

THE EYE OF STORMS: A SHORT NOVEL

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THE EYE OF STORMS: A SHORT NOVEL

HONORS THESIS

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By

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The Eye of Storms: A Short Novel

BEING THE FIRST PART OF
FLIGHT OF THE HERON

BY

C. CYPRUS WALTER

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The Eye of Storms: a Short Novel

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Prologue

excerpt from the Book of Nuth'laanija of the Kohnigan Scripture:

written by Stewards and scholars between 1945 and 1962, Age of the King

first printed by the Normenian Church in 612, Age of the Council

In the thirty-third year of the reign of King Edward upon the island of Nutha'il, in what sayeth the Second Era of the Age of the King, that being the Second of all Ages,

When the golden-haired Miiya did descend from the clouds in the form of an eagle, and changed her form to a woman clad in a violet robe with a violet hood,

His Holiness the King did love the beautiful Miiya, knowing his love wer being the will of Len, whose name shall appear only once in this book and shall be heretofore calling 'the Spinner,' until the next book, wherein the sacred name of the Spinner shall appear once, and again in the book following that One, so until the end of the Scripture,

And Miiya did return her love to Him,

And they wer wed upon the island of Nutha'il.

And in the thirty-fourth year of the Second Era, Miiya did bear to the King twin sons, who wer calling Pæter Goreg and Makiil Jored.

And in the thirty-seventh year of the Second Era, Miiya did bear to the King twin daughters, who wer calling Temori Ja'h'ba and Merianin Lev'am'tiyaa.

And the King did see that all was good and that it wer the will of the Spinner.

In the forty-ninth year of the Second Era, when Pæter and Makiil wer having fifteen years of age, the two sons of the King did leave the island of Nutha'il to return to the lands of their father.

And Pæter did go by boat to the great city of Shanarelle, wherein the Lesser Council of Shaniiya did greet him and proclaim him to the public his sovereign birth, and wherein the High Council of Shaniiya did appoint him and dub him the High Father of the Shaniyan Kingdom, that sayeth *dal'Arkan don'Kohnigat shaniska*.

And Makiil did go by boat to the great city of Han'Sharii, wherein the Council of Stewards did affirm his sovereign birth and did anoint him as Honorable Steward, that sayeth *dal'Idoshar*.

And in the fiftieth year of the Second Era of the Age, that sayeth the year 181, Age of the King, the wisdom of Father Pæter did compel him to move the Shaniyan capital to Norinn, that was upon the island of Ceriib, in the Sea of Hope, that sayeth *d'Ohznem e'Zheranne*.

And in the fifty-second year of the Second Era, Father Pæter did issue the Edict of Human Sovereignty, whereby all the cunning races that wer not human did face expulsion from the Shaniyan Kingdom,

And among the races that Pæter did list wer the Ser'ane and the Ainkjaal and the Daziela and the Wuuletosk and the Ethgorn, that sayeth the dragon, the phoenix, the gryphon, the boar-horse, and the capricornus.

And Pæter did perform all this because the people did become fearful of the other creatures, and much fighting wer between them, and the creatures wer being dangerous to the people of the kingdom.

And in the fifty-third year of the Second Era, Pæter did begin his campaign to rid Shaniiya of the creatures that he did have in the list of his Edict, and he did lead the

Norinnian army through the region of Normen and through the region of Ceradrim and through the region of Soyen, all wherein the cunning beasts did flee before his tread.

Thus Father Pæter did cast out the Ser'ane and the Ainkjaal and the Daziela and the Wuuletosk and the Ethgorn from the Shaniyan Kingdom, that sayeth *di'Kohnigat shaniska*.

And the kingdom was made safe for the human races.

And the most wise Pæter did hear word of more terrible monsters dwelling in the center of the Circular Sea, and that they wer terrorizing human sailors therein, and he wer knowing that those foul creatures wer in alignment with the Unnamable One, whom we benignly call the Lord of Chaos. Yea, our wise Father Pæter did perceive that these monsters of rumor wer the true servants of that dark and evil lord, just as wer all the cunning creatures he did just expel from the kingdom.

And Pæter did meet with his brother Makiil, who did yet yield the Great Power, after the Stewards of Han'Sharii did teach him, and the two brothers did concert and discuss the issues that wer facing them. Thus Pæter and Makiil did decide that the Circular Sea did contain a true threat to Shaniiya.

And in the fifty-fourth year of the Second Era, that sayeth the year 185 Age of the King, the Holy King His sons did gather a mighty host of bladed men, and that host with the two brothers did cross the Circular Sea and did arrive to those islands therein, that wer calling Bedh'oraan'khalem, that sayeth shortly Bedh'lem.

And in the fifty-eighth year of the Second Era, the Battle of Bedh'lem did end.

Sharp were the blades of Soyen and quick wer the mind of Father Pæter and great wer the wielding of the Power by Idoshar Makiil, and the host of the kingdom did smite the hideous monsters that wer dwelling within Bedh'lem

But the victory was high in cost, as the bold and selfless Makiil did give his life so that his brother could live, so that the King His lands could be safe from demonic forces, so that the glory of His Holiness the King could be known to all, so that the Spinner could satisfy its will.

And upon hearing the news of the victory and tragedy in Bedh'lem, the High Council did canonize Pæter and Makiil, that sayeth they did make them into saints.

Thus did the Holy King His sons did purge Bedh'lem of its darkness, thereby making Pæter's own power stronger.

But in the province of Tsoraia, which wer in the northern part of Normen, did remain the closest and boldest threat of cunning creatures not human, being thus a threat to Norinn upon Ceriib Island. And the army did keep to its crusade, that wer leading by Pæter, whose wisdom did reveal to him that the Spinner wer wanting the army to continue to Normen in order to face this final foe to the kingdom.

Thus did begin the most great hour of glory for our Saint Pæter, the Protector.

Know ye that the blood of the King be strong, and the Spinner be good and full of love for the threads that it weaveth, that sayeth the lives of us, the people,

And know ye that the Web be weaving according to the plans of the Spinner, that nothing be accident, that all be set forth by the Word and Will of That Which Weaveth,

that one his purpose be knowing by the reading of the Word, which be laying down forth in this the Scripture.

And in the fifty-ninth year of the Second Era, Pæter came to Normen from Bedh'lem with the wind in his breath and the lightning in his fist and the thunder beneath his tread.

And the sly Ser'ane of Ganor did greet Pæter and his host on the shores of Tsoraia.

And with the help of witches and their witch-children the Ser'ane did change their own selves into stone, that maketh them more strong and more sturdy.

But the wrath of Father Pæter wer more great than that of the witch magic, and the Ser'ane did fall before the might of our King His son the eldest.

And so great wer the arm of our Father Pæter that he did confront the eight towers of Tal'Kalin'Sorai, unto which he did assert his own sovereignty, and the witch magic faltered in the towers, and the greatest thereof did crumble unto the soil.

Thus did the founder of our steadfast and godly house end the threat of the heathen beasts that wer dwelling in the province of Tsoraia.

And what follows in this the Book of Nuth'laanija is the account of how our Father Saint Pæter Goreg did found the Holy Church of the King, that sayeth *dal'Haarthihn festet fol'Kohnik.*



excerpt from the Storm Scroll:

written anonymously during the First Era of the Age of the Council

discovered by Tiram Malkhar in Al'Kalai village, 964, Age of the Council

The mistake of believing that the random, the non-linear, is in opposition to divine purpose—indeed, the error in believing that divine purpose is somehow beyond or above the simple purpose, that such a thing as divinity can be so fragmented, that the everyday and the sacred exist separate from each other—is a common misconception among the religious and moral thinkers of the previous Age, yet it troubles the author to admit that this misconception still exists in the minds of a significant portion of today's spiritual leaders.

It is in the random act and in the common action that we see the expression of divinity. This erroneous motive of fixing the spiritual experience into a proscribed period of time—yea, even so far as to fix it into a deliberately structured space—confuses those who would otherwise arrive at divine understanding in and of their own accord. As we know, even the King himself (whose name was 'Edwin,' not 'Edward') was born in the unconventional way, which is saying by an immaculate conception in the earth, in the currents of the River Puurusat, an act which should remind us that the impossible is possible (and it should also remind us that, although such a miraculous birth has never been repeated, extraordinary talents are not reserved for the gods alone- see Chapter 47 of this scroll).

In the outside world, in the wild places, we can see the perfect unity of randomness and order, of common animal traits and the traits that make human beings unique among animals. One can think of no better example of this illustration than the people of the Kalinne Nation (that is, of course, if we limit our focus to the scope of this

planet, Edorn). With few exceptions among the species, the life of an individual *kalini* occurs mostly outside, in the open air, not counting the times in which the *kalinii* take shelter from the discomforts of harsh weather.

It is advised that one dwell not on the fact that the *kalinii* can assume the form of wild animals. It is their human qualities that draw our attention to them. They love, they mourn, they make art, and they do exhibit many of the behaviors not typically found among non-human animal species. What we share with the *kalinii* are the things that connect us. However, it is contingent to the current point that the *kalinii* do not share with the rest of the human races certain qualities that make us the less wise.

They make neither war, nor murder, nor rape. The implementation of punishment is rare among their tribes, yet their instances of theft and betrayal are even less frequent. They have no gods, no religion, yet their common behavior is comparable to the holiest and purest of our own legendary human heroes. It is this examination of the wild, the non-linear, that leads me to revisit the story of Saint Pæter Goreg, whose name was actually San Pietre Ghoregh.

What follows is the true account of how San Pietre stole the Eye of Storms from Bedh'oraan'khalem, that which we call Bedh'lem, and how he led an unsolicited attack on the Tsorajan coast, how he slaughtered the last remaining non-human race that might have demonstrated to us the ways of non-linear holiness, that is to say, the Ser'ane. In this scroll the reader shall find the truth of how San Pietre destroyed one of the Eight Pillars of Tal'Kalin'Sorai, that ancient city which we know now as Al'Kalai village, the

very place in which the author scrawls upon this *Paapirush*¹. Herein shall ye read how
San Pietre tainted the sanctity of his father's name

¹ Scroll

Chapter 1: Visions

year 1195, Age of the Council

Leaning on a bamboo walking stick, Lumen gauged the distance of the clouds that hung over the horizon, darkening the colors of the sunrise. It was not the first storm to have hit the Broken Coast, but this one was out of season. Having spent all fifteen years of his life by the sea, Lumen was adept at guessing what the weather would do. This storm would need at least half the day before it arrived. He looked east to get a broader view of the sea.

The waves made long lines on the water, turning from blue to white as they crashed on the beach and rolled around the feet of broken statues, which had been there for centuries. They shone like a strand of cracked pearls on the neck of the earth, statues that must have been huge before they were destroyed. All that remained of the white, speckled stone was what seemed to be the bottom halves of animal sitting on their haunches, each one with a large, cat-like tail curled around its left foot. They were once identical, before the cracks and jagged edges made them unique.

Lumen jabbed his walking stick into the sand and picked up the wooden bucket near his bare feet. He searched through the tide pools, collecting mussels, clams, and whatever happened to be catching a ride on their shells. As he neared the first statue, Lumen noticed something odd about the sand on the other side of the ruins, something he had never seen before. Where he stood, the sand was pale, almost white—like all the sand in Normen—but on the other side, the sand had a golden hue.

Shifting his gaze up from the sand, Lumen saw the air shimmer as it would over a hot surface in the height of summer. The world beyond the statue looked like a painting.

The turquoise waves that rolled up to the shore were slightly bigger there. Time seemed to have no place in the vision before him, with tide pools emptying and filling as quickly as light glitters on the surface of a pond.

He looked farther up. Feathered wisps of clouds dissolved and materialized against the blue sky. They never stayed in one place, but stepping closer to the statue and looking past it to the horizon, Lumen noticed something that did not waver, the only thing that held any resemblance to the world his side of the statue. Beyond the sand bars, farther even than the deeps where the fishermen dropped their nets, the same storm cloud lingered at the point where sea met sky.

The idea of waking dreams was not uncommon to Lumen—they were visions people had while fully conscious and under no influence of ritual drugs. Aunt Wenomer claimed to have had such a vision, according to Lumen's father, Tahm, and she had left home soon thereafter. In fact, her story was frighteningly close to what Lumen was experiencing this very moment. She said she had been on the beach when it suddenly changed, and she saw the world as it once was during the previous Age. The most interesting part of Aunt Wenomer's story was that she claimed to have seen the sculptures fully intact, before they were broken. Lumen turned his gaze from the horizon to the statues lined before him, complete and unblemished.

Wanting to escape the waking dream, Lumen turned around toward the tall grasses that harbored his rowboat, but instead of a clump of reeds he saw turquoise waves and bare golden sand. Lumen swallowed and turned back toward the first statue, seeing it in full detail. It appeared to have the build of a large cat, but it was broader across the chest, like a horse. Its tail still curled around the left foot and tapered to a slender point.

The head sat at the end of a sinuous neck that curved back, then forward, like a crane's. Strange reptilian traits adorned the face, but the feature that stood out most was the pair of large, bat-like wings that fanned out behind the creature.

Suddenly, Lumen's fifteen-year-old sarcasm spoke up in his head. *Perfect... a dragon. I'm sure everyone will believe me when I tell them I saw a dragon.* Of all the things the statues could have been, they turned out to be creatures from a faerie tale. If he told his father, Tahm, or the people in the village, he would be laughed at. If he decided to tell anyone. Even so, his curiosity compelled him to discover more, to walk closer to the frozen dragon.

By the time Lumen could see the sharp points of the stone teeth, he had accepted the imminence of death, consigning himself to the river ferryman. But what gave him hope were the empty eye sockets in the statue. Everyone knew that a dragon without eyes was powerless. The statue remained still. Lumen looked farther down the beach at the next white dragon facing the storm clouds, which were closer now.

Approaching the second statue, Lumen noticed parts of the marble billowing like white flags in the wind. He thought that this dragon might actually be alive and moving, but the parts in motion appeared different from the rest of the body. The flags were not part of the statue, he realized, nor were they flags. They were white tunics, articles of clothing worn by three people: a woman, a girl, and a young man.

They stood together near the statue, facing the northern horizon and the approaching weather. The young man turned to make eye contact with Lumen, lifting his arm to point at the clouds. The woman looked at Lumen as well, with a face that seemed to be carved from stone. The tiny girl suddenly clutched the arm of the young man and

covered behind him, pointing frantically at the storm. The wind increased.

Soon, the clouds reached the east end of the beach, with lightning hitting the far statues, sending showers of spark and stone into the air. Shards of white marble sprayed out along the sand and landed in the now tumultuous water. The waves grew even larger, pounding the crumbling statues. The farthest statues glowed like a blacksmith's crucibles. Lightning struck closer, and again closer.

The young man lifted the small girl into his arms and ran towards Lumen, with the stern-faced woman close behind. The girl in the man's arms seemed to be screaming—although Lumen could hear nothing, not even thunder—and she waved her arms as if to tell Lumen he should also be running. Could a waking dream be so real as to be dangerous?

Lumen didn't wait for the others to reach him. As he turned to flee the approaching lightning bolts, he quickly recited a prayer to Shaniiya, the Holy Mother. He passed the first statue just in time. A white bolt struck the dragon, which exploded in a cloud of stone, sand, and salt water. This time, he heard the thunder. The earth heaved; sand sprayed into the air and dimmed the light of the world in a golden fog. Lumen lurched forward and landed with his face in the rumbling sand.

Abruptly, the thunder ceased. Lumen rolled to his side and brushed sand from his eyes. The same old wooden bucket was where he had left it, with a hermit crab struggling to climb over its edge. The statue behind him was a unmoving, crumbled mess, slightly grey from age. The strangers in the white tunics were nowhere in sight, and there was no evidence of the other world Lumen had just seen. He looked out to the sea.

The storm cloud was much closer. It should not have moved that quickly.

Grabbing his bamboo stick and dumping the contents of the bucket into the tide pool, Lumen sprinted to the clump of tall grass, toward his rowboat, afraid to look back.

Thank the Holy Mother of Edward that the water was calm. Earlier, it had taken nearly half an hour to cross the harbor. Lumen hoped to cut that time in half by rowing harder. Either way, he hoped to be far from the statues when the storm made land.

The waves farther out at sea crested higher, but the harbor remained tranquil. He passed fishing boats and trade barges, hoping their crews would notice the storm and forgo their daily routine. He wished he could tell each one of the approaching danger, but his family would have to come first. Minutes later, Lumen tied his boat to a wooden post—all that remained of a broken pier sitting at the mouth of a creek that emptied into the harbor.

The sky grew instead of brighter, as it should have in the morning. The clouds were getting closer to the east end of the shore, just as the lightning had arrived when Lumen was... wherever he was, with those people. He looked inland toward the circle of seven towers that stood above the heart of Al'Kalai village.

Standing in the heart of Al'Kalai, a person would think that the towers were made from blue-grey stone, but peering from the fishing boats, or from the road that crossed the Wilderland, one would say that the towers glittered like polished silver. Seen from Lumen's vantage point, however, with dark clouds to the east, the towers were seven needles of cold, raw iron. Seven piercing pillars looking for a sky to hold, they found only the darkness of a night that refused to release its hold on the sea. Pillars that had once, in the previous Age, tried to protect the village from the falling ceiling of a storm. The Seven Pillars of Al'Kalai. Lumen ran.

Chapter 2: Family Business

year 1177, Age of the Council

Tahm Umbrian smiled as his trading ship crossed under the enormous Bridge of the Rising Sun. Something from the first Era of the Age of the Council, the bridge held up the quickest road between the two peninsulas that cradled Tihlikinu Bay, like a mother's arms, sheltering it from the Circular Sea. As the trade vessel turned northward, Tahm viewed the city of Preth Mase, with its spires of multi-hued glass shimmering like frozen candle flames, the buildings also relics from the first part of the Age.

Tahm smiled for having left behind the humid summers of his native Al'Kalai, as the crisp wind pulled his ship towards the docks of Helnor's wealthiest city. He smiled at the thought of swapping ale-stories with his cousins in the city. If he had known that in Preth Mase waited the mother of his firstborn child, Tahm would have been smiling for that as well.

The wooden frame of the boat creaked under the weight of its cargo. Dried herbs, cured olives, and red wine were among the luxuries that people in this part of the world valued for their rarity, and Tahm knew he would make a small fortune for his family's estate back home—a considerable part of which would go to Tahm himself. He also smiled at the prospect of prosperity.

Although the trade vessel's broad helm and four-pointed sails marked it as a Normanian rig, the dockhands greeted the crew with good cheer, most likely, Tahm suspected, since he had the red-orange hair and tan skin that were common among the people of Helnor. Not to say that Helnorians harbored any vendetta against the nation of Normen; rather, they were mildly suspicious of all outlanders, except for the black-

skinned Tarbadi, whom they hated.

Despite having been raised in Normen, the nation of all colors, Tahm was grateful for not having any black-skinned crewmen aboard, at the same time feeling ashamed for that gratitude. But some things were too big for one man to change, he told himself, and there was important business to tend to.

With family members already established in Preth Mase, Tahm was able to sell his goods to savvy buyers within the next three weeks. Reni Umbrian, the head of Umbrian operations in Preth Mase, was well connected to a network of merchants and magistrates eager to buy Tahm's hard-to-reach commodities.

The merchants considered it an investment, turning inland so they could resell their acquisitions at higher prices. The magistrates purchased a few items for themselves, and many more for the public ale houses, using Helnor's taxes for both purposes. Tahm was surprised at how quickly he could turn Al'Kalai's everyday foodstuffs into several bags of gold. In addition to thanking his personal family connections in the city, Tahm gave a mental nod to his older brother Lucius for giving such great advice on when to make the voyage.

Timing is everything to a merchant, especially when it comes to celebration time. In Normen, the summer festival was big enough to keep the children awake for a few nights prior, but in Helnor the first festival alone would last three days, causing more sleepless nights for the adults than it would for the children. This far north, summer meant much more to the Helnorians, and being so far away from the influence of the Normenian Church, Helnor's citizens—the People of the Flame—were free to celebrate with such passion that they caused Shaire, the goddess of the sun and the matron of love,

to blush as she beamed down on them, her children.

Each year, golden ale and ruby wine flowed into stone mugs, wetting the beards of men and coloring the lips of women. Scores of green eyes danced around the bonfires like emerald comets circling the sun. In honor of Shaire, the People of the Flame expressed their passion with warm embraces and long kisses. Men and women were equally bold in seeking each other out for rituals of love. Some women went in search for other women. A few men sought other men.

The People of the Flame engaged in contests of might and wit in order to impress a would-be lover, or just for fun. The Umbrian boys had a reputation for having both the brawn and the brain for such competitions. The brains came from a family tradition of studying literature. The brawn came from their insistence on carrying and loading their own fair share of the trade goods they transported, making them a rare group of merchant-class citizens who weren't afraid to rub shoulders and dodge fists with labor-hardened dockhands.

The most popular competition—among both men and women—was the arm wrestle. Although not as rowdy as his cousins, and completely uninterested in the love games, Tahm was unbeatable as an arm-wrestler among the regulars of the wharf pubs. It was this talent that brought him Charynne, the mother of his firstborn child.

Charynne's father was Shea mach'Oden, a master leathersmith from up the coast. He had started his leather trade by hunting elk near the foothills of the Butterfly Mountains, learning more about working the hides every year until he eventually opened his own shop in Ortann, a small yet prosperous port city. Smart enough to hire and train other people, Shea eventually sold his entire business and started a larger operation in

Preth Mase.

Like the Umbrian boys, Shea liked to do a lot of the work himself. He was built like a blacksmith, with skin as tough as the leather he had spent hours scraping and salting. That, and having the name of a woman, his mother's name, landed Shea into no small number of fights as a young man. Now, far past his youth, Master mach'Oden had the strongest arm north of the Tilki River.

When he heard about this newcomer from Normen, a soft southlander with the same last name as the three boys who tried unsuccessfully to court his daughter Charynne, Shea felt the need to remind folk who the local champion really was.

He knew a written challenge would seem weak and probably go unanswered, so he arranged to meet Tahm in person. The problem was leaving his Eastland neighborhood, which doubled as home and place of business, without being obvious. Furthermore, he would need a reason to visit the main docks, which he hadn't seen in person since he arrived by boat from Ortann.

Who did he know in the wharf?

He remembered a troupe of musicians that always came during summer festival, arriving at the docks and eventually making their way through all the neighborhoods, including Eastland. Sometimes they slept in Shea's shop for free—he was fond of their music and knew that Shaire smiled upon people of generous hospitality. But what reason would he have for seeking them out so soon?

The idea came to him while he was staring at a stack of goatskins that he had purchased from his cousin in southern Helnor. He only bought them as a favor, since he didn't normally trade in goat, but the hides were in good shape, with the fur already

removed. And there was something about what his neighbor the local tailor had said about goat skin.

Shea sighed and let his fist drop onto the wooden barrel next to him, which made a hollow, booming sound. Of course. Goatskins were used to make the *bodhran*, a hand-held drum used by pastoral folk in the Butterfly Mountain Highlands. Hælyghen the tailor was from the highlands; he would know which skins would work best for refitting a *bodhran*.

He took off the next day and put Charynne in charge of the shop. By the time he reached the wharf, he was so excited about greeting the musicians that he forgot about Tahm Umbrian for a while. He soon learned from the dockhands that the troupe had arrived that very morning, emerging from the Tihlikinu fog like ghosts looking for a resting place.

It was easy to identify them by their kilts, which were uncommon this far from the mountains. He found them lounging in and out of the Limping Crab, a private tavern famous for hosting arm-wrestling matches. Shea approached slowly, with a few goatskins slung over his shoulder, speaking up as soon as one of the drummers made eye contact.

“*Hoe behr fa Tohben²?*” Shea said in the mountain dialect.

“*Fe behr³*, mach’Oden, *fe behr*,” the man responded, continuing in his thick highland accent. “Fer what ye come so far don yer hill?”

“I’ve a heap of quality goat hide from me cousin down southway,” Shea said in his best country brogue. “I figure you boys could use a new skin for the *bodhran*.”

“And ye figger good, Master mach’Oden,” the drummer said, sitting up with

² Literally means “How fares your life?” loosely translated: “How are you?”

³ “Well it fares,” i.e. “All is well.”

interest. “‘Tis a long way we come—all up from South tre’Danna this time—and the drums wear don a bet. Let’s have a look at ‘em, ne?”

Shea set the hides before them, and they proceeded to discuss the quality of the skins and their prices. Suddenly, the tavern door opened as a man walked out, allowing a small chorus of yells to erupt from within. With a couple of days left before the first festival, the men must have been practicing the arm-wrestle. Was this his opportunity? He settled on a price—lower than he would normally accept—and walked inside.

Although the tavern was cleaner than normal for the Limping Crab, Shea was put off by the litter on the floor and the empty, untended mugs that attracted flies. Nevertheless, he kept a stern face, not wanting the others to think he was affected by the rough environment. He walked boldly to the center of the room, close to the stout wooden table with peg handles. Two men sat on either side laughing, apparently after a finished match.

The mood was cheerful, since it was only practice, but the laughter and lewd comments abruptly ceased as soon as Shea walked into the light that filtered down from the high windows above the table. All but a few of the men recognized Shea at first glance.

“Which one of you is Tahm Umbrian?” Shea said calmly.

The man who spoke up could have been Reni Umbrian’s little brother, but his eyes were brown instead of green. “I am he.”

“Then let me welcome you to Preth Mase, Master Umbrian,” Shea said neither smiling nor frowning. “I hear you have a strong arm on you, some even say unbeatable. If you’d like to find out who is the real champion of Preth Mase—ne, of all Pres

Tohmath⁴—then meet me here on first festival night.”

“If that’s a challenge, sir,” Tahm said carefully while standing up, “then I’d like to know the name of the man who gives it.”

“My name is Shea mach’Oden, leathersmith, and I have the strongest arm north and south of the Tilki River. You can save yourself the trouble now by just saying here in front of your cousins and newfound friends that I am the best.”

“Master mach’Oden,” Tahm said extending his hand, “I’ll see you here, and we shall all see who is the champion.”

They shook hands, the first test of strength, and Shea turned slowly around to walk away. This Umbrian boy would be a challenge, he already could tell, but nobody beat Shea Mach’Oden.



The last time Shiner o’Clerihgh had seen this many people in his tavern was the night the voluptuous Lili Gudbron agreed to dance there for half price. He had charged normal prices for ale and still made a large profit, only to find out that Lili had only given him the discount in order to get close to Breck, the scullion boy. They ran off together two days after the show. Shiner, of course, had fallen in love with Lili, and business hadn’t been the same without her—especially with Shiner having to wash dishes for two weeks before finding a new scullion boy.

But now, Shiner’s normal crowd of rough wharf men shared the floor with rich

⁴ Pres Tohmath is a province of Helnor, Preth Mase being the capital of both province and nation.

merchants, who held scented kerchiefs to their noses and tried unsuccessfully to avoid stepping on the empty crab shells littering the floor. It was a good thing Shiner had just ordered two new crates of stone mugs. During such an important arm-wrestling match, things would certainly be rowdy, especially the first night of festival, when showing off was held in higher regard than showing affection.

Shea mach'Oden and the southlander, Tahm Umbrian, would be facing off right here in the Limping Crab. Mingled with the sound of men shouting and crab shells crushing underfoot, Shiner o'Clerihgh could hear the clinking of coins. It would be a night to erase the memory of Lili Gudbron.

Chapter 3: Warning

Lumen ran through the village docks of Al'Kalai, past the sun-bleached dinghy that his neighbor promised to scrap for firewood but never touched. He ran past the three pubs that the fishermen filled nightly after pulling nets all day in the Circular Sea. He ran over the smooth road, jumped the ditch, and continued on a divergent trail that cut through the tall shore grasses.

He took the trail to a slim creek and followed it through a corner of the o'Falden estate, home of the village's only smithy and into a small bamboo forest. He jumped over the tiny trickle of water and cut through the don'Porto estate, heading for a break in the line of oak trees that framed Umbrian property.

As soon as Lumen stepped onto the estate, he looked up the hill to the great wooden hall and the circle of cottages that surrounded it. Most of the family would be there starting daily chores. That wasn't the place to go with his story, not yet. He needed to speak with someone who would take him seriously about the coming storm, about what he had seen, someone closer to his age.

Lumen ran.

The path he took went alongside the tree line before turning left into the pasture, which sloped back down to the sea. Lumen and his cousins called the pasture "Paradise," for the way it looked in the afternoon after a light rain. Lumen figured someone was probably feeding the horses, since he didn't see any animals at the pond. He ran across the meadow, his pant legs soaking up the morning dew, until he reached a copse of gnarled elm trees covered with blackberry vines.

Two boys with almond-shaped eyes were standing next to the vines, picking

berries and eating in silence. They were brothers. Lumen stopped, leaning forward on his knees to catch his breath.

“Lumen, is something wrong?” the taller, dark-haired boy asked.

Lumen held up a finger as if to say, *As soon as I can breathe I'll tell you.*

“I bet he found some treasure,” said the shorter one with blonde hair. Like his older brother’s, his long hair was pulled back behind pointed ears and held in a pony tail.

“No, Shin So’zei,” Lumen said. “I found a storm—at the beach. It’s really bad, and it’s getting closer as we speak.”

Kendal, the tall one, wiped blackberry juice from the side of his mouth. “This time of year?” he mused. “That explains why the horses are acting funny. It was our turn to feed them this morning, but they wouldn’t let us get near them.”

Shin So’zei squinted at Lumen and spoke through a mouthful of berries, pieces of which decorated his chin. “You were at the beach already? How did you find us so quickly?”

“You two are always out here in the morning,” Lumen said impatiently. “Listen, there’s a really bad storm on its way right now. We should take cover soon. You won’t believe what I—never mind. Just help me get everyone inside, ok?”

“We won’t believe what you what, Lumen?” Shin So’zei asked, leaning in. He had that same glint in his eyes that he had before hiding a garden snake in someone’s boots.

“Nothing,” Lumen mumbled.

“Come on, tell us,” Shin So’zei persisted.

Lumen put his hands in his pockets and shuffled the dirt with his foot. “I had a

day-vision.”

“You had a waking dream?” Kendal asked, raising his slender eyebrow. “What did you see?”

Lumen hesitated, looking at each one of his cousins carefully.

“At first, I was just looking for mussels on the Break—you know, on the other side of the harbor...”

“We know where the Break is,” Shin So’zei interrupted.

“Shut your trap, Shinso,” Kendal said with an elbow to his brother’s ribs. “So, you were on the Break, and...”

“And the air started looking funny, like I was underwater, and everything on the other side of the first statue looked different.”

Lumen did his best to recall what he had seen. First, he described how things moved slowly and quickly at the same time, how the storm cloud had been there from the beginning. He mentioned seeing people in white tunics. Then, he warned about the danger of the lightning.

Kendal and Shin So’zei said nothing, so Lumen continued.

“I’ve never seen anything like it in my life,” he said, looking fearfully towards the coast. “Oh, Mother of Edward, the storm is coming right now. This could be bad. You guys have got to help me tell the family!”

Kendal and Shin So’zei looked at each other for a few moments, looked at Lumen, then looked at each other again, bursting into laughter.

“Lumen,” Shin So’zei hooted, “you’re getting better than your father at telling those stories.”

Even Kendal couldn't stop from laughing.

Lumen turned red from frustration and snorted at his cousins, who continued to ridicule him. He walked away from them, downhill toward the coastal inlet that belonged to the estate. He could still hear Ken and Shin So'zei making jokes behind him and chortling. They didn't even have the decency to stop making fun of him when he wasn't there to defend himself!

Looking for his peers was a mistake. Lumen picked up his pace toward the shore.

The tiny harbor of Umbrian estate was more marsh than cove. Tall reeds and cattails filled most of the space, where Lumen could see a couple of blue herons wading and fishing. It was Grandfather Drvithian's favorite fishing spot; lately, he had been going there every morning to sit for hours, catching a fish or two, or doing nothing at all.

He was easy to find, sitting in his rowboat, with a bamboo pole in hand. Lumen didn't want to wade out into the mud without the proper boots on, so he tried calling to his grandfather without being too noisy on account of the fish..

"Bobo!" he whispered loudly, but Drvithian didn't hear him. "Bobo!"

He pulled a reed out of the muck and tossed it like a javelin towards the boat, where it landed sharply next to the fishing line. The old man peered from under his straw hat and mumbled something about scaring the fish away, as if he didn't already know that this spot was only popular with blue crabs. Lumen waved his arms, motioning his grandfather to join him.

Grandfather Drvithian paddled slowly towards Lumen as the reeds danced in the shivering wind. Lumen pulled the boat to dry land and spoke softly, yet urgently, to his grandfather.

“Bobo, a storm is coming.”

The old man pushed on his cane to stand upright and look north, from where the wind blew. “Uncommon time for a storm, Lumen,” he said in a strong, scratchy voice. “I usually notice these things right away.” Not that he really did, at ninety years old. “But I can see that you’re right. Did you tell the others?”

Lumen mentioned his cousins by the blackberry vines.

“Just those two, eh? Then let’s go warn the rest of the family. Here, help me get this boat to some place the tide won’t catch it.”



Drvithian accompanied Lumen up the hill to the group of cottages that surrounded the Hall. As they walked, Lumen described to his grandfather what he had seen, but he told the story differently than he had to his cousins, including more details, like the people in the white tunics. Lumen even mentioned his recounting the story to his cousins, but he left out their laughing at him. Umbrians were not in the habit of snitching on each other.

The two of them walked past the blackberry vines, while Kendal and Shin So’zei were up at the pond, where three of the horses huddled together. Both boys had handfuls of blackberries staining their fingers, enticing the horses, which they led back to the stable.

Drvithian stopped Lumen near the pond with a firm hand on his shoulder, looking the boy in his gray-blue eyes. “I want you to tell this story to your father and everyone else in the family, but not right away. First, go tell your uncle Lucrius that you saw a

storm approaching, and that I want him to bring everyone inside. Then, meet me in the Hall.”

Chapter 4: The Match

Charynne mach'Odna worked almost as hard as her father Shea, but not in the same way. Instead of spending all her time scraping the skins of dead animals, chopping firewood, or building stone walls just to see how well they could stand without mortar, she kept the shop clean, the clients happy, and her father fed.

She was not a soft person. While her father's skin was leather, hers was like bronze-colored iron. Yet every unmarried man—and a few married—that paid a visit to Master Shea's shop felt the need to comment on her good looks. Her hair was dark auburn, and she inherited her ice-blue eyes from her unknown mother.

“Your father must have climbed the glaciers of the Butterfly Mountains to get those eyes for you,” one would say, or “The Great Mother herself has come back to live with us mortals, right here in Eastland.” She didn't mind them, mostly, but some men went too far, particularly one of the Umbrian boys.

On the afternoon while her father was away peddling those goat hides, she had to handle each buyer personally, when normally she could defer to Shea if necessary. Rearranging the straps fashioned for horse and ox tack, she heard a familiar voice behind her—familiar, but not welcomed.

“Your father does a fine job making leather.” It was Degger Umbrian, the youngest and latest of three brothers who tried to court her ever since she was old enough to go without the traditional headband that held back a girl's hair. Degger leaned onto the counter, speaking through a sly grin. “Some of the best skin in Pres Tohmath is right here in this shop.”

Charynne took one glance at Degger's expression, realizing the implication of the

comment, and slapped one of the leather straps across his left cheek. The grin vanished, and his eyes widened in disbelief. It took him a moment to feel the pain, at which point he walked out of the shop with a hand and a frown on his face. Charynne was no fool when it came to words.

Now, a few days later, her father was off to prove his manhood to a southlander cousin of those fool boys, and he wanted *her* to be there.

“I have no desire to kick my way through a trash-covered floor and punch my way through drunk, over-friendly men,” she had told Shea, but he insisted that she be there so the Umbrians and other fellows would think before they spoke.

“Besides,” he had said, “those men know who I am, and they know you’re my daughter. They won’t so much as glance at you unless they want a mug full of my fist.”

She reluctantly agreed to go, but not before she finished closing the shop. By the time she arrived at the door of the Limping Crab, Charynne could hear men’s voices chanting her father’s name. She entered, in her right hand a leather strap that Degger Umbrian and others would surely recognize.

The rules were simple. Since they were both right-handed, they would not need a double match. Left hands grip the wooden pegs. Elbows never leave the table. Best two out of three.

The two men locked hands. Tahm could tell from the first handshake that he was in for a challenge. He met eyes with the man sitting in front of him, muscles tight, his breathing deliberately relaxed. Just before the bell rang, someone behind Shea caught Tahm’s eye. She had the bronze skin and red hair typical of Helnor, but her eyes were

like pieces of a glacier, intense enough to convince Tahm that fire was actually blue.

Tahm quickly lost the first round.

During the second round, Shea felt more resistance from his rival. The ease with which he had won the first round disappointed him, when he had been expecting more of a challenge. Now, the initial jolt that usually caught his opponents off guard could barely move Tahm's arm two inches.

In fact, Tahm had regained his confidence and moved in the slow, deliberate style that had built his fame. Shea could only watch in frustration as the back of his own hand fell gradually to the table and finally pressed firmly onto the wooden top, making it time for round three.

The match overseer promptly interrupted the two competitors before they could start again, allowing them a brief rest and allowing the patrons of the Limping Crab a chance to refill their mugs. Shiner o'Clerihgh had given specific instructions that the match proceed this way, knowing that a one-to-one score would inspire more drinking, an activity that always inspired profit.

Speaking of profit, Shiner—along with most people in the wharf—had his money on mach'Oden winning the fight. The man had a longer-standing reputation, and it was bad luck to bet on a foreigner against a local. Should Tahm Umbrian win, a small handful of people would make a huge profit, but the Umbrian family would find new challenges in their business. The Helnorians were a fiercely loyal people.

Perhaps it was this knowledge that caused Tahm to lose the third round, costing him the match. Perhaps it was the knowledge that the beautiful woman catching his eye was the daughter of his challenger. Or maybe Shea mach'Oden really did have the

strongest arm on both sides of the Tilki River. Either way, it was a reminder that the underdog sometimes loses, despite what the stories would have us believe.

At the end of the match, the men shook hands with dignity. Tahm, against his natural desires, afforded himself nothing more than a quick glance at the ice-blue eyes that cost him the first round. It would have been easier for him to just leave the Crab, find a different pub on the wharf, but Shea invited Tahm and his cousins to join him at a table in one of the many private booths. Victory makes a generous man, they say, especially in a land where competition is most often a means of forging new camaraderie.

Neither Tahm nor Charynne said more than a few words at the table—he had just lost a major competition; she was being forced to sit with men she didn’t care for. Yet, this brave, brown-eyed man who accepted her father’s challenge seemed to be much more polite than his raucous cousins.

In the weeks that followed, she cursed herself for being excited whenever the southlander made business in her Eastland neighborhood. He tried to keep his distance, but the famous arm-wrestling match demanded that he visit mach’Oden’s shop whenever nearby. In Helnor, fights were known to make mortal enemies or lifelong friends. Anyone appearing to avoid the latter implied the former. Inevitably, the young man and young woman found themselves in frequent conversation.



Tahm Umbrian and Charynne mach’Odna were married one year later in a fishing village halfway between Preth Mase and Ortann. Charynne decided to keep her maiden name—the feminine derivation of her father’s mach’Oden—mostly out of tradition,

although pride had something to do with it as well. Despite her devotion to Tahm, she wasn't keen on the idea of sharing the same last name as the boys who used to act inappropriately around her. At least they behaved during the wedding.

Celinda, Tahm's aunt, invited them to have the ceremony on the Umbrian estate, of which she was the head. In the small village of Kræbkotzten, it was the oldest remaining estate of House Umbrian. During the year that followed, Tahm helped his aunt Celinda and her son Breag develop the trade operations of the Kræbkotzten estate.

With all the focus on Preth Mase and Ortann as trade cities, the market in Kræbkotzten was completely open, and it was the closest city to Sfaalendoch, an inland river town that shipped large amounts of timber and precious metals.

It was not long before Tahm re-opened the ship yard of his ancestors, hiring travelers whose wanderlust and gold had run empty. Soon, the estate was running goods by sea between Ortann and Preth Mase, improving the Umbrian estate down coast and generating revenue for the estate in Al'Kalai. As business grew, Tahm had the idea of hiring Raghen o'Derwen, a master shipbuilder from Preth Mase who had grown tired of living in such a large city. Just as Tahm was ready to open the shipyard with Master o'Derwen, Charynne became pregnant.

Chapter 5: Precautions

Lumen easily found his uncle leaning on the northwest edge of the Hall, the edge that faced the coast. It was his favorite spot in the mornings.

“Good morning, Lumen,” Lucius said.

“G’ morning, Uncle Luc,” Lumen replied. “I just talked to Bobo, and-”

Lucius held up his hand. “You’ve come to tell me about a storm, no?”

“Yes, Uncle Luc,” Lumen said.

“I noticed it on the horizon,” Lucius explained gazing at the small harbor, “and then I saw you walking up the hill with a purpose. Do you think the storm is serious?”

“Yes, sir. I was on the beach at the Break when I saw it,” Lumen nodded, “and I think it’s moving rather quickly. It looks mean.”

“I see,” Lucius said, turning to face the wall. “Go tell the adults to find me here, and then find someone to help you pull in the carts, yes? I’ll be here, checking out this storm.” As Lumen nodded and walked toward the Hall entrance, Lucius climbed the permanent ladder on the side of the building. He took it all the way to the roof, where he sat on the edge facing the coast.

The black jetty that cradled Bobo’s fishing cove had been in the same spot long before the Umbrian family ever built their cottages on the hill. From the roof of the Hall, Lucius could watch the slick boulders hold back the tide, watch the marsh reeds lean away from the sea, watch as the wind swept across Paradise Pasture.

The waves crashed higher on the jetty as the shadow over the sea approached the shore. Farther out, the sea was chaos, with the waves creating so much white foam that Lucius thought of the icy waters off the coast of Laethet. Where else could this storm

have formed, if not from the cold air over the Glen Arthana peaks, with the melting snow of Laethet's plains? It didn't make sense, however. How could air be moving from the north, when, during this time of year, it always moved from the south?

It didn't matter. Lumen was right about the storm. It looked mean. Hearing the shuffling of feet and murmur of voices below him, Lucius turned to face the four men and one woman who now stood below him, waiting.

"It looks like the storm of '83 has come back for more," he said. The group below him moaned—Ketrynne, Fæbold, Brendon, Faedra, Trevithan, and Tahm—but Lucius just grinned.

"I'm going to stay up here and pray to Crell for some protection." He looked at his sister Ketrynne, the oldest of all his siblings, saying, "The rest is up to you, Kate." When it came to certain things, like watching the weather, Lucius was in charge, but the real power of the family, ever since Drvithian became too old to run the estate, belonged to Ketrynne.

She stood with her fists on her hips. Tough, polished, and bitter, her eyes were like green acorns. "Fæbold, Brendon—you two board the windows." she snapped. Her voice could sting like a yellow jacket; her husband and younger brother quickly went to the storage shed to search for the hurricane planks, which had been there, along with a bag of wooden pegs, since 1183.

"Trevithan, dear" she said to her eldest son and father of her only grandchild, "go ring the bell, and quickly. And tell whomever you see to get working. We've got preparations to make."

The bell by Pillar Circle had been there since before Drvithian's grandfather,

Hagan Iobhor, arrived by ship in the eleventh century, AC⁵. It only ever warned of two things: a storm, or an invasion. Members of the other estates, upon hearing the bell, would look warily to the sky, searching for what would signify the lesser of two dangers. A cloudy sky, although not necessarily welcomed, spelled relief. Trevithan went to look for P. Lettie, the estate's fastest horse.

Tahm walked up to Ketrynne. He was the youngest of the siblings, Ketrynne's favorite. "I'll take care of the barn, Kate," he said.

"Good," she responded. "I'll see to the Hall."

Before going into the Hall, Ketrynne looked up at Lucrius as he swayed gently on the roof. She knew that his "praying to Crell" had little to do with the god of storms. The Umbrian family still recognized some of the old gods from their ancestral Helnor, but Lucrius was *Idoshar*, a Steward, which meant he could call upon the Great Power in times of great need. The last time he had used his power to make a wind shield had been 1183, the year of Hurricane Pete.

That year, when Lumen and several of his cousins were barely old enough to speak, Lucrius used the Power to weave an invisible shield that covered the Hall and protected the family gathered inside. It worked well, especially since he had used the Hall's lightning rod as a focal point for the shield.

But Lucrius knew that a storm out of season could cause serious damage. Al'Kalai should have saved the name "Hurricane Pete" for this year, he thought.

Every coin has three sides: the side we hope to see, the side we hope to land face-down, and the inside. Lucrius hoped the storm would jump over town and land in Jenisat, where water was scarce anyway. He would hate to see Al'Kalai's loose soil wash away to

⁵ Age of the Council

leave mostly rocks. They had just planted seeds a week prior; having to replant would cost valuable time to all the estates. A week was something they could manage, hopefully, but the soil took years to develop in Normen. In some places, it took centuries. Lucrius knew the inside of the coin would reveal itself only through time, as a green coin reveals copper with just the right scratch.

As a Steward, Lucrius could see the character of a storm the way a seamstress could examine fabric. This storm was strong, certainly, but it lacked depth. It reminded him of the Dairy Hills in southern Normen, which ran long, yet narrow, like the roots of a cypress tree. The tall hills looked daunting at first glance, but he and his wife Zabel could cross one in less than half an hour, when they had visited during their youth. He hoped his analogy would prove true, for then the storm would barge in, give a quick wallop, and leave before dark.

Lucrius began working the shield. He used mostly *Fatarn*, the Craft, in the construction. It was a feminine aspect of the Great Power, but only fools figured that weaving the Craft belonged strictly to women, just as it was foolish to believe wielding *Vakarn*, the Force, was strictly for men. The world was definitely full of fools.

He used *Vakarn* to strengthen the shield, but *Fatarn* was more effective for defense against wind. The shield would function as a parry, as opposed to a wall. Better to embrace the force of the attacker, let him throw himself to the ground.

The bell near Pillar Circle rang its warning.

During the Age of the King, the gray sky that had inspired the forging of that bell carried more than rain and lightning. It was a storm that had broken much more than windows and fenceposts. The statues, as they continued to smolder throughout that night

during the ancient Age of the King, cast a red glow upon the evening clouds.

Now, during the Age of the Council, Lucius scratched a red eyebrow, waiting to see the inside of the coin.

Chapter 6: Expecting

Charynne mach'Odna stood with her feet buried in the sand as the waves sent armies of goose bumps marching from her ankles to the back of her neck. The northern wind swept over the waves, after a long march across the Laethet tundra and a short trip over the Butterfly Mountains. It carried the resilience of the tundra's permafrost, boring into the blood of Helnorians like mistletoe crowds the veins of an old tree. The People of the Flame certainly claimed that their land of stone and wood was different from the barren lands north of the boreal forest, yet the tundra wind still found its way into their lives, keeping men's beards long and chilling the bellies of pregnant women.

Arms folded between her swollen breasts and bulging midsection, Charynne watched the sun climb over the sea, imagining that the dark water was actually a field of ice. In some way, her view of the frozen plain was more than imaginary. Ever since Charynne was old enough to salt the meat in her father's leather shop, she had dreams and day-visions of the Laethet tundra, which she had never seen in person. In her dreams, she had black hair, white skin, and green eyes, and she was often near a woman of the same complexion, though her eyes were a blue so pale that they seemed colorless.

Now that she was six months pregnant, Charynne awoke each day before dawn with the dreams fresh in her mind, not subsiding until after she had eaten her second meal. Every one of these mornings, before anyone else was awake, she would stand with her feet in the autumn tide, experiencing a vision in which she were ankle-deep in snow, watching the sun rise over a field of frozen flower stems.

But this habit of visiting the beach gave way to staying indoors, while autumn quickly gave way to winter. As the skin across her belly stretched, the vivid dreams

faded, leaving her with winter boredom. The soon-to-be mother kept her mind occupied by knitting wool stockings and sweeping the front room after her husband's trips to the firewood eves. Tahm's unconscious habit of giving her space when she felt crowded, showing affection when she felt lonely, continued to amaze Charynne. Maybe it was because he had witnessed his two older sisters during their pregnancies.

It was a trait of Tahm toward which few people grew accustomed, his strength with an axe or command of a sea vessel crew, accompanied by such tenderness around the hearth. More than a few women made comments on his destiny to be a good father, well-meaning gossip which only reminded Charynne of certain fears that would bite her flesh like fishhooks, refusing to let go without pulling out a piece of skin, drawing up blood.

I am too hot-tempered to raise a girl, she would think. No daughter of a leather-maker should be teaching a lass how to be a woman, least not Charynne. And a boy? Tahm will make a great father... and tender enough to be a better mother than she could ever be. And what if something would happen to her during labor? Would this child grow up without a mother like she had?

But the most common fear, the wasp that continued to sting without ever harming itself, was the worst of all, the one that all women probably share at one point or another. That is, the one of losing the child altogether.

As she gazed out the frosted window one night, she stared the full moon in his eye, not quite challenging him, but refusing to be afraid of him. In this world of which I write, the moon was known as Father Ice, or the Eye of the Void, and he had his own following, just as the sun goddess had hers. Charynne watched as moonlit snow dusted

the plains beyond Umbrian estate, while elsewhere the acolytes of Father Ice dusted off their robes, which had been kept safe from the summer sun under wooden planks in the floor, behind hidden places in barns, or even locked within the gilded chests of wealthy merchants.

They called themselves Azherii, the Watchers, and although their true bastion was Faranym, the northernmost nation of Shaniiya, they were allowed their rites in Helnor, if only during the winter they adored. The only time Azheri acolytes had a legitimate place in Helnor—outside the span of winter—was when they were called to a duty that only they could perform, a duty that through the years had become their greatest purpose.

It was an old tradition, based on an old story that had been translated and retold so many times that folk wondered if the story was anything more than legend. What mattered most, however, was not the truth of the story, but rather the effect it had on people's lives. As it was, certain children of Shaniiya were born with a tattoo-like symbol on the back of their necks, a birthmark resembling an upside-down teardrop, colored black.

Some country folk called it the Dragon Claw, or the Snake Tooth, while others named it the Icicle, or the Moonsliver. Everyone knew it as the "Mark of the Cursed," so named for the Grand Council of the Cursed who claimed the Mark as their own, lending the symbol a morbid reputation. But this is not yet their story.

It happened seemingly at random. A family might produce a child with the Mark in one generation, never to see it occur again. Families with less luck would see more than one child bearing the Mark. A child born in the southlands wouldn't draw significant attention with the symbol, but in the lands closer to the North Pole, these

infants were considered a danger to all life in Shaniiya. That is why, whenever one was discovered, it was up to the Azherii to set these infants upon a raft at shore, casting a spell that would carry the raft far into the sea and sink this aquatic cradle, baby and all.

Charynne slept little that night, likewise during the rest of winter, but she didn't allow her fear to affect her health, enabling the labor to go more smoothly than she had expected. He was a healthy boy, named after his great-great grandfather Hagan. With his father's olive skin and his mother's blue eyes, Hagan III was born crying with all the vigor of a healthy boy and—on the back of his neck—a black tattoo in the shape of an upside-down teardrop.

Chapter 7: The Breaking Storm

After going into the Hall and telling the adults that Lucius wanted to see them, Lumen hurried to the barn, where he found Shin So'zei helping Kendal put the horses in stalls. The two brothers were nearly inseparable, but Lumen knew that Shin So'zei would welcome a short break from his brother's company. Lumen also knew that without an older brother present, Shin would be less likely to tease Lumen about what he had seen on the beach.

Soon, they were pulling a hay cart to the leeward side of the barn, and Shin So'zei asked him, "So, what else did you see on the beach this morning?"

Lumen stopped pulling the cart to look at his cousin, expecting to see a smirk, but Shin So'zei actually looked serious. Seeing that, Lumen was glad he stopped before he answered. That, and the cart was heavy, even for two farm boys.

Lumen thought a moment on how to answer. "The statues were whole. They looked exactly like that drawing on the Storm Scroll."

"You mean the one on the border, on the first page of the text?" Shin asked, leaning over the harness rig with the same look he had when the family went hunting for glass beads on New King's Day.

"The same, Shinso," Lumen said. The boys had seen the scroll only once, when Lerod Malkhar, the Academy's seal-keeper, showed it to them at end of the previous year.

They propped the hay cart on its side against the barn and walked toward the Hall. Shin So'zei gave a hurried glance over his shoulder at the darkening sky.



Shortly after Lumen and Shin had left the barn, Tahm hurried in and asked Kendal if he would help him secure the large doors. Kendal didn't consider it a request. Beneath their patience and gentle speech, the uncles of the Umbrian family expected quick responses when it came to chores. The successful running of the estate depended on everyone doing a fair amount of simple, yet important, tasks.

They pulled the doors closed and climbed a ladder that went up by one of the animal stalls. As Kendal latched the large door of the hayloft, he asked Tahm if he had heard from Lumen about his encounter on the beach.

“I haven't seen much of him this morning,” Tahm answered, looking down from the ladder as he tied down the last vent that ran along the ceiling boards. “What did he find down there today?”

Kendal explained briefly what Lumen had said about the way the beach looked, forgetting about the people in white tunics. Tahm climbed off the ladder with a hand on his belly and a smile on his face. “It sounds like he was selling you and Shinso a ball of yarn that he pulled from your own socks.”

“Hey,” Kendal said as he chucked a handful of straw towards Tahm. “We're not that gullible. Shin and I thought he was joking at first, and... but when we put the joke back on him, he got that serious look on his face and just walked away.” Tahm, having grown up with two older brothers, swiped away the straw, not even realizing that he had moved his hand.

“What else did he say?” Tahm inquired.

“He did say something about the lightning,” Kendal remembered. “He told us that

was what destroyed the statues in the first place. If this storm is anything like the one Lumen saw over there, then none of us will be laughing.”

As Tahm gave each of the animals a square of alfalfa to keep them distracted from the weather, he thought of something. “Right before my aunt Wenomer left Al’Kalai,” Tahm recalled, “she said something about seeing the ‘old coast’ with her own eyes. She said, ‘I saw the Broken Coast before it was broken, and I can’t stay here anymore.’ I was about eight years old at the time. If I remember correctly, she ran off with Master Lerod’s brother, Delian. The last any of us heard of them is that they were passing through Hanogul, and the only people who went to Hanogul in those days were merchants or settlers on their way to Peradelle. Bobo has a few friends in Peradelle, but to this day—”

“Uncle Tahm,” Kendal interrupted. “The storm?”

The wind got louder, and the horses were already eyeing around nervously. “Of course,” Tahm said. “Let’s go see if we can help the others.”

The wind was strong enough that they both had to lean into the barn door just to get it open.



As Faedra and her daughter Amelys rushed to close the shutters on the cottage windows, they could hear the sound of hammers striking pegs that would hold wooden planks in place over the windows of the Hall. When they finished, they went inside, followed by Tanner, Niabrelle, and Lihneth.

As people trickled in through the southern door, they noticed Aunt Ketrynne

standing on the steps that divided the dining room from the kitchen, as if to stand guard against intruders. Ketrynne was queen of the kitchen. She handed her grandson Breagan to her sister Faedra.

The Hall was built in the same traditional style of the *prosh'den* of ancient Aldich, with a wide, open-pit hearth that provided not only warmth but also heat for cooking. The dining area was separated from the kitchen by only three shallow steps. The raised level of the kitchen allowed for drainage and water pipes beneath the kitchen floor.

Zabel, with the help of Seanna and Desaaale, arranged a stack of logs in the hearth along with bundles of smaller twigs, which they fit into the open spaces. She stood at the edge of the hearth, gazing calmly at the logs. After a few moments, smoke trickled from holes in the stack of logs.

Ketrynne walked out through the east door and returned with a burlap sack slung over her shoulder, full of vegetables. She dumped the contents—mostly roots—onto the counter near Seanna and Desaaale as they prepared a large pot of lamb stew for the family.

The flames in the hearth grew at a steady pace, and the smell of searing meat filled the space. For additional flavor and aroma, Seanna added a small spoonfull of the dark, sweet wine vinegar that the family produced every twelve years. After dumping the cut vegetables in with the lamb, Desaaale carefully poured in steaming water from a separate pot, and the stew was soon boiling. Ketrynne, nodding approval, set to slicing through a loaf of tough, stale bread, which would be nice and soft in a bowl of soup.

Soon, the family was sitting around the fire eating, listening to the wind get louder. By the time most of the bowls were empty, the storm arrived, slamming sheets of rain onto the windows and illuminating the now-dark sky with bright flashes of light.

Although Lucius had formed a windshield around the Hall, one that pivoted on the lightning rod atop the chimney, the Hall was not as safe during the storm as the family had hoped. Lightning was drawn to the lightning rod, but too strongly. The top part of the chimney exploded, shattering the rod into splinters of iron, dropping bricks and rubble down the chimney shaft directly into the hearth. Breagan erupted in infant shrieks, and the other children began to cry. Sparks and embers spilled onto the floor, setting the edge of a woolen rug afire. Zabel was able to subdue the flames before they spread.

Lucius, feeling the shock of his shield disrupting, spasmed and fell back to the floor, his legs bent over the chair, which went down with him. Zabel rushed to his side to help. Rain spilled down the chimney onto a fire that had not yet grown to full strength. Tahm hurried to close the damper halfway, enough that it would control the falling water, but not so much that the room filled with smoke.

Two of the wooden storm planks were torn off the outside by the wind, and one of the windows shattered outward into the rain and angry thunder.

As Lucius expected, the storm did not last long. A couple of hours before the sun started setting, the clouds cleared, making their way inland. Trevithan, who had returned by the time Zabel was starting the fire, climbed the ladder on the outside in order to check the sky to the southeast. The storm had made its way through Pillar Circle and seemed to be strongest over the far edge of Al'Kalai village.

With the little sunlight that remained, the Umbrian family set to checking and repairing what damage they could before dark, as did the other estates surrounding the heart of Al'Kalai.

The young children needed consolation. The broken window had to be fixed, or at least boarded temporarily. The chimney needed immediate attention, likewise the hearth, although removing hot bricks from a fire pit was a challenge. Fortunately, none of the cottages sustained any serious damage. Part of the barn roof had found its way to the ground, but the animals were safe, if a little scared. Having addressed the most urgent of tasks, the family prepared for sleep.

After drinking a cup of yellow-wink tea, Lumen lay in bed, thinking about the storm. It had probably been a serious event for the others in the family, but after seeing what he had seen on the beach, Lumen felt relief. When the lightning had been hitting the top of the Hall, he had thought that the entire place would crumble on top of them. Even before he nodded off, Lumen had the feeling that the storm may have carried more than just rain and lightning.

Chapter 8: Against Tradition

Due to the tradition surrounding the Mark of the Cursed, fear and hatred of the Azherii was common among expecting mothers, but Charynne surprised herself with her own audacity when she found herself setting fire to one of their roadside shrines. However, the sight of unshaded snow banks that should have melted by now, coupled with the shifting images in her peripheral vision, reminded her that she was having another vision, this one while sleeping.

Without needing to look in a mirror, she knew that her hair was black, her skin pale white, and her eyes green. One moment she was watching the flames consume a shrine decorated with the Icicle—a harmless symbol as long as it wasn't on a child's neck—the next moment she was surrounded by the sight of pine and fir trees, their trunks sinking into a quagmire of snow slush and mud.

She wanted to know why her head was throbbing with pain, unable to believe it could hum so loudly when she realized that the noise she heard was the buzz of hundreds of pairs of tiny wings. Someone had tied her to a tree stump and left her to the hoards of mosquitoes, which had been known to literally drain the life out of unprepared travelers. What she thought to be the fog of death rolled through the forest, causing her to cough. It was smoke. Just before her vision faded, Charynne saw a familiar blue-eyed woman thrashing her way past branches on horseback, wielding a bright torch and wearing a mask of fear and frustration.

“Chorinaya,” the woman said. “Stay calm, child. I will help you... again.”

Charynne woke up. The dream was as real as every other in which she had black hair and blue eyes. So, she thought, the woman's name is Chorinaya. The other woman

who was about to rescue her looked familiar; she could have been an older relative, but not from Shea's side of the family. It was hard to make sense of the dreams, awake or asleep. Their realness convinced Charynne that she was seeing the world through another woman's eyes, a real living woman with a name that closely resembled her own. Chorinaya. In the Kolani dialect, it was spelled "Čorynaja," meaning "black." She was probably named for her hair.

The intensity of Charynne's dreams convinced her to seek the company of Aunt Celinda and Cousin Briina, especially since they were so eager to help take care of Hagan III, now six months old. She knew that being cooped up in her cottage would seem unbecoming, not to mention suspicious. Despite that, she would have stayed inside were it not for the dreams. Against tradition, Charynne neglected to inform any local officials that her child had been born with the Mark. She just didn't want anyone to know.

Inevitably, Celinda and Briina noticed the dark tattoo on Hagan's neck, although Celinda pretended not to notice. At more than eighty years old, she had seen many mothers crying at the loss of their Cursed children, even living in such a small village as Kræbkotzten. Briina, on the other hand, didn't possess the strong will that was common among Umbrians, especially among the women. That is why, when her husband Clemn asked about the newborn, she considered no other option but to volunteer all the details.

A few days later, while Tahm was at the shipyard with Raghen o'Derwen, three Azherii paid a visit to Umbrian estate. Two of them, marked by simple black robes, were Acolytes, the lowest level in the Temple of Azher. The third was a brown-haired woman wearing a blue robe, marking her as a High Priestess, second in rank only to the Maroni, the frost mages.

They were waiting in the front room of Charynne's cottage when she returned from picking herbs in the estate's hills with Hagan III in a cloth wrap held close to her chest. As she entered, she noticed the two acolytes standing ready and the priestess lounging on the wooden bench. She threw the herbs in the face of one acolyte and grabbed for the broom she knew would be next to the door, hoping to use it against the second acolyte.

The broom wasn't there.

"We know about you and common household objects, Charynne mach'Odna," spoke the High Priestess.

"Who are you?" Charynne asked through gritted teeth.

"I am Vjed'ma." It was obvious from the woman's accent that she was a native of the region of Il-Kolan.

The two acolytes grappled Charynne and held her against the wall, careful not to harm the screaming infant. "Do you think we are being called Watchers for nothing, child?"

"You will die for this," Charynne said. The priestess pulled a knife from the folds of her robe and cut the cloth that held the baby Hagan, carefully taking him into her arms without cutting him on the blade. "She is tired," the priestess said, gazing affectionately at Hagan, caressing him. "Let her to sleep."

The Acolyte who had received a face full of herbs was eager to practice what he had learned under the watch of his elders. He placed his thumb and forefinger on Charynne's neck, pinching in a way that caused her eyes to roll up and her body to go limp. They laid her out on the floor of the cottage and left.

On their way out of the estate, High Priestess Vjed'ma paused near Clemn as he chopped firewood. She looked toward him, though not *at* him, not making eye contact, and spoke in a distant tone. "Cold Father remembers those who are loyal. Think not on reward, but rather safety you have assured for you and your kin. And see that rebel woman is placing in proper care."

Later that day, Vjed'ma set Hagan Umbrian III upon a raft of reeds as she whispered incantations over his infant head.



When Charynne awoke, she was on the bed. Tahm sat by her side, hunched over on the edge of a wooden chair. His eyes were red. Aunt Celinda stood in the bedroom doorway, picking pieces of lint from her red and yellow wool skirt. As soon as she noticed Charynne awaken, she turned into the adjacent room, where she poured a cup of tea from the kettle on the cast-iron stove.

"How is your head?" Tahm asked his wife.

Charynne looked at him once and closed her eyes, weeping. The only thing he could do was sit on the bed next to her and take her in his arms. Celinda walked in and set the tea on the small wooden table next to the chair where Tahm had been sitting. As head of the estate, she was accustomed to witnessing private moments of intimacy, but she decided it would be better to leave the two alone.

After Celinda left, Tahm sat up to speak. "Celinda told me what happened. I'm sorry, Charynne. I should have been here."

"No, Love," she said, looking at him with sudden anger mixed with the sorrow in

her eyes, “It was Clemn who told the Acolytes. He’s the responsible one.” Having said that, she gently pushed Tahm away and curled up beneath the blankets. Tahm brushed her hair off of her neck with his fingers, leaning over to kiss her there.

“Drink your tea before it gets cold, please,” he whispered. “I’ll be back soon.”

Leaving the cottage, Tahm was furious at what had happened, desperate from the guilt. He knew that the truth about their son’s Mark would get out eventually. With that knowledge, he had left her alone, vulnerable. But Clemn knew when Tahm would be away, and he was the one who had notified the Azherii.

At first, the shouting outside the Hall concerned Celinda, but when the shouting abruptly stopped, she knew there was trouble. Tahm had Clemn on his back, pounding fists into Clemn’s ribs, while lines of tears streaked his face.

Celinda screamed, as did Briina as she ran out of the Hall. Tahm stopped himself in the middle of punching, ashamed but still angry. He walked back to his own cottage. That night, they went to bed early. Tahm was so distraught from what had happened, so tired that he didn’t notice when Charynne slipped out of bed before dawn.



Finding an Azheri temple required little effort, but sneaking in to steal a blue robe was easier than Charynne had expected. After donning the robe, she went through town, leaning on a quarterstaff as if it were a cane, which lent her the appearance of being an elder High Priestess or Priest (she kept her face well hidden).

The morning fog was still thick over the harbor when she found the two acolytes walking alone near the docks. She beckoned to them with her finger and walked along an

empty pier that stretched into the harbor. They approached her carefully, subordinately. They never knew when an elder would show up unexpectedly, a habit Charynne used to her advantage.

Using her best scratchy voice, she told them to kneel. They obeyed, nearly pressing their noses into the wooden planks of the pier. The acolyte to her left felt a sharp pain on the back of his skull and slumped forward. The second looked up, saying “Your Grace, what right have you to—“

First, she split open his nose with the end of the staff, getting ready to hit him again, but as he fell backwards, glassy eyes staring at the sky, she knew that she had struck the brain and accomplished what she had come to do. Making sure the first was dead, she whacked him on the skull twice more, then kicked the two bodies into the water, unconcerned whether or not they washed ashore. Charynne walked back from the pier, maintaining her disguise and going in search of the High Priestess who had taken her child.

Chapter 9: Dreams

Although Tanner snored every night, Lumen was still kept awake by the noise. He usually lay awake for an hour before falling asleep, thinking about the day that had passed. However, telling his story and drinking the cup of yellow-wink tea had him falling asleep before Tanner. When the sky began to turn light gray again, Lumen woke up and walked groggily outside to the pasture.

He went straight through Paradise Pasture all the way down to Bobo's fishing cove. There he went in search of the small dinghy that had disappeared during the storm. He waded into the muck, stepping carefully to avoid the soft, sinking patches. He found the boat among some reeds, but it was badly damaged, already leaking algae-green water.

Lumen climbed into the boat, and it floated out to sea before he realized it was even moving. A thick fog hung over the sea; Lumen could barely see the waves rolling around him. Suddenly, he noticed a hooded figure sitting on the other end of the boat.

All Lumen could see of the person's figure was a white beard poking out of the cowl of a rust-colored cloak. Lumen looked back the shore, which was covered with trees instead of cattails, and when he turned back around, the figure was gone. In fear, Lumen picked up the oars and began to row.

After one pull of the oars, the boat scraped against sand. Stepping onto the beach, Lumen noticed a shorebird gliding over the water where he had just been. The fog had dissipated. When he turned around to face the trees—where the marshy cove should have been—he noticed a dog sitting just inside the tree line. He could tell it was calm, non-aggressive, so he approached it.

He thought the dog looked bigger than normal; then he realized he was looking at

a wolf. The wolf stood up and ran away on a trail that led deeper into the woods. Lumen entered the forest, unable to see the wolf but keeping to the path.

Rounding a corner, Lumen saw something bright blue dart across the path and land on a branch nearby. Expecting to see a bluebird, Lumen was surprised to see a bird of similar size but much different plumage. Only the bird's round head was blue, and its body was yellow, green, and red along the back and sides.

It flew deeper into the woods along a narrower, less noticeable path. Lumen followed the bird, and as he noticed mist forming between the branches, he heard the sound of running water. He could barely see the bird perched several yards in front of him, and as he neared what seemed to be a grove, Lumen woke up to the cold air of his bedroom and the loud snores of Tanner.



Lumen had often awakened from his dreams feeling the obligation to return and finish whatever task was at hand. Once, he found himself walking through a corridor of white walls covered in tapestries. His purpose had been to follow an old man who appeared to be a king. Whatever the king did, it had been Lumen's goal to make sure the king didn't pass through a certain door. Lumen had awakened just as the king had stopped before the doorway, his reluctant hand reaching forward to grasp the handle.

During another dream, Lumen stood on a bare hill gazing at sand dunes, a great lake, and the glass sphere he held in his hand. That sphere had a hinge somewhere, and Lumen knew he must open it. As his finger found a groove, the edge of an opening, Lumen awoke.

In the most frequent dream, he found himself running on a flat rock of a size that would cover Al'Kalai, Calloway, and the Wilderland all at once. To his right he saw the edge, a cliff, and the endless ocean beyond. He knew he had no destination, but he couldn't stop running.

This dream about the bird, however, had a different effect. Lumen knew the bird was waiting for him, and he would return to the path in the forest whenever he had the chance. The obligation that normally set in, which made the dream world more important than the "real world," was even stronger this morning. Looking out his window, Lumen could see puddles and rain-pressed grass. He was the first person to be awake.

Lumen put on a pair of pants and boots and covered his bare chest with a light wool jacket. Against the wet, slippery air, the scratch of wool upon bare skin brought a strange comfort. Another comfort that Lumen enjoyed was being in the Hall alone, before anyone else had even opened their eyes. He put a kettle on the wood stove and sat at the cold hearth, letting his chills keep him awake and listening to the kettle sing its chorus of clicks and rumbles.

That the blue-headed bird in the forest really was waiting for him, Lumen was sure. When he was able, Lumen would return to the forest and find the bird. Everything else was secondary: the dark leaves that sat in a jar near the stove, the water in the pot, the tea he would drink, and the inevitable repairs of the estate would all serve the purpose of passing time, filling space between one dream and the next.

The crescendo of noise coming from the tea kettle mocked Lumen, as the daily chores would mock him with their self-prescribed significance. As the kettle clicks calmed, Lumen knew the water would be at the point just before boiling, the best

temperature to steep tea. After filling his mug with steaming—not boiling—water, Lumen turned to approach the hearth, but in the place where he had just been sitting sat his grandfather Drvithian.

“I hope you don’t mind me taking your warm spot, Lumen,” he said.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” Lumen responded. He prepared another mug for his grandfather.

“That’s because you were too busy listening to that tea kettle, instead of letting it tell you when it’s ready.”

“Then it would be too hot, Bobo.”

Lumen took a seat on the cold stone next to Drvithian and handed him a mug. They sat in silence for a few moments, letting the tea steep, letting their hands warm. The door opened, and Tahm walked in with wet hair. He had a habit of dowsing his head in cold water every morning, a habit he had brought with him from Helnor.

“There’s a lot of work to do today,” he said. “I suggest the three of us start by finding that boat of yours, Papa.”

The other two nodded agreement. After drinking the tea, they went to their own cottages to put their work clothes on and met by the Hall for a walk down to the fishing cove.

Chapter 10: Cold Pursuit

The shade of maple trees protected several remaining patches of white snow, making it easy for Tahm to see the young brown hare that approached the meadow where he had stopped to let his mare rest. Under different circumstances, he would have considered himself lucky to find dinner so easily. But luck, he thought as he pulled a sling from his belt, was a sinister joke. He bent over to pick up a smooth, flat rock.

Much later, as the hare roasted on a makeshift spit, Tahm re-read the letter he had found on his bedside table late that morning, with streams of tears glistening on his face in the light of the campfire.

My Dearest Tahm,

When you read this, I will be gone. I cannot bear the loss of our son any longer. The weight of his absence pulls me down and makes an old woman of me yet. Each hour is a year. Better that I am gone, than to burden you with my unhealable sadness. Please understand.

It is important that I also tell you that I have done a horrible thing. They will come looking for me. Rather you learn from me than from a stranger. The two Acolytes who came for Hagan are dead, by my hand. You can be certain that if I had found the High Priestess, she would be dead, too. Thank the grace of Shaire that I did not. Forgive me for any problems I have caused you.

Oh Tahm, know that I love you! That is why I must leave you and all else. My presence only brings pain and death to those around me. The

comfort of the Mother's Locks will keep me. Do not mourn for me, my love.

Eternally yours,

Charynne

Despite his lack of appetite, Tahm ate his dinner with a piece of bread, a sweet onion, and a few swigs of wine, knowing that he would need his strength in the morning. He awoke just before dawn and continued on the quickest trail to Shai'anna Falls. Short for *fol'Shaire Aniina*, the Mother's Locks, they were named after the copper-colored rocks that surrounded the falls. If Tahm understood the letter correctly, then Charynne meant to throw herself from the top of the waterfall, one of the highest in Pres Tohmath.

The moment he could hear the roar of falling water, he whipped his horse to run even harder, oblivious to the low branches that scratched at his face and arms. Rounding a bend, he was caught off guard as he came nearly nose to nose with Charynne's gelding, riderless. The two horses reared, almost throwing Tahm out of the saddle, but he held tightly and had the mare running again in no time. Just behind, the gelding joined them in their flight. Soon, the white rapids of the Lapi River came into view.

As soon as he could see the spray of the falls, Tahm began to yell his wife's name repeatedly. "Charynne! Charynne! Charyyyy!"

Closer to the waterfall, the path was too rocky and unpredictable for running a horse, so Tahm dismounted and sprinted as well as he could over the slick orange boulders that millennia of rushing water had tossed over the edge of the cliff above him.

“Charynne!”

A third of the way up the steep trail, where the dry rocks were black, Tahm looked down at the swirling pool at Shai’anna’s feet. Something bright blue barely caught his eye, floating in a backflow pool near the horses. Charynne had been wearing a blue gown the night before she disappeared. “Charyyyne!”

In his rush back down, Tahm slipped and scraped a large piece of skin off his shoulder. He almost didn’t feel it. The loyal horses waited for him but shied away as he hurried frantically in their direction. He jumped into the shallow pool and was soon struggling to breathe from the chill of the river. With hands shaking from the cold, he lifted the gown—without Charynne—out of the water. The left sleeve had been torn off, and on the fabric that remained near the shoulder, Tahm could see violet spots that he knew were blood stains.

Tahm climbed out of the pool and lay on the cold, wet grass. Underneath the full noon sun, he was warm enough to stay alive, but the chill would give him a cough for a couple of days. He let his exhaustion overtake him, and he slept. The Locks of the Mother continued to spill over the edge of the rust-colored cliff, churning the ice-blue pool at their feet. From a bird’s view, this part of the Lapi River looked like a single blue eye, pleading, staring at the face of Shaire, may Her light warm the world.

Chapter 11: What Comes after the Storm

Lumen, his father Tahm, and his grandfather Drvithian walked together through Paradise Pasture, where the grass had been pressed down by the weight of wind and water. Several new puddles—as well as the pond—were brown from silt. The rising sun cast hundreds of tiny rainbows off the drops of dew and leftover rain.

“How did you sleep, son?” asked Tahm, thinking that Lumen’s day vision on the beach must have been upsetting to experience.

“I’m sure I slept fine,” Lumen responded. “I don’t feel tired, but it seems like I didn’t sleep at all. I had a strange dream.”

“Tell us about it,” said Drvithian.

“Most of it escapes me now, but the last thing I remember before waking up was a blue-headed bird in a forest, but it wasn’t like our bluebirds here. It had colors on its side, and it was a bit smaller. I had the feeling that the bird wanted me to follow it, but I woke up before I could get close.”

“I once heard a story about a bird like that,” Drvithian mused. “Our old friend Elm had just returned from a trip through the jungles in Bunting Pass, and he told me the legend of the *ciris* bird, which few living people have ever seen. Tell me, did it have patches of green, red, and yellow along its side?”

“Yes!” Lumen answered, stopping to look at his grandfather, surprised. “But I don’t remember hearing that story. I’ve never even heard of a *ciris* bird, so how could I dream about it?”

“Incredible,” Tahm muttered, scratching his mustache.

“I think you have a knack for seeing things that are... in the actual world,”

Drvithian said, “even though you’ve never been near them.”

“Just like Aunt Wenomer,” Tahm said. “Come on, let’s go find that boat.”

“Good idea,” said the grandfather.

They resumed their walk toward the cove.

“Yes, this reminds me of Wenomer, too,” Drvithian continued. “My sister claimed to see the same thing you saw on the beach—as you know—but it seemed to make her fearful more than anything else. Be careful not to let your fear run away with you, Lumen.”

“Holy Edward grants us strange talents at times,” Tahm added. “Luc and Zabel are Stewards. Seanna and Desaaale know each others’ thoughts, an odd talent even for twins. And you, son, can see portraits of the real world, even if it appears to be a dream.”

“The King equips us with such talents to aid him in His works,” Drvithian said with a raised finger. “To better prepare the world for His return, may it be soon.” He finished his last sentence with the sign of the Tree, bringing his palm up in a straight line and drawing a circle in the air before his face.

“I don’t know what to do with these visions,” Lumen complained. “I’m just a boy. Sometimes I think I’ll always be a boy.” The last part was a whisper, but his father heard it.

“Just because your voice hasn’t dropped yet doesn’t mean you don’t know a thing or two about manhood,” he said. “I’ve known men with enough hair on their face to make a sturdy broom”—they all laughed at the thought of a man’s chin sweeping the floor—“but you have more of what it takes to be a man in your left pinky than they did.”

“I suppose,” Lumen said, unconvinced. They soon reached the cove, where the

muddy areas were larger than before. Many of the reeds were bent over, and a bloated fish carcass sat in the mud under a cloud of flies. The dinghy wasn't readily visible, but the sunlight was increasing, making it easier for them to search. Lumen noticed it first.

“There it is—on the jetty.”

The boat was cracked, almost broken in half over one of the black boulders. They knew it was beyond full repair, but at least it would make a good bonfire. They carefully made their way out along the jetty and managed to pull the boat to the top, with Tahm lifting the bow and the other two on the stern. They carefully turned the boat around so Tahm could be the one walking backwards as they slowly carried it back toward firm ground.

Used to carrying things like this, Lumen looked to his left at the sea. Gradually, the air started to shimmer and undulate in the scene before him. The waves crashed irregularly. The colors were more vivid than normal. “Papa...” Lumen said nervously. “I think I’m having another waking dream.”

They stopped walking and set the boat down. “What do you see, child,” Drvithian asked.

“It looks like the beach looked in my vision yesterday. No, it looks different. The boulders are moving below us now. The...” Lumen stopped, backing away from the edge of the jetty. “Those aren't boulders, they're men.” Three dark figures were climbing the rocks below him. They had blue-black skin and large, menacing teeth protruding from their lower jaws. As they neared the top of the jetty, each one lifted what appeared to be a club the size of a tree limb. They weren't men.

“*Durghes!*” Lumen yelled. Immediately, the vision disappeared, as if naming the

creatures took away their substance. “Oh, Great Mother, it’s over. They were *Durghes*! Did you see them?”

“I’m afraid not, Lumen,” Drvithian said, feeling the same uneasiness he had felt when his sister started having her visions.

“I didn’t see anything, either,” Tahm said.

“But—but you believe me, right? Papa? Bobo?”

“Of course we believe you, son,” Tahm said chuckling. “You wouldn’t make something like that up. Besides, many people have visions. It’s not like in the stories where people call such things *magic*. This is the real world.”

“Let’s get off of this jetty anyway,” Drvithian said, nodding his head toward the estate. “I’m feeling uneasy up here.”

“Bobo, why don’t you let me carry this end by myself?” Lumen suggested. “I think I can handle it.”

“I’m sure you can, Bibi,” Drvithian replied. Although ninety-year-olds were a lot stronger in this world than what you and I are used to, aging still took its toll. “I’d be happy to take you up on that offer.”

Lumen grunted and struggled under the weight of the boat until Tahm suggested they switch sides. “It’ll be easier for you to carry the bow, since there’s less weight on this side.”

Lumen took the suggestion and walked backwards, giving quick glances over his shoulder. They made sure to walk slowly and deliberately, not only because the boat was heavy but also to avoid slipping. One thing about the jetty boulders was that they often held puddles of water along the top. If the puddles remained there long enough, then

algae and dust would collect, making those spots on the rock as slippery as an oyster. Typically, such spots were easy to notice as multi-colored streaks on the black rock; however, on this day, everything was wet. A good, hard rain usually washed the jetty clean, but you'll remember that the previous day's storm was quick moving and not enough to do the job.

Just as Lumen stepped down from the boulders to the soil, with the corners of the bow digging into his palms and the weight of the boat shifting to him, he glanced up at his grandfather. Drvithian immediately gasped as his foot caught a slick spot. "Bobo!"

Tahm quickly looked behind him, and they both saw Drvithian fall on his side and roll over the edge of the jetty. They chucked the boat on the ground—let the Lord of Chaos take it if it broke—and ran to Drvithian, who yelled sharply. The poor man had bounced on one of the lower rocks and fallen into the surf that repeatedly pounded the jetty.

"Papa!" Tahm climbed as quickly as he could down to the boulder and pulled his father up by the collar so he could get a grip under his shoulders. Lumen started to climb down as well when Tahm said, "No! Stay there. I need you to help me get him up. Quickly!" He lifted Drvithian up to Lumen, who then hugged his grandfather around the chest, under the shoulders, and pulled him up to the top. Just as Lumen thought he might buckle under the weight of the full-grown man, Tahm took him and carefully laid him on his back. "Papa. Are you hurt?"

Thank the Holy Mother of Edward that his eyes were open, that he wasn't bleeding. He seemed to have trouble breathing, though. "I'm broken, son," he said weakly, looking at Tahm.

Tahm quickly made eye contact with Lumen. “Go get Zabel.” Lumen hurried to the grass and sprinted as fast as he could toward the Hall.

After Lumen left, Tahm pulled off his shirt to make a pillow for his father. “I know these rocks are hard, Papa, but if I move you too far I might make it worse. And you aren’t broken. You’re a bloody oak tree, you hear me?”

“I’m not young anymore, son—oh, watch the ribs!” Drvithian sighed and lay back onto the pillow. “And watch your mouth. These rocks are killing my back.”

“Wait, Papa.” Tahm ran to the boat and kicked at the sides until they came off, enabling him to pry off the leather-padded plank that served as a seat. He brought it back to his father and laid it next to him. “I’m going to put you on this plank. Just relax, and don’t move suddenly.”

“Don’t tell me to relax, dammit! I’ve had to set more broken bones than you know, between you damn kids and the animals. Oh! Careful!” When Drvithian was up on the plank, he sighed again. “This is better.”

“Tell me what hurts, Papa.”

“I told you, my ribs are—” whatever he was going to say was abruptly cut off by a coughing fit. On the last cough, drops of blood colored his lips.

“By the eyes of Numi! Just breathe, Father.” It was worse than Tahm had expected.

“It’s my ribs, son,” whispered the old man. “I think one of them went through my lungs.” More coughs, this time making his teeth and beard red. “I was hoping to be among the centenarians of the family. Well, at least I made it past my father’s age.”

“Papa, don’t even say that. It wasn’t that bad a fall. Zabel is on her way down

right now.” Just to be sure, he looked up at Paradise Pasture, but she and Lumen had barely reached the pond. “Yep, I can see her coming already.”



Zabel’s chocolate brown hair threatened to bounce loose from its pony tail as she bounded down to the cove. Her pointed ears were twitching nervously, but she didn’t break her concentration. By the time she reached the end of the jetty, Zabel had already woven an invisible net of *ko’Nym*, the blood energy, ready to use on Drvithian.

She could tell by the way Tahm held his father’s hand, his head slumped forward, that she may be too late. She leaped onto the jetty—with more grace and distance than normal—and cast the net over Drvithian. She let the weaves settle into his body, but nothing came as a response. Instead of the typical flow of warmth, there was nothing. Not even coldness. Nothing.

In addition to being *Idoshar*, a Steward, Zabel was a member of the *erandi*, the race that dwelt in the ancient forests of her homeland, Kjonn. Incredibly agile, they could jump greater distances than humans, and their sensitivity to the emotions of other people made them famous. You never lied to an *erandu*, unless you wanted trouble. They could see glimmers of whatever a person felt or thought in what they called the “spirit halo,” a small aura of images that danced above a person’s head.

Zabel, like all *erandi*, could suppress the ability to read others, but she had to know what to say, how to comfort her husband’s brother. Tahm’s spirit halo was dark and heavy with guilt. This wasn’t the first time he had lost someone, not the first time he had jumped into a body of water to try to save someone he loved. He hated the water.

He hated the sea. And, above all else, he hated himself.

She knew then exactly what she should say to Tahm: nothing. Zabel took Lumen, wide-eyed and speechless, by the hand and led him to Drvithian, where she pulled him down to sit with her and Tahm. She held them both as they cried. With more than three-hundred years of experience behind her, this wasn't the first time Zabel had had to comfort someone who had just lost a loved one, nor, she imagined, would it be her last.

Chapter 12: Going Back

Tahm returned to the Umbrian estate of Kræbkotzten visibly bruised and scratched, but the skin would quickly heal what the heart could not. In lieu of giving his relatives an explanation, he merely showed Celinda the letter saying, “I was too late.” She took it upon herself to relay the message to the rest of the family. Days later, after Tahm had mostly kept to himself, he went to the shipyard and handed over his part of the business to Raghen o’Derwen, who refused to accept the business without some kind of payment. Given the size of the village, word about Charynne and Hagan III had gotten around fast, not to mention poor fisherman Tecker discovering the bodies of the two Acolytes.

“You ain’t walking away from here empty-handed, Master Umbrian,” o’Derwen said. “I can’t say I know what you’re feelin’ now, but any man can see that you’re sufferin’. Be sensible—let me give you what you need to get where you’re goin’.” With that, Tahm Umbrian accepted a bag of gold that would buy him passage from Kræbkotzten to Preth Mase.

He packed only the items he would need on the road and the few belongings he had brought with him. Celinda insisted on giving him one of the estate’s two packhorses and nearly skinned him alive when he tried to pay for it. He solemnly said his goodbyes, even to Clemn. There was no sense in Tahm holding a grudge, despite what the man had done for his livelihood. The news of a Cursèd child would have gotten around anyway. But that didn’t mean Tahm Umbrian and Clemn Arvish would ever be friends.

Tahm boarded a ship that was making a coastal run from Ortann to Preth Mase, where he met briefly with his cousins and told them the sad news. He stayed with them

through the following month as he waited for his Normenian trade vessel to return from Al'Kalai. The crew had been steadily making trips back and forth, handling goods and generating revenue for the House of Umbrian. Captain Anrii provided his years of experience while the Umbrians provided their invaluable trade connections.

Before leaving for Al'Kalai, Tahm knew he would have to visit Shea mach'Oden and bring him the terrible news. It was hard enough that he had taken the man's daughter away, leaving him with no option but to hire help in the shop. Now Tahm would have to tell him that his daughter and the grandson he didn't know were no longer alive. He walked up the hill to Eastland neighborhood, where the view of Tihlikinu Bay was spectacular, whenever one could see it. The season being late winter, this entire part of Pres Tohmath was shrouded in fog. The men who had been at the Limping Crab the famous night of the arm-wrestle recognized him at a glance and kept him warm with mugs of spiced tea and puffs of black pipeleaf from the Mosquito Coast in Normen, which only reminded Tahm of how much he wanted to be home.

He figured that telling Shea the news would be difficult, but after having to recount it so many times to people he barely knew—they inevitably asked about Charynne—he felt well prepared as he approached Master mach'Oden's leather shop.

The man working the front happened to be Aodh, Shea's cousin from southern Helnor, the one who had sold Shea the stack of goatskins. Tahm asked for Shea, saying only he was a friend from Kræbkotzten. "He's in the back there," Aodh said, nodding behind him. "Make yourself at home, sir."

Tahm walked between the various hides hanging in the shop and found Shea leaning over his latest project, a goat skin imported from down the coast. He looked up

from his work and recognized the face before him immediately. “There’s my favorite Umbrian. Back sooner than I thought, Tahm. Looking for a rematch?”

When Tahm didn’t smile and reply with a quip, Shea wondered. “Where’s my Chary?”

Tahm pulled up the nearest stool and sat in front of Shea with a sigh. “I’ve got to be the one to tell you this, sir. However you react, I won’t hold it against you.”

“Tell me what, by the Flame?”

“She’s with the Great Mother now, Shea.”

Shea was silent for a few minutes. He had lost Charynne’s mother Nialyn. He had lost their other daughter, Chorinaya, a twin older by minutes. But not like this. He and Nialyn hadn’t planned on having children, hadn’t even planned on the act that caused the conception, but what the mind carefully planned the influence of ale and wine easily swept aside. Their agreement was that each parent raise one of the twins, with Nialyn returning to her native Faranym. Now, the woman he cherished above all things—to him still a girl—was gone forever.

“Tell me what happened.”

Tahm did his best to tell the story as he had to the men on the street, and although his voice remained steady, his cheeks were wet during the telling. Shea could have easily been angry, but there was no reason to blame Tahm, who had lost just as much as he. He knew of his daughter’s stubborn will, but he never knew it would lead to this. He had even been wondering about grandchildren during the year. When Tahm finished, the two men embraced.

“I’m sorry,” Tahm said.

“Thank you,” Shea replied.

Tahm left silently, and Shea decided at once to close his shop and prepare for a trip to Faranym, come cold weather or the Lord of Chaos himself.



Within weeks, Anrii returned with the ship. Tahm helped the crew restock the cargo holds, and they departed for Normen. The trip from Preth Mase to Al’Kalai typically lasted about two months, depending on the weather. The Circular Sea was traversable only within a five- to seven-hundred mile band along the inside coast of the Shaniiya continent, due to the storms and reefs that covered the greater part of the sea’s center.

About a month into their journey, past the official first day of spring but still sailing under cold winds, the trade vessel rolled past the coast of Kjonnn, within sight of the cliffs of the Da’Wakari Highlands. The steep slope of Kjonnn’s coast allowed boats to travel close to the shore without having to worry about brushing the continental shelf, whose edge made a sharp drop at this part of the sea. Tahm leaned over the starboard railing, eyeing the distant cliffs that loomed over surf so powerful that he could see it this far away. The top of the highlands was covered in a mantle of mist. Turning his back to the wind, facing the bow of the square-rigged vessel, Tahm brought a long-stemmed pipe to his lips and drew on the glowing pipeleaf. Fog hid the Da’Wakari Highlands, and the clouds over the sea cast a grey light. Tahm exhaled a puff of smoke, which flew away and seemed to blend with the clouds. Suddenly, Tahm heard a sharp cry coming from his right side. He leaned back onto the railing and immediately recognized the sound. It was

the cry of an infant.

“Anrii!” he shouted towards the stern. “Man overboard!”

Upon hearing the last two words, four crewmen ran to the dinghy strapped to the starboard side and began untying knots in order to lower the small boat. Two of them jumped in with Tahm right behind them. By this time, they could all hear the crying baby, and they followed its sound until they saw it floating on a small raft of reeds on the crest of a wave several yards before them. “That be a Cursèd child,” said the man with the thick Normenian mustache. He stopped rowing and pulled the oars out of the water. “Bad luck to take a child like that, Master Umbrian.” The other man pulled up his oars as well. Tahm turned around from his point in the very front of the boat and looked the two men in the eye, one at a time.

“There was nothing wrong with my boy when they came and took him. If you mean to let this child perish out here, then throw me over the side so I can drown with him.” The two men said nothing, not moving. “Otherwise, drop those oars and get us over there.” They looked at each other first, then back at Tahm, who stood up and started removing his shirt.

“Umbrian, no!” said the second oarsman, setting his oars back into the water. “We can at least look.” The other man reluctantly joined him in paddling. They went through the trough of the wave and came up near the makeshift raft. The baby, upon seeing Tahm’s brown eyes, ceased its wailing and stared at him curiously. It was a pale-skinned child with grey eyes and dark hair. All it had for clothing was a thin blanket wrapped around its body like a cocoon. The raft it sat on was made mostly of reeds but also contained twigs and even lashings to help it remain intact. Next to the child’s head

sat a flat, grey river stone. “Hold me up,” Tahm said, leaning over the side of the boat. The mustached man directly behind him got up and held Tahm by the belt so he could reach down and pick the baby out of the raft.

When Tahm extended his hand, he felt warm air just above the raft. He delicately grasped the blanket with one hand and picked the baby up with his other hand behind its head. Holding the child close to his chest, Tahm reached down and picked up the smooth rock. As soon as he did, the lashings in the boat loosened, and the entire apparatus fell apart before his eyes. He felt a rush of warm air pass his face, and then the air was crisp again. “I got the baby,” he said, and the sailor pulled him back into the boat. As Tahm sat down, the baby started crying again. Apparently, it had been kept warm but was now in colder air. Tahm held it close to his chest, rocking it. “Let’s go back.”



In his cabin below, Tahm unwrapped the blanket and looked the child over with care. It was a boy, and as Tahm suspected, it had the tattoo-like Mark on the back of its neck. The air had been warm over the raft, he remembered, and the stone seemed to have a magic that held the raft together. It wasn’t what he expected from a raft meant to fall apart in the tumult of the sea. He was glad he tossed the rock into the water as they pulleyed the dinghy back up the side of the boat. He heard a knock at the door. “Come in.” It was Anrii.

“You gonna keep ‘im?” the captain asked.

“You know what happened to my Hagan,” Tahm replied.

“If you ask me, sir, I say it ain’t right.”

Tahm looked up at him, his eyes tight.

“Like I say,” Anrii continued, “it ain’t right to let an innocent creature die in the elements like that.” He said added something colorful about the Azherii. “You’re the only one on this ship fit to be a Da. So?”

“I will keep him, Anrii, and raise him as my son.”

Anrii smiled and clapped his hands once. “I’ll go get us some wine, and we can think of a name.”

“No need for that—I mean, bring the wine, and some milk from that goat of yours—but I already have a name. This boy arrives at the darkest time I’ve ever known in my life. All I could think about is how low-down of a man I am, and here he is waiting for me to save him. It makes a man feel good, like he has a reason to be strong, when he has someone to look after, you know?” Tahm held the child in his arms, letting it suck his thumb. “That’s why I’m going to call him Lumen.”

“That’s a good name, Umbrian,” Anrii said quietly. “Candlelight. A good name.”

Chapter 13: Facing the Truth

Besides the coastal wind and the people slapping at mosquitoes, the only sound Lumen could hear was the drone of the Normenian priest as he recited the funeral eulogy for Drvithian. The priest wore a dark green robe with the Tree symbol embroidered in gold thread over his left breast. As he spoke, he had one hand raised before him with two fingers pointing upward, the other hand holding the Kohnigan Scripture. Having read this passage several times before, the priest found no need to look at the book for reference. Not even glancing at the mourners, his eyes remained fixed on some imaginary point before him.

“le'Irand choro quele Ziivera i valo quele Laasni”(A tree dies every winter and returns every spring).

The rain of the storm, coupled with the warm air that came with spring, had brought on the mosquitoes. But small, annoying bugs were insignificant among the troubles the storm had brought. For one thing, it reminded people that they lived in a world where unexpected events could occur, sometimes resulting in tragedy. When bad, unexplainable things happened, people often looked for someone to blame. Although the strength of the Normenian Church protected folk from the Azherii tradition surrounding the Mark of the Cursed, people remembered the suspicions associated with the Mark. That is why, when the Umbrian family and several members of the other estates of Al'Kalai stood around Drvithian's funeral boat, Lumen noticed more than a couple of narrow-eyed glances looking in his direction.

“cre'chorat oponiris tosartat codo'König” (By dying, we are able to live with the King).

His Mark was kept well hidden by the length of his hair, which grew past his shoulders, but the villagers knew it was there. Among the few people who looked at him with any kind of sympathy were Madame Buffalo and Mister Elm. The first, a rotund, dark-skinned woman decorated with brilliant white tattoos, was the matriarch of the Kalinne Territory outside of Calloway. People respected her, even feared her, for her talents in the supernatural. The *kalinii* were the only race of people in Shaniiya unable to become Stewards, but they had other talents to compensate. Mythology would tell us that Epimath, the god of animals, created a race of people complete with all the qualities and intuition of his other creations, hence the *kalinii*, but the *kalinii* themselves thought little of gods and myths.

“d'Edorn mao olo Tlish” (The earth is His flesh.)

Nevertheless, Madame Buffalo was always present during funerals and weddings, and she was known to help interpret dreams. Not that she had could look into the future or even change its outcome; rather, she merely helped people to notice what they could already see, to realize what they were already thinking. Similar to the way the *erandi* could see spirit halos, the Madame could see the turmoil and pain swirling over Lumen's head. Mister Elm, although outwardly void of any telepathic talents, was old enough to see the same thing when he looked at the grandson of his now deceased friend. He was a man whose white hair and wrinkled eyes made him seem as old as Drvithian was, but his skin was tighter, his muscles stringier. The Umbrian family was used to seeing him at least once a year, but the traveling man never stayed for long. His stories of the Far East, with its desert dunes and perilous mountains always captured the children's attention. Under different circumstances, the young ones would have been pulling at his cloak,

begging him for a story.

“di’Perasse mao olo Sancrea” (The great river is His blood).

Madame Buffalo and Mister Elm stood next to each other, bringing their heads together occasionally to speak, even while the Normenian priest continued to give the eulogy. Apparently, Madame Buffalo and Mister Elm had heard it enough times to think they could start their own quiet conversation. But as Lumen listened to the words of the sacrament carefully, he realized that very little of it had to do with his grandfather, and it was what a priest would say at anyone’s funeral.

“khazhasi elle wel’maatat onden sod’olo Queran” (We shall all become one with his body).

The priest said nothing of his Bobo and seemed to know nothing of who he had been. He was only in Al’Kalai because he had come from Norinn in order to instruct the new clergy at the chapel in Calloway, the nearest city. After the priest finished, Zabel would ceremoniously light the floating pyre—with nothing more than a thought—and they would all sing as it floated out to sea. Lucius had woven a net of *Fatarn* over the small boat to ensure that it would drift out into the harbor. Earlier, Tahm, Brendon, and Trevithan had constructed the pyre using mostly parts of Drvithian’s broken fishing boat.

“hats mad’Inkend nenurzh disem do’Rekaape” (May fire cleanse us of our sins).

Buffalo and Elm continued to whisper to each other, making repeated glances in Lumen’s direction. Were they blaming him for what had happened? He knew he didn’t have the right to let that upset him—he blamed himself—but these two strangers had no place judging him. Elm seemed to sense his frustration. He joined his thumb and forefinger in a circle and brought his hand to his sternum, letting the other fingers point

upward. The sign of peace. If that was a true indication of Elm's feelings, then perhaps he and the matriarch favored Lumen.

"hats ma'Driach nemaat le'Onte don'Satre" (May ice be the source of new life).\

The priest gently closed the book.

"am'dibam" (Amen), he said, finally.

"am'dibam," the small crowd repeated.

Those who weren't already staring at the boat turned their heads to watch. A tendril of smoke sprang from the center of the bulk that contained the late Umbrian, and flames quickly followed. Slowly, the tiny craft crept away from the pier, and the entire thing was soon blazing. Ketrynne began singing in a steady voice, which wavered and cracked as the rest of the family joined her. She had chosen an old Aldish song, one the tunes Bobo would sing when the family sat around the hearth. Lumen didn't know the exact meaning of the words, but he had memorized them throughout his childhood. As he sang, he was surprised to see Elm join them. No one quite knew where Elm was from, but he certainly didn't look Helnorian. Ketrynne's husband Fæbold pulled a bamboo flute from his belt and played along. Eventually, the fire went out as the boat and its contents crumbled and sank into the harbor.



Genshe, the fourth day of Shaniiya's eight-day week, was for socializing. It was the day that many people went to Pillar Circle to participate in community activities. It also made a good day for *Naazhalo*, the wake, which was celebrated after burial or cremation rather than before. To the people of Shaniiya, the deceased's soul was unable

to join the festivities until after it had been freed from its body.

Lumen walked along the pier toward the path that led to Pillar Circle, where the wake would be. Kendal and Shin So'zei joined him, with Shin putting his arm around Lumen's shoulders. As they walked arm in arm, they remained silent. When they reached the top of the stone steps that came up from the pier, they saw Madame Buffalo and Mister Elm standing in the grass off to the side. Elm was leaning on the thick tree limb he used as a walking stick, and he smoked red Sharani pipeleaf through a thin, long-stemmed pipe decorated with ivory and copper. As long as the man had been smoking from that pipe, the copper should have been green, but it maintained a well polished look.

The madam swayed as she stood, her apparent way of balancing her extreme weight. Her eyes squinted as she stared at the sea, wrinkling the white tattoos that decorated her face. Lumen patted Shin So'zei on the back and went to join the two adults standing in the grass.

"Peace," he said.

"Peace," they repeated in unison.

"Drvithian was my friend for a long time," Elm said. "I won't say anything to try and make it easier for you, Lumen. He's gone, and we won't ever see him again. All we can do now is celebrate the beautiful life he lived."

Lumen wiped the fresh tears from his face.

"Lumen already know that the *kalinii* leave the bodies of their dead to the RAN," said Madame Buffalo. "The *kalinii* take a drink of *dake'Nym* and a puff of *ove'Naabish*. Then, the people of Madame Buffalo let the spirit go away."

Lumen didn't say anything, so Elm spoke after a few moments.

“We heard that you’ve been having day-visions.”

“Yes,” Lumen said, tucking a lock of hair behind his ear.

“What about dreams,” Buffalo asked. “Does Lumen have dreams he wants to talk about?”

“What kind of dreams do you mean?”

“Lumen know what the Madame be talking about,” she said.

Lumen hesitated but answered anyway. “The night before Bobo’s accident, I did have a dream that I remember.” They stood patiently, waiting for him to describe it. “I dreamt about the riverman of Death, and I was on a beach by a big jungle. I went into the trees, and I saw a colorful bird—Bobo said it was the *ciris* bird. I followed it on a path, but I woke up before I could get close.”

“What do you know about the *ciris* bird?” Elm asked.

“Only that it is rare and that it lives in Bunting Pass.”

“Lumen got to go to that Pass,” said Madame Buffalo. “Lumen got to find that bird, find his spirit animal.”

“My spirit animal?” Lumen exclaimed. “But I’m not even *kalini*; besides, I’m too young to travel that far.”

“No matter,” said the Madame.

Elm said, “Hmph,” and Tahm, who had been standing to the side, walked up to them and said, “In light of all that has happened, son, you have my blessing to go anywhere you feel is necessary. As for me, I’ve decided to move again, this time to Jenisat. I’m going to start trading for he family in Mul Sahs.”

“Well, can’t I go with you?” Lumen asked.

“Of course you can. I want you to go with me, son, but if you decide to go on a trip somewhere, I’m not going to stop you. Madame Buffalo always speaks the truth—her advice might be a good idea—but in the end the decision is yours.”

“That’s insane, Papa—I couldn’t travel alone across Normen,” Lumen pleaded. “I’ve never even been past Bouldin.”

“If you’re worried about your safety or getting lost,” Elm interjected, “then you should know that I am already headed in that direction, and I would be happy to accompany you.”

“I don’t know,” Lumen said.

“All you have to do today is think about it a little,” Tahm said. “We can talk more on it tomorrow. For now, let’s join the rest of the family at Bobo’s wake. He would want us to have a good time for him.”

“Everybody can go ahead,” Madame Buffalo said. “The Madame want to stay here and talk more with Lumen.” Saying that, she made eye contact with Lumen. Tahm and Elm left the two alone, walking uphill towards Pillar Circle.

“Madame Buffalo been wanting to talk to Lumen alone for a long time. Madame Buffalo know that Lumen got the Mark on his neck, but she see something about the Mark that make her look twice.”

“What do you mean?” Lumen asked nervously. “What about my Mark?”

“The Madame don’t know what. That why Lumen got to let her see it for a moment.”

“I don’t want anyone to see it.”

“Lumen, please let me see your neck, just for a moment.” Whenever the kalinii

used words like “me” or “your,” it was clear that something was wrong.

“Okay, but just for a moment,” Lumen whispered as he turned his back towards her.

She gently moved his long hair aside to reveal the black tattoo-like mark shaped like an upside-down teardrop. When she traced the outline of the Mark, she hissed and spat once on the ground.

“What is it, Madame?”

“This is what Madame Buffalo been thinking what she afraid of. She got no doubt—this no Mark of the Cursed. Somebody put this Mark on Lumen like a tattoo, but not like the clean tattoos of the *kalinii*. Oh no, not like the white tattoos Madame Buffalo got. This be a tattoo that someone writing with *nor’Keluum*, that being a good magic for writing, but it got no business being on a person’s skin.”

“You mean somebody put this... you mean I wasn’t born with it?”

“No, not born with it. The only thing that Madame Buffalo can see is that Lumen got to go to the Bunting Pass, where the *ciris* bird can help him.”

“Are you sure?”

“The Madame know what she see. Lumen let the bird help, and he find his spirit animal, too. Spirit animals not for the *kalinii* only, but Lumen’s people live so short that they forget those things.”

“If I do all that... then what?”

“Then... then Lumen do what he got to do after all that, and that be something the Madame Buffalo don’t know.”

Epilogue

excerpt from the Book of Egip ta'Ud of the Kohnigan Scripture:

written by Stewards and scholars between 1945 and 1962, Age of the King

printed by the Normenian Church in 612, Age of the Council

In the two-hundred fifty-sixth year of the Second Era, that sayeth the year 387, Age of the King, Saint Pæter Goreg did end his campaign to spread the realm of the Holy Kohnigan Church, which he did complete by divine force and righteous might, that being throughout the years that were following his crusade upon the islands of Bedh'lem.

And the reign of Saint Pæter wer long and peaceful, and civilization did reach new heights, and our technology and art did advance,

And in the two-hundred fifty-ninth year of the Second Era, Pæter did rebuild the ancient home of his father, that wer calling Endel Palace, making it so that all people could enjoy its splendor.

And in the years that did follow, Endel Palace wer a place of gathering and peace and joy and the sharing of ideas.

And in the two-hundred seventy-second year of the Second Era, that sayeth the year 403, Age of the King, Pæter did command the building of a great ranch estate on the northern coast of the Sea of Hope, therein housing all kinds of wild animals.

But heavy was the heart of Pæter, as the cunning creatures he did expel wer something that he did miss, as the animals in his estate wer so dumb. Yea, that the greatest of Pæter's enemies wer long since smitten, this did trouble Father Pæter.

And for the memory of the glory of his crusading years, Pæter did place the prize of his conquest of Bedh'lem, that blue pearl which glowed with the power of Ages, that

wer calling the Eye of Storms, he did place that into a special chamber of the Palace.

And in the three-hundred sixty fifth year of the Second Era, that sayeth the year 496. Age of the King, a wicked thief that wer one of the descendents of the witch-children of Tsoraia, he did betray the open doors of the Palace to sneak therein one night and he did steal the magic blue pearl, that one calling the Eye of Storms,

And the thief did depart Ceriib Island upon a small one-sail boat and did make his way to the southeast, whereupon a storm that wer arriving from the south hills did catch the thieving sailor, causing the boat to turn over, and the Eye of Storms did drop into the water and sink into the sea.

Thus the Spinner punisheth those who would steal from the Father, from the Church, or from anything that be sovereign, as set forth by the King.



year 1179, Age of the Council

The mine shaft bored into the side of a large hill that resembled a beehive; next to it sat a lake whose diameter was equal to that of the base of the hill. Collectively, the hill and the lake were known as Giant's Holiday. A thin stream of oily water flowed from the entrance of the shaft, making fluid rainbows in the morning sunlight. Leaning over as he walked, Daanofed Esduro dripped beads of sweat into the pools formed by the stream, breaking the surface of the slick water into hundreds of facets of colors, reminding him only of the gems he hoisted on his back. They weren't the most valuable class of gems—mostly from the quartz family—but what he carried in just one trip out of the caves was worth more than everything he owned.

Daanofed had never worked in a mine before and didn't know much about the gem industry, but he knew that this was probably the greatest store of semi-precious gems the world had ever seen. Apparently, quartz gems were becoming more valuable—smoky quartz, milk quartz, amethyst, agate—for such a large, costly operation to take place in such a remote area. The only reason people normally traveled through the Badlands of southern Jenisat was to reach the Floating Temple of Numi, a remote city in a far corner of the province.

Yet work was hard to find in Daanofed's home in the Normenian province of Taavekos. That is why he had taken this job, even though the daily wages were barely enough to feed him and his younger brother Ehsmet. It was warm back home in Taavekos, but the only sign that there had ever been a night in this sun-blasted land in southern Jenisat was a thin layer of dew on the piece of canvas that covered the pile of gems, and that dew quickly evaporated.

He stopped once to readjust the pack on his back—quickly, so as to avoid the whip—and while doing so he caught a glimpse of the person who was rumored to fund the entire operation. Dressed in a blue robe with a white belt, the figure was clearly Maron, one of the frost mages that served the Temple of Azher, but what a Maron was doing so far from Faranym, anyone could guess. The presence of one of the cold wizards was enough to put the workers on edge, but what frightened Daanofed the most was the expressionless white mask the mage wore beneath its hood.

The mask seemed to be made from ceramic, the way it reflected the sunlight. Along with those stark white gloves, it concealed any human features that would have otherwise been visible. The mage slowly turned its white, soulless face towards

Daanofed, who then nearly dropped the pack from his shoulders. The figure in the blue robe gave no outward sign of noticing Daanofed, then turned its gaze back to the mine shaft entrance, at which it had been staring since before sunrise.

His name was Maron Gjalti Turao, but few people at the mine knew his identity. Being of the Inner Circle Maroni, Gjalti had the liberty to pursue his own personal interests while using some coin from the coffer of the Temple of Azher. The official reason for this operation was to amass a store of quartz gems, which he had projected to increase in value as construction in Horseshoe Canyon increased. However, the real reason for his long trip across Shaniiya was one that should have inspired such an operation centuries ago. It continued to surprise Gjalti that no one had thought of exploring this part of Jenisat, but it only reminded him that people put too little faith in the Kohnigan Scripture.

For Gjalti, it wasn't so much a matter of faith or devotion to scripture as it was knowing how to glean factual information from the texts. Although more well read in Kohnigan lore than the average person, Gjalti was a high-ranking member of the Temple of Azher, and the closest feeling to inspiration that he felt in relation to King Edward was amusement. Nonetheless, the story of the King's eldest son Pæter held practical implications that had somehow escaped the majority of the world's deep thinkers, of which there were few in number.

According to the Scripture, Saint Pæter's Eye of Storms had been lost in the southeastern part of the Sea of Hope, which was now the Stone Quarter of Horseshoe Canyon. Of course, the Stone Quarter covered more than one-hundred thousand square miles, but narrowing down the possibilities was easy if one knew his "mythology."

According to Shaniiya's Reforging Myth, the giant god of war named Venin was made peaceful by his daughter Numi at the end of the previous Age, and during the beginning of the Age of the Council he had used his powers of destruction to decorate the lifeless parts of Horseshoe Canyon—shaping hills into the likeness of animals, flattening the tops of hills to make them like tables, and creating this geographical wonder, the hill-and-lake formation known as Giant's Holiday.

If Venin the Warrior was anything like his brother Kang, then his creation of the hill-and-lake would have been a display the common habit of covering up that which one couldn't control. As the myth explained, Venin had scooped a large chunk of earth from the floor of Horseshoe Canyon, previously the Sea of Hope, and set that giant-sized clod of earth next to the hole left in the ground. Thus, said the story, was Giant's Holiday formed. It was too close in nature to the story of King Edwin burying the Moonskull on the other side of the planet. Sometimes the gods had a tendency to hide from view the things that frightened or threatened them, and there was no reason for Gjalti to believe that Venin was likely to ignore the Eye of Storms. If this myth were true, as myth often was in Shaniiya, then the Eye of Storms had to be here, under the hill of Giant's Holiday.

When the digging began, the crew encountered mostly limestone, but they soon discovered a vein of semi-precious stones of the quartz type. It would be an exaggeration to say this pleased Gjalti, since such an emotion came to him only once every ten to twenty years, but the discovery of quartz had been an unexpected convenience that he ... appreciated. It gave him the justification he needed for digging while funding a large part of the minor expenses. Now, in the dampest part of the year, that being winter and still dry compared to most places in the world, the crew had found a system of caverns that

Gjalti suspected had formed from the water that clung to the massive clump of earth in Venin's hand.

Although a hopeful sign, the caves proved to be a nuisance for the first week. The accidents, unexplainable illnesses, and occasional deaths were expensive inconveniences. As Gjalti glanced at this young man fumbling the pack of gems on his back, he wondered if that one would live through the day. The foremen had already tried to momentarily halt the operation when the workers broke through a pocket of centuries-old toxic gas. At the first occurrence, the workers could only stay in the caves for two hours at a time before falling unconscious or vomiting on the other workers. The powers of the Maron put a quick end to that.

Being a specialist in poisons—Gjalti had rid himself of many enemies in his lifetime—he easily recognized the signatures of the noxious fumes and was able to isolate them with a simple cooling spell. With a thin thread of *Fatarn*, Gjalti concentrated the harmful gases into white clouds that hovered close to the floor of the cavern; as a result the gas was easier to see and avoid. At the same time, its effects went from simply impairing to instantly lethal, which meant the workers would have to be more careful. As Gjalti saw it, a man foolish enough to let his caution slip—or insubordinate to ignore simple instructions—was a man who demanded more space than he was worth.

Eventually, patience and attention to detail yielded a positive result at Giant's Holiday, if it wasn't exactly what Gjalti desired. Late in the afternoon, the main foreman brought to the Maron a rare stone that one of the workers had discovered. It was the size of sheep's head, a flawless opal shaped perfectly like an egg. The stone was translucent

near the surface, catching the light and reflecting a full spectrum of colors, just as precious opals do, but the stone was abnormally light. Gjalti was the only one who realized that the stone was not an opal, but rather a Ser'an egg, something from the previous Age, and whether the egg was yet living or merely a fossil was unclear. Deciding to play it safe, Gjalti assumed the former to be true and decided to leave at once, intending to show it to his peers in the city of Han'Sharii. He immediately ordered the preparation of a shipment convoy for travel to his storehouse near Whitehorn Lake, a few hundred miles to the west, and he ordered his servants to prepare his own riding horse and pack horse. He would travel alone.

After arriving at Whitehorn and seeing that his goods were secure, Gjalti took the road north to the Dove Hills, the quickest, most convenient exit from Horseshoe Canyon, and there he resumed travel along *d'Feld don'Perasse*, the River Road. He took the road through Bunting Pass in Kjonnn and turned south before he was within sight of the Silverwood. That place, and the Da'Wakari Highlands to the north, made him nervous, especially since it put him among the *erandi*. He chose to travel instead along the south through the Ten Thousand Hills. Although infamous for losing travelers, the Hills were a great place to pass through without attracting notice, and getting lost was something Gjalti hadn't worried about for centuries. Part of becoming Maron was the ceremonious baptism in the cold headwaters of the River Puurusat, at the foot of Mount Koleni near the north pole. Nowadays, Gjalti could feel the pull of the mountain from anywhere in the world, with such a strength that he could point to true north even in his sleep.

After passing through the Hills, he carefully traversed the Black Swamps and the Cypress Marsh, continuing until he crossed the border into Tarbaad. He still had a long

way to go before reaching the nation of Waktana, whose capital was Han'Sharii, but something happened that saved him the trip altogether.

Up to this point, the Ser'an egg had been as cold as any other stone, but one day as he was riding, he felt the presence of warmth emanating from behind him on his packhorse. The source of the sudden warmth, of course, was the leather bag holding the egg. Gjalti quickly found a side road and then a deep ditch in which to hide—trees were scarcer in Tarbaad—and he pulled the egg out to examine it.

Placing it on the ground, Gjalti immediately noticed that the myriad of colors were replaced by a single magenta hue, which flickered like a candle flame. This egg was definitely alive. A hasty day and a half later, Gjalti arrived at the shore of the Circular Sea, where the water could be a source for immense power should he need it. As soon as he reached the beach, he pulled the egg out carefully and set it into the sand, at which point the mild candle flicker intensified to a bright magenta flare that pulsed in the dim light of dusk. This was no surprise to Gjalti, keeping in mind that the first people to ever walk the earth were created from the ocean sand. This egg was merely responding to the first substance ever used to create sentient beings. After the sun set, Gjalti saw what had been growing inside the egg.

He expected to see a baby dragon pushing its beak through pieces of shell, but instead the egg merely cracked from the top point and split down the sides along perfect geometric lines. To Gjalti's knowledge, no one in this Age had ever witnessed such an event—since it was never known to occur in the Age of the Council—but it surprised him even more when, in place of a dragon emerging from the shards of the crystalline egg, a infant boy lay on its back, wailing just like any newborn human would do. The babe had

pale skin, grey eyes, and a few dark hairs on its moist head.

Gjalti did his best to soothe the child—it had been a long time since he'd had to handle children—but the best thing he could think of was to cast a sleep spell, which slipped off the child and had no effect. Acting quickly, he added a thread of strengthening *Vakarn* to the normal threads of *Fatarn* and *ko'Nym*, which finally caught hold and subdued the child. No child in Gjalti's experience had ever withstood a sleep spell, but this was obviously no normal boy. Gjalti briefly wondered if he would be better off killing the child before it caused him and his society any trouble. If he let it live, he would have to seek the aide of a woman in order to sustain it; otherwise, he would be forced to cast a sustenance spell, and that would surely earn him unwanted attention between here and Han'Sharii. Then again, under the right circumstances a sustenance spell could be the perfect thing.

Gjalti reached a decision and gently wrapped the child in the extra blanket he carried among his things. He set the sleeping boy on the sand and went along the beach to collect an armful of reeds and twigs. With that, he crafted a small raft using a few lashings from a coil of light rope, and he set the delicate raft aside. It had been many decades since Gjalti had fashioned a raft meant for the Cursèd, but the skill had fortunately stayed with him. After that, Gjalti found a flat, grey river stone and used it to anchor his spell. Not only would it hold the raft together, but it would also keep the child safe on the open sea and would lead it to where all Cursèd children were meant to go. Just to be safe, Gjalti scrawled a thread of *nor'Kehuun* onto the child's neck, leaving behind a tear-drop tattoo that perfectly resembled the Mark of the Cursed.

By the light of the moon, Maron Gjalti Turao whispered the incantations he had

learned in service of Azher, Father Ice, but the words he spoke were not in devotion to the god of frost. He chanted in service to his true master, the one ruler of the Bain Islands, the Lord of Rebellion, the Unweaver. Beneath a cold mask of white porcelain, Maron Gjalti smiled like a serpent as he released the raft into the tide and reflected on the rewards that awaited him.

Patience. Attention. Service. He knew exactly what he needed in order to turn the world on its arrogant, foolish head.