “Prince Dawet...?”

“Yes, that Dawet.” His face was a proud, hard mask, but she saw something in it that she thought might be pain. “The one you have heard called murderer, ravager, thief, traitor. And I must admit that not all those names are unfairly given. But despite the worst of the tales, I have never harmed a woman. On that I offer my soul in surety to the Great Mother. You are

safe with me, lady. And neither will I harm anyone in your household if you ask me to leave this very moment. You greeted me very courteously. Will you hear me out?"

She looked to her grandson, then to the porter snoring gently in a pool of light. The afternoon sun had crept out from behind the clouds again.

"What is it you want from me, Prince Dawet?"

He shook his head. "Let us put away pleasantries, at least those which do not apply. That title was taken from me, nor do I wish it back. All I desire from you is information. Tell me what happened to your house. I have been told that the fire was set by men in the service of Baron Iomer. Why should he do such a thing?"

Idite now wished she had run from the garden when the impulse had first struck her. How could she tell this well-known criminal anything true without giving away that which could not be told? And if she told him lies, what would he do to her? To her family? His promise not to harm them was, if even half the stories about Dawet were true, as useless as shoes for the wind. "I...I do not know why the fire was set. The baron's soldiers were in our house, it is true, and many think they set it, but it could have been an accident..."

"Please do not waste my time with nonsense, lady," he said, his voice firm but not threatening. "Otherwise the day will turn cold and I will feel it my fault if you catch a chill. The rumor is that he was searching for King Olin's daughter, Briony, who was in your house. I have heard this from Briony herself, lady, so do not bother to deny it."

"You...you have seen her?" After the girl disappeared that night Idite had feared that Briony was dead or in a Southmarch dungeon, although in recent days she had heard rumors that the princess had somehow reached Tassis. "Truly? She is alive?"

He looked at her closely, as if he suspected her concern was not genuine. “Yes,” he said at last. “She lives. Although she will not talk much about the night of the fire.” He paused a moment, gazing at the starlike blossoms of the pear tree. “And beside your husband, many others died that night, Lady Dan-Mozan. I want to talk about one of them. About Shaso dan-Heza.”

Idite’s heart almost stopped beating. “Sh...Shaso?”

“Yes, lady. The one whose daughter all believe I kidnapped and ravished. The man who hated me so much he swore he would cut out my heart and lay it on his daughter’s grave. Tell me about Shaso.”

“What...what do you mean?”

“Do not pretend he wasn’t in your husband’s house that night, lady. I will not threaten you, but neither do I wish to be insulted. I know he was there – I have spoken to the princess, remember?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Idite wondered if he truly would leave if she asked him. What could this famous monster want? Who could have sent him? “He was there, yes, Lord Shaso was. It was a secret. He was killed in the fire. Only myself, the other women, and a few of the servants survived.”

“But I do not believe that, my lady,” said Dawet. He stood up. He was taller than she’d imagined. His shadow fell across little Moseffir, who looked up in confused surprise, muddy twig clenched between his teeth. “I believe that Shaso dan-Heza is alive. And you, lady, are going to tell me how I can find him.”

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It was one of the most dreadful things Pinimmon Vash had ever seen, a dusty black horror as long as a supply-wagon, with six thick plated walking legs and two more that each carried a heavy claw. Almost a dozen men pulled at it with ropes but still couldn't coax it out of its cage at the bottom of the ramp, a box taller than a man, made of heavy wooden boughs woven together like wicker.

“By the gods, what is that terrible thing?” demanded Olin in a tone of horror. Even his guards had turned their backs on him to watch the angry thing swiping claws as large as ox-yokes at its handlers, who although presumably experienced with such creatures looked no happier at dealing with it than anyone else would be, their faces pale and set in tight, fearful lines.

“Have you never seen an askorab?” Vash tried to sound matter-of-fact, but it was not easy with a hissing monstrosity like that only a few dozen paces away, struggling so hard as it was dragged out of the cage that the sand it kicked was landing on the paramount minister's feet. “I believe you have them in the south of Eion. The Hierosolines call them...”

“Skorpas,” said Olin, staring as though he could not help himself. “Yes, I have seen them, but never one as big as a wagon...!”

“By my blood, but that is a handsome fellow!” said the Autarch, laughing. “Have you ever seen such a splendid machine?”

“Machine? It is a living creature, or I miss my guess,” Olin said. “I can hear its breath piping.”

Sulepis chortled. The god-king was in a good mood. “I meant only that it was a machine in the sense of being something created to fulfill a task, as a plow turns the soil or a

windmill turns a stone to grind grain. The forefathers of this brute in the Sanian desert hills were nothing like this big – scarcely larger than a hunting dog. He and his cousins have been bred just for this task.”

“And what task is worthy of such a hideous demon?” Olin asked, but if he meant to sound defiant or disgusted, he failed: even Wash could hear how shaken the man was by the sight of the terrible beast, which had just caught one of its handlers in a flailing pincer and was busy crushing out his life as the others struggled to hold onto their ropes and cursed uselessly, breaking their sticks against the monster’s hard shell.

“Why, to go down into the tunnels beneath your old home and clear them for us,” said the Autarch. “The askorabi are hunters. This fellow will make short work of anything alive down there. And he is only one of a dozen!” Sulepis sat up straight. “Ah, look there – they have lured him out at last!”

“Lured” was perhaps not the word that Pinimmon Wash would have chosen, since a dozen more of the askorab-handlers had been forced to run and help their fellows keep the monster from escaping, but with so many more hands on the cords they had at last managed to drag the hissing black beast out into the direct light. Wash saw that its tail was more slender in proportion than that of its small desert brothers, but still a formidable weapon, coiled over the creature’s back, trembling with the urge to drive the dripping barb at its tip into the handlers, who knew well enough to stay out of reach of the tail as well as the claws.

Most of them knew, Wash amended himself as another handler was abruptly caught up in a massive pincer, tweezed mostly in half, then shoved into the creature’s clicking mouth parts even as he still tried to scream. King Olin turned away, clearly struggling not to be sick, but Sulepis watched avidly.

“Into the tunnels with him!” the Autarch shouted. He turned to Olin and Vash. “Then we will seal the entrance with a big stone.” He seemed as pleased as a child describing a new game. “They are all but blind – the beast will go downward in search of food.” He frowned. “They should not have let him eat that slave. He will be sluggish.” The moment of bad humor did not last. “Then we will let the next ones go. Soon the tunnels beneath Southmarch will be full of these beauties.”

Olin looked up, pale and shocked. “But the tunnels beneath the castle – some of them must lead to Funderling Town. And from there, up to the rest of the city.”

“Yes,” said the Autarch. “Yes, indeed.”

“And it would be pointless to beg you not to do this,” said the northern king heavily, “wouldn’t it? To say that if you refrain, I will cooperate with whatever you plan?”

“Worse than pointless,” said Sulepis, smiling. “You will cooperate whether you wish to or no, Olin Eddon – your part in what is to come is important but not subtle. And although I have soldiers in the thousands, I myself must go down the depths beneath your old home. Do you see? In the dark caves there are many places to hide in ambush. But when the askorabi are finished, nothing that breathes will remain.”

“It is not that skorpa who is the monster here,” Olin said.

Sulepis only laughed. It seemed there was nothing the northerner could ever say to make the Autarch lose his temper – an astounding talent to have, and one that Vash fervently wished he too possessed. “I am another perfect machine, King Olin. I let nothing stand in my way.” He clapped his long, gold bejeweled hands and his platform was carried away, back toward the massive tent that had been set up in the town square, a new Orchard Palace underneath the skies of the March Kingdom.

The askorab had lifted what was left of the dead handler and had stung it over and over in a raging frenzy until what remained was scarcely recognizable as having once been human. As the shouting handlers slowly drove the many-legged beast toward the rocks it dropped the tattered remains into the sand. The other handlers, ashen to a man, turned their faces away as they passed. Behind them, scores of other workers were lowering more cages down from the deck, each with its own hideous, hissing passenger.

“We shall probably lose a few askorabi down in the depths,” the Autarch said cheerfully. “They are not hounds, after all – they will not return when called. It is interesting to think that generations from now their descendants will probably still be emerging from the tunnels to hunt unwary travelers...”

Olin’s movement was so swift it astounded Vash, who had come to think of the northern king as someone like himself – older, passive, a creature of mind and manners. With a shout of rage that clearly had been long bottled inside him, the northerner leaped past his own guards and in a quick two paces had crossed the sand to the Autarch’s litter, then began to clamber up onto the platform. The Autarch watched with unhidden interest, as if the murderous northern monarch was just another entertainment. Olin’s attack was hindered by the alarmed slaves, who in their sudden fear made the whole litter dip and sway alarmingly, so that Olin slid backward, away from the Autarch, but the Leopard guards had already moved to block him. Three of the elite guardsman grabbed the northerner and yanked him off the litter, then threw him to the ground. Two of them kneeled on his arms while the third set his blade against the king’s throat hard enough to draw a thin line of blood.

“Don’t hurt him,” said Sulepis, sounding for all the world as if Olin had done nothing more than startle them all with a clever trick. “He is valuable to me.”

The skin of Olin Eddon's face was white above his beard and he was trembling in every limb as the guards roughly dragged him to his feet -- he looked as though he might even try to attack the Autarch again. Instead, to Pinimmon Vash's great relief, the northerner yanked himself loose from the unresisting guards and stalked away up the beach, back toward the Autarch's camp and the guarded tent that served as his prison. His guards hurried after him.

Vash, however, was still petrified. "Golden One, I am so sorry...!"

The Autarch laughed. "I was beginning to wonder whether any blood at all ran in that man's veins, let alone the ichor of a god." He nodded. "I would not want to spoil my long years of preparation by the use of an insufficient vessel." He waved his hand and his slaves turned the platform around to face the distant rocks. "Oh, and see that all King Olin's guards are replaced, then execute them. Do it in front of the other men. Make it slow, so the lesson is well-learned by their replacements." He raised his hand and the slaves stopped moving. "There was something else..." The Autarch frowned, closing his brilliant yellow eyes to think. "Ah!" he said, opening them again. "Of course! Arrange a parley with the master of Southmarch Castle. Time is growing short."

He wriggled his fingers and the slaves carried him away down the beach -- to watch the rest of the askorabi being released into the tunnels, Vash presumed. He watched him go.

Surely even the northern king has realized by now that the Golden One cannot be resisted, thought Pinimmon Vash, as if someone had spoken to him, had questioned him, but of course he was now alone on the dock. Only a fool would do anything differently than I have done.

*That's all for now... Hope you enjoyed it... Please support writers of all stripes by never downloading from bit-torrent sites or unauthorized sources... Piracy is theft, and there will be less and less fiction if it takes its toll... Thank you for listening !*

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