

CHOSEN OF THE SUN

TRILOGY OF THE SECOND AGE  
BOOK ONE



# Chosen of the Sun



BY RICHARD E. DANSKY



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# Chapter I

The tomb they called Talat's Howe was a good twelve days' ride south-southeast of Great Forks, where it rose up near a patch of scrub wood that all the locals knew was haunted. Wiser than strangers, they gave the place a wide berth, and made sure to shut their doors securely once night fell. Shutters were drawn across windows, fires stoked in hearths, and weapons were kept close at hand in case one of the wandering dead decided to make an unwelcome guest of itself. The farmland was good by Talat's Howe, now that the gnarled laurel trees and scrub pines had been pulled from the soil, and life was easier than it might have been in other places. A clever man simply knew not to be out and about after dark for fear of dead men up and walking, and otherwise it was easy for a hard-working man to prosper in those fields. Even when the dead found a village and started pounding on a man's door, it was a relatively simple matter for torches and scythes to do their work and lay the menace to rest.

And so, once night began to fall, the farmers of the villages near the Howe ended their labors and trooped home manfully. Thinking of what lay beyond their cottage walls in the dark was something that few did, and fewer still enjoyed.

Therefore, it was something of a surprise to the farmer named Bold Hare when a mailed fist pounded on his door in the middle of the night.



**T** There were six riders, all heavily armored and riding coal-black horses. They entered the village slowly, their horses' tack jingling with an odd, funereal sound, and the scent of rot and death trailed behind them. Overhead, clouds scudded low and fast across the moonless sky. Smoke puffed to heaven from a dozen chimneys, rising up to meet the clouds along with the occasional wisp of song or conversation that escaped past wooden shutters. Firelight spilled from beneath cottage doors and around the edges of windows, but in the streets nothing moved. Livestock was penned in barns, a precaution that had been taken ever since Old Man Kheleth had found one of his cows dead in its pen one morning, drained of blood but still staring wild-eyed up at the sky.

The lead rider looked left, looked right, and then raised his hand. Behind him, the column halted obediently. The riders bore names like Bonedust and Shamblemerry and Pandeimos, and only some of them could still be said to be, in any sense, living.

Their leader, who styled himself the Prince of Shadows and who had helped to bring slaughter and madness to the ancient city of Thorn, frowned beneath his helm. "We," he finally said after a long pause to survey the scene, "lack direction."

One of the riders broke formation, urging his horse to walk him forward. He, alone of all the Prince's entourage, went helmetless. His black hair was long and held in place with a silver clasp, and his sharp features were pinched with disapproval. A row of crimson tears had been tattooed down his cheek, in imitation of drops of blood, and his eyes were a shocking shade of green. "If we were using a map scribed on something sturdier than a moth's wing, my prince, perhaps that would not be the ca—"

"Ratcatcher? Do not speak." The Prince's voice was high and soft, but it carried with it the unmistakable tone of command. "Whether the map was frail or not is immaterial. It was, after all, over a thousand years old. I at least can find it in my heart to forgive it for being fragile. What concerns me at the moment is the fact that, without the map, finding

our destination becomes somewhat problematic. Hence,” and he gestured disdainfully at the collection of huts, “our visit to this charming place.”

“Surely you cannot think that anyone *here* would know how to find our destination. They don’t know enough to scrape the dung from their boots!”

“You have a curious way of interpreting a command for silence, Ratcatcher.” The Prince’s tone was mild, but Ratcatcher reacted as if he’d been struck. Reddening visibly, he wheeled his horse back into line.

The Prince watched him go with some amusement. “Well, then, if no one else has any thoughts he must share? No? Then, Ratcatcher, be so good to inquire of *that* gentleman” —he pointed with a single slender finger at the nearest cottage—“as to where our path might lie. The rest of you may observe. It should prove interesting.”

Amidst low laughter from the other riders, Ratcatcher swung down from his horse. It made neither motion nor sound as he did so. “Good boy,” he murmured, and turned to stride toward the cottage in question. Starlight reflected off the black lacquer of his armor, and a cloak of mottled black and gray billowed out behind him. The horse watched him, placidly, with the air of someone grown bored of seeing the same play repeated endlessly. As the thunder of metal on wood cut the night, it whinnied softly, then bent its head to the lush grass. Still in formation, the other riders waited.



Bold Hare nearly dropped his mug when the first knock on the door echoed through the cottage. Until that point, it had been a fairly normal evening; his wife Grey Rushes sat weaving broad-leaved grass into a mat to trade to Kheleth’s daughter, who made good fabrics. Hare himself was bone-weary from a day in the fields. His son, who was simply called Rabbit, sat behind him, emulating his father’s posture and weary observation of the day’s labor.

The pounding on the door changed that. Hare’s wife froze, as did his son. Hare himself gently put his mug down and, half-crouching, groped his way to where his sword hung

**A** on the wall. He put his finger to his lips for silence, unnecessarily. His wife had already put down her weaving and hastily bundled their son into the corner of the room. Grey Rushes made no sound; she'd heard the dead at the door before.

**E** Painstakingly, Bold Hare took down his sword from where it hung. It was a stabbing blade, perhaps eighteen inches in length and notched from innumerable uses for which it had never been intended. Bold Hare's father had carried it before him, and his father before that, and it had been lovingly cared for down through the generations. The sword was the only one in the village, and thus was a point of pride in Bold Hare's family. Bold Hare even fancied himself a bit of an expert with it. Certainly he'd held his own in dealing with the handful of beasts who'd preyed on the livestock at various times, and more famously in a fight with a pack of woodland barbarians who thought that a passel of farmers would be easy pickings. They'd been wrong, though only briefly, and digging the mass grave for the bodies had taken longer than the fight itself.

The knock echoed again, impatiently, and then a third time. Bold Hare settled into a guard position and glanced over at his family to reassure them. His wife's face was a mask of determination, while the boy was clearly terrified. He was doing his best to hide it, though, and Bold Hare felt a swelling of pride at his son's fortitude. The next morning, he resolved, he'd start teaching the lad how to use the sword. He'd waited long enough already; it was time to train the boy in the arts of becoming a man.

The pounding stopped. Silence hung in the air. Bold Hare held his breath and counted heartbeats. Ten passed, then fifteen, then twenty.

"Maybe it's gone," his wife breathed, so low that the crackling of the fire nearly drowned her out. Bold Hare nodded, and relaxed his stance. The sword's point dipped toward the floor, and he took a half-step back, relieved. "I think so," he said, in a voice barely louder than his wife's, and then the door exploded inwards.

A chunk of wood caught Bold Hare in the midriff, and he went down, puffing. Another landed in the fire with a



shower of sparks. Others went spinning through the cottage, and the boy shrieked, his voice cracking as he did so. As if the cry were a fanfare of trumpets, a figure in black armor strode through the door.

Bold Hare picked himself up and gawked. The figure was over six feet tall, clad in elaborate armor painted in black lacquer and crafted to look as if it were made from monstrous scales. He was bareheaded, with sharp features and an expression of pure disdain on his countenance. A long sword in the shape of a serpent was in his fist, and absently the stranger sheathed it across his back as he stepped forward. The fire leaned away from him, the flames moaning, and shadows crept across the room as the intruder advanced, heralds of his darkness.



Ratcatcher stepped through the door and inwardly sighed. It was clear that this man would be lucky to remember his name, let alone where to find a long-forgotten tomb. Still, the Prince's orders were the Prince's orders, and thus must be carried out.

His gaze took in the cottage, then focused on Bold Hare himself. The man wore brown, unsurprisingly, and had a bit of a paunch. Once he'd probably had a full thatch of hair; now there was just a fringe of it around a bald pate that gleamed in the firelight. His hands were scarred and thick, the fingers clearly more used to gripping a plow than a weapon. Trembling, the man raised his sword and squared his shoulders. "Come closer and I'll spit you!" he dared, the quaver in his voice belying the bravado of his words.

Abruptly, the figure stopped, just out of reach of Bold Hare's best lunge. "You'll spit me? Amusing." Ratcatcher's voice was surpassingly pleasant, the forced jollity of a peddler too long at his stall. "I've a question for you, that's all. Do you know where a weary traveler might find Talat's Howe?"

"The Howe?" Bold Hare narrowed his eyes in suspicion. "No one ever asks for the Howe, 'cept to know how they can avoid finding it. It's a bad place, a haunted place. Whyfore you'd want to go there?"

**A** “Do you really want to know?” The figure chuckled, and Hare took another involuntary step back. The weapon suddenly felt very heavy in his fingers, and Hare became quite aware of how little he knew about swordplay after all.

**E** “Who are you?” Hare tried for defiance, but the question came out weakly. The rider advanced another step, and shadows pooled around his ankles.

“Who am I? Tsk tsk, don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to. You’ll be happier and live longer.” In a heartbeat, the smile fell from his face, and his voice grew suddenly harsh. “Now, to business. Tell me where to find Talat’s Howe, and I’ll leave. Continue to pretend you’re braver than you are, and I’ll gut your boy in front of you, then whisper a charm that’ll make your woman think you held the knife. For the last time, where is Talat’s Howe?”

Without waiting for an answer, the rider turned and strode to where Hare’s wife cowered. With pitiful ease, he tore the boy from her grasp and held him aloft. Ineffectively, the child beat at the fist that held him, crying for his father to save him. Grey Rushes leapt desperately for the armored figure and was slapped contemptuously aside; Bold Hare heard bone break as Ratcatcher’s fist crushed her cheek. Breathing heavily, he stepped forward, sword raised.

Abruptly, incongruously, Ratcatcher laughed. “Oh, you mighty warrior,” he said, and dropped into a swordsman’s crouch with the screaming boy held before him like a shield. “Come, Sir Dirt, attack me. I’m sure a swordsman of your mettle will be able to skewer me in a single blow.” He pretended to stumble, and the hand holding the boy almost dipped to the floor. Bold Hare saw his chance and lunged. With inhuman grace, the intruder brought his kicking, screaming shield up in time to knock the sword away effortlessly. Bold Hare shrieked, but could not stay his hand, and the boy’s side caught the flat of the blade with a meaty smack. The child screamed, but no blood spilled and his captor danced back mockingly.

“Care to try your luck again? You didn’t quite spit your boy last time, though I’m sure we can do something about

that." Enraged, Bold Hare lunged again, and again the human shield was brought down expertly on the flat of the blade.

Overbalanced, the farmer stumbled forward and received a blow on the ear from a mailed fist as his reward. He crashed to the floor, narrowly missing impaling himself on his sword, and grunted from the impact. Weapon still in hand, he scrambled to his knees in time to receive a solid kick to the ribs. Howling with the pain, he crawled forward on hands and knees, buffeted by additional, precise kicks and blows.

Panting, Bold Hare reached one of the cottage walls and turned, holding the sword before him with his knees drawn up tight. Looking down on him was the intruder, child held negligently in his off hand. The boy was silent now, his eyes wide with terror and his jaw slack. Red welts showed against the bare flesh of his stomach where the sword blows had landed, and his tunic was in rags.

"Is there still some fight in you?" the boy's captor inquired, and made a come-hither gesture with his free hand. "Really, I expected better from one of your oh-so-noble stock."

Slowly, Bold Hare stood. He looked from wife to son and then back again, and then dropped the sword.

"You ride south about an hour, maybe an hour and a half. Due south, mind you, straight as you can go. You'll come to a stream that's got a hedge of mountain laurel around it, some of it burned by the roots. That's your sign. Turn left and follow the creek upstream. When it peters out, you'll be at the base of a hill. Climb it, though be careful for wolves. They're thick that way, thick as thieves. Climb the hill and look east. You'll see the Howe, surrounded by old forest. There's dead men that haunt it, though, and I hope they tear you apart."

"Doubtful, I'm afraid. We have mutual interests." Ratcatcher released his grip on the boy. With a cry the child hit the floor and scrambled over to where his mother lay, then looked up at his father with accusing eyes. "However, I thank you for the warning about the wolves." The armored figure bowed sketchily, then turned his back on Bold Hare and strode toward the door.



**A** Grey Rushes saw her chance. The stranger's back was to her, and the sword was within her reach. Slowly she reached for it, then, when her fist closed on the hilt, she sprang up. "You don't touch my boy!" she said, and stabbed with all her might. Bold Hare dove to stop her, but stumbled and fell.

**B** Ratcatcher turned just in time to catch the full force of the thrust on his breastplate, below his heart. He raised a hand out of reflex, but it was too late; the blow struck home.

With a sound like a hammer on stone, the blade broke into pieces. Grey Rushes froze, astonished. Ratcatcher looked back at her with a sad smile, one that promised vengeance for perfidy and a great deal of pain. For an instant, no one moved.

Then the boy screamed. Ratcatcher pursed his lips, then struck Grey Rushes with the back of his hand. Her head whipped sharply sideways, and a sharp crack rang out. She crumpled to the floor and ceased to move.

Bold Hare howled and threw himself on the stranger, who made no move to dodge or resist. Instead, he bore the farmer's pitiful blows and brought his hand to Bold Hare's throat. The man's eyes bulged, and he gave a shriek that abruptly cut off as Ratcatcher's fingers closed on his windpipe. Without so much as a moment of hesitation, the intruder lifted his victim like a child lifting a doll. The farmer's face reddened, and his fists pounded impotently on Ratcatcher's armor as his feet left the floor. "I'll kill you," was all he could choke out, each blow coming wilder and weaker than the last.

"I don't think so," replied Ratcatcher conversationally. "Say good-bye to your boy. He might miss you." Then the stranger squeezed, and Bold Hare started what a generous man might call screaming. It took him a very long time to stop.



Vaguely dissatisfied but no longer hungry, Ratcatcher turned and left the cottage. The interlude that had played out within had not done much for his mood, and he'd found the farmer's Essence vaguely dissatisfying. The man's wife was already dead from the blow he'd struck her, and the boy wouldn't have been worth the trouble—or the screams. Besides, leaving him alive was crueler by half, a practice

Ratcatcher followed whenever circumstances permitted. *After all*, he thought, *without witnesses, artistry is nothing.*

Ahead, the Prince waited, the insufferable bitch Sandheart to his left. She had just told a joke, it seemed, as beneath his helm the Prince was laughing.

“Ah, Ratcatcher. Do you have news for us?”

“I should never have doubted your wisdom in stopping here, my prince. The peasant was indeed acquainted with the location of the tomb we seek.”

“Was?” The Prince sounded mildly amused.

“I’m afraid so, my prince. He was a terrible host.”

The Prince laughed. “I see. We certainly cannot countenance a failure of courtesy, can we now, Ratcatcher? So tell me, where do we go from here if we are to pay our respects to Talat?”

Ratcatcher bowed deeply. “It is simple, my prince. We ride south until we see laurel trees at a small stream, then turn to follow the stream to its source. From there, we should be able to see the Howe.” He paused to brush an imaginary speck of dust from his greave. “I should also inform you that I was warned to watch out for wolves and ghosts. I assured my host that his concern was misplaced, but I did appreciate at least that much consideration from him.”

“I’m sure you did,” the Prince said dryly. “Mount up. Since you disapprove of this place so much, we will leave it forthwith as a reward for your service.” Ratcatcher opened his mouth to say something, caught the Prince’s tone, and thought better of it. Instead, he gave another bow and walked stiffly to where his horse waited, patient as always. As he mounted, it chewed prosaically on a mouthful of grass, then tossed its head once, waiting.

With a bone-chilling cry, the Prince touched his spurs to his horse’s flanks. It cantered forward, headed south, and behind it the other five riders followed without comment or question. Only the boy witnessed their departure, and he was as wordless as they.

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In the morning, the villagers came to Bold Hare’s house. They found Bold Hare’s wife, dead, with her neck at



an angle like a broken marionette. They found Bold Hare's son, silent and mad, clutching his father's broken sword as if it could conjure up the ghost of peace. They found a mound of ash in the fireplace, and shattered furniture, and a smoldering patch on the grass mats that covered the floor.

And in the center of the room, they found a withered husk that they agreed must once have been Bold Hare, and they silently congratulated themselves for not coming to his aid when the shrieking had started. Then they started piling up wood for the pyre, and made damned sure that their own doors were stout.

After all, the least they could do was learn from Bold Hare's example.



It was still two hours before moonrise when the procession left Bold Hare's village, giving them plenty of time to seek Talat's Howe before dawn. Only the jangle of tack and harness, and the sound of extra bolts being thrown across doors, heralded their departure, and soon enough they left the village behind. The path south was relatively smooth. It bore the look of an old game track that men had taken for their own for a while, and then abandoned.

Now, however, it was disdained by animals as well. Neither man nor beast disrupted the small column as it moved steadily forward, and the few pairs of watching eyes in the bushes soon turned away. To the west, a thick bank of clouds blanketed the sky. Their advance was slow but steady, and the night grew steadily darker as they swallowed up the stars. Flickers of white light demonstrated the presence of lightning, and low rolls of thunder drowned out the patient hooting of owls.

Ratcatcher turned to the advancing storm and spat. "Damned if we won't get soaked again. I swear, one of us must have offended the entire West. Why else would we get rained on every damn night?"

Pandeimos muttered something about rain drowning out foolishness. He was a nemessary, an unquiet soul who'd clawed his way out of hell and stolen one body after another in order to

wreak havoc upon the living. As each shell either rotted away or was hacked down by enemies, the soul inside fled to another corpse, and then another one. Only hatred sustained such as him, which was why they were drawn to the Prince's service.



There were several such as Pandeimos in the Prince's retinue, Sandheart among them, and the sole trait that they shared was a poor sense of humor. Ratcatcher hated the lot of them, and they hated him right back, though in an impersonal, dull way. They hated all creation, after all, and Ratcatcher was just a particularly annoying manifestation of it.

After Pandeimos's comment, the others—living and dead—ignored Ratcatcher stonily. He paused for a moment, then, undeterred, bantered on. "All this, and for what? Talat's Howe? A myth, a legend, a hole in the ground—and no doubt one plundered already by grubby-fingered men with picks and shovels. I'll wager they brought the treasures of the ages home to adorn their fat wives, or melted them down for coin to buy beer and whores. And yet, here we are at the Elemental Pole of Boredom, of Idiocy, of Sheer Bloody-mindedness. That peasant certainly was an avatar of it, I swear, if such things can be said to exist. After all, the sages are still debating as to whether or not a shadow that falls in the forest creates darkness, while—"

"Silence."

The single word cut across the chatter like a whipcrack. In its wake thunder rolled, much closer now.

"Your Majesty, I most humbly apologize. I was merely—"

"I believe I called for *silence*."

There was silence. The rider at the front of the column stopped, and an instant later, the rest of the riders stopped as well. A cold wind whipped over them, the herald of the coming storm. One of the horses whinnied anxiously, and stamped its hoof upon the turf. No one spoke.

With slow deliberation, the lead rider turned his horse and walked it back along the line. When he reached the spot where the complainer's steed stood, he stopped. None of the other riders moved, hands tight on the reins to control their mounts.

"Your observations, Ratcatcher, are not amusing." The voice that issued from the Prince's hyena-shaped helm was no

longer light. Instead, it was flat and weary, with a brutal undertone. “Do you understand why I gave you the name that I did?”

The man called Ratcatcher slumped in his saddle, very carefully not meeting his master’s gaze. “No, my prince.”

“It is because you are here to serve me in the same way that a small dog serves its master, namely, by ridding the pantry of rats. Your services are welcomed, but not indispensable, and should you prove troublesome, there are always much larger hounds than you about who’d view you as a morsel. A *snack*. Am I not correct?”

“You are correct in all things, my prince.”

“No, I am not, and idle flattery is not going to get your paw out of the trap you’ve set it in. But in this small thing, at least, I most certainly am.” Ratcatcher began to respond, but the Prince waved him to silence.

“No, no, we’ll have no more of that. Now, give me your crop.”

“My crop, my prince?”

The Prince’s words were icily precise. “Yes. Your crop. The small device made of leather and bone you use when you wish to make your horse run as fast as your mouth. Give it to me.”

“Of course, my prince.” Ratcatcher handed the whip over, nearly dropping it in his eagerness. It was black, with a bone tip that was cruelly barbed, and it bore signs of hard use. The Prince examined it, then held it up so that he might see it better.

“Yes, this will do,” he remarked to the night, and brought his hands together. He spoke a word of power, and then another one, and something considerably darker than the night flared between his fingers.

Then, abruptly, it was done. The Prince lowered his hands and offered the crop to Ratcatcher, who took it, gingerly. Experimentally, Ratcatcher tested its heft, thwacking it thrice against the palm of his hand. There was no effect save the dull clang of bone on metal and the swish of the leather in the night air, and several of the other riders laughed. The Prince joined in the merriment, head cocked to one side as he observed Ratcatcher’s predicament.



Finally, uncomfortably aware of being the object of scorn, Ratcatcher made a great show of straightening himself in his seat, and bowed his head formally. "I thank you, my prince, for returning my crop to me. I trust its service to you was most satisfactory." At this, the laughter rang out louder in the night air, and Ratcatcher's posture stiffened.

"Oh, quite satisfactory, I assure you—at least to me. You may find it less so."

"My prince? I don't understand."

"That's to be expected. I have not yet explained to you how matters now stand." Again, there was a general round of laughter, and Ratcatcher turned wildly from left to right, in vain hoping the force of his gaze would silence his tormentors.

"Oh, do stop that," the Prince barked irritably. The laughter cut off, its last echoes mixing with the thunder. "You look like a drunken puppeteer's last wish. Now, take your crop and strike your steed."

"Will it not bolt if I do so?"

"Not if you are any kind of horseman, it won't."

"As you wish." Ratcatcher tapped his horse's flank lightly, to no effect. Dubious, he raised his whip hand and brought the crop down harder. Again, the horse stood stock-still, with only the ugly slap of bone on flesh marking the impact.

"Harder, you fool," the Prince snarled. "Pretend you might actually want your horse to move."

Fearfully, Ratcatcher raised the whip up over his head and glanced once more at his Prince, who nodded once.

Ratcatcher was no coward. He had descended into the vaults that lay beneath the Underworld and there pledged his service to the dead gods in their restless slumber, dreaming foul dreams of corruption and hatred. He had seen battle, and had slain so many foes that the blood had coated his armor inside and out, and he himself was crimson and wild-eyed when he emerged. He had made sacrifices of villages, and had bartered with spirits whose names it was not good to say in daylight. But Ratcatcher feared his Prince, and he feared his Prince's whims most of all.

The crop descended, meeting horseflesh with a sickening crack. The horse moved not at all. The Prince of Shadows watched impassively, any smile or concern hidden by his monstrous helm.

It was left to Ratcatcher, then, to scream. Searing agony burned through his side, and a warm stickiness along his ribs told him that he was bleeding. The riding crop lay innocuously in his hand. He lifted it and gazed at it, and there could be no mistaking what he saw. Its barbed and vicious tip was wet with fresh blood, and surely not the blood of a horse. With a howl of rage, he drew back his arm to fling it aside, but the Prince reached out and caught his wrist, just as a father might catch the wrist of an erring child.

Incredulous, Ratcatcher looked up at his master. "My prince?"

"This is yours, I think, for a while longer." Gently but irresistibly, the Prince brought Ratcatcher's hand down. "Now, I think, you'll pray for a slow pace, for every blow you strike with this will paint itself on your body. At least, until I decide otherwise." The Prince sniffed the night air and shook his head. "You're too hard on your horses in any case."

"As you say, my prince." Ratcatcher bowed his head and switched the crop to his off hand. "I have no wish to delay our journey further, and I humbly beseech your forgiveness for having cost you this valuable time."

"One more thing, my little terrier: We will have no more of your comments about the road, the food, the labor or indeed anything else until our journey is complete, and then not for a year and a day after that. If you manage to obey that particular command, then you'll be suitably rewarded. If not, I'll cut your tongue out and burn the stump, and then make you sing for your supper. Do we have an understanding?"

Ratcatcher nodded, dumbly.

"You are finally learning. Excellent. Now let's ride on, without any more foolishness. Ratcatcher, drop back in line and take the rear. Shamblemerry, take Ratcatcher's place behind me. The rest of you know your place, I trust. Let us ride, before we run out of night." He trotted to the front of

the line, then gazed back over his shoulder at his followers. “And we most certainly don’t want to get wet.”

Thunder boomed, much nearer now. As one the six horses leapt forward, their riders pressed low against their backs for speed. All save the last went for the whip within seconds.



The creek, as Bold Hare had called it, suffered from the local population’s delusions of grandeur. It was scarcely three feet across, and the shallow water it contained gave every promise of being muddy and unpalatable even to the horses. Fat raindrops broke its surface at odd intervals as the Prince’s column cantered up to the banks, eyes anxiously scanning for the promised laurel trees. Ratcatcher brought up the rear, haltingly, his horse picking its way among the exposed roots of the creekside with slow dignity.

A few moments’ diligent searching was all it took, aided by a fortuitous flash of lightning.

“There, my prince.” Sandheart dismounted easily and walked lightly down to the water’s edge, as if her armor were no more of an encumbrance than a summer tunic. Her helm was crafted to mimic the visage of a fanged stallion, and her armor was hammered with patterns like crashing waves. “Someone’s been here before us.”

She had not been long in the Prince’s service, but her eye was keen and her counsel good, and she held a place close to the Prince’s throne. The other riders feared and hated her, and for her part she returned their hatred with cool disdain. In the presence of the Prince of Shadows, however, such jealousies were pointless; the Prince could destroy any and all of them at a whim, and if it was his wish that they journey together in peace, then journey peacefully they would.

Advancing along the creekside, she knelt and pointed. Behind her, the Prince and two other riders dismounted. The others, including Ratcatcher, stayed mounted and turned their steeds around, the better to keep watch through the thickening rain. Low shrubs and tall grass covered the landscape, leaves bending under the rain and bowing to the wind. Across the muddy ditch the landscape was the same,

rising to a low wooded hill. No sign of human habitation marked the hillside; for all the riders knew, the trees might have been undisturbed since the Contagion.

None of the riding party were in the slightest bit moved by the scenery, the Prince least of all. Clearly displeased, he strode to where Sandheart knelt. "Explain."

"Here, my prince." The knight gestured to a row of burned and blackened stumps, cut low to the ground. "This is mountain laurel, or was. It's a strange place to find it, but we've all seen far stranger. No wonder the farmer used it as a landmark; it doesn't grow anywhere else around here."

"Yes, yes, I'm quite certain it's fascinating" the Prince said impatiently. "The farmer warned Ratcatcher that they'd be burned, but gone? What happened?"

"Gone for at least a half-dozen years, my liege. The cuts on the stumps are smooth and old; I'd say they were hacked down, though there's precious little use for that wood. The burn marks are older than that, though, and by the looks of them, no natural fire made them. I'd not venture a guess as to how they survived."

The Prince made a dismissive gesture. "Unimportant. The trees were a signpost, not a destination, and I don't care if they were cut down, torn up by the roots or devoured by deranged gnats. So tell me why you think we're not the first on this track?"

"Here," she said, pointing at some long lines across the top of one of the stumps, "and here. Scratches on the stumps, made with a knife. Fresh, too, though I can't understand why." She looked up and shook her head. "If we'd been half an hour later, the rain would have washed away all sign of this passage. It's a good thing we made the pace we did."

"Indeed," said the Prince with a smirk. He glanced only briefly at Ratcatcher's back, then returned to the task at hand. "Hmm. Are you sure?"

"I would not dare suggest such were I not sure, my prince. And if you look by the water's edge, you'll see a half-sandal print. Someone's not taking good care to cover his tracks."

"Sandal. But no hoof prints?"

Sandheart shrugged and stood, careful to let the Prince rise first. "I see none, and the ground's barely disturbed. I'd

say we're following one man, two at most. On foot, and traveling light, but tired and careless. He probably thought the rain would cover his tracks. The level of the water is already rising. You can hear it." And indeed, the gurgle and rush of the stream was far louder than one would think such a small rivulet would make.



The Prince swung himself back into the saddle. "He is alone, or nearly so, and on foot. And we are many, and well armed. 'Tis a pity for him that we did not arrive here first."

Sandheart mounted and turned to look at her liege. "Pity, my prince? From you?"

"Only because I've run out of contempt," he replied, and touched his spurs to his horse's flank. It snorted and turned, and began the careful process of picking its way along the creekside in the dark and the rain. One by one, the others followed. One by one, raindrops obliterated the single footprint in the mud.



Beneath the shadow of the trees, a tall man did his best to make himself seem much shorter. His name was Eliezer Wren, and he was by profession a priest, though not a very good one. He was lean and strong, with a long face that seemed incapable of more than half a smile, and light brown stubble grew on a scalp that normally was clean-shaven. His only garment was a simple robe, belted at the waist with rope, and woven sandals were on his feet. One of them was, despite his best efforts, muddy.

"Are they gone yet?" he asked of no one in particular. His voice was low and quiet, nearly drowned out by the spatter of raindrops on leaves. Nevertheless, something heard and answered.

"They're not gone yet, but they're leaving. Now hush before they notice that I'm about. There's power on the other side of the water, wild power, and it's hungry."

The speaker was not a man, nor would it ever be mistaken for one. It was a shambling effigy of woven reeds and grasses, with sinews of climbing vines and eyes of shining water. With a creaking of branches, it rose up from

**A** the creekside and strode to where Wren squatted upon his haunches. The apparition was easily eight feet tall, and its maw was wide enough to take a man in a single gulp. Rough hands on its rough hips, it stood before the priest, waiting.

**E** “They’re less likely to find us if you’d see your way clear to being less conspicuous, Rhadanthos. Not that I’m not grateful for your gift of shelter, but I’d rather live to pay it back.” There was a hint of wry amusement in Wren’s voice, but a very real urgency as well.

“If you insist,” the spirit grumbled, and sank back toward the earth. In seconds, it was little more than a rough mound, though its eyes and mouth remained. “If I had a tenth of my former strength, you’d not speak to me thus. You owe me a boon, priest. Remember that while you order me about.”

“I’m a priest, Rhadanthos. I take oaths and bargains rather seriously.”

“You are a very poor priest, Wren, and according to some of your fellows, should not be making bargains with the likes of me at all.” The spirit chuckled. “Then again, four hundred years ago there were men dwelling here who’d castigate me for speaking to one such as you. Wheels turn, Wren. Wheels turn.”

“Indeed they do. That is part of why I’m here.” Satisfied that he and the spirit were alone, Wren stood carefully and reached into his belt pouch, searching for something. “And for whatever it may be worth, it is a tenet of the faith that due reverence is to be shown to spirits and lesser deific beings by those most appropriate to show it, namely the priesthood. You, of course, are worthy of my friendship and respect, but precious little reverence, and thus it is entirely fitting that I treat with you.” He paused thoughtfully for a moment. “If you’d like, I can quote the appropriate passages.”

Rhadanthos roared with laughter. “I see. No need for that, I think. And since your unwelcome companions are gone, I’ll take my fee for hiding you.”

“I can’t give you it all right now, Rhadanthos, but I’ll pay as much and as dearly as I can. You wanted a word, a deed and a gift, yes?”

"You know the terms of the bargain, Wren. A word, a deed and a gift, and in exchange I hid you from prying eyes, muffled your breath so that unfriendly ears would not hear you, and lifted up the reeds that lay broken in your track. Now give me what is owed, or you'll see that even old godlings like myself are not to be trifled with."



Wren sketched a rough bow. "I'd not dream of cheating you or your kind. Now let me hold up the first part of our bargain. I owe you a word; what tale would you have of me?"

Rhadanthos rumbled and drew himself up to full height again. "It was a simple favor, so I'll settle for a simple tale. Two days ago you trod on my banks; now you return and things with the stench of graves ride on your old track. Give me the story of those two days and I'll call the first part of our bargain finished."

"There's not much to tell," Wren said with some embarrassment, briefly venturing far enough out from under the canopy of leaves to ascertain that the rain was indeed still heavy. "But if that's what you wish..."

"It is."

"Very well. Two days ago I first found your banks, and as I had been instructed to do by a friend whose name I prefer not to utter, I turned my course upstream to where my destination lay. You no doubt have heard tell of a mound that lies beyond where your spring arises. Men call it Talat's Howe when they feel kind, or Talat's Hell when they are drunk."

"I have heard of it," the creek-spirit rumbled. "Needless to say, I have never seen it."

"It's quite unremarkable, in truth. It's a hill, as this is a hill, and it is green with tall grasses and taller flowers that fight to claim their share of sunlight. There are even trees on it, though they're not what I'd call fine specimens of such. But it is perfectly round, and on its crest is a single standing stone, and thus men and things that deal with men know that it is no natural hill. If they come by night, they learn this lesson but briefly, as there are dead men that haunt it, and they don't take kindly to the living."

"I know it is not a natural hill, and I've never cast eyes on the thing, Wren."

**T**he spirit bowed its head in acknowledgment, and Wren went smoothly on. "Set in the stone is a lock, though not a lock that takes any key ever forged or cut. Beneath that stone is a passage, and at the end of that passage is a burial chamber. Buried in that chamber is, according to legend, song, and several of the Immaculate Texts, something that was once known as Talat."

Rhadanthos chuckled. "And who no doubt was buried with untold treasure and riches, not that a priest would have any use for such."

Wren spread his arms wide in a beneficent gesture. "Not I, but I am in service to others. You will notice, I trust, that I bear no treasure with me."

"I had noticed." The spirit stepped back, out into the rain. Rivulets of mud washed from its flanks, and it raised its arms to the heavens as if to supplicate for an even heavier squall. "Curious, that," it said, burbling.

"That was, of course, because someone had found Talat's burial chamber before me, and had emptied it of everything, including Talat, in a manner of speaking. But now I get ahead of myself. Let me speak more plainly. Having obtained the key to the lock in stone some time previously, the details of which I shall not bore you with, I approached the Howe by day and used it, pouring first a libation of blood to the spirits of that place from a rabbit I'd caught. This being done, I was not surprised to see the stone itself sink into the Howe. The strange movement of the stone revealed a passage down into the mound, and I followed it cautiously. There was no need, however. The Howe was empty. There was but an empty tunnel and an empty chamber, with a single coin on the floor."

"Preposterous!" Rhadanthos roared. "A burial mound with no burial? Such a thing would be an affront to the heavens! Stealing bones? What wretch would do that?"

"Or," said Wren quietly, "there never were any bones in the first place."

Rhadanthos blinked. "No bones? Then the entire mound...a ruse?"



Wren nodded. "Exactly. The coin dates to the first days of the Empire. I suspect it was left as earnest of the architect's rather poor sense of humor. The lock, the riddles leading me to this place—all were designed to keep the curious searching for a way into the Howe, and never to wonder why they were doing so."

"A fine jest indeed. So, you entered empty-handed, and you left behind an empty tomb?"

"That is not quite the case, I confess."

"Oh?" The monstrous figure leaned forward, curious. "Explain."

"Well, I took the coin. It was left as my fee, after all. And it would have been shameful not to leave something in return."

"Something?"

"Something." Wren adopted a supplicant's humble posture. "Though I don't suspect it will be to the liking of those who rode after me."

"You've more assassin in you than priest, Wren, and more thief than either." The spirit shook its ponderous head slowly. "I'll not trouble you for the details as to the traps you laid; I know that they are deadly to men, and that is enough. Now, for the rest of your tale?"

"The rest you know. I hid myself back here, and cut some ashes from the stump to summon you when I heard the riders approach. It seemed prudent."

"It did indeed. Consider the first portion of your debt paid. Now, as to the second."

In response, Wren took from his pouch a single coin. It was golden; that much was clear in the brief flickers of lightning. "A gift," he said, and threw it with all his might toward the rough valley below. A distant splash told him that it had found its destination, the center of the creek.

"Very clever, Wren," the spirit chuckled. "Your gift is accepted. I'll let the coin from the heart of Talat's Howe lie in the muck, and laugh every time another fool rides past to seek the fabled treasure. Now you just owe me a deed, and one of my choosing."

"May I point out that if I labor here in service to you, I am rather likely to meet with the riders whose stench you disliked so



**A** much, and thus am most unlikely to finish my task.” Wren spoke softly, choosing his words carefully. What he was attempting was dangerous. Spirits were rarely open to re-negotiation, he knew, and while Rhadanthos seemed jolly enough, he could easily take Wren’s flesh off his bones in a matter of seconds.

**L** “I hear your words, priest, and I do not like what they say. What are you asking for?” the spirit growled.

“Time. And in return, I shall work a greater labor for you than the one you might receive from me now.”

“Hurrum. By all rights I should bind your feet with roots until you served me, and set biting flies to dance on your eyes while you labored.”

“And you’d get poor service from me that way, Rhadanthos. You know better than that. Grant me this, and I swear by the love of the Five Dragons, you’ll not regret it.”

“That is not,” growled the spirit ominously, “an oath of which I am particularly fond. But,” it said, straightening its form until it stood, willow-like, upon the hillside, “you have made me laugh, which I value greatly, and you tell a good tale. Go. Find your way, if you can, and then return to me to settle your accounts. I’ll give you seven years, Wren, but with each year the debt you owe me grows. Pay it sooner and your service is light. Pay it later and your labors will have songs written about them. Seek to avoid paying it, and I will have my vengeance.”

“Thank you, Rhadanthos,” Wren said, heartfelt relief in his voice. “I will not disappoint you. If nothing else, it would be bad for the priesthood if one of us broke that sort of promise. It would cause no end of talk.”

Despite himself, Rhadanthos roared with laughter again. “Go, priest, before I change my mind and keep you here as my jester. The rushes will part for you until the edge of my domain, and all that grows will hide your passing.” With that pronouncement, he sank into the earth and vanished. But all the grasses and weeds of the long hillside now bowed to where the priest stood, regardless of the direction of the wind.

Wren noticed this and quirked one eyebrow in amusement. Hopefully Rhadanthos would remember to withdraw

his power before the riders returned, else he'd have some unpleasant explaining to do. Wren had not gotten a good look at his pursuers from where he'd crouched, but even from a distance he'd been able to tell that they were Anathema, and worse. He seriously doubted that the traps he'd left at the Howe would be enough to do more than annoy them, but annoyed monstrosities of that sort could no doubt do him—and the spirit—quite an injury.



Sighing, he took stock, rescued his pack from the tree branch he'd hung it on, and then set a course south and west, over the crest of the hill. The slopes ahead looked to be thickly wooded, tough country for men on horseback, and he'd take every advantage he could get. Eventually he'd have to cut back to the north, but he was confident he'd be able to find ship passage to Nexus, and whatever assignment awaited him there. That is, if the little joke he'd played back at the Howe didn't catch up with him first.

Perhaps it had been pride, a desire for the ages to know him. After all, it had been hundreds of years since Talat's Howe had been raised, and never once had it been disturbed; how could he have known that others were searching for it not two days behind him? He'd never imagined that the token he had left behind would be found in his lifetime, or indeed found at all.

And thus, he was very worried about the fact that he had left a token with his mark on it amidst the lethal traps he'd strung up in the corridors and chambers of the empty burial mound. A clever man might be able to decipher the token, discern its origins and hunt down the one who had left it there.

The Five Dragons alone knew what Anathema of that power would be capable of.

Rather nervous, Eliezer Wren walked faster.



“What is the name on the token, Ratcatcher?” asked the Prince of Shadows. Sandheart's unmoving body lay at his feet, and it was none of his doing. His anger was terrible, and his anima flared around him like the beating heart of some great nightmare beast.

Ratcatcher did not answer. Rather, he cautiously approached and, bowing, placed the token in the Prince's outstretched hand. Behind him, the others murmured amongst themselves and kept a sharp eye out for more snares like the one that had claimed their companion. She lay on the floor, a narrow blade neatly protruding from her eye, and there could be no doubt that she was in fact dead.

This was a lesson, one that Ratcatcher understood. He could see plainly that power is useless if it is not guarded, and that a clever assassin may succeed where an army cannot. He also saw that Sandheart had gotten cocky, and thus had gotten herself killed, and that the Prince's anger was as much directed at Sandheart for her foolishness as toward her killer.

They had called upon their powers to tear open Talat's Howe while dead men made obeisance to the Prince. The ghosts had stood at the base of the Howe, never drawing nearer, and whined their devotion as he strode past. Behind him, the others had followed, and the ghosts had watched fearfully as they did so. One called out a warning to Sandheart, but she ignored it. *More fool she*, Ratcatcher thought. *More fool she*.

Power, raw power had shattered the lockstone and sent great gouts of earth geysering into the night. One by one, they had descended into the gaping maw of the tomb, and in the distance they could hear the wolves howling in fear. The wolves, Pandeimos had noted, were wise. He'd seemed uneasy, Pandeimos had, as he'd entered the tomb. Shamblemerry had made some comment about it, and Pandeimos had snapped at her. He'd said that he'd entered his own tomb once already, and that this place had the same feel. The walking dead among the Prince's retinue were sullen after that, and the living were thoughtful.

They had come seeking a dead man and a sword. The dead man was one against whom the Prince bore some sort of grudge, and it was always wise to indulge the Prince's hatreds. The sword was the one that this Talat had borne, and in passing Ratcatcher had gleaned that it was of a vintage and a craftsmanship to put the mace the Prince bore to shame. Thus, it behooved them to find this place, to sack

it, to desecrate the bones of the one who lay within and to make off with his grave goods as a final insult.

Alas, then, that they had found a tomb empty save for a maze of hasty traps. Sandheart had triggered the first one, striding confidently forth into the dark, and she had paid the price for that arrogance.

Ratcatcher had seen the trap, of course. It would have been nigh impossible not to, so amateurishly had it been set. But calling out a warning would have required him to speak, and he was not willing to risk the Prince's ire in this matter any further.

The fact that he had hated Sandheart with a loathing so pure as to be luminous had, he decided upon reflection, played some small part in his decision as well.

The Prince had been furious, and in the tomb little withstood his fury. By the time the least edge of his rage had been abated, the rest of the impudent thief's traps lay in ruins, as did much of the interior of Talat's Howe.

Ratcatcher had not been terribly surprised to find it empty, once he'd finished picking through the ruins that the Prince had created. What had surprised him, however, was finding a token the thief had arrogantly left behind.

If the thief had been clever, and had found a deep enough hole to hide in, he might have survived his cleverness and its consequences. Leaving the token, however, was too much. It was bragging, and it was a gauntlet thrown at the feet of the Prince of Shadows.

The Prince did not like braggarts. The Prince did not like those who murdered his servants. And most of all, the Prince did not like those who thwarted his plans, and the man who had left this token had done all three.

Ratcatcher found himself feeling sorry, briefly, for the unknown assassin. Then he put the thought out of his mind, bowed, and backed away while the token was examined. Long seconds went by while the Prince stared at it, then suddenly, it was over. He closed his fist on it, and crumbled it to powder.

"That token was temple-made," hissed the Prince, "And it belonged to a priest named Eliezer Wren. I'll have his heart on a spit. Bring it to me, any of you, and you'll be rewarded. Now go!"



**T**he others left and rode off slowly, the Prince's stallion with them. A few seconds later, a deafening explosion shook the hill, and the Prince strode forth from the wreckage. He dusted his hands and mounted, his body ramrod-stiff in the saddle.

**E** "A fitting tomb," he said, and was silent for a moment. "She will not rise again. There are enchantments on this place to prevent such things. No doubt Eliezer Wren was unaware of such when he left behind his little toys, but he'll pay for it nonetheless. Let us leave this place, then, and do our best to find this unfortunate priest. Ratcatcher, Pandeimos, ride at my flanks. We are leaving, and may the gods and spirits help anyone who makes the least move to thwart us."

A flash of lightning split the sky, freezing everything in a tableau of grim determination for a single moment. Then it was gone, and the thunder rolled in, and with it came the clamor of hooves, galloping.



## Chapter 2

The Most Learned and Venerable Hai Sholosh took his duties very seriously, which is why Tanak Milam didn't take him seriously at all. Had Sholosh known this, he probably would have disciplined his acolyte severely, but since he was fundamentally absorbed in his work, it worked out for the best for all concerned.

Sholosh was an Immaculate of the Fourth Coil, who had given long years of service to the Order and as a reward had been given a post in a secluded shrine near Chanos. The temple was a small one, housed in a building that had once been a family chapel on a minor estate belonging to House V'neef, and a posting there was regarded as quite the prize. The accommodations were spacious, the duties light, and the temple grounds harmonious to mind and eye.

It had been suggested to Sholosh when he accepted the post at Trae Chanos that he devote his time to teaching human acolytes the art of translating and recopying the Immaculate Texts. A devotee of the path of Hesiesh, Reciter of Loud Hymns and Efficacious Prayers, Sholosh was a past master at the art of the illuminated manuscript, and the precision of his brushstrokes was legend. One story often told to ambitious acolytes was that of Shraeash Cynis, who fancied himself an artist until he first saw a manuscript in Sholosh's hand. At a single glance, Cynis understood that his work would never equal that which he saw before him, and so he took a knife and slashed the palm of his drawing hand, lest he be tempted to try the impossible.

But Sholosh would have none of that. Gracefully, firmly, humbly, he declined every offer and averted every entreaty. Old in service, comfortable with the contribution he had made, and intimately aware of his fading strength, he wished nothing more than to attempt the path he had turned away from in his early days in the Order.

“For is it not fitting,” he had said to the Mouth of Peace herself, “that at the end of all things, when the pattern of one’s life is woven, is it not fitting to string the loom for the next life?” And to this even the Mouth of Peace acquiesced, and decreed that he might live out his days performing the duties of holy divination, and thus assisting the natural order of the world.

“After all,” she confided in one of her advisors, “what harm could it do?”



Tanak Milam was a bastard’s bastard, which was why House Mnemon had been only too glad to see him enter the Order. Of moderate talent and immoderate temper, he had been gently but firmly guided into the ranks of the priesthood. This was done both in the hope that the Order would teach him mental discipline and the certainty that, once the Order of the Immaculate Dragons took him, Tanak would be safely out from underfoot.

And so he had entered the Order, his feeble powers harnessed imperfectly to Heshiesh’s path. Within a few short years, he had acquired an admirable reputation for efficiency in his labors and diligence in his studies, along with a less admirable one for being an officious, overbearing, ambitious loudmouth.

Thus it was that a brilliant plan was conceived. To teach Milam humility, he would be placed under the authority of the humble Sholosh. To teach him patience, he would be removed to the sleepy temple at Trae Chanos. And to teach him that his elders and betters in the Order had seen a thousand like him come and go, and that he had best learn to behave himself if he ever wished to achieve a more desirable posting, he would be sent packing with no notice and less consideration.

In the end, it was decided that Milam, who had just attained the First Coil of the mysteries, would be sent to “study” under Sholosh, to assist him in his labors for the foreseeable future.



Milam had accepted this with good grace, at least publicly, and had taken up his position with Sholosh in good time.

Rapidly, however, he learned the exact nature of the predicament he was in. For it happened that Sholosh was obsessed with divination and astrology, and with reading the stars and omens to pinpoint the location of Anathema when those ancient powers were spat back into the world. Sholosh approached his labors with grave solemnity. After all, his task was one of vigilance for the Realm entire, and the slightest lapse in discipline could have disastrous consequences. The fact that there were diviners and astrologers of much greater expertise and skill laboring toward the same end meant nothing to him; he would carry out his duties as best he could. After all, he reasoned, sometimes the child who sees the flower for the first time is the only one who can see the butterfly nestled within.

Milam, for his part, thought this to be arrant foolishness, and as a result thought Sholosh to be an arrant fool. Thus, it was with less than good grace and spiritual equilibrium that he brought the instruments of divination to the temple's small central garden as the sun rose on an unseasonably chilly morning. Sholosh stood there, wearing nothing more than a plain robe of white cotton and sandals. Milam, for his part, was garbed in a heavy robe surmounted by a wool cloak, and he was shivering. As he pushed the cart with the ceremonial implements into the tiny garden, Milam mentally cursed the old man for demanding a reading outside instead of within the comfortably warm sanctuary. Most days this garden was pleasant enough, and cool, but during the morning it was always quite chilly. Sholosh was fond of observing the stars from its confines, no matter how cold the nights might be, and apparently the old man had seen something in the last night's vigil that had excited him tremendously.

"Is the water pure or salt, Tanak?" Sholosh's voice was clear and surprisingly strong, a stark contrast to his frail form. "Pure works better for this sort of thing."

"I know, Most Learned Sholosh." Milam was taller, bulkier and heavier than his putative mentor. His face was handsome, in a sullen sort of way, and he missed the black locks he had sported before joining the Order. "I have



**A** brought you the Five Instruments of Divination, and should you wish it, I have prepared a sanctified knife, a hare and a chicken so that you may read their entrails if you so desire.”

**S**holosh waved. “No, no, none of that will be necessary. The signs were quite clear last night. A pity you did not join me, though I understand that it was a cold night for young bones.” He chuckled with artless condescension, and Milam found himself irrationally hating the old man for a brilliant moment. Instead of replying, he simply wheeled the cart forward, and bowed.

The cart itself was made from some dark wood not native to the Realm, and it had seen long centuries of use. On its top rested an intricately carved crystal bowl. Next to it was a pitcher of silver, an inkwell of jade, a golden brazier and a rod carved from five different woods so cunningly that it seemed to have been taken whole from a single, miraculous tree. Sholosh examined the items, clucked to himself, and then selected the silver pitcher. Chanting quietly, he poured the bowl full to the brim with clear water. Milam joined in the chanting half-heartedly, which drew a raised eyebrow from his mentor.

When the bowl was full, Sholosh pointed to the wooden rod. “Take it, Milam. It’s time you participated in this.”

“I would not dare to presume, Most Learned. I am untrained in the arts of divination, and would not dare interfere with your scrying.”

“You are also quite certain that I am an ancient fool, and that all this is the fantasy of an old man who has spent too long on the Wheel.” There was steel in Sholosh’s voice now. “That may be. But for the moment, unworthy one, I am still Most Learned, and you are my student. Take the wooden rod.”

“Yes, master,” Milam mumbled sullenly, and reached for it. Before he could take it in his hand, Sholosh caught his wrist in a grip like a circle of steel. Try as he might, Milam could not move his arm a hair’s breadth, and unthinkingly drew back his other hand as if to strike.

“That would be very foolish,” Sholosh said softly. “Very foolish indeed. I have walked my path far longer than you have been alive, you silly boy, and you have not learned all of your lessons well. Now,” and he adopted a more pedantic

tone, “before I let you do this, let us see if you are worthy to attempt divination. We shall see how well you heed your studies. The wooden rod before you—what is its purpose?”

“It is the wood that binds the world, that draws life up from the earth and light down from the sky.” Milam gave the answer perfunctorily, but Sholosh seemed satisfied and released his wrist. Wincing, Milam took up the cylinder of wood and gazed at it. Apart from its unique composition, it seemed quite ordinary. A swift blow to the back of his hand brought his attention back to the present, and he tried to look contrite as Sholosh quizzed him further.

“Somuch for the wood, aimless one. Now, what of the water?”

“It is the sea that holds secrets, and which gives birth to mystery on the shore.”

“You might have studied after all. The bowl?”

“Air, which brings whispers to the ear, and which shrouds the world.”

“Very good. Now perform the ritual.”

Milam bowed his head, in part to hide the look of disdain on his face. Apparently he had successfully hidden it from Sholosh, as the old man was smiling. “As you wish, Most Learned,” was all Milam could trust himself to say. He took the bowl, into which a long-dead craftsman had painstakingly etched the shape of a map of the Realm, and rang it five times. Ripples formed in the water, and they did not subside even after Milam once again laid the rod down on the cart.

“Ah, superb.” Sholosh’s voice was wry, as if he had expected this result all along. “You do have some talent after all. Tell me, then, what comes next?”

By way of reply, the younger priest once again took up the rod and held it to the brazier. “Fire, which illuminates mystery, and devours that which has been hidden.” The wood smoldered, and Milam quenched it in the still-rippling water. Ash washed from the stick floated to the bowl’s surface and danced in patterns. Against his better judgment, Milam found himself leaning closer, peering at them in an attempt to make sense of the ever-shifting patterns they made. “What does it mean, Most Learned?”



Sholosh's face split in a wide grin. "Ah, so you do care! There is hope for you yet, young one. Now, pay careful attention to the patterns on the water. Do not attempt to make sense of them. Let them explain themselves to you. Make no effort. *Accept.*"

Milam nodded, and tried to still his racing thoughts. Never before had he taken part in a divination, and now the results promised to be spectacular. No doubt, he would be called upon to explain what he had seen, perhaps before the throne of the Mouth of Peace herself! He would be called back from this dreadful posting in honor, and never see Trae Chanos again. Smiling, he looked down on the bowl.

To his horror, the waters stilled, and the ashes sank. He looked up, and his eyes met Sholosh's.

"Well?" the elder priest asked quietly. "What did you see?"

"I saw..." Milam's voice trailed off into nothingness under the Most Learned's gaze. "I saw nothing."

Sholosh nodded. "Good. You admit your failure. Why is this, do you think?"

"My thoughts were of myself, Most Learned." There was a note of genuine humility in his tone, which surprised him. "I did not see what the ashes held."

"Fortunately, I did." He smiled warmly, and Milam felt his spirits rise. "You are a quick study, and you have taken the first step on an important road. But for the nonce, you have journeyed far enough. Give me the last instrument." Wordlessly, the young Immaculate gave him the inkwell.

"Do you know why we are performing this divination, student?"

"No, Learned One."

"If you had observed the stars with me last night, you would know. They speak plainly; soon the Wyld Hunt must ride again."

"Another abomination is born?"

The old man nodded. "I am afraid it is true. And so the ink, which is the darkness that follows in Anathema's wake, will show us where this abomination will rear its head." With infinite care, he unstopped the ink bottle and let a single drop fall into the water. Immediately it began to dart

back and forth, looking like nothing so much as a tadpole created from the stuff of night.

Milam watched, fascinated, and Sholosh watched Milam. “What will it do?” he asked curiously. “I confess to never having seen this before.”

“That is because until now you could not be bothered with the old fool’s foolishness. Remember that before you surrender to your pride again; you know very little, but knowing how little you know is the greatest wisdom you can achieve. Now, if all goes well, the ink will find the spot where the Anathema will rise, so that we can call forth the Hunt to descend upon it in fury and wrath. Keep a sharp eye. This is no time for thoughts of yourself.”

“Of course not, Learned One.” As Milam watched, the droplet of ink spun faster and faster, then suddenly turned and slowly made for the bowl’s side.

“That is it, yes. Watch where it strikes the crystal,” murmured Sholosh. “Can you see it?”

“I think so.”

“Do not think. Do!”

Abruptly, the surface of the bowl began to steam. Sholosh jerked back as if he had been scalded.


“Is it supposed to do that, Learned One?” quavered Milam, retreating in alarm.


“I...I do not know. I do know that it has never done this before.”

“Learned One!” Milam looked back at the water and gasped in horror. The single dot of ink had been transformed. Where it had been was now a cloud of darkness spreading around the outside of the bowl, and the surface of the water now boiled and hissed.

“This cannot be. This *should* not be! Get back!” Milam threw himself to the ground a second after Sholosh did. An ear-splitting whistle rose from the bowl, followed by a series of sharp retorts. A geyser of black water fountained upwards and the bowl shattered, sending crystal fragments in every direction. As the water crashed to earth an instant later, the cart toppled as the other Instruments of Divination hit the flagstones of the walkway with a clatter.




 Milam broke the silence, scrambling to his feet and exclaiming, "Learned One! Are you hurt?"


 Sholosh rose gracefully, and dusted himself off. "I am well, though I fear that we will need to commission new Instruments. These are...no longer suitable."

The younger priest surveyed the devastation. "Yes, I can see that. But did you see what you needed to learn? Did the divination work?"

The older man fixed his student with a gimlet eye. "What I needed to learn? No, this was to discover what the Realm needs to learn. This is horrific, unnatural, a crime against the natural world. What we have seen is the harbinger of evil, Milam. I only hope that we have seen it soon enough to allow us to prepare."

Milam persisted. "But did you see where the evil will come from? Where shall the Wyld Hunt ride?"

Sholosh shook his head sadly. "I almost saw, before the waters went black. But all is not lost. The crystal itself should bear some mark of the power that shattered it. If we can rebuild the bowl, we can see from whence the evil came, and arm ourselves with that knowledge."

"But, Most Learned," Milam said with dismay, "the bowl is broken, the pieces scattered all across the courtyard. The task is hopeless!"

"Then you had best begin it quickly, yes?" said Sholosh, and departed into the depths of the temple.

"Iknew there was a reason I hated that old man," said Milam to no one in particular, and began picking up pieces of crystal. A second later, he paused and asked of the air, "Prepare for what?"

The wind gave him no answer, and no comfort, either.

• • •

"How goes the work?"

Tanak Milam did not turn around. He sat, cross-legged on a reed mat, before a low wooden table that had been transported to the garden for this very purpose. On the table sat a partially reconstructed crystal bowl, and around it were various fragments. The shards ranged in size from tiny slivers to pieces the size of a man's thumb, and they were painstakingly arranged

from smallest to largest. “It goes well, Most Learned. If you will grant me another four days, I believe I will be able to complete the reconstruction of the bowl.”

“We do not have four days.” Sholosh glided into the room, his strides noiseless as always. “Your progress is excellent, but simple excellence is not enough.”

“I am doing my best, Most Learned,” Milam snapped, a bit peevishly.

“I am quite certain you are.” Sholosh strode over next to where his student sat and folded his legs underneath himself to sit. “You do good work, I think. What are you using to hold it together?”

Milam gestured to a pot and brush at the end of the table. “One of the acolytes makes glue from snails he catches here. I don’t understand it, but it works, so long as you don’t pour water on the seams that you have joined.” He grinned briefly. “I, at least, do not think we’ll be doing that again.”

The elder priest shook his head, smiling. “I think not, at least not with this bowl.” Abruptly, he sobered. “Your work is very important, you know.”

“I know. Have you sent word yet to the Mouth of Peace of the vision we were shown?”

Sholosh stood, shook his head to the negative, and began pacing past carefully tended trees and the precisely minded flowers.

“I have not, and I will not until you finish your labors. The Mouth of Peace is wise and learned, but she is wise and learned enough to demand proof. Even an Immaculate of the Fourth Coil, an august and noble personage such as myself,” and at that he chuckled, “may be required to bring forth evidence supporting his claims in her presence. I would hope that other diviners, astrologers and sages saw the same thing that we did—surely something so potent, so dangerous could not have passed by unnoticed—but one takes no chances in matters like this. No, when we go before the Mouth of Peace, we shall do so with all our arguments in perfect harmony, our evidence in undeniable display.”

“And if we are still not believed?”



Sholosh stopped, looked over his shoulder, and affected a beatific expression. "Why, then we raise our voices."

Milam burst out laughing, and Sholosh sketched a deep bow. "You honor me with your laughter. I shall leave you to your task, and make provision for our journey."

The younger priest turned and half-rose to his feet. "Our?"

Sholosh nodded. "Our. You'll be coming with me. You will of course report what you have seen, corroborating my story, and you will bear and care for the bowl that you reconstruct. It is nothing less than fitting."

"Thank you, Learned One."

The old man shrugged. "Do not thank me. I do not do this for you. I do this for us all." And with that, he departed, leaving Milam to run through an entire series of breathing exercises in order to be calm enough to take up his labors once more.



It was a bare six hours later when a new acolyte brought word to Most Learned and Venerable Hai Sholosh in his chambers that he should hurry to the garden. The acolyte, who could not have been more than a dozen years of age, was as insistent as he dared to be, and once had the effrontery to grab Sholosh's hand in an attempt to pull him along.

Sholosh, perhaps wisely, gently removed his hand from the boy's grip, giving him a reassuring glance as the acolyte turned pale with terror realizing the enormity of what he had done, and strode unhurriedly toward the garden.

The sight that met his eyes as he reached his destination was not entirely unexpected, though it saddened him nonetheless. Milam lay sprawled on the mat, his form unmoving and his fingers curled into claws. The skin of his hands and arms was stained pitch black, as if he had drawn all the darkness the scrying bowl had contained into himself. On his face was a look of wretched agony, his eyes wide and staring.

Sholosh dismissed the boy and knelt next to the corpse. It was cold, far colder than it had any right to be, and when he manipulated Milam's arms to grant him a posture of peaceful repose, the dead man's limbs were as stiff as if they were frozen.



Sholosh frowned. While Milam's self-absorption and petulance had made him a less than perfect member of the Order, he had begun to show promise of late. The successful divination, odd though it had been, had sparked something within the man which, if given time, might have made him a worthy Immaculate.



But that, it seemed, was not to be. Behind him, Sholosh could hear other monks gathering in silence, all curious but none willing to shatter decorum by asking what had occurred. They, at least, were disciplined.

Sighing, Sholosh put forth a hand to close the cadaver's eyes. Doing so would enable Milam's spirit to rest more easily, and Sholosh did not want the Underworld gaining any kind of a foothold within the temple walls during his tenure here.

Abruptly, he jerked his hand away as if it had been burned. Looking down into Milam's dead eyes, he realized with a shock that a message had been left there, and that it had been left for him to deliver. In elegant and tiny characters, an unknown hand had scribed a warning in characters of blood on Milam's eyes. The message was simple enough, a combination of dire threat and ominous prophecy, and it commanded its reader to bear word of its existence to the Mouth of Peace.

Sholosh committed it to memory, then closed Milam's eyes for the last time. He stood, and turned to the gathered monks. "Postulants Surus, Ishi, Lofol, my brothers, I would be most grateful if you would take the body of our brother Milam and dispose of it by fire. Do not look at it after the flames have caught, and use cedar wood for his pyre. Afterwards, cleanse yourselves before you return to prayer. Beyond that, I most humbly require that you forget the tale of what you have seen ere you leave this place. That is all."

Arms folded across his chest, Sholosh stood and watched impassively as the crowd filed out, decorously. Three monks came forward to lay their hands on the corpse and remove it for burning, and each gasped wordlessly when they felt its chill. Walking in effortless lockstep, they ferried Milam inside, while deeper within the building voices called out for pitch, for torches, and for the purifying wood of the cedar tree.

Alone once again, Sholosh turned his attention to the table. In its center sat the rebuilt bowl, but instead of clear crystal, it had been stained entirely black.

Gingerly, the priest lifted the bowl and made a small sound of surprise. It, too, shared the chill of Milam's corpse.

Frowning, he examined it. On the whole, the reconstruction had been a success. Pieces were missing here and there, but the world was clearly recognizable even in the fractured crystal. *Here* was Lord's Crossing, and *there* Arjuf, and further toward the edges of the bowl the familiar shapes of the coastline and forests of the Threshold.

Suddenly, pain stabbed through the ring finger of his left hand. Resisting the urge to drop the bowl, Sholosh instead cradled it in his right hand while he examined the source of the pain. It was a cut, no doubt inflicted by one of the rebuilt bowl's jagged edges, and it was perfectly semicircular in shape. Even as he watched, a single drop of blood welled up from it, but no more.

Moving very slowly, Sholosh brought his injured hand over the bowl. "Perhaps," he whispered to himself, "perhaps this is what it really wants."

The drop of blood fell. As it struck, the bowl rang like a bell, tolling for uncounted dead. A charnel smell filled the air, and the entire bowl turned the color of blood. Then, as quickly as they had begun, the scent faded and the bowl's chiming ceased.

Frustrated, Sholosh set the bowl back down. It was only then that he noticed that in the midst of the crimson was now a single spot of black.

To the untrained eye, it would be nothing at all, or perhaps a chip in the much-abused crystal. But to Sholosh, it was a banner of darkness proudly waved, a sign that something foul was brewing in the wilds between Great Fork and Sijan.

"But there's nothing between Great Fork and Sijan," he said, puzzled. "Curious."

With steps that seemed entirely too slow, Sholosh paced down the temple's corridors to its venerable and overstuffed library. Various of the Immaculates studying or scribing within made a tremendous show of not looking at him, and he

returned the favor by ignoring them as he searched for a map of sufficient detail to unravel the mystery. With surprising impatience he went down the long shelves of scrolls, passing a thousand years of collected wisdom in a heartbeat. The space that had been devoted to maps and cartography was now filled with the Immaculate Texts penned by one Sullen Tiger of Yane, as well as scrolls of interpretation of his works. Of the maps, however, there was no sign.



Finally, one of the younger initiates approached him. She was short, with a round face and eyes too close together to be beautiful. “May I help you, Most Learned One?” she inquired hesitantly.

“You can make me more learned by telling me where I can find a map,” he snapped, and instantly regretted it. “You have my apologies. That was unworthy. Still, the library seems to have been rearranged since my last visit. Who authorized such a thing?”

“It was,” and she hesitated, “a project of the Most Studious Milam Tanak. He was quite certain that this would be easier.”

“Of course it was,” Sholosh said softly. “Would you do me the honor of showing me where I might find maps more easily today? Then leave this place and rest, for your labors tomorrow will be heavy.”

Her face showed puzzlement. “Tomorrow, Most Learned One?”

He nodded significantly. “Tomorrow you begin putting everything back where it was.”



Much later, Sholosh sat on a wooden bench in the library, alone. Stumpy, fat candles burned in every corner. In the shadows cast by their dancing flames, the priest could almost see the forms of his teachers and predecessors watching him, waiting to see what he did.

The map that young Taphat had led him to had been made over three centuries earlier, so he could no longer be sure of its absolute accuracy. Villages died and borders changed, after all, and a thriving metropolis of a hundred years gone might be little more than towers poking from

As sand today. The fate of the city of Thorn, which in living memory had been overwhelmed by the forces of the Abyss, served as mute reminder of that inescapable fact.

The work itself was beautiful, and Sholosh suspected that more than a little Essence had been spent in long-forgotten ways to make the colors more radiant, the penstrokes of the mountains sharper, the picture itself more real. Gazing down on it, Sholosh could imagine himself a bird, soaring unimaginably high over the landscape with the entire Realm spread out below. But, alas, he was no bird, and he had a task before him.

The area between Sijan and Great Fork was mostly barren of civilization and its trappings, a hodge-podge of small villages and farmers' steadings that had been passed down from time out of mind. Careful searching, however, revealed a single name; a small hamlet that had been immortalized where its neighbors had been ignored. Next to the village's name was the symbol that denoted an Immaculate shrine, and nothing else. Roads, Guild caravan routes—nothing passed anywhere near the place.

"Qut Toloc." He pronounced the name carefully, as if saying it too loud might conjure something untoward. "A small temple, a small town—nothing more. What could possibly emerge from that? This is someone else's riddle to unravel, I fear." Carefully, he rolled the map up, then called for an acolyte to bring him parchment and ink so that he might write to the Mouth of Peace herself and advise her of what he had seen. "Younger legs than mine will have to make that journey, I think," he said, and waited.

• • •

Later, when he had finished the missive and chosen an initiate to bear it to the Palace Sublime, Hai Sholosh was informed that the divination bowl had miraculously crumbled to a pile of red dust, which had been swept up by the wind and mingled with the smoke from Milam's pyre. While no one could claim to have seen this miracle directly, everyone who knew of it agreed that it was a very bad sign.

Upon due reflection, Hai Sholosh decided that he agreed with them.



## Chapter 3

“Tracks?” asked the Prince of Shadows. Ratcatcher shook his head mutely, then spread his arms wide to indicate that he was at a loss. The Prince looked at him narrowly. “You’re doing your best to make me regret the geis, aren’t you? I warn you, now is most emphatically not the time to test my patience.”

Ratcatcher bowed low and backed away, perturbed that his motives were so plainly transparent. Up ahead, Pandeimos thrashed about in the woods ineffectively, cursing the damnable trees at every step. The corpse Pandeimos’s spirit inhabited had been clumsy when he’d first taken control of it, and time and hot weather had done nothing to improve its coordination.

“Pfaugh,” the man spat when Ratcatcher joined him, and Ratcatcher’s nose wrinkled at the smell. “There’s not a trail here made by anything bigger than a squirrel. Tell the Prince that this Wren may as well be a bird, for all that we’re going to find sign of him here. Damned if I know why we even stopped to look for him.”

Ratcatcher looked curiously at him. Pandeimos was a heavysset man, well-muscled and broad of feature. His hands were huge and his beard was black, and he had long since removed his helmet because the steady rain dripped relentlessly down inside it. Like the others, he wore armor that had been lacquered black, though his was styled so as to make it seem as if he were some sort of nightmare beetle, stalking the land ponderously. The rain had washed his hair over his

forehead and into his eyes, and it was with a half-hearted gesture that he brushed it back.

“Cold fire, I forgot you were under geis not to speak. I’ll tell him myself.” With that, the larger man shuffled off downhill, cursing once again as he moved from under the canopy of the leaves into the open downpour. Downslope toward the creek, the Prince sat astride his horse like a statue carved from ice. The rain seemed to shy from touching him. Boneshadow was down by the creek, doing something spectacularly ineffective, and Shamblemerry stood and tended the horses.

On the whole, it was not an auspicious beginning to their pursuit of Wren.

With a disgusted sound, he retraced Pandeimos’s steps, looking to see if the man had missed anything. Privately, he considered the possibility unlikely. The forest floor was thick with leaves and soaked through, and any trace the mysterious fugitive had left would most likely have been washed away by now. As for the forest itself, it was so dense that it would be impossibly easy to miss a single footprint in the undergrowth and gloom. In addition, a nagging voice at the back of his mind warned Ratcatcher that they had no proof that Wren had ever passed this way at all, and that they were wasting precious hours searching for phantoms.

Resolutely, Ratcatcher ignored that voice and pressed further into the wood. The trees grew closer and closer together until he could scarcely fit between them, and overhead the canopy of leaves was thick enough that the furious rain sounded like a gentle rhythm played upon a child’s drum. From down the hill he heard Shamblemerry calling his name, but he ignored it and pressed on, in search of he knew not what. There was something here. He could feel it. The signs at the Howe had been too fresh for the mysterious Wren to have vanished so completely. Something else was at work here. He could feel it.

Frowning, he tore vines out of his way, the stink of fresh sap in his nostrils. Underfoot, dead leaves swallowed his footsteps. An owl, or something that looked very much like

one, peered at him from its perch in a tree trunk and warned him against going farther. He fixed it with a stare, and felt mildly gratified when it blinked, twice, and then turned its gaze elsewhere. It was a small victory, but tonight he'd take what he could get.

"This is pointless," he grumbled, low lest someone hear him and bear the tale back to the Prince. "This forest hasn't been disturbed in decades. Wren couldn't have slipped through here without an axe, let alone do it so neatly." From afar, he heard his name called again. Resigned to his failure, he turned and headed back. The trees thinned rapidly as he did so, and Ratcatcher could not shake the feeling that the woods were glad to see him go. Indeed, the vines that had barred his path into the woods were now entirely gone. For a moment he thought he'd simply hacked them to the ground, but a quick glance showed that there were no tatters of greenery there, either. They had simply vanished.

"Aha," he breathed. "You've overplayed your hand, whatever you are." Crouched low to the ground, he ran his fingertips along the soil. His eyes darted left, right, looking for anything—a footprint, a scrap of cloth, anything—that would betray Wren's passage. The others, he noticed distantly, were all watching him. Let them, he thought. This was his hunt now. This was what he had been made for.

Right at the edge of the trees, he found it. Pressed into the mud was the unmistakable outline of a sandal.

Or rather, half the outline of a sandal. The rest of the print was filled with a gnarled tree root, one that clearly could not have been there when the footprint had been made.

In an instant, it all made sense. The tree could not have been there when the footprint had been made. Therefore, the tree had moved. The whole forest had moved to cover Wren's tracks. Spirits had been at work here, had aided the fugitive, had played the Prince for a fool. Wren had summoned one down at the water's edge to help him, and they'd missed it. But now the evidence was clear. If they could not catch Wren, they could at least bring to heel the spirit that had aided him, and burn answers from it.



Triumphant, he lifted up his head to shout, then let his cry die in his throat as he realized that doing so would be foolish. At the edge of the creek, the Prince and others stood, waiting for him to finish his fool's errand. Shamblemerry was actively calling out halloos, while Pandeimos was having trouble controlling his restive mount. For a moment, Ratcatcher clearly imagined the sight of Pandeimos's horse rearing and dumping the man, armor and all, into the muddy creek, but nothing came of it. With as much dignity as he could muster, he stood and gestured urgently for the Prince and his company to join him, to see what he had discovered.

None of them moved. Through the rain, he could hear snatches of their conversation.

"...being insolent, my prince..."

"...was over that ground myself and didn't see a damn thing..."

"...could use the extra steed..."

As for the Prince himself, he sat stock-still in his saddle. His helm was tucked under his left arm, and his right hand held the reins loosely. His eyes sought Ratcatcher's, challenged him, commanded him.

Yes, *my prince*, he thought, and headed down the hill.

The Prince was not smiling when Ratcatcher reached him. Shamblemerry and the rest were, but they had positioned themselves strategically so that the Prince could not see their smirks. Boneshadow had gone so far as to replace his helmet so as to stifle his chortling, and booming, choked sounds echoed from beneath his helm whenever laughter got the better of him.

Ratcatcher found none of this amusing. Bowing extremely low, he simply turned and gestured to the spot where he'd found the priest's track. Hopeful that he'd gotten his point across, he loped a few steps up the slope and listened for the sound of the Prince following him.

Instead, he heard the rain.

Slowly, Ratcatcher turned. The Prince had not moved. Behind him, the other three were helpless in the grip of



hilarity. Grimly, Ratcatcher lifted one foot off the ground and pointed to the sole, then knelt and indicated the ground. Slowly, he turned and pointed very deliberately at the spot where he'd found the footprint. Desperately hoping his face would not betray his true emotions, he knelt, then looked up at the Prince.



The others were helpless prisoners of hilarity. Shamblemerry was making rough gestures in the air in imitation of Ratcatcher's rough capering while the other two egged her on.

The Prince, however, merely sat stock-still. Gradually the laughter faded, until the only sounds were the rain and the thunder. Still, the Prince did not move. Miserable, Ratcatcher knelt before him.

Then, wordlessly, the Prince urged his mount up the hill. Ratcatcher scrambled to his feet and staggered after him, terrified that the Prince's mount would obliterate the footprint and thus leave him empty-handed before his Prince.



The Prince was waiting when Ratcatcher reached the spot where he'd first found the footprint. He had dismounted, and bore a look of extreme displeasure on his face. "Well?" was all he said.

Ratcatcher bowed again, then gestured emphatically toward where he'd seen the footprint. The Prince nodded, then leaned forward to examine it. He clucked to himself under his breath, turned to look at Ratcatcher, then peered at the ground again. "Fascinating," he finally said. "You have done a remarkable job of finding a telltale root."

Horried, Ratcatcher stepped forward and stared at where the footprint had been. It was gone, replaced by a swollen and twisted tree root that, by all evidence, had been there for years. Any sign of any footprint other than his own was gone, grown over in the few moments he'd spent playing the clown to lure the Prince up here.

In the sound of the wind through the trees, he distinctly heard soft laughter.

“I do hope you have a very good reason for showing me this tree root, Ratcatcher. Does it perhaps remind you of your mother? A favorite pet? Shall I guess, or will you act out charades?”

“My liege, there was a footprint here a minute ago, I swear it!”

Ratcatcher’s words echoed in sudden silence. The rain seemed to stop, the thunder to hold its breath. The Prince looked up, eyes blazing, and a stab of fear gnawed at Ratcatcher’s guts.

“You spoke,” the Prince said, his anima flaring out behind him like tattered dragon’s wings. “You actually dared speak. And why? To lie to me.” He advanced a slow step, shaking his head sadly. “I think, Ratcatcher, you have made a terrible mistake.”

Ratcatcher was instantly aware of his danger. Tendrils of the Prince’s anima wrapped around and caressed him, their touch burning cold against his skin. The Prince himself was too calm, too peaceful for his intention to be anything but murder.

“No, my liege.” Shuddering, he dropped to one knee and bowed his head, exposing his neck. “If you disbelieve me, then take my head. But I swear to you as I swore in the tombs of the dead gods that I saw the mark of a man’s foot here, and that the very trees of the forest work against us here.”

“You would dare make that oath?” The Prince’s voice held faint amazement. “The dead gods hear when such things are sworn. They know who honors them and who forswears them. They *listen*, Ratcatcher. Know this: If you have lied to me now to save your wretched skin, there will be a reckoning that will last ten thousand years. The ones you have named do not take oaths sworn in their name lightly.”

“I swear that oath, my prince.” Ratcatcher closed his eyes, felt the touch of the Prince’s mace at the back of his neck. Along his arms, the hairs stood on end, and it was all he could do to avoid fleeing. Then suddenly, the pressure was gone. The Prince stepped away, and he could hear rain falling once again.

“Get up, Ratcatcher.” The Prince’s voice was tired. “Get up, get on your horse, and get out of my sight. I’ll find

you when I need you. For now, though, it is best that you are far, far away from me.”

“Yes, my liege,” he mumbled. He pulled himself erect, not daring to meet the Prince’s eyes, and walked stiffly over to where his horse waited. The others watched him in silence, and for that he was grateful. They had seen this before, a favorite dashed to humility. They also knew that in the Prince’s service, the humble could rise very quickly, and it was best not to make enemies who might one day return as their betters.

They also knew precisely how unlikely this was, and in their minds they thought of Ratcatcher as if he were already among the dead. And so as he rode north, only the Prince stared after him, and he did so with narrowed and suspicious eyes.

“Go,” he said, “and catch a bird for me.”







# Chapter 4

Upon due reflection, Wren decided that he was in trouble.

He stood on an open road in the middle of a pleasant and sunny day. Behind him, the road stretched up and over a low hill, and beyond it into the distance. Ahead of him, he could see a distant haze where Nexus should be, and the blue ribbon of a river scrolled in and out of view. Trees dotted the landscape in a most picturesque fashion, and the sky was a pleasant shade of blue. A soft wind rolled down from the hilltop, ruffling the sleeves of Wren's robes and making him wish, irrationally, that he had a kite.

Indeed, the only element in the scene that was not suitable for preserving as a landscape or tapestry was the clutch of armed men standing on the road perhaps a hundred feet from where Wren stood, leaning upon a makeshift staff. They wore belted red tunics and loose blue trews, and bore a motley collection of swords, maces and less identifiable weapons. It was quite clear that they were officially waiting for Wren, and just as clear that they intended to do him harm as soon as they were finished waiting.

Wren counted. There were five of them, all looking reasonably accustomed to causing mayhem. He saw no bows, though, and nothing that indicated that they'd had formal training in anything beyond a basic understanding of how to use a sword. This, he thought, was a good sign, or at least as good a one as might be expected under current circumstances.

**E**xperimentally, he took a step back. The band in front of him took a single step forward. Had he been watching it from afar, Wren would have deemed it comical, something out of a puppeteer's catalog of stock scenes. In real life, it was less amusing, though it gave him another measure of the men facing him. They were, beyond a doubt, amateurs.

Wren exhaled sharply. There was nothing for it, then. If he retreated, they'd pursue, and finding a route around them offered no guarantee that he'd not find others like them. The bull had lowered its horns; it remained for him to grasp them.

Accordingly, he fixed a cheery smile on his face and strode forward. "You look ridiculous, you know," he said, and advanced as if the warriors before him were no more substantial than air. Glances darted back and forth between the men. They had not expected this, and were unsure of how to deal with it. Meanwhile, Wren continued to advance.

"Furthermore, I must say that you look quite nattily turned out for bandits," he prattled. "Did you rob a traveling haberdasher?" He spread his arms wide, to show that he was unarmed. "What could you possibly want with a poor initiate of the Order, though? My robes don't even match your trews."

Uncertain, the ruffians took a step back. One, presumably the leader, half-stepped and was half-shoved forward. She held a thick oak stave, which she thumped into her palm nervously, and on her head was a red turban. "We're not bandits," she said, almost apologetically.

"Oh?" Wren smiled pleasantly. "Then you must be Official City Gardeners, here in the name of the Elemental Dragons to tend the flowers along the road. Your labors seem to be bearing fruit. I congratulate you."

"We're here to take a toll for using this road."

"Ah. So you're uncommon bandits, then."

The woman looked flustered. "We're toll collectors. Now halt, and you won't get hurt," she finally said, then "Halt!" again, as Wren refused to stop. "I'm warning you," was her next pronouncement, and she dropped into a guard position. Behind her, the men readied their weapons.

“Don’t be ridiculous. This is Nexus territory, and you’re not wearing Nexus city guard uniforms. If the city guard knew you were extorting from travelers this close to the city, they’d have your guts on a string. Do be sensible, and just get out of my way.” Wren was within a few steps, and showed no sign of slowing.



The woman jabbed her staff at him, and took another step back. “We’re legitimate toll collectors for this road.”

Wren stopped and yawned. “Nonsense. At best you’re brigands in uniform, at worst you’re lousy liars. Besides, I’m a penniless monk of the Immaculate Order, so what you think you’re going to get from me by way of a toll escapes me.” He let his walking stick fall to the ground. “Not that you could take anything from me I didn’t want you to, in any case.”

The taunt had the desired effect. With a shout, the woman brought her staff around in a low sweep designed to catch Wren across the shins and knock him to the ground. He leapt over it easily, landing a kick to her chin in the process. Her head snapped back and she stumbled backward, losing her turban. The others charged forward, yelling hoarse battle cries that Wren refused to take the time to try to understand.

One thrust high at him with a sword. He ducked forward and grabbed the man’s sword arm, then straightened and flipped the man over his shoulder. A thump and a yelp behind him told Wren he’d managed to trip up yet another attacker. He spun to the side, sparing a half-second to land a blow to the leader’s ribs, then ducked away from a wild swipe with a mace. The mace wielder, a short woman with a long braid of brown hair down her back, swung again. Wren caught the handle of the weapon in his right hand, then twisted it before his assailant had a chance to let go. The sound of something snapping filled the air, and suddenly she was stumbling backwards, clutching a ruined wrist and a hand that dangled at an odd angle.

Wren turned. A sword thrust cut the air where he had been, as a bearded man with a curved blade chopped downward in hopes of landing a crippling blow. Wren extended his

**A**rm, palm flat, and struck the side of the blade as it descended. The sudden shock jarred the swordsman into dropping his blade, and in that instant Wren landed a pair of side kicks to his gut. The man whooped as the air was knocked out of him, and he sat down heavily in the middle of the road. Behind him, another maceman circled left, ready to try his luck if Wren's attention wavered. Wren matched strides with him, keeping an eye out for the man he'd thrown, who even now was groggily climbing to his feet.

The maceman saw his ally recovering and grinned, bright teeth in a dark beard. He feinted left, then right, trying to buy time for his friend to pull himself together thoroughly enough to attack Wren from behind. When footsteps sounded behind him, though, Wren simply dropped to the ground. The sword whistled harmlessly overhead, and as the mace-wielding brigand rushed forward, Wren spun on his heel, delivering an elbow to the swordsman's knee. The man crumpled forward, onto Wren's back. He landed heavily, and Wren staggered for a moment, but then finished his spin and straightened up. The swordsman flew forward and hit his friend with the mace. Both went down in a tumble of limbs, and Wren distributed kicks where appropriate as he strode past.

The leader was attempting to stand again as Wren reached her, and had gotten so far as her hands and knees. Wren considered his options for a second, then kicked her under the chin. She collapsed with a satisfying thud, the staff rolling from her grip.

Wren looked around. The woman whose wrist he'd shattered had run. The others were all down, and blessed with the sense not to attempt to rise. He briefly pondered killing them, so they'd not afflict other travelers, but thought better of it.

"It's too beautiful a day," he said. "Pick yourselves up when you can, and run. I might be taking this road again, and you don't want to be here when I do."

He heard a single moan, which he took as assent, and followed the road into Nexus.





As he headed down the gentle slope toward the city, Wren reflected that it was highly unlikely that these bandits were nothing more than a cluster of brigands trying to capitalize on the road traffic to Nexus. Still, the presence of the uniformed thugs so close to the bustling, eminently civilized city was mildly troubling. It was yet another sign that things were unraveling all over. Still, that was more the concern of the city fathers of Nexus, if they could be bothered to look up from their counting-tables and scales. His duty, and that of his fellows, was protecting the world itself.

That, he told himself, was why he'd followed his circular path to Nexus. After his flight from Rhadanthos's domain, he'd gone southwest for several days, then turned west until he struck the Rolling River. Men he avoided during this time, and beasts he only saw when he trapped them for his supper. Spirits he spoke to when they seemed benign, and he'd bargained with one to send a message through intermediaries to the Palace Sublime. It has cost him his pack, but he felt little need of it here. The land was rich enough for him to survive without it, and the nights warm enough that he needed no blanket. A few times he saw what looked to be evidence of barbarian raiding parties, but he felt disinclined to investigate, instead redoubling his own pace.

Once he found the stream, he followed it north until it met the Yellow River at Great Forks. This was his signal to take passage on a barge that would take him downstream to Lookshy. There he booked swift river passage down the Yanaze toward Nexus where no doubt the Most Illustrious and Illuminated Chejop Kejak had a message and a new task waiting for him. Three days' travel outside the city, he'd disembarked with the intention of walking the rest of the way. His head told him that it was to avoid the possibility of being seen at the docks, but his heart knew that he simply wanted to avoid his next assignment as long as possible. While the two debated, he strayed south from the river, and found himself approaching the city from an entirely unexpected direction.

Still, he reflected, it was indeed a beautiful day, and he was alive, and Kejak's missions were infinitely more fascinating than sitting in an Immaculate scriptorium, copying out the Texts until he saw them in his dreams.

In that, at least, he was content, and he might even have considered himself happy as he strode down toward the river.



# Chapter 5

Thousands of silkworms would have wept, were they able, had they seen the chamber in which Chejop Kejak received his visitors. Silk curtains of an envious shade of green hung in every alcove, and silk cushions were strewn carelessly across the polished marble floor with its cunning inlay of jade. Crystal chimes hung from the azurite dome of the ceiling in imitation of the stars and planets; each was hung on a silken thread and repositioned daily by meticulous, fearful slaves. Kejak read the stars from this chamber on occasion, and the punishments visited on those who misaligned his makeshift orrery were terrible and swift. Equally spaced around the room were five braziers made from hammered bronze. Each stood as tall as a man, and had been lovingly fashioned into the shape of a dragon. Each had gemstones for eyes and had been constructed so that fragrant smoke curled from its mouth. So detailed was the craftsmanship that many a visitor swore that they seemed to be resting rather than wrought, and glanced nervously at them on occasion for reassurance that they had not moved.

In the center of this room sat Chejop Kejak and his guest, each seated upon a pillow that matched the blue of the ceiling and was embroidered with an intricate geometric pattern. Slaves hovered around them, offering wine, sherberts, and sweetmeats. After a moment, each would swoop away, to be replaced a few minutes later by another. All moved silently and none spoke; Kejak had removed their tongues years previously, so they would not disturb his meditations. Like

wraiths, they vanished behind the silk curtains noiselessly, and barely a ripple of silk marked their passage.

Kejak sat on the higher cushion, as was his right by rank. He wore robes of blue silk, tied at the waist with a green sash, and on his wrists were bracelets of copper and white gold. He was tall and slender and sat at perfect ease in the lotus position, his head high and his gaze clear. Those who had seen him compared his face to that of a hawk, and there was some truth to it, for his eyes were bright and his face narrow. A caste mark was prominent on his high forehead, and on occasion he brushed it absently with his hand. What remained of his hair was steel-gray, and it hung over his left shoulder in a ponytail wrapped in a device made from black leather and silver beads. His hands were long ones, with fingers that a harpist or a surgeon might have put to good use. One hand held a glass of wine, the other nothing at all, and he was smiling.

Opposite him sat his guest, whose features were coarser and whose hair was darker. Shajah Holok was a burly, heavysset man, whose hands were callused with labor in the fields and whose scarred arms showed that his toil had not been easy. He wore simpler robes than Kejak, linen instead of silk, and his bare feet still had some road dust on them. Holok's beard was thick and black, and his eyes were equally dark. His visage was that of a mystic, or perhaps a fanatic, and he did not suffer fools gladly. Holok had no wine, but a wooden cup filled with water sat on the stone in front of him, untouched.

"So what is the news?" Kejak's voice was strong and assured. It had power behind it, the confident power of a man who was used to having his voice heeded. The tone of his question indicated that it was not in fact a question; that he already knew everything that Holok would say to him and was simply checking the accuracy of the man's recitation.

Holok grunted. "The news is about what you'd expect. V'neef and Cynis ships setting on each other just out of the harbor at Cherak. Some damn fools off siccing the Wyld Hunt on a wendigo up in the northlands when they've got more pressing problems at home. There's a new crop of acolytes just in, none of them worth a damn. Oh, and this might interest

you: There's more Deathlord activity every damned night. I'd swear they're seeding the land with ghosts. They've gotten bold as brass, and they ride to and fro as they please. There's word that they set an ambush for a Wyld Hunt three days south of Nexus, but that's just alehouse rumor."

"It's not an alehouse rumor of the sort we can afford. A great deal of the Wyld Hunt's power is tied up in the fact that everyone knows it is invincible. The inevitability, if you will, that it *will* run its prey to ground, come fire or flood or the next breaking of the world. But now we have a rumor in an alehouse." He unfolded himself and stood, his gaze a thousand miles away.

"It starts like this, it starts small. A rumor in an alehouse, a story that a Wyld Hunt failed. A drunk, or a man pretending to be drunk, staggers to the next inn over and repeats the story. The process repeats. Men bring the story home with them and tell their wives, who gossip it to their lovers and friends. It spreads. It becomes," and he paused to inflect the words with particular bile, "common knowledge."

"So?" Holok took a noisy sip of his water. "Everyone knows. Do you think that will make a difference when the Hunt rides next?"

Kejak shook his head. "Not the next time, or even the time after. But slowly, it becomes part of their lives. They are conditioned to believe that the Hunt is fallible. That it is weak. That there are other powers out there greater than the arm of the Realm. And that, Holok, is where they slip the dagger in."

Holok shook his head. "If you say so. It's just one tale that no one believes, Kejak. You're growing anxious in your old age."

"I'd like to reach an even older one, Holok. That's why I pay attention to these things. Look around you when you leave this place. Look for rot. You'll see it. Our Realm has enemies, and this is the moment they've waited a very long time for. Without the Empress to command their allegiance, the Houses are turning on one another. With the Houses marshalling for strife, the armies and fleets are neglected, and the territories at the borders discover that they like keeping their tax monies home. That's how an empire becomes a memory. What's holding the Empire together, Holok? Tradition, and momentum, and the



**A** very few things that the Dragon-Blooded and the dung-on-the-boots peasants can agree on. The fact that the Dragon-Blooded saved us from Anathema. The Order. And the Wyld Hunt. It's flimsy thread to stitch together the fabric of the Realm, but it's what we have to work with. And this little alehouse story of yours is a seamstress's knife."

Holok grunted and shifted on the cushion. "If you say. I'm a simple man, Kejak, and I have been for as long as I've had a beard. If you say the tale's a danger, then I'll see to it that it's stamped out. I'll call out the Hunt and send it past every tavern in town, and see who dares to mock it then. I'll find the men who spread the tale and have them exposed as frauds, and denounce the notion of the Hunt's fallibility from every altar for forty leagues. What I am, is the Order's. You know that. But I don't see the danger in this."

"No, you wouldn't." Kejak's back was to Holok, and he did not turn as he spoke. "Fortunately, it is enough that I did. Your suggestions are excellent. I expect you to implement them upon your return. You are a craftsman, Holok, and the Order is the better for having you help shape it."

"You honor me—" Holok began. Kejak put forth a hand to stay his thanks.

"It is nothing more or less than your due. Now, what other news do you have for me?"

"Little enough worth reporting. Salaos prepared a scroll and has long since given it over to your servants."

"Ah, I should have remembered. How is Salaos?"

"Well enough, for an ambitious man. Meticulous and clever, but too eager to have my rank by half." Holok snorted, half in amusement. "He thinks he's too clever for his, that's for certain."

"If his ambition fuels his excellence, I am not concerned. Your place is secure, and you at least should well know that. Come, walk with me a while."

"Of course, Kejak." Holok stood and bowed precisely, bending slightly at the waist and deeply at the neck to denote the proper attitude of respect to an honored superior. Kejak returned the bow, inclining only his head as was proper, and gestured his guest forward.

“You honor me,” Holok said, and stepped through the curtain. Kejak followed.



• • •

A quartet of slaves prostrated themselves as the two men stepped forth into the temple. Kejak ignored them and trod leisurely down the corridor, Holok falling naturally into a position a step behind. The walls they walked past were adorned with mosaics, each depicting a scene from the Order’s scriptures. Here the Five Dragons coiled protectively around the throne of the Realm; there the Empress personally slew a chaos-spawned monster with a howdah of Fair Folk lords on its back. Each was painstakingly crafted from sparkling glass and gemstones, the result of decades of labor by dedicated, devout craftsmen. Such was the skill that created them that, with the cunning placement of lights, the figures in glass and stone seemed to move as one walked past them, bringing the Order’s doctrine to shining life.

Kejak strode past them without a second glance. Off in the distance, a gong sounded, calling monks to their chores. The sound of chanting mixed with the distant shouts of monks at their daily martial-arts regimens, off in one of the courtyards. Now and then a gong was struck, and the telltale whirring of prayer wheels was omnipresent. Hints of a hundred different types of incense wafted on the breeze, making the air a heady mix of scents.

Holok paused to close his eyes and breathe in the potpourri of offerings, then realized that Kejak had not slowed his pace. With as much dignity as he could muster, he hurried down the hall in pursuit. A handful of acolytes, heads bowed respectfully, walked past in the opposite direction and then burst into giggles. Holok made a mental note to have them reprimanded, then abandoned all pretense and pelted after Kejak’s receding figure. Belatedly, he found himself wondering if this was exactly what Kejak had intended.

Holok finally caught up to his host at the entrance to a massive sanctuary, pentagonal in shape and curiously unadorned. Rows of priests of all ranks sat on prayer mats, cross-legged. Some chanted, some meditated. Most had their eyes closed. Kejak motioned Holok to hush, and gazed out across the room.

“Why have you brought me here, Kejak?” Holok’s voice was a harsh whisper that carried. Across the room, heads snapped up in surprise.

Kejak shook his head. “First Coil priests. You’d think they would have mastered themselves sufficiently to ignore even your whispers, Holok.” A few upturned faces showed embarrassment, and Kejak smiled. “Ah, they will learn. They will have to,”

“Yes, yes, very good, but I am assuming you didn’t call me all the way here to show me that you can impress students.” Holok was caught between puzzlement and irritation, but reserved judgment as to which he’d allow free rein. “I do assume there is a point to this?”

“There has been a point to everything I have done for two millennia, Holok. You, of all of us, should know that.” Holok’s face reddened, but before he could say anything, Kejak smoothly continued. “There is something here I want your opinion on. It troubled the illustrious Mouth of Peace, may her enlightenment shelter us all, and so she sent the problem to me.”

Holok’s expression demonstrated ample disbelief, but Kejak continued. “The matter troubled me as well, and so I wish your interpretation.”

“Of course,” Holok said wryly. “I shall be happy to confirm whatever course of action you have already decided upon.”

“It’s not like that, Holok,” Kejak said wearily. “For once, it’s not like that.” He raised his voice. “Eager Student Hinnah!”

One of the priests chanting in the third row looked up. She was short, and she was round, and she was unlovely. Her ears were large and her mouth was small, and in her eyes Holok could plainly see a fervent, unwavering devotion. In this, she was much like hundreds, if not thousands, of other acolytes Holok had seen over the centuries. He could not possibly imagine how she could be in the slightest way troublesome.

“Arise, Eager Student Hinnah, and approach.” Kejak’s voice was musical now, cajoling and commanding, and it washed out over the rows of priests. There was magic in that voice; there always had been. Fifteen centuries ago it had been enough to start a war against those ordained by the



heavens. It still was a formidable weapon, and Holok found himself idly wondering if it was wasted on these children. But Hinnah had approached and was already speaking, and Holok mentally wrenched himself back to the present.

“—ost Learned Hai Sholosh sent me to the Mouth of Peace with these tidings, Most Enlightened Ones. Having been sent here by the Mouth of Peace, I felt it best to spend time in meditation for guidance regarding my next duty, as I had not been instructed how to proceed.”

“An excellent decision, and one demonstrative of your devotion.” Kejak’s voice was all honey and cream. “It would honor me, Most Eager Student, if you would share with the Most Enlightened Holok what you have shared with me. But first, let us repair to someplace more private, so as to avoid disturbing the meditations of others.”

“I would be honored to oblige, Most Enlightened,” Hinnah said, and Holok reflected that she almost certainly would be. He heard Kejak murmur something unintelligible, and then the three of them were walking back toward a small, empty chamber that was furnished with wooden benches and nothing more. Kejak entered first, followed by Hinnah. With a scowl Holok brought up the rear and closed the chamber’s thick wooden door behind himself.

And so Holok listened as the young initiate told a story of prophecy and murder, and of the other strange events at the temple at Trae Chanos. She recited it in singsong fashion, chanting it as if she were chanting passages from the Immaculate Texts. For all she knew, Holok reflected, she could be.

Eventually, the recitation ended. Hinnah looked up at Holok, a little breathless. “That is all, I think. At least, that is all Most Learned Hai Sholosh charged me with bringing to the attention of the Mouth of Peace.” She looked slightly embarrassed. “There was a letter as well, but I left it at the Palace Sublime. Elsewhere in the Palace, that is. But I just told you everything that was in it.”

Kejak smiled. “You have done very well, Most Eager Student. Worry not about the letter. Instead, I would ask that you return to your meditations until such time as we call for you again.”



“Of course, Most Enlightened One.” Hinnah got up, bowed deeply, then fumbled with the door and left. It shut behind her with a dull thud, and the two men were alone.

“What do you think?” Kejak asked lazily.

Holok snorted. “I think you could ask her to walk on clouds, and pick flowers from a Deathlord’s garden, and she’d skip off to do it.”

“Probably,” Kejak shifted in his seat. “I was referring to her account, however.”

“I don’t know what to say. How long have you known about this?”

“She’s been here over a month, flitting from one functionary to another. She arrived the same night Wren’s message about the goings-on at the Howe did, come to think of it. Odd, that. In any case, it was sheer luck the Mouth of Peace actually stumbled across her, and another bit of luck that she was sent to me. I think the Mouth of Peace rather enjoys making me deal with the impossibilities.”

“That’s because you’re impossible yourself, or perhaps because she likes tying you up with mysteries like this so you stay out of her plans. Bah.” He swiped at the air irritably. “This story bothers me. If it’s true, we should probably send someone to Qut Toloc posthaste. Have any of the other seers confirmed this?”

“Not a one.”

“Hmm.” Holok hunched his shoulders and leaned forward. “It is entirely possible that Most Learned Hai Sholosh is not nearly so learned as he would like to think when it comes to the delicate art of divination. What exactly are the other augurers discovering?”

“That’s what disturbed me. Every reading they have taken has been full of boundless optimism. There is, according to their star charts, nothing but glory and wonder ahead.”

Holok half-suppressed a bitter laugh. “Well, we know that can’t be the case. Do you think it’s possible that Sholosh saw something they missed?”

“Or that something was hidden from the known diviners, but Sholosh was able to discover it because he was... shall we say, unique in his approach?”

“An excellent way to put it. I trust that you have the letter in your keeping?”

Kejak nodded. “Of course I do. She got it mostly right, but there are a couple of details our over-eager acolyte neglected to pass on. The unusual temperature of the corpse is one, as I recall. It was quite chilled, you know.”

“Interesting. Who penned the letter?”

“Sholosh himself, and in quite a hurry. There’s actually a misplaced brushstroke.”

“That *is* a sign of impending doom.” Abruptly, Holok stood and paced. “You know that you cannot afford to ignore this. Send a rider to Qut Toloc. At best, you’ve shown interest in the initiates in that sky-forsaken place. At worst, you have someone there to deal with things when the storm sweeps in.”

Kejak nodded, tiredly. “I agree. The whole matter puzzles me, though, in a way I’ve not been confounded in centuries.”

Holok frowned. “You know what’s buried at Qut Toloc, my friend.”

“I know *who’s* buried there as well, and what she was capable of,” Kejak snapped wearily. “If it’s her spirit up and about again, then a dead bastard and a broken bowl are the least of our worries.”

“On the other hand, no sense causing a panic.”

“Agreed. So this is done quietly, at least for now.” Kejak yawned, and for a brief instant looked almost frail. “I’ll send someone in the morning. It’s too late to begin today, in any case.”

“Is Wren back?” Holok tried to sound unconcerned, and failed. “I understand he was off causing trouble again, but you seem to enjoy enlisting him in this sort of thing.”

“I have word that my clever Eliezer is alive and well, but being detained by other business on his way to Nexus. His message was not the most complete—I’m certain your Saraos could do better—but it was quite interesting. You can read it if you like.”

“Thank you, but no.” Holok’s annoyance was palpable. “I still fail to see why you use him when one more...”

“Powerful?”

Holok nodded. “Exactly. He’s but a man, and yet you favor him over those who have a hundred times his worth.”



“Ahh, but you miss one telling detail.” Kejak rapped Holok’s shoulder with his fan. “None has done me a hundred times Wren’s service. He may be but a man, but he is a most resourceful one at that, and profoundly attached to his own continued survival. As such, he is more likely than some to return after his task is completed, and more likely than most to complete it. And besides, he has no idea whom he really serves, other than the Order, and so his head is untroubled by thoughts that might distract him from his duties. A more perfect servant in these troubled times? I could not imagine one.”

“If you say so, Kejak.” Holok’s voice was still troubled. “I still say your little songbird is going to end up a pile of entrails and ashes one of these days, and sooner rather than later.”

“And if that’s the case, Holok, then he’s a dead man, and there are many more men where he came from.” Kejak grinned like a schoolboy who has just confounded his teacher. “But in any case, it is irrelevant. Wren is otherwise engaged.”

“Most Eager To Get Herself Killed Hinnah?”

“Don’t make me laugh.”

Holok shrugged. “There are several thousand monks within the Palace, and several thousand more within a day’s walk. I’m sure you’ll be able to find someone. Just do it quickly, and make it someone you trust. Even most of the initiates at Qut Toloc don’t know what they’re standing watch over. There’s no sense sending someone out there just to add to the confusion.”

Kejak bowed slightly, from the neck. “Your advice, as always, is excellent, Holok. I shall take it to heart, and confer again with you in the morning.” He left the chamber, and after a moment, Holok did the same.



Morning came, and with it came a message for Holok from the Most Enlightened Chejop Kejak. It read, simply, “I look forward to your observations of the Qut Toloc shrine,” and nothing more.

“Most Unreasonable Bastard is more like it,” said Holok, and called for an acolyte to help him prepare for the journey.



## Chapter 6

Ratcatcher had a certain theory about horses, namely that they, and not his liege lord, were the true servants of evil in the Realm. His current steed was doing nothing to allay that suspicion, picking its way at a too-leisurely pace along a narrow dirt track that seemingly led from nowhere to nowhere. The land on either side of the pathway was green and bland, marked by occasional farmholds and nothing more. Of civilization, of inns and hostels and good wine, there was no sign.

“Damn you,” he said absently to the horse, which whickered but otherwise ignored him. “Where have you led me this time?”

The horse did not answer, and neither did the surrounding countryside. Cursing his luck, Ratcatcher rode on through the pre-dawn gloom. He’d chosen this route, north toward Sijan, back when the Prince had exiled Ratcatcher from his company. He still couldn’t say what had made him pick this path, save that it ran directly counter to the course he’d seen Pandeimos charting, and that was enough reason for anything.

Initially, his plan had been to make the river crossing at Lookshy, then angle west when a propitious omen told him to head for the coast. Ratcatcher sincerely doubted that Wren had fled to this particular bit of trackless wilderness. The man was an Immaculate, after all. The priests tended to run for home when they were spooked, to hide under the

**T**wings of the powers that lurked in the Palace Sublime. The chances of Wren's deciding to take refuge in Sijan instead were somewhere in the close neighborhood of nothing. Still, something unspoken told him that this path was worth following, and so dutifully he had gone.

**T**hat unspoken voice, Ratcatcher dully resolved, was a liar, and if he ever found a way to embody it, he'd do so just for the pleasure of killing it. Since leaving Lookshy he'd seen nothing but smaller and smaller towns, bigger and bigger fields, and less and less interesting scenery. Only the knowledge that he was putting more leagues between himself and the buffoons who still traveled with the Prince kept him from turning back; that, and the potentially unpleasant consequences of returning to the Prince's presence without any success to report.

Ahead in the distance, something shimmered. Ratcatcher straightened in his saddle. It flickered like torchlight, and torchlight that could be seen from this distance meant that someone had lit a great many torches.

"Hopefully, this will be amusing," he said to himself, then spurred the horse forward. It snorted its disdain for anything Ratcatcher currently felt like proposing, but set off at a brisk trot regardless.

As he got closer, the hazy glow became more distinct. It was indeed torchlight, mixed with a steadier glow that must have come from oil lamps. Feeling vaguely excited by the prospect of a comfortable bed and anyone's cooking but his own, Ratcatcher pressed forward. The horse protested, having no wish to maintain any kind of fast pace in the dark, but Ratcatcher was insistent, and so they traveled on.

Eventually, shapes loomed up out of the dark. Most were cottages roofed with thatch, their walls made from dried mud. Taller buildings lurked behind them, presumably made from more mud and the odd wooden beam. And behind that, illuminated by the torches that had called to him across the dark, was a temple.

The building, from what Ratcatcher could see, was made entirely from a dark, smooth stone. That in and of

itself was enough to arouse his suspicion. He'd seen no quarry anywhere on his journey. Where the stone for this fane of the Immaculates had come from was a mystery.

The exterior of the temple was awash in light. Torches in sconces and great oil lamps illuminated it, making shadows dance and writhe all along its many columns. Like all Immaculate shrines, it was unadorned, elegant in its simplicity. The sweeping grandeur of the entranceway, the breathtaking simplicity of the columns supporting an overhang, the clean lines of the roof—all had been crafted to please the eye and calm the mind.

"So maybe my little bird ran here after all," Ratcatcher whispered to his horse. "I certainly had no idea this place existed. I think it bears closer investigation, don't you?" Without waiting for the unlikely possibility of an answer, he turned the horse around. "But not right now. Let's find somewhere to rest for the day, and then tomorrow night we'll pay the Immaculates a visit to see if Wren's fluttered his way here."

Obediently, the horse picked its way through the dark. Dimly, Ratcatcher spotted something that looked like a rock formation, and resolved to use that for the day's repose. Close inspection revealed that the formation was in fact a chunk of an ancient and broken tower, and that it should serve nicely to shelter him and his steed from prying eyes. The land around it was uncultivated, and Ratcatcher had the definite feeling this was the sort of place yokels regarded as being "cursed."

Sighing with relief, he slithered out of the saddle and proceeded to tie the reins to a particularly convenient outcropping. Satisfied, he removed his blankets from his saddlebags and, eschewing the removal of armor, settled in with his back against the stone in preparation for a few hours' rest.

Beneath him, something howled.

Ratcatcher leapt up, somehow managing simultaneously to turn in midair and draw his sword. His eyes pierced the fading dark, looking for any sign of an enemy. There was none, just a gentle breeze.



The howl came again.

This time, Ratcatcher was prepared for it. Now that he could listen attentively, the moan sounded less like something living, and more like wind forcing its way through a narrow chamber.

“There just might be something down there after all.”

Ratcatcher rummaged around in the dirt until he found what he was looking for: a well-hidden opening into the earth beneath the wrecked tower, fringed with tall weeds. The hole was large enough to admit a man in armor, and bruising on the weeds’ stems showed that someone had passed this way recently.

Looking up at the sky, Ratcatcher made his decision. “Try not to get eaten by anything,” he implored the horse, and then he slid through the cavern entrance into the deeper darkness.





# Chapter 7

Unforgiven Blossom was alive, which meant that she was a genuine rarity among the servants of the Prince of Shadows. She also still had her tongue in her head, which made her even rarer. And most uncommon of all, she had the privilege of entering his throne room unannounced when she felt she had news of sufficient import to pass along to her liege. As Unforgiven Blossom was not a stupid woman, she exercised this right very rarely, but the mere fact that she possessed it demonstrated that the Prince held her in very high esteem.

Once, she would have been considered beautiful, but years in the Prince's service had flensed her youth from her. Her face was angular where once it had been striking; her figure thin instead of slender. She had seen barely thirty summers, yet her hair was entirely silver, and her gait was the measured, careful pace of a woman who awakens one morning and realizes that she no longer wishes to recognize the stranger in the mirror.

Such was the price of service to the Prince of Shadows. Yet she had sought him out of her own free will, and gladly vouchsafed him her loyalty. He, for his part, had been intrigued by her boldness and impressed by her talents, and had taken her for his own.

Now Unforgiven Blossom tended the Prince's orery and was considered chief among his diviners. Indeed, so efficacious were her readings that, one by one, his other diviners had been dismissed, destroyed

**A** or otherwise removed from his service. Now she, and she alone, consulted the future on the Prince's behalf, and this she did with skill, with artistry and with an eye ever toward advancing the Prince's fortunes.

**E** Today she wore a blue robe, embroidered with a speared dragon and belted with a sash of black silk. Her hair was tied back with blue cord, and her feet were bare as she labored at her task. Above her, the orrery whirled and spun, stars and planets dancing by with alarming grace.

A fool might look at the device and wonder how it worked, as the five planets darted and swooped amongst a host of greater and lesser celestial bodies in imitation of the motions of the heavens. A knave might gaze at the prince's engine of divination and wonder at the cost of its making, for the stars and planets were made from gems, and the orbits and epicycles upon which they moved were hammered from silver and gold. And a wise man might worry about what the stars had just whispered to Unforgiven Blossom, as she checked and double-checked her hastily scribbled notes against the humming machine.

"Something interesting, I hope?"

Unforgiven Blossom whirled, dropping the scroll that she had been studying. "My prince, I did not hear you enter."

The Prince of Shadows gestured artlessly. "It was not my wish that you do so. I wanted to observe you at work. Unless, of course, you object?"

"Not at all, my prince." Stooping to retrieve the scroll, she was once again effortlessly cool and unfeeling. "You may wish to examine this," she said, and extended the parchment for him to peruse.

The Prince smiled, as much at the failure of his attempt to rattle her further as at his pleasure in having such a servant, and took the scroll. "Your latest prophecy, I take it, my unwilted flower?"

She nodded, and backed away. The Prince unrolled it and strolled about the room, ducking instinctively to avoid an unfortunate collision with a careening planet, or a celestial catastrophe in miniature as Luna veered by in all

her glory. “Fascinating,” he said at one point, and, “Are you sure?” at another.

“Quite,” Unforgiven Blossom replied. “The signs are quite plain, but there is no clear oracle to be divined from them. Never before have I seen such confusion among the stars.”



The Prince nodded. “Indeed. It seems that we stand on the brink of times that may prove most auspicious—if they do not destroy us first.” He paused in mid-stride and mid-thought. “What is this?” he asked, one long finger stabbing at the parchment. “A name?”

The diviner approached. “May I, my liege?” The Prince nodded and handed her the notes. “Ah.”

“Ah?” The Prince quirked one eyebrow. “Would you care to expand upon that, or shall I simply wait for wisdom to descend from the skies?”

“It already has, my liege,” she said, disconcertingly, and rolled up the scroll. “This much I can tell you: Great things were set in motion today. Jupiter’s path was altered by an unseen star *here*,” she turned and gestured to the orrery, “while a new comet manifested itself *there*, and scribed for itself a path uncomfortably close to the sun. It may be destroyed, or it may flare into prominence; the omens are uncertain as of yet.”

“Please let me know when they become more certain, then.” Ghost-like, he dodged between two rapidly orbiting globes and set each one to spinning with but a touch. “And the name I saw written in your hand?”

Helplessly, Unforgiven Blossom shook her head. “It is no name I have ever heard before, my prince. The stars insisted on scribing it, but...I do not know what it means.”

“Then find out.” His voice was silky with menace and low with command. “Or I may yet decide that dismissing my other augurers was a mistake, and add another to my service. One who reads entrails, perhaps?”

“Yes, my prince.” She bowed very low and made no other sound. The Prince waited for her another moment, then strode off with almost unseemly haste. The door to the

orrery chamber closed behind him, the crash of heavy wood swinging shut echoing throughout the room.

Unforgiven Blossom sank to the floor, and was still for many minutes. At last, she roused herself and made her way to her master's library, which held many thousands of scrolls. Hours later, she re-emerged, grateful that she had been able to discover the information she sought but still befuddled as to its ultimate meaning.

*Still*, she thought, *this is a beginning. Wisdom will follow.* And she sat down so that she might prepare a document for her master, one that would contain all there was to know about the town called Qut Toloc.

It would be, she suspected, a very short document indeed. But that was not her concern, at least not yet. Head bowed, she dipped a reed brush in ink and began writing.