

The Dread And Fear of Kings  
by Richard Paul Russo

We enter the splendid cities at dawn. Always at dawn, when the rising sun lights up the skyscrapers and towers with orange and gold flames like the fires that are to come. Isengol was the first, many months ago; Kazakh-Ir is to be the next—tomorrow morning. It will not be the last.

We enter the splendid cities at dawn, and when we leave, they are no longer splendid at all.

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I am the First Minister's scribe. My name is unimportant, but my words carry the weight of his station, his power. This manuscript, however, is not an official document. He has charged me with the task of preparing an alternative account, one which will, at the very least, question our objectives, perhaps even challenge the king's design. Doing so, we both risk treason. We both risk execution.

Grave doubts have begun to plague the First Minister. He sleeps poorly, disturbed by nightmares, disoriented by hallucinatory episodes that attack as he wanders the halls at night, unable or unwilling to return to sleep. His stomach and bowels trouble him.

Yet this evening, as we prepared for tomorrow's incursion into Kazakh-Ir, he stood alert and assured before the assembled host, the vast plain alight with a thousand campfires. His breath was like plumed smoke in the icy air, but his voice—strong and confident—issued forcefully from the towered loudspeakers and carried across the night to the thousands of men and women standing before him, perhaps even to some of the residents of Kazakh-Ir who might have been watching the fires from the upper levels of their homes.

"Tomorrow we enter Kazakh-Ir. As you know, the citizens of Kazakh-Ir are renowned for their stained glass—both for the production of the glass itself, and for their design and craftsmanship, especially the many majestic windows. The city is ours to take, and take it we will. But tomorrow, we take it with as little violence, as little destruction as possible. The king wants Kazakh-Ir's famous glass preserved—untouched, unbroken. Particularly the windows.

"So tomorrow, march with vigor, march with strength and purpose, but march with care." He continued for two or three more minutes, now speaking more generally. Finally, preparing to give way to the Second Minister, who would provide more specific marching orders, he paused, slowly washing his gaze across the field. "Tomorrow ..." he said, "tomorrow, Kazakh-Ir will be ours."

He stepped back and turned away from the growing roars and cheers, his expression lost and pained. I followed as he hurried toward his tent; he seemed unaware of his surroundings, stumbling into one of the camp stewards, sloshing through a muddy creek just two paces away from planks laid across the water, and tripping over a loader for a rocket launcher. When he reached his tent, he pulled the front flap wide and stood for a few moments in the opening, outlined by the phosphor lamp within. He slowly turned to me.

"I won't need you anymore tonight," he said. "I'll do my drinking alone." With that, he entered the tent and pulled the flap closed behind him.

I walked up onto a small rise away from the fires and lights of the camp, tilted my head back, and looked up at the night sky, a tapestry of stars that shone with a bright and icy light. Some centuries past, it has been told, our ancestors came to this world on starships, stayed for a time, then departed, leaving behind some of their descendants along with the eggs and seeds of animals and plants from their home world, but taking with them the knowledge and technology of interstellar travel; we have not seen any sign of them since. I imagine their other descendants are out there still, plying their way among the stars, traveling from world to world. I often wonder if they will ever return.

If they do, someday, what will they think of the world they left behind? Will they be proud of the magnificent cities that have blossomed on every continent? Or will they be appalled at the old king's devastation of those cities? Perhaps they will simply be mystified, as I am, by what their descendants have done with this world.

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We entered the city like a grand parade, twenty thousand strong, accompanied by rousing music and the bright flowing colors of banners unfurled atop long pikes. Most of us on foot, we approached from the south, crossed the River Thule, then spread out among some twenty avenues, and passed unimpeded through the open gates as if Kazakh-Ir was welcoming us. Yet there were no people out on the streets, no smiles, no cheers—the residents watched silently from open windows, from balconies, from turrets and doorways. As if they knew it was no parade, as if they knew what was to come.

I walked beside the First Minister, who rode straight-backed atop Tarkus, his warhorse. Behind us rode the other ministers, and then came the king's howdah on its massive, powered wheeled platform, the ride cushioned by pneumatics. I could see the shimmer of the king's Metzen Field enveloping the howdah, so strong that we had to keep our own personal fields deactivated. There was little danger, however, for there were no signs of resistance, and we were protected by several rings of heavily armed security forces.

We entered a large, grassy commons and set up a central command post. All twenty divisions were holding, preparing to disperse throughout the city, but waiting for the

king's command. An enormous pavilion tent was quickly erected, and the king's howdah rolled into it. We waited for more than an hour in the frigid morning air, waited for the king to be unloaded and for his sustainment apparatus to be assembled. Eventually, a herald emerged from the pavilion.

"The king reiterates to all—preserve the city's prized glass!"

With that, twenty runners ran off toward the division commanders, and twenty more stepped to the ready. Several minutes passed, then a second herald appeared.

"The king orders—take Kazakh-Ir!"

The second twenty runners dashed away. Within minutes, two crimson-tailed signal rockets streaked across the sky above us, and seconds later three more. Horns blared and I could feel the marching resume, the ground vibrating beneath my feet. Twenty thousand soldiers began to spread through the city.

By sunset, Kazakh-Ir was taken.

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The king is kept alive by machines and a large retinue of physician attendants. He has been sustained by machines since he was eleven years old, and that was more than a century ago, but now even the machines and physicians struggle greatly—they cannot forever keep Death at bay. The old king is dying, and he knows it.

I saw him earlier this evening when I accompanied the First Minister to a council session with the king and the other six ministers. The old king sat in his long glass vat, afloat in the bubbling amber fluids that preserve his withered, discolored flesh. One arm rested on the edge of the vat, the hanging skin dotted with golden droplets that reflected the dancing torchlight from all around him. The king's chamber, installed in the now imprisoned proconsul's quarters, was stifling with a damp heat; at the same time, tendrils of cold air curled across the floor from the vat's cooling fans.

The king sat up, yellowed neck and shoulders rising above the fluid. He lifted his right hand, waved it generally in the direction of the gathered ministers. When he spoke, his mouth hardly moved, but his amplified and distorted voice emerged from the base of the vat, a harsh and metallic grating like some mechanical beast imitating human speech.

"Is the city secure?"

The Second Minister, still dressed in black battle armor, stepped forward and nodded. "Yes, Excellency," she said. "There was little resistance. We took a few minor casualties, no deaths. Kazakh deaths were minimal. Currently we have posts established throughout the city, in all major residential and commercial districts. No trouble

reported."

"Hold," the king said, stiffening his fingers. He called forth the Royal Astronomer, who stepped out of the shadows—a tall, thin man with wire spectacles. "Any sign of change in the heavens?"

The astronomer sniffed, scratched at his ear, and cleared his throat. "No, Excellency." His voice was hesitant.

The king was clearly disappointed. I had witnessed this exchange several times before, but had no idea what the king was hoping for. Had he inexplicably become a convert to astrology? What changes was he expecting? He waved the astronomer away and returned his attention to the Second Minister.

"What is the condition of the stained glass windows?"

"Nearly all intact, Excellency. A few cracked, with minor damage. Only one seriously damaged, in a prelate's house."

"Good," the old king said, nodding. His eyes seemed large in that gaunt head of his. "They will believe their precious handiwork safe. Tomorrow, I want every stained glass window in this city shattered. *Every one*. Break every piece of stained glass you can find—windows, lamps, door panels, decorative artifacts, vases, goblets. Everything. I want to see the streets of Kazakh-Ir littered with broken glass."

"Yes, Excellency." The Second Minister stepped back with a snapping click of her boots.

"Perhaps ..." the king began, rolling back his head. "Perhaps *that* will finally be enough to bring them back from the stars."

The king's eyes closed, and his raised hand went limp for a moment; he shuddered, rippling the surface of the amber fluids. Then his eyes opened once again and he turned to the court cartographer. "Display," the old king said.

The cartographer wheeled out his equipment, switched it on, and a holographic projection came to life in the air above the king's vat. Two continents were displayed: Duur, on which we now stood, and Galla, which lay to the east on the other side of the Diamanta Straits. Most of the cities on Duur glowed a steady dull crimson, while Kazakh-Ir itself blinked bright red. The cities across the straits, on Galla, were all glistening green lights.

"And if they do not come ..." the king said in his mechanical whisper that trailed away. He stared at the shimmering chart above him. "When we are finished here," he resumed, "when we have replenished our stores, we will continue on to the coast. There, at Kutsk, we will appropriate the ferries, then cross the Diamanta Straits, and ..." He raised himself higher out of the amber fluid and reached up as the cartographer manipulated the projection, bringing it closer. The old man jabbed a trembling finger at the shining emerald light of Marakkeen. "There. Marakkeen is next." He gestured violently at the map, and the cartographer silently exploded the projection and scattered the fading pieces of light around the room.

The king fell back, splashing fluid onto the floor, then closed his eyes and let his arm drop below the surface of the liquid, so that only his head remained visible, appearing as though disembodied, afloat in the long glass vat. We were dismissed.

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The air is filled with the sounds of shattering glass. Shattering glass punctuated by an occasional scream or piercing cry or muffled explosion, all accompanied by the music of trumpets and French horns. I am sitting in the upper tower of the proconsul's quarters, fifteen floors above the street, with expansive views of the city and the fires that burn throughout.

The First Minister and I had taken the groaning, halting elevator to the tenth floor, then climbed the spiral staircase up into the tower room and stood together at the window, listening to the sounds of breaking glass. From our vantage we could make out a large cathedral to the east, and watched as its beautiful stained glass windows were destroyed one after another, the king's soldiers smashing them from within; they used pikes and clubs, threw heavy objects through the windows, hacked at the glass and wood with swords and axes. A rocket burst through the large rosette window above the steeple door. Colored glass rained onto the street below.

"When will it end?" the First Minister murmured. His face was drawn, his skin ashen except for dark, sunken shadows beneath his eyes. Although the day was cold, his forehead was beaded with sweat.

"Some of the citizens are resisting," he said. "I have heard reports. They accepted our occupation, but this..." He pulled at his beard; his fingers shook. "Today there have been many deaths, and there will be many more before the sun sets." He turned away from the city and leaned back against the stone parapet as though he were in danger of collapsing. "You are still keeping the other record?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And it is safe?"

"On my person, always," I assured him. "I can destroy it without a trace in an instant."

He nodded absently, his gaze wandering as if he was unable to focus on anything. "I don't know what purpose it can serve, but we must do something, we must ..." He sighed heavily. "If I were a better man, I would act more forcefully, and to greater effect."

"What could you do?" I asked.

"I don't know." He smiled sadly. "If I were a better man, I would know what to do."

"What did the king mean yesterday, when he spoke of someone returning from the stars?"

"His wits are deteriorating along with his body," the First Minister said. He turned and looked out over the city, then sighed heavily. "No, that's not completely fair. How well do you know the Levancian Chronicles?"

"Passing knowledge," I replied. "My parents were indifferent believers."

"There is a passage in the book of Ishiaua, which the king quotes extensively in the private sessions where no scribes are permitted. 'The day will come when the great cities wither. The land will become barren, art and spirit and hope will lie fallow, and the skies themselves will burn day and night with unholy fire. In that time will we return. The blood of the land shall be washed clean, and the profane shall be purified. We shall resurrect the dead, and bring life eternal to the living.' Are you familiar with that passage?"

"Yes. Prophecy of the end times."

"The king does not much believe in a god or gods. But what he chooses to believe, because he desperately *wants* to believe it, is that the Chronicles were written by those of our ancestors who journeyed back to the stars, and that this passage lays out the preconditions for their return to this world. He is dying, and afraid, and he is mad, and he is attempting to bring about those preconditions himself so that the starfarers will return. And when they return, he expects them to not only prolong his life, but also to vitalize his body so that he can live free of the machines and that obscene vat that sustains his life."

"And what do *you* believe?" I asked.

He turned and regarded me with weary eyes. "I believe the king is destroying this world ... and all for nothing. For nothing." With that he pushed away from the parapet, crossed to the spiral staircase, and quickly descended, as though fleeing from his own words.

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Isengol was first. Isengol, sister city to the old king's own city of Glinn, and just as beautiful. *Was* just as beautiful. A city of lush and picturesque gardens both public and private, and a number of colorful outdoor markets that served as centers of the people's social lives. A city of great pride and community.

In the early morning hours, the sky still dark, we crossed the Asunciol River, marched across the Naming Field, then, as the sun was beginning to rise, entered Isengol. The residents believed we were some kind of parade, for they emerged sleepy and mystified from their homes and began to wave and smile and cheer at the host marching through their streets.

It was not long, however, before the soldiers began to set fires and retreat, until the entire force had withdrawn back to the Naming Field, where we watched the city residents

desperately attempting to put out the dozens of fires; watched them frantically trying to retrieve their precious belongings, their children and pets; watched the fires spread from home to home and shop to shop. Watched Isengol burn.

Two days later, when the fires were finally either extinguished or fully spent, we marched back into the city, ignoring the stunned and lost and desperate faces that watched us, marched through the smoking ruins until we at last emerged on the other side of the city, and headed toward the next.

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Tonight the First Minister slept with the aid of a strong soporific, while I could not sleep at all. Near midnight, I dressed for the cold and for anonymity, and went out into the city. Snow fell, bringing a hushed quiet to the air, an almost holy light and purity despite the fires that still burned and the pale gray ash that drifted down with the soft white flakes of snow. I deactivated my Metzen field and let the snow through to my face, melting on my skin.

Unsurprisingly, the streets were nearly deserted, but phosphor lamps burned at each intersection, giving the snow and the city a pale, bluish cast. Broken glass crunched under my boots with each step. In the distance, a flickering orange-red glow pulsed above the buildings. At first I thought it just another fire, but there was something different about the light, and I headed toward it. As I neared, I heard a quiet chanting. Two minutes later, I entered a large open plaza.

Two long pyres blazed to one side of the plaza, each surrounded by men, women, and children who held hands and chanted and watched the flames and smoke rise into the night sky. The burning bodies of the dead were still visible, twenty or thirty corpses carefully laid atop each pyre, shrouds and skin blackening.

More people entered the plaza, one or two at a time, occasionally an entire family. These newcomers did not attend the pyres, but gathered at the perimeter of the plaza, on all four sides. Although they watched the fires, they appeared to be waiting for something else; they huddled together, rubbed hands, and spoke quietly among themselves. I stood apart from them, backed up into a burned-out alcove, and watched.

A delicate chime sounded in one corner, followed by another, then a third, and finally a fourth. The people stopped talking, and the mourners' chanting diminished until it was only barely audible. A hushed sense of anticipation hung in the cold air, and seemed to momentarily suspend the snow; the flakes drifted sideways for a few seconds, danced upward, then began falling again.

From each corner of the plaza stepped a figure dressed in voluminous layers of brightly patterned clothing. I could not determine whether they were men or women, for they were masked with sequined strips of bright red cloth, and the folds and layers of their

costumes hid all hints of body contour. A wide, shining metallic band circled each of their waists, and from the back of each band rose a thick, stiff wire that arced up and over their heads, then down, ending in a delicate stained glass vessel that hung about a foot before their eyes.

They moved slowly and deliberately, taking one long step, pausing, taking another step, then pausing again. When they had advanced several paces into the plaza, they stopped, touched the waist bands, and lights came on within the stained glass vessels. They resumed their progress toward the center, and four more figures in the same dress appeared at the plaza corners, with the same glass lamps hanging before their faces, moving forward in the same deliberate manner. It was elegant and moving, and I felt as if I had entered some other world.

"Beautiful, yes?" The shadowed face of a woman looked into the alcove, and her gaze met mine. She sidled into the alcove beside me. She wore charcoal gray trousers and heavy jacket, black boots and gloves; her hair was long and straight and black, reflecting highlights from the flames. "They're called lightbearers. You're not one of us," she said, "so you won't know."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's the way you hold yourself, standing here. You don't have the bearing of someone whose city has been overrun and half burned to the ground. You're part of the invading force." Her tone was matter-of-fact, and seemed to hold no judgment. "With that sorry old king."

Her even tone and words annoyed me. "I would say *occupying* force," I said recklessly. "The invasion is complete."

The woman nodded. "You're right, that's more accurate." She turned to watch the lightbearers, who now wove complex patterns among each other, but she leaned her shoulder against mine, pointedly making contact. "You have a field generator, but your field is down. That's risky in the current ... climate."

"I thought I would be anonymous," I said. "And I am no threat. I have no intentions of harming anyone."

She gestured at the burning pyres. "Like the invasion, the harm, too, is complete."

"I've never killed anyone," I told her. "Never harmed anyone."

"Not directly, perhaps. Since you have a field generator, you must be a member of the old king's inner circle. And here you are, your field down, vulnerable, only a few strides away from dozens of people who would gladly see you dead. Or perhaps you would be more valuable as a hostage."

I shook my head. "I am only a scribe. If you took me prisoner, the king would let me die. I am easily replaceable."

The woman considered this, then gave me a faint, wry smile. "I think you underestimate



your value. Probably the king does as well, along with all of his ministers, whoever employs you. I suspect a superior scribe would be very difficult to replace." She turned back to the plaza and pointed at the lightbearers. "They celebrate the first snowfall of the year. They've done so every year for centuries, and they decided the ransacking of their city wouldn't stop them from doing so this year."

"So you are not one of them, either," I noted. When she looked at me, I added, "You said 'they.' You, too, are foreign to Kazakh-Ir."

The woman nodded. "Not so foreign as you, but yes."

"Where are you from?"

"Marakkeen."

I did not reply. I saw the king's trembling finger pointing at the pulsing green light on the topographic chart as his harsh voice condemned Marakkeen.

As though reading my thoughts, the woman said, "Oh, I know Marakkeen is next."

"How can you know that?" I said carefully.

"Just have to look at a map of the world, and chart the king's progress. The pattern is clear, and we are next. When you are finished here, you will march to the coast, to Kutsk, and then you will cross the straits to us."

She was right—that is exactly what the king and ministers had planned. We watched the lightbearers in silence as they formed a ring in the center of the plaza, all facing outwards, the headlamps dipping gently.

"My name is Kiyoko," the woman said.

"Named for one of the old dead gods."

"Yes, but I am very much alive, scribe." She tipped her head to one side and asked, "Why are you here?"

"I couldn't sleep."

"One of you has a conscience, then."

I chose not to reply.

"Why did you come out here, though? You could have stayed in the protection and comfort of your command quarters, roamed the corridors without the slightest danger."

"I wanted to see the city. When it was quiet, and peaceful. I..." I didn't know what else to say.

She nodded at the lightbearers now bowing in unison to the people around them, the tiny bright lamps leaving fading electric streaks in the air. "This will continue until dawn.

Let's go inside, in from the cold, where we can watch in comfort. I can even offer you warm grog."

"Why?" I asked.

"Because you and I have much more to discuss."

Why did I go with her? Because it seemed the right thing to do, though I had no idea why. And I believed, somehow, that the First Minister would approve. I followed her along the plaza perimeter, into a narrow street, then through a door and into a brick building dark and gutted and still reeking of damp, charred wood. She led the way up two flights of unsteady wooden stairs, down a deserted corridor, and finally into a warm and comfortable room that looked out onto the plaza, the glass windows surprisingly intact. A cone-shaped ceramic heater glowed a wavering pink in the center of the room. In the corner was a cot piled with blankets, and against the window stood a small table and three chairs. A few other objects were scattered about the room, unidentifiable in the dim light.

I sat at the table and looked out at the lightbearers. They were walking slowly through the crowd, randomly it seemed; they dipped their heads, and each time they did someone would cup the lamp in his or her hands and stare at the colored light through gaps between their fingers for a few moments before releasing the lamp and stepping back. Kiyoko set two mugs on the table, then sat across from me.

I picked up the mug and drank; the grog was hot and strong with alcohol.

"You didn't hesitate," Kiyoko said. "Maybe I've just poisoned you."

"You could have killed me out there," I replied. "As you noted, no one would have objected." I drank again, relishing that warmth flowing into my belly. "Why are we here?"

She regarded me as she slowly drained her own mug, then carefully set it on the table. "The king must be stopped. Otherwise, by the time he dies this entire world will be in ruins, and it will be a century before we can recover. You've been lucky so far. You've met with very little resistance. Too many decades have passed without wars. Weapons have rusted, ammunition has deteriorated, defenses have been neglected; people have forgotten what it is to fight, or have lost the will, or have never even *known* what fighting is. They've known you were coming, but could not quite believe it would really happen, that you would destroy their cities, their cultures, their way of life." She paused, and when I did not reply, she went on.

"That won't continue. This has been your last easy conquest. At Marakkeen we will fight back."

"Why are you telling me this?" I asked. "When I can inform the king and his ministers, so that they will be prepared for resistance?"

"I don't believe you will. But I know I'm taking a great risk."

"I still don't understand why."

"I want your help."

"My help?"

"Yes. This is wrong, and you must know that. Besides, the king is doomed to fail at what he is trying to accomplish."

"Which is?"

"Take us all with him when he dies. Take this world with him. He will fail. We will survive, we will endure. The cities will endure and rebuild and recover the art and beauty and spirit that makes life special, those qualities that make life something more than simple survival and existence. But for now we have all this needless death and suffering, and if he is not stopped, it will continue until he dies." She shook her head. "It's all such a horrible waste."

"You think it's that simple? What the king wants?"

"You don't?"

"No."

"Explain to me, then, what the king is hoping to accomplish."

"I can't. I don't understand it myself, I just know it's more complex than that."

She considered that, then said, "Can any good at all come from his actions, whatever the reason?"

I breathed deeply and looked out once again at the lightbearers, the other people in the plaza, the slowly dying pyres. "Perhaps not." I turned back to her. "But I can't help you. I am only a scribe."

Kiyoko shook her head. "Oh no, that won't do. You must have access to all sorts of useful information. You are, I imagine, privy to the most vital deliberations, strategy sessions, planning councils."

"I only record."

She continued to shake her head. "You would have me believe you retain nothing? That you don't consider what you hear and see, that you don't assess and evaluate and make judgments?"

"I don't make judgments, no."

"That's why you suffer from insomnia and wander the dark streets of a conquered city with your field down."

I stood. "I *had* my field up," I said. "I turned it off so I could feel the snow."

Smiling, Kiyoko said, "Risking your life for such a small pleasure. Even better, scribe."

"I'm leaving now," I told her.

"I'll be here," she said. "For a few days. Come out into the city, and I'll find you."

"We won't see each other again."

She offered no reply. I turned and made my way out of the building, then walked back to command quarters. For some reason I still do not understand, I never brought my field back up.

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I did not see her again. A week has passed, the king waiting with growing frustration for the arrival of starfarers who never appeared. This morning, with our stores replenished—taken, not bought, from the city's residents—we moved out of Kazakh-Ir and marched into the rising sun, trailing long shadows behind us.

The morning was cold; frost dusted the vegetation, while thin cracked ice coated puddles and trickling streams. There has been no snow since the night I met Kiyoko, and none remains on the ground—the terrain we march through is all hard ice and rock and stunted brush, frozen mud and frozen grasses. But the road is in good condition, well-traveled and well-maintained, straight and wide and marking the way east to Kutsk ... and then to Marakkeen.

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In the early Autumn we entered Salterno, city of canals and lagoons. Nearly all transport takes place on water, and a greater part of the city's food is (or *was*) provided by the abundant fish and mollusks harvested by fishermen with their boats and nets. Once we had occupied the city, and restocked our own food supplies, we fouled the waters, dumping into them noxious chemicals and neurotoxins and bio-contaminants, so that by the fourth day a poisonous stench hung in the air and the waterways were choked with dead aquatic life that floated to the surface. Starvation for the city's residents was assured, as was despair. By the time we were ready to leave, the elegant boats were rotting, disease was rampant, and as we left that once beautiful city, we poured flammable compounds into the canals and set them alight. For days afterward, even as we traveled farther and farther from Salterno, we could see black smoke rising from the ruins of the city.

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Kutsk is no city, is hardly even a town—it's an agglomeration of makeshift, run-down buildings on the barren coastline at the narrowest passage in the straits, the men and women as drab and ruinous in appearance as their dwellings. The residents of Kutsk operate the ferries that cross the Straits of Diamanta, and service the basic needs of traders and travelers who pass through their town—no one travels *to* Kutsk, they only travel *through* it, like us.

Gray clouds hung leadenly above us, threatening snow or freezing rain; the clouds did nothing to improve the appearance of Kutsk or its residents as we approached near midday. The Kutskans knew we were coming, appeared to know why, and were waiting for us with every single ferry docked on this side of the Straits, each vessel fully fueled and ready to be boarded. Initially, I was impressed as the first wave of ferries was quickly loaded, pulled away from the docks with a fifth of our force, including the king, and headed across the choppy waters. Eventually, however, as the day went on and the First Minister oversaw the remaining troops waiting for the ferries to return, I observed the Kutskans' anxiety and soon realized that they were so efficient because they wanted to be rid of us as quickly as possible. I imagine that, without the slightest sense of irony, they were afraid we would want to loot and conquer them.

The First Minister and I traveled on the last ferry out of Kutsk, which did not depart until dawn the following day. We stood together at the bow rail, huddled in heavy slicks and cloaks against the sleet that had finally begun to fall; we could make out no sign of the rising sun through the heavy clouds. Behind us, most of the soldiers on this final run had crowded into the sheltered cabins, and I suggested to the First Minister that we do the same. He shook his head and stared glumly across the dark waters; the orange glow from one of the ferry's running lights gave his skin a waxy, unreal sheen.

Twice he opened his mouth as if to speak, but both times he closed it without a word. Finally all he did was shrug with a heavy sigh, as if to make clear to me that there was no longer anything to be said.

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We are still two days out from Marakkeen, yet have already suffered our first casualties. The road to Marakkeen is mined. Several soldiers were killed by the initial explosions on the roadway, then more were injured or killed by the harassing actions that followed—projectile weapons, crossbows, and bolas were all fired upon us from the cover of trees and dense thickets and impenetrable rock formations. We were completely unprepared, and soon retreated to establish a defensive perimeter and set up camp for the night.

The old king is furious. Angry at those who mined the roads and attacked us, and even angrier at the Second Minister for being so unprepared. This is unfair to the Second Minister, but she knew better than to protest. She accepted responsibility, and, as I write, is meeting with her commanders to draw up battle plans for tomorrow.

The king should be angriest at me, of course, but he does not know this.

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This afternoon we reached the outskirts of Marakkeen. We have suffered unaccustomed casualties—more than two hundred killed and nearly nine hundred wounded. Yet, the damage to our forces is more psychological than material.

Tonight we made camp without fires, though the temperature will almost certainly drop below freezing once again. The king insisted, afraid that campfires would pinpoint our location and make a night attack easier. The Second Minister argued with him, noting that we are a force of twenty thousand and impossible to hide, and that the defenders of Marakkeen, who harassed us all day, already know exactly where we are. Hot meals and some warmth through the night would better prepare us to fight tomorrow, she added. The king sputtered and cursed, threatened to demote her to the soldier ranks, then finally dismissed us all, reiterating his order that there be no fires.

I sit in the First Minister's tent as I write this, warmed by the stone heater glowing at the foot of his cot. He sleeps uneasily, drunk and restless and sweating, reeking of alcohol and despair. I am thinking of Kiyoko, who is likely somewhere inside Marakkeen, preparing to fight us, if she is not already dead, and I struggle with my own despair. There seems to be no hope for either of us.

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It is worse than we expected. Most of the fighting ceased as darkness fell and the troops dug in their positions for the night, but skirmishes continue. I can hear reports of weapons fire, an occasional explosion, as well as other, unidentifiable sounds—two loud cracks, oscillating whipping noises, a heavy splash. A few minutes ago I heard a distant, ragged cheer, but it was impossible to know if it was ours or theirs. When the other sounds fade away, I can hear the cries of the wounded and the dying.

We will eventually prevail, there is no doubt of that. We will overwhelm Marakkeen and its defenders with sheer strength of numbers and force of arms, but at a cost to both sides far higher than any we have previously encountered.

As for the old king, he is strangely gratified. This evening he listened with nods and smiles to the status reports of the ministers, even though the news was bad. I understand the reasons for his satisfaction, but that understanding only leaves me more disturbed. When we were finally dismissed, a sense of utter desolation shuddered through me as the old king's mechanical laughter followed us out of the room.

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Marakkeen is ours, but we have paid heavily for it. Three and a half days of fighting, with casualties yet to be numbered. It's unclear whether Marakkeen's defenders have gone into hiding, fled the city, or all been killed. The fighting, for now, has ended.

As the sun rose this morning, the First Minister and I stood on the stone roof of the largest building in the governor's compound, which has been transformed into our command quarters. Smoke rose from the city, lazy smoke drifting up black and gray and white from the ashes and embers of fires that no longer burned. Marakkeen seemed deserted except for the king's patrols moving through the cold morning streets, and the soldiers' camps established in parks and fields throughout the city. We didn't speak; we stood and gazed out upon the devastation, then wordlessly turned away from it and re-entered the building to attend the king's morning session.

At midday, I took my leave of the First Minister and set out into the city. I wandered defenseless among the dead, searching for her, my stomach knotted and burning. Our dead, Marakkeen's dead. Never before so many, never before had the stench of death—urine and evacuated bowels, charred flesh and warm congealing blood—hung over one of the king's conquered cities like this. Fat black flies swarmed over the corpses, while buzzards hopped awkwardly from one body to another, wings flapping, beaks dripping with blood and gore.

An hour, then two, then three, until I could hardly walk, staggering from street to street as if in a delirium. Dead men and women, dead children, dead animals. Once I saw several people hurrying from a row of smashed market stalls, their arms loaded with rotting vegetables and other food scraps, and occasionally I saw a hint of movement inside a ruined building, or heard a footstep, but otherwise did not see anyone except an occasional patrol of our own forces.

I entered a small courtyard and stopped, staring at a body draped over the edge of a small fountain. Rose-tinted water bubbled up from the mouth of a stone armadillo, filling a shallow, circular trough. It was a woman's body, face down in the water, right arm hacked off at the elbow. That's her hair, I thought, watching the long black strands drift in the stained water. I approached, hesitated, then gently took hold of her left shoulder and rolled her over.

It wasn't Kiyoko.

Knees weakened, I sat on the edge of the fountain. The sun was low, obscured by haze, but seemed painfully bright. I felt sick with relief. Exhaustion weighed me down, and a high-pitched ringing swelled in both ears. Each time I swallowed I tasted metal.

A scraping alerted me, and I turned to see Kiyoko step out of a doorway and walk toward me. Her clothing was torn and filthy, her face smeared with soot and dried mud, and she smelled not unlike the dead all around us. Her hair *was* almost exactly like that of the dead woman. She stopped a few paces away and regarded me with weariness.

"Did you think that was me?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And were you relieved when it wasn't? Were you relieved when you saw me walking toward you."

"Yes."

She shook her head. "You shouldn't have been. Do you understand that? It's not any better that *she* died rather than me. You should feel just as sick about *her* needless death as you would feel if it were mine."

I nodded. I knew that she was right, but I still felt relief, and wondered if she understood that, and understood why. She sat on the fountain's edge, with the dead woman's body between us. There was a blistered burn on Kiyoko's neck, and streaks of dried blood across her arms.

"What does the old king think now?" she asked.

"He was enraged, at first. Then, as the fighting worsened, and the casualties and destruction on both sides mounted, he began to take a morbid satisfaction from events."

"I don't understand."

"I tried to tell you before, the king's motivations are complex." I hesitated, then decided any reluctance on my part was ludicrous. "The First Minister says the king is attempting to create the end times of the Levancian Chronicles, which he believes will in turn bring about the return of the starfarers. He believes the starfarers will be able to bestow both eternal life and a whole body upon him." I glanced down at the dead woman. "It doesn't matter how absurd those beliefs are because, unlike most of us, he has the power to act on them." I paused and watched Kiyoko's face as she considered my words, watched her growing understanding and acceptance. "But I think you are right as well," I added. "He believes that if he is unable to bring the starfarers back, then at least he can take much of the world's civilization with him when he dies."

Kiyoko looked down at the face of the dead woman and put her fingers on the woman's pale lips. "I'm tired. And this is only the beginning for me." She looked up at me. "It will be one of two cities next," she said. "Haggorn, or Jassmel. Which will it be?"

"Jassmel," I told her without hesitation. "Will you go there now?"



"Yes." She rose to her feet. "Will I be able to bring anything with me?"

"What do you mean?"

"Information. Special knowledge. Maps or plans or security arrangements, arms inventories. Anything that can help us."

I sat for some time without replying, watching her. The lower edge of the hazy sun dipped below the building before me. "Tonight ..." Then I shook my head. "No, not enough time. Can you stay until tomorrow?"

"If I have to, yes."

"Tomorrow night, then, two hours after sunset. Here, in this courtyard. I will bring everything I can. I don't know if it will help."

"I'll be here."

I expected her to thank me, then smiled to myself at the thought—it was so absurdly self-centered.

"I will see you here tomorrow night, then," I said. "After that, I will not see you again until Jassmel." I stood uncertainly, slightly dizzy.

She nodded. "You are a good man, scribe." With that, she turned and walked back into the building she had emerged from.

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What would be best, of course, would be for me to kill the king myself, but I do not see how I could succeed. The king is well guarded. All that I would accomplish in the attempt would be my own capture and execution; the king would remain alive, and Kiyoko would have nothing. A wasted, histrionic gesture.

.....

I spent a restless night in my room—a storage closet with a camp cot—trying to decide what to do. I have direct access to very little information that would be useful to Kiyoko and her colleagues; the First Minister, on the other hand, has access to nearly everything. I was reluctant to approach him, however. Although his sympathies clearly do not lie with the king, he has provided his service and loyalty to the old monarch his entire life; he has foregone marriage, even companionship, all to serve the monarchy. Questioning

the king's actions is one thing; betrayal is another. If I approached the First Minister, and he decided that what I was doing was more treasonous than he could abide, he might have me imprisoned. Of what use would I be then? On the other hand, what use was I *without* the First Minister's help?

I rose at dawn, exhausted and distraught, and brought morning coffee to the First Minister. Slumped on the edge of the bed, skin puffy beneath his eyes, he appeared to be as tired and despairing as I was. We drank coffee together at the room's single window, and looked out on a river flowing sluggishly past the building; fog drifted above the water, slowly burning away with the rising sun. The First Minister did not speak.

With a fear that dried my mouth, I took a circuitous approach. "There was organized resistance here at Marakkeen," I began. "There will probably be more at Jassmel."

The First Minister nodded, still looking out the window. As the fog cleared, skeletal white-barked trees made their appearance on the far river bank. "And at Haggorn after that," he said, mouth turning up in a faint smile. "Perhaps that is something to be welcomed."

Encouraged, I pushed a little further. "If they had ... intelligence about our weapons and tactics, invasion strategies, information of that kind, they might be more successful."

The First Minister turned to look at me, frowning, but didn't say anything.

"They might even be able to stop the king," I added. I could feel my heart beating hard at my throat, and I was afraid to breathe.

"You are suggesting something," he finally said.

"Speculating," I tried. "If someone had contact with the opposing forces, had that knowledge and could pass it on ..."

The First Minister stared at me for some time, then turned back to the river. I drank coffee and waited, my hands shaking and stomach burning. The First Minister put his arms on the window sill and rested his chin in his hands. When he eventually spoke, his voice was strangely without emotion.

"That type of information *would* be helpful to them," he said. "Even more helpful, perhaps, would be the details of the king's security arrangements, which have been strengthened after all the fighting here. And other information as well. Ammunition stocks, supply logistics ..." His voice trailed away, and I watched his lips move as he spoke silently to himself. Then, without facing me, he said, "I need to bathe and eat. Meet me back here in one hour, and we'll begin."

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We spent the rest of the morning and all of the afternoon collecting information in various formats. Sometimes we went together to a chamber or cell in some distant wing of the command complex, other times the First Minister went alone, returning with cubes or ledgers or scrolls hidden within his robes. Once he came back with a portable cube reader—that rarest of tech devices—and showed me how to operate it, how to recharge its power cells, how to scan, and how to print documents on reusable parchments.

As the sun fell, I told him I didn't have much more time. We hung satchels and pouches from my shoulders and waist, packed the reader, cubes, and documents inside them, then covered them with layered cloaks. After several circuits around his rooms, I was able to move fairly naturally.

We walked quickly through the command complex, avoiding the main corridors, and saw few people along the way. Fear dampened my hearing so that our footsteps seemed silent on the large clay tiles, and my mouth was so dry I could barely swallow. I became disoriented, and only gradually realized we were heading for the back of the complex.

"I've arranged to have Tarkus ready for you," the First Minister said as we emerged from the rear entrance. The big warhorse, saddled and armored, pawed at the dirt a few paces away. "You can't risk exposing anything, so walk him at first, then when you are out of sight of the watch, mount him and ride." He approached Tarkus and untied the reins from the wall post. "I must warn you of something," he said, stroking the warhorse's long head. "So you will not misunderstand, so you will not think we have been discovered." He would not look at me. "When you return, I will be dead. By my own hand."

"Why?"

"It's difficult to explain. I've given my life to the king, and he has betrayed my faith in him. But my own betrayal of him... It only emphasizes the utter corruption of the king, the monarchy, my position. I do not regret what I've done this day, but I can no longer continue as First Minister." He turned and gave me a melancholy smile. "First Minister is all that I am. I am too old, too rigid, and far too exhausted with life to become anything else."

We stood silently beside Tarkus, then the First Minister finally handed the reins to me. "Go," he said. He turned and signaled to the watch commander, who in turn signaled to guards who pulled the gate wide.

I walked Tarkus out through the gate, resisting the urge to run, to look back. When I was several streets away, hidden from the watch, I climbed a low stone wall, awkwardly mounted the warhorse, and rode into the heart of Marakkeen.

.....

I lost my way several times—few lights burned in Marakkeen, and there was as yet no

moon to break the darkness. Twice I nearly turned back, but I kept on, and finally found the right courtyard; a torch burned atop the armadillo fountain, showing the way. The dead woman's body was gone, and water had ceased to flow from the armadillo's mouth.

I sat Tarkus for some time, listening to the unnatural stillness of night in a vanquished city. I was sweating under all the layers of cloth and the weight of the pouches, but my face and hands were cold and stiff. Tarkus's breath steamed from his nostrils, and he shook his mane with impatience, jangling the reins. An animal snuffled nearby, then scampered invisibly away. I grew afraid that something had happened to Kiyoko, or that she had already left Marakkeen.

I sensed movement behind me and turned to see a stranger standing in the roadway as if blocking my exit, a stocky man in half-armor, cudgel in one hand and long-knife in the other, face lit by the flicker of torches. He did not speak, though he nodded once. I didn't understand the gesture, but a moment later I turned again at scraping sounds and saw Kiyoko and two others emerge from one of the buildings.

She stopped a few paces from Tarkus and looked up at me. "We needed to make sure you weren't followed," she said, explaining the armed man who now joined her. "What do you have for me, scribe?"

"Everything," I replied, dismounting.

"Let's get inside," Kiyoko said.

The armed man stayed in the courtyard with Tarkus. Kiyoko led the way into a brick building, along a dark passage and into an interior room with no windows. Once inside, I stood waiting in the darkness until a lantern came to light, revealing a room with makeshift mattresses, rucksacks, water jugs.

I approached a table pushed up against one wall, and began removing my cloaks. One by one I took the satchels and pouches from my shoulders and around my neck and laid them out on the table. Over the next two hours, I showed Kiyoko and her companions all of the documents, explaining what each was, and showed them how to operate the cube player.

When I was finished, Kiyoko smiled warmly at me. "I told you, scribe. You are a good man."

I did not feel like a good man. I felt a vague and distant sense of accomplishment, but that was overwhelmed by my thoughts of the First Minister, who might even now be taking his own life. Would I, too, eventually find myself contemplating the same act?

Kiyoko put her hand on my arm and stared intently at me. "Come with us, scribe. There's no reason for you to go back. *Join us.*"

I did not at first reply. Instead, I looked behind me, in what might have been the direction of the command complex, though I of course could see nothing but a brick wall and a wooden door; yet gazed back as if I could see the complex, and as if seeing it would help

me understand the consequences for me if I were to accept her proposition; as if I could understand what kind of future I would be giving up and what kind of future would lie ahead of me instead. There were no answers, no concrete understandings.

The First Minister would not be waiting for me when I returned. He was dead, or soon would be. But even if he *had* been waiting, I knew he would understand if I were not to return.

Still. I have been a scribe all of my adult years—a man of words, not action. I have watched and listened, and recorded the decisions and deeds of other men and women. I have always stood somewhat apart from the world, and now I was being asked to participate fully in it. It was a terrifying and paralyzing prospect. Terrifying, but exciting and liberating at the same time. And yet... I stood there wanting very much to stay, to join Kiyoko and her companions, but as I pictured the First Minister lying dead in his room, I knew that I couldn't.

I turned to Kiyoko and said, "I can't. I want to, but it's too much of a risk." I explained to her about the First Minister. "If they find him dead in the morning, and discover I am gone as well, the king and his advisers will suspect treachery. They may well change all of their plans, security arrangements, tactics, everything they *can* change. They might attack Haggorn next instead of Jassmel. By the time you knew for certain, it would be too late to get to Haggorn and make effective preparations to defend it."

"Perhaps," said Kiyoko, "but some of this information will still be useful, no matter what changes they make." Her voice held little conviction, however.

I shook my head. "It's not worth it, not for one person, and you know that." We regarded one another, both of us knowing there was really no choice. "I have to go back."

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I have stayed here in this room long enough to bring this account up to date. In a few minutes I will leave, go out into the courtyard, mount Tarkus, and return to the old king. I will leave this account behind with Kiyoko, where it may serve some useful purpose, and where it cannot possibly be discovered. It seems appropriate, moreover, for even if I resume my official duties with a new First Minister, I feel that in some real sense my days as a scribe are ended. I feel reborn.

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They enter the splendid cities at dawn. Isengol was first, and, if we are fortunate,

Marakkeen will have been the last. If we do not stop them at Jassmel, however, then we will stop them at Haggorn, or Benniamad, or one of the other magnificent cities of this world. Someday, somewhere, they will be stopped. And if the starfarers ever return, they will find not a world of ruins and death, but a world of courage and hope, of wonder and desire ... a world of splendor and life.

The End