

Legends of the Jade Moon

Book 1

Liquid Sky

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PART ONE: THE CHILD OF CENTURIES

CHAPTER ONE: ECHO OF LOSS

The great temple of the Holy Ennead, on Al-Benu where it all began, was full of friends and strangers. Ianus was stunned. So many people came for his day of Ascension, but his adopted father was a very popular predicant in Shiloh. They must have come for him. Standing quietly in the narthex, he straightened his white robes nervously. He closed his fox brown eyes, and recited his prayers. His chestnut skin paled, when he heard his cue to enter the nave.

As he walked slowly down the center aisle, Ianus scanned the crowd for his adopted parents. They were sitting in the front row, smiling. Maya, his mother, waved at him. Her cinnamon eyes shimmered with tears of pride.

The spicy, sweet smell of the altar incense wafted down from the dais and filled the room with otherworldly warmth. Ianus' footsteps resounded off the marble floor. Sterile echoes broke through the sound of his breath. So many people sat quietly staring at him. Ianus gulped; he could see in their eyes how much they expected from him. The tender touch of the incense that only a moment ago invited him into the heart of the mystery now only numbed him. He felt caged in. He wanted to run. Even the familiar bas-reliefs carved into the granite oppressed him. The legends were remote; today, they lacked grace. Taking a deep breath, Ianus tried to let the scent of the incense relax him, but the great responsibilities he would soon carry weighed heavily on his mind. After today, he would be an adult in the eyes of his community, and a guardian of another's life. Stopping before the dais, he bowed to the altar.

"Ianus Akeru!" The green robed predicant behind the altar cried out. The oversized, leathery wings of the tiny dragon-like Ceeri hanging onto his back opened. "You have come to this place through many trials and tribulations, and may I say a few more than most." A whisper flashed like lightning across the congregation. "Do you come to this place willingly, knowing the consequences of the choice you make today?"

Ianus smiled at the predicant behind the altar. He wished that his father could have performed the rite, but that was forbidden. Family members were not allowed to officiate the ascension ceremony. At least his good friend Aashen could initiate him. "I do." He pronounced confidently.

Looking down at the golden laver on the altar, Ianus blanched at the sight of his own boyish face looking back at him. Beyond the mirror-like surface of the water, he

watched with trembling lips as the silvery black Sukallin churned in the water. He could still hear Aashen speaking, but no one had ever fully explained the ramifications of sharing his body with another sentient life. He agreed to the merger because it was tradition. Every Shedu on his eighteenth birthday would enter the temple to be entrusted with a Sukallin, to repay their debt to their original hosts who were now extinct. Those who refused this honor, the Lamassu, were seen as weak, or even unstable. He wondered if he would share its memories of the countless other hosts with whom it had shared its life. For the first time, he was afraid of losing himself.

Aashen walked around the altar, and laid his palm on Ianus' brow. "My child, may your life be long, and full of joy and wisdom. Today you open your heart to another, may your life together be filled with peace." Aashen took hold of Ianus' hand, "On this day, we entrust you, Ianus Akeru, novitiate of the House of the Jade Moon, with Osanna, this great and noble Sukallin."

Ianus turned to face the golden laver, pushing back his robe from his right arm. Cautiously, he submerged his forearm into the laver. The fluid Sukallin felt like seaweed against his skin. He struggled to keep his arm submerged. Pain, like a thousand needles, cut through his skin. The Sukallin constricted around his hand. An icy cold shock ripped through his fingers. Slowly, the hematite—colored ooze crawled up the black skin of Ianus' arm. Rivulets of blood dripped into the water. Ianus fought off a shiver as the Sukallin merged into the flesh on his arm, seeping between the cells leaving only a discolored mark in its wake. Ianus smiled. "That wasn't so bad," he thought.

Suddenly, the world spun around; his vision blurred. The warmth fled from his body; his chest collapsed. He steadied himself as the room went black. Softly, in the periphery of his vision, a cold light illuminated a field that stretched out before him.

"Where's the temple?" He thought, desperate to catch his breath. The light grew brighter. Ianus staggered backward as a great stone tower appeared out of nowhere... out of nothing.

Something white glistened at the base of the tower. Ianus was drawn to the strange white shadow. Closer and closer, step-by-step, he approached the tower until the image became clear. It was a white dragon! Larger than any Ceeri he had ever seen before. The beast was sleeping.

"It sleeps, blissfully ignorant of the world around it." A soft feminine voice whispered in his ears. "Look on it well boy, for your time has come. Ihy's time is passing."

"No!" Ianus screamed, "My Father's time is now! He is strong and healthy."

"He stood by and did nothing at the foul deeds of his children!" The voice interrupted.

"What are you talking about? I am his only child, and I'm adopted. Who are you talking about?"

A sudden gust of wind shoved Ianus to the ground. He looked over his shoulder. A titanic, red dragon rose from the ground. Its blood red scales glistened in the light. Savage teeth overlapped in its maw, as smoke billowed from the corner of its mouth. It hovered over Ianus' head. Calmly, it surveyed the tower. With a great burst of speed, it lunged forward. The white dragon stirred. The red pulled back.

"What's going on?" Ianus shouted. "Why are you showing this to me?"

Silence.

The red dragon landed. Slowly, it crept toward the tower. Closing in on the white dragon, the red one smiled. Rearing up on its hind legs, it slashed the white dragon's throat.

Blood gushing from the wound, the white dragon let out a great cry. It reeled back on its hind legs and thrashed about violently, as if fighting off numerous unseen assailants. Screeching, it crashed to the ground. After a thunderous roar, it fell limp beneath the tower. Its hollow eyes stared plaintively toward the heavens. The earth shook violently. A horrid clatter echoed from the very stones of the tower. Dust and smoke erupted from the grout lines. Ianus leapt back. Brick by brick, the tower crumbled and fell, crushing the body of the slain beast.

The red dragon crawled atop the rubble and bellowed in victory.

"Some have lost their soul to the machine," the voice continued, "The cacophony of voices within the liquid sky is too much for them. Others have lost themselves to their aspiring spirit, thinking they can control the fluidity of thought itself. You must become the soul of the machine—swimming in the waters without drowning. Follow the path of the War Maiden, and rebuild the tower."

Ianus gasped. Everything vanished. He was alone.

His mouth fell open as the high altar came back into view. The statue of Uma Nari caught his eye. Her soft blue robes invited Ianus to prayer, "O holy Mother, protect us all from evil, stand guard at the gates of our cities and in the temple of our hearts. Pray for us Holy Mother, now and at the hour of our death."

Slowly, he turned around. The proud, thin face of his father stood out of the crowd.

"The rite is concluded," Aashen announced, triumphantly, "May we all go in peace."

CHAPTER TWO: THE GUARDIAN

No one had noticed Ianus' confusion. Aashen put his arm around Ianus' shoulders, and guided him down the aisle. Through the intricately carved doors, they exited into the paved courtyard.

"I remember when I was eight, and received my Ceeri," said Aashen with a distant look in his cerulean eyes. "His thoughts confused me for several days, until I learned to separate his from mine," slapping Ianus playfully on his back, "I understand it is very similar for the Shedu." He watched Ianus inquisitively.

Ianus closed his eyes, "I don't hear anything."

"Really?" Aashen cocked his head. "You should hear something, even if it's only general chatter. I will ask someone about it, if you like?"

"That's all right," Ianus nudged Aashen in the arm with his elbow. A moment of dizziness, he shook his head, "Maybe our connection isn't strong enough yet."

With a slow, appraising look, Aashen said, "Well, happy birthday," he bit his lip, "I should go find my brother before he upsets someone."

The crowd filed into the textured cement courtyard that stood between the gothic towers of the temple, the marble domed library, the stone arched façade of the monastery, and the hedged and flowered gardens. Drummers ran to their drums, and filled the air with music. The rich aroma of the confections and the fruity scent of the meads filled the air. The crowd divided, some went to the tables on the north end of the courtyard nearest the library, and the others joined with the music and began to dance. Ianus worked his way through the "Congratulations," and the "Good show," one man began recounting the story of his merging. "I almost blacked out you know, that thing was so cold, but you get used to it."

Ianus shook hands as they presented themselves out of the mass of people. Finally, he saw his parents, Ihy Khem and Maya Isann, at one of the tables. Ihy's tall gaunt frame was hard to miss in a crowd. He carefully navigated the sea of pleasantries from people he had never met before, until he fell out of the throng and into a chair next to his father. Looking around at the well-choreographed chaos, he smiled at Ihy. Maya was gone. 'She must have gone to get something to drink,' he thought.

"So, you're a man now?" Ihy said, his weathered face was just beaming with pride, "Do you feel any different?"

"I feel like someone filled my arm with jelly," before Ianus could say anything else, his father thrust a wrapped package into his hands. "Something strange did happen," he looked up from the parcel, "When I merged with the Sukallin, I... well, I think I received a vision. Is that normal?"

Ihy's smile only widened, "No, that is very rare. This is a very auspicious sign," he wrapped one of his long arms around his son, "It is said that Tien Shaa and Rohan

received visions at their merging, and they're saints now! Come to think of it, I think your grandfather, Nusair, also had one." Ihy looked over his shoulder for Maya. "We really should wait for your mother to come back, but this is too funny. Open your present." Ihy shifted down the bench away from his son.

Ianus ripped off the shimmering silver wrapping paper much more cautiously than he usually would have. Ihy had a bizarre sense of humor. Ianus expected something to jump out or shock him.

"O, come now, it won't bite!" Ihy grabbed his son's hands and tore the paper off.

Ianus lifted the black leather book up to the light to see the gilded title. "Sen Prescience Book, for the Shedu language (Illustrated)."

Ianus flipped through the pages, "It's blank?"

"Well of course it is, boy," Ihy pulled a stylus out of the pocket of his jade green cassock, "You haven't written anything in it yet. You see, you write a date, or a 'what if' into the book, and it will predict the future. Isn't it funny! We got you a prescience book on the same day you received your first word of knowledge!"

Ianus wanted to laugh, but the lingering dread from his vision was too powerful. Forcing a smile, "But surely, prophecy can't be trusted." Ianus grabbed his father's hand, and squeezed. "I mean, after all, we all make our own destinies, don't we?"

"Well, boy, you know I'm an augur, don't you?"

Ianus gasped, "No! I had no idea."

"I can see patterns of action, and intuit the possible future. Sometimes it's easy, other times it's quite difficult. Sometimes I'm right, and well, I don't know of a time I've been wrong." Ihy threw his head back and laughed. "It's like, if you see a person heading toward a store. If you have enough information, you can say whether or not he's going to go inside. Maybe even predict what he's going to buy. It's just like that, but on a larger scale."

"Well, I need to see more proof before I believe what I saw was anything more than a side effect of the merging."

"O, Ihy!" Maya said with a sigh, a stony look on her heart-shaped face as she arrived back at the table with three mugs of honey mead, her midnight skin glowing with anger, "Couldn't you wait for me to get back before you gave Ianus his birthday present?" Setting the mugs on the table, she threw her arms around Ianus, "Well, Happy Birthday!" She held him so close; he could hear her heart racing with excitement. She kissed him three times on the top of his head. Laughing, she shook her head as her irritation faded, "Do you like it? I told him you would prefer a vacation to Idunn beach on Adrakaya, but you know what Ihy's like when he sets his mind to something."

"I love it, mom," Ianus lied through an exuberant smile. He couldn't stand to see her sad.

The crowd fell inordinately silent. Even the drummers left their rhythms to the wind. Ianus followed the eyes of the crowd to two people wearing long, red robes and masks who were emerging from the garden. The smooth masks that covered their faces were even inlaid with lenses to cover their eyes.

"Raewyn!" Someone in the crowd shouted. "Allostheoi!" Someone else gasped in horror.

Mysterious nomads, the Raewyn wandered aimlessly from planet to planet. Little was known about where they came from or why they sojourned through the galaxy, and

what was known was more rumor than fact. Still, it was rare to see a Raewyn; two in one place was often considered a sign or omen. The two cloaked figures looked at each other and turned toward the garden labyrinth.

Ihy climbed up on top of the table, and motioned for the band to resume playing.

“Do you think those people were Raewyn?” Ianus muttered.

“What would it matter if they were?” Ihy retorted, “Raewyn are open members of the Jade Moon, the Camenae, and even the Mne Serephin. It’s just superstitious townspeople. Raewyn move from world to world, never settling down because of reactions like that. Totally uncalled for!”

Seeing the anger in his father’s silvery eyes, Ianus slipped away and joined the dance.

Ianus woke up early the next morning, put on his Gi and belt, and hurried out to the courtyard to practice his forms and stances. Ihy was already outside. Ianus watched as he moved as if to unheard music. His father’s pale skin gleamed in the sunlight with radiance unmatched in all of Shiloh. His long silver hair flowed elegantly behind him as he twirled and kicked. Ihy was a master of the arts.

Recognizing where his father was in the fire song movement, Ianus joined him. He leapt through the air, careful to control every muscle; he kicked. As he spun around, he moved his arms to block the imagined fists. A slow crouch and lightning quick slide to the left.

“Ihy!” He heard Maya call out, “Feel like sparring?”

Ianus almost tripped over himself.

“Focus, boy!” Ihy reprimanded him.

Ianus quickly turned to watch Ihy and Maya duel. Maya leapt into the air as a light from the green jewel that was embedded in the black leather glove on her right hand flashed. ‘A periapt sword,’ Ianus thought as he touched his own periapt jewel.

Swords materialized in Ihy’s and Maya’s hands simultaneously. The blades clanged as they danced around each other. Two hazy forms locked together in conflict floated lazily across the courtyard. For a moment, Ianus lost himself in the dazzling sight of the two Makers, just as he had lost himself in the dance the night before. ‘This must be the dance of destruction that Rohan muses over in the Scriptures,’ Ianus thought. ‘The dance of defense and the dance of aggression. One could almost forget the violence of the scene.’

With a great laugh, Maya and Ihy ended their duel. The morning bells were ringing; chef would be serving breakfast, soon. The queue was already growing. Arm-in-arm, Maya, Ianus, and Ihy walked into the dining hall.

After breakfast, Ianus and Ihy went off into the temple to prepare for the day’s services. Ihy prepared the altar, while Ianus swept the floors.

“Father?” Ianus said, rubbing his thumb hard against the broomstick’s handle, “Do we really practice magic?” He sighed, casting his gaze to the floor. “I mean no disrespect to our ancestors, or to the tradition, but the periapt *really* does everything. All I’ve learned in my years with the order is science, math, programming, and meditation. I know nothing of magic.”

“We are not like the Mne Serephin, if that is what you mean. Our practice is not nearly as arcane as theirs. We summon no spirits, nor do we dominate the more subtle energies, but we have our own secrets.”

“Like the Periapts?” Ianus asked staring at his reflection in the jade stone embedded in the black leather, fingerless glove on his right hand.

“What is the periapt?” Ihy smiled, laying out the altar cloth.

“It is nothing but a piece of technology that connects to the implant in my hand. It is software and Nanotechnology.”

“What does it allow you to do?”

“I can use the liquid steel to make weapons— I can erect shields, project illusions, and float above the ground.” Ianus looked up, “There is no magic in it. It’s all physics.”

Ihy thought for a moment. His words had to be chosen carefully. “Does the periapt do all of these things for you?”

“Well, no,” Ianus sighed. He looked up into the maze of stone arches that crisscrossed the ceiling. “The machine has no mind. I have to control the effects of the periapt, but if I didn’t have these implants all over my body, I wouldn’t be able to do anything! I mean, what am I to the machine?”

“You are either its master or its slave,” said Ihy, brushing the altar cloth flat. “What makes you ask? I can see the tension in your neck. What’s bothering you?”

Ianus focused his attention on his sweeping. “Bad dreams. I know there’s nothing to it, but they left me feeling hollow. When I woke up yesterday, the world was full of magic. By this morning, I feel like I’ve lost everything.”

“Dreams are the most powerful magic,” Ihy opened the lectionary, and began search for today’s reading. “Angels and demons are real, no matter what you choose to call them. You say you had bad dreams, our ancestors would say that you were troubled by demons in the night. Two ways of saying the exact same thing. What were your dreams about?”

Ianus stopped, and stared blankly at the floor. “I’d rather not say. I just want to know that this isn’t the way life is going to be after the merging.”

“There comes a time in everyone’s life, my boy, when we loose our sense of wonder. All you can do is fight that feeling. Reclaim your life— don’t let anyone take that from you.”

“So magic is just an illusion? We choose to give it meaning or to see it for what it is?”

“Don’t you see?” Ihy said, as he stepped down from the dais. “Everything is magic! From the moment our species evolved from the early hominids to the time that our soul was born within us. It’s all magic, my boy, whether you are part of the machine or not.”

“How could our soul be born in a soulless animal?” Ianus felt hollow. He was asking about himself.

“What makes you think the animals don’t have souls? Everything has a soul or a consciousness if you like, unique to its type. Our soul evolved the moment we discovered superfluous beauty. Beauty is magic. Everything happens by chance, but it is fate at the same time. It’s all a matter of perspective.”

“Does the machine have a soul?”

Ihy's face turned sallow, "You mean that you've never heard it whisper in your ear?"

"No?"

"Good," the color slowly returned to Ihy's face. "We need to get ready for services, people will be arriving soon."

The two Sen brothers, Aashen and Tuun Fallon stood in the elevator, carefully controlling their breath. Aashen kept brushing his blond hair behind his elfish ears with his hands, annoyed that his Ceeri Azi Mandas kept blowing his hair over his long angular face. The small blue green, drake-like Ceeri held onto his shoulders and waist with his claws, holding his over-sized wings tightly behind Aashen's back. Azi laughed silently, and looked over at the red and gold Ceeri that clung tightly to Tuun's back. Tuun resembled his brother in most ways, save for the black hair and sickly white complexion.

Counting under his breath, Azi reached his long neck around and blew Aashen's hair back over his eyes.

"Stop it!" Aashen barked, as he brushed his hair back again, "What has gotten into you today, you know we are on important business."

Azi rolled his eyes, "Don't forget I hear every thought that goes through your head, just as you hear mine, and right now, you are giving me a headache. You need to relax! You knew this was coming."

The journey to the Garm system from Al-Benu had felt longer than it really was. Aashen didn't like having to leave so soon after Ianus' birthday, but after what he had seen... Besides, he had his orders, and his duty to the Jade Moon came first. The flight was comfortable, and the walk from the spaceport to this apartment building seemed longer. The weight of his mission weighed heavily on him. Watching the aging buildings of the city spread out into the hazy distance, Aashen sighed and smiled at his brother.

The elevator doors slid open. Aashen and Tuun exited into the dimly lit room. Books lay haphazardly all over the tables; the shelves themselves appeared to be empty. "I almost forgot how crazy monastic life can be," Aashen said, elbowing his brother.

"Maya would beat you if you ever left a study hall like this," Tuun responded.

"Just think of the look that would be on Ihy's face."

The sound of a man clearing his throat echoed down the hall. A short, balding man sat at a table in the far end of the room. He fidgeted with the sleeves of his deep blue robes.

"Is he mending three books at the same time?" Tuun asked, pointing at the little old man.

"That must be him," Aashen strode confidently over to the old man. "Pryor Isann," he bowed, "I am Aashen Fallon Ken-Azi, Maker Predicant in the house of the Jade Moon."

The old man looked up from his books with a broad smile across his round face. "And you arrive on the transport from Shiloh, on Al-Benu, with Maslin Talbot piloting. Did I leave anything out?" Pryor's face fell flat, "You come from Shiloh?" He exclaimed as if he heard the news for the first time, "Did my sister send you?"

"Yes Master Isann, we were sent by Maya..."

"Drop this Master Isann, call me Pryor. What is the message?"

Aashen took a deep breath and steadied himself against the table. “The Machine’s song can again be heard. The Red Dragon no longer sleeps. My dear brother, our time has passed.”

“O, thank you very much.” Pryor settled down into his chair, a grave look crawling over his face. “Is that all?”

“Yes, Master... Pryor.” The two Sen turned and left.

Daru Shaheen sat in a small room in the small apartment on Garm, reading *Tides and Seasons*, by Tien Shaa. “Thoughts flow through the mind like a river unseen,” she mouthed the words as she read, “As spacious as the sky, the river flows by. Emotions tug on its course like the moons on the tide. Warm in summer heat, frozen in winter frost, the mind is a world unto itself.”

Hearing Pryor’s chair creak in the next room, she pulled her fire red hair over her shoulder and tied it back with an elastic band that materialized out of her periapt. Even though she was only nineteen years old, her talent was strong. She had tried to listen in when she heard voices a moment ago, but was unable to make out what they were saying.

A man sighed behind the door. Slowly, the door opened, and Pryor ambled in mumbling to himself. Looking in distress, he said, “Daru!”

Daru put her book down; the generous expression on her face took some of the chill off the expression in Pryor’s face. “Do we have visitors?”

“No, dear child,” Pryor said tenderly, “Go pack your things. We are going to Al-Benu.”

“To Shiloh!” Daru leapt out of her seat, “Are we going to visit your sister?”

“Yes, but not to visit. I have decided to step down from my position as guardian of the To’asaa. I will entrust it to Ihy.”

“But he’s older than you are! I thought the To’asaa would come to me after you... well, stepped down.”

“It might well—but Ihy is wise when it comes to such things. He will make sure it finds its proper guardian.”

“Is everything all right? You seem more formal than usual.” Daru waited, but Pryor didn’t answer. “Master, would it be all right if I went down to the market to buy Ianus a birthday present?”

“But Ianus’ birthday was last week? I would have thought you would have sent him something, but since you are coming in person, you want to have a gift in hand.” Pryor smiled knowingly. “Very well, go. But don’t be long.”

Daru hurried to her room, grabbed her money purse, and ran out to the market. Wandering from booth to booth, Daru looked down disapprovingly at the countless trinkets designed for the tourists. She and Ianus had grown up together in the monastery at Shiloh; she had to find him something extra special. It had been at least a year since they had seen each other. At the end of the row, she noticed an interesting booth. Two men, in deep red robes stood haggling with the customers.

She wended her way through the crowd to take a look at the table. Various carved stones, necklaces, and pendants. One of the shopkeepers stopped in front of her, and smiled.

‘Ianus would love an Eidolon,’ she thought. In the booth, she saw a Benbenstone. ‘This will be perfect, he’ll just love it.’

Ianus sat in the Atrium of the Monastery, thumbing through the waxy pages of his prescience book. The vaulted skylight illuminated the circular reflecting pool and the various plants and flowers around it. A few other monks and nuns roamed through the atrium, but Ianus paid them no mind. He skipped about a hundred blank pages into the prescience book. It was no different from the blank books he used in his classes. Running his finger down the ribbed and embossed spine, he could feel the heat of the processor. In the bottom of the spine was the small disk drive. Other than the title, there was nothing apparently special about the book.

He opened the book to the middle and wrote the date in the top right corner. The motion of the stylus activated the book. "Shiloh Monastery of the Holy Ennead, on planet Al-Benu," he wrote immediately under the date. Words filled the pages; Ianus flipped back to the beginning of the book. It must have been written in code, or at least in confused, broken sentences.

Tapping his fingers against the book, Ianus thought about the strange vision he had the day he received his Sukallin, Osanna. "Ihy Khem," he wrote at the top of the first page. The book changed, but the quality of the language degenerated into simple words and phrases. "Book: What is the problem? Why is the language so poor?" He wrote.

"This book, like all prescience books, is not designed to track individual people," the book wrote back. "Our accuracy is impaired. We need more information to predict events."

Chewing on the end of the stylus, Ianus sighed. "Ihy Khem and the Red Dragon." He wrote. To his amazement, the book began to tell a story, but only singular words were legible.

"Ihy called... to the Camarilla of the Jade Moon. He... them... dragon... red... dragon..." The book did not have enough data for its analysis. Then Ianus came across a word that was unfamiliar: A'nath-ari. "Now, A'nath means 'noble order,' and Ari means 'red or blood,'" he muttered. "The Noble Order of Blood?" Ianus closed the book.

Something about that word was familiar, but Ianus couldn't place it. Seeing the new group of novices stream through the door, he knew that Maya had finished her lesson for the day. 'Maybe she knows who the A'nath-ari are,' he thought. And there she was her books in her arms. She was heading toward her room.

Ianus sprang from his chair, and ran up to her. "Mom, do you have a minute?"

"A minute, if that much. I promised the novices that I would referee their dueling practice today. I don't know why they can't wait for Aashen to return."

"Where is Aashen?"

Opening the door to her quarters, Maya walked past him into the immaculately clean room and over to her dresser drawers. "I... I don't know. They said that they had business off world. What did you need? I really do have to get out to the courtyard to make sure none of the boys are using live steal."

"I was doing some reading today, and I came across an unfamiliar word, A'nath-ari."

"Mistress Isann?" A ten-year-old boy poked his head into the room.

"Yes" Maya responded, looking relieved.

“James and Stephen have forged live steal blades with their periapts, and have started chasing each other around.”

Rolling her eyes, “Thank you, Lyndall, go and tell them that I’m coming. And tell them if either one loses another limb, I might not have it reattached.”

“Yes,” Lyndall said, quite cheerful. As he ran off toward the courtyard, Maya put her hand on Ianus’ shoulder.

“I have to go. I’m sorry I haven’t been around as much as I should, but after you take the initiation to become a cenobite, we’ll have all the time you need.”

Ianus watched her walk past him and out into the courtyard.

“Is something wrong?” Ihy’s voice startled him.

Spinning around, Ianus looked into his father’s kind eyes. “I was just trying to talk to mom, but she is very busy.”

“I don’t think she would have it any other way. If she ever had a free moment, I think she might go mad.” Ihy winked.

Ianus shook his head and looked to make sure Maya hadn’t heard. “I was asking her if she had ever heard of a group called the A’nath-ari. I came across the word in my reading.”

“The A’nath-ari are one of the great old houses of the Chian’niu. If they still exist, they would be in the forbidden lands on Adrakaya tending to the needs of the Enmadra. They are the remains of the order founded by Adir Radd, before he was murdered.”

“That’s why they call themselves the A’nath-ari, the noble order of the blood!”

“Exactly, my boy. They are one of the five ancient houses. They are keepers of secrets. The Camenae sing in search of enlightenment; while the Mne Serephin test themselves, resolving to see the truth always. The Ual-leen gave into the machine, and seek to dominate. And we learn and teach.”

Ianus wanted to ask about the song of the machine, but he knew Ihy wouldn’t answer, so he went out to help Maya.

Aashen, Tuun, and their Ceeri Azi and Leor sat in the small common room of the independent freighter. The cold metal ceiling, walls, and floor made the voyage to the Ymirin home world feel longer than it really was. The door opened, and the ship’s captain, Maslin Talbot entered. His clothes gave the impression of being wealthier than he actually was. His short black hair and beard were as well manicured as his hands. From his black tailored suit to his polished leather shoes, Maslin exuded confidence. Pulling a mug out of the cabinet, he poured himself some tea.

“We will be coming out of hyperspace at the Ymirin gate soon,” Maslin said, before he took a sip of the hot tea.

“Good, the sooner we arrive,” Tuun huffed as he slouched in his chair, “The sooner we can leave.”

“Now, now,” Aashen shook his head. “The Ymiri aren’t that bad, once you get used to them.”

Sitting down at the table, Maslin looked across the table at Aashen, “Do you mind me asking you some questions?”

“As long as they’re not about my family,” Aashen laughed, only to realize that no one else got his joke: Even Azi rolled his eyes. “Go ahead.”

“You are both part of the Chian’niu aren’t you?”

“We’re not smugglers, if that’s what you mean.”

“No, I saw your periapts. It’s rare to meet a Predicant who wears such a weapon. I am a merchant, after all, I have had my share of run-ins with the underworld.”

“Yes, we walk in the Place of Tides, but we are Bahn Se’leen.”

“You’re Jade Moon? Really? I’ve read stories about the Jade Moon.”

Tuun smirked, “You’re Shedu, aren’t you?” He said starring at Maslin’s unmarked ivory skin holding the mug.

“No, I am Lamassu. I chose not to be joined.” Maslin shifted his weight in his seat, and crossed his arms, “Why?”

“Don’t pay my brother any mind,” Aashen looked harshly at Tuun who smirked proudly, “He has been in a bad mood since shortly after birth. No one knows why.”

“I think it was when I looked at my older brother and realized that he would be taking credit for everything I ever did.”

Maslin laughed, “You sound like my sister and I.” A red light flashed on the wall over the door to the cockpit. “We are approaching the Ymirin gate, would you like to join me in the cockpit?”

Tuun rolled his eyes and huffed loudly; Aashen leapt up and followed Maslin, who quickly sat down at the controls.

Aashen stood there, his mouth gaping at the sight of the distorted star-field, twisting, and spiraling past them. Soft lines of blended colors curled past them. Directly in front of the small freighter, a flash of brilliant white light whipping around like a cluster of balled lightning opened to reveal the red-brown disk of the Ymirin home world.

The sky was filled with thousands of dirty space docks, like giant, mechanical crabs, lobsters, and shrimp cradling all different shapes and sizes of unfinished ships.

“Here we are,” Maslin announced, “Do you have business with the station or the ground?”

“The station. We have an appointment with Hildred Nadir.”

“Here we go, incoming signal from the station,” Maslin hit the controls on the panel to his right.

A frail bald man with large, floppy, pointed ears and a long, crooked nose that was out of proportion with the rest of his face appeared on the screen directly in front of them. “Incoming freighter, identify yourself and state the purpose of your visit.”

“This is Maslin Talbot of the independent freighter Ashiyr. I bring Aashen Fallon Ken-Azi and Tuun Fallon Ken-Leor for a meeting with the merchant Hildred Nadir.”

“By Tor, you are long winded. Just send over the information and prepare to dock,” the screen went black.

“They seem pleasant,” Maslin scoffed as he transmitted the data.

“They are the best shipwrights in the galaxy— they don’t have to be polite.”

Ihy spent most of the morning watching Ianus scurry about the complex preparing for the visit in the same detail he would for a visiting dignitary. Even though the Guardian of the Holy To’asaa was arriving today, Ihy knew that Ianus was setting up for Daru Shaheen. They hadn’t seen each other for almost a year. Ever since Daru had taken vows as a predicant, she and her overseer, Pryor Isann, had been traveling around from monastery to monastery.

Maya also ran around like crazy. “My brother will be here soon,” she said every time Ihy passed the monastery’s kitchen. She was cooking all of Pryor’s favorite foods. The whole monastery was buzzing with excitement over the arrival of the To’asaa.

The sun fell lower in the sky, the gardens filled with spectators hoping for a glimpse of the holy relic. Ianus snaked his way through the crowd and down the hill toward the docks. Glancing back, he saw his parents not far behind him. The winding city streets opened to the bazaar. Street performers clamored for attention on every corner. The pungent scent of burnt alcohol and black powder overwhelmed the fresh salt air fighting its way on shore from the harbor as fire-breathers and magicians flashed and sputtered. Musicians and people who thought they could sing performed for the many tourist and pilgrims.

Beyond the gate, the docks were filled with merchants, shoppers, and passengers milling around. The sound of splashing water filled the air as naval and space ships docked. Someone with red hair caught Ianus’ eye. At first, Ianus was not sure. He was so used to seeing her in baggy street clothes, the cassock took him off guard, but when he saw Pryor’s familiar smile, he knew for sure.

Excited, Ianus ran to hug Daru. Pryor was just like an uncle to Ianus. Maya failed to hold back her tears at the sight of her brother. Elated, Ihy arranged to have their bags delivered to the dormitory, and led the group back to the library at the monastery. Past the front desk, and down a long hall to the right, Ihy unlocked the door, “The To’asaa will be safe in here.”

Pryor pulled a black velvet bag out from under his vest. Opening it, he revealed the soft green of the periapt within. “I entrust this holy relic of our founder Tien Shaa to you, Master Ihy Hahu Khem. Keep it well.”

Ihy looked very grim as he took possession of the To’asaa. “I will guard it with my life,” he responded, words that Ianus did not want to hear. Ihy laid the To’asaa on one of the shelves, closed the door, and motioned for the group to go back down the corridor.

When they reached the main room of the library, Ianus grabbed Daru’s hand, “We’ll meet you later at dinner,” then they were gone.

Pryor, Maya, and Ihy took seats around one of the tables.

“When I got your message, I came right away,” Pryor said gripping Maya’s hands tight, “Is it true?”

“Yes, the Machine’s song has been heard again by the Camarilla itself,” Maya’s eyes darted about the room.

“Does Ianus expect anything?”

Ihy leaned across the table and whispered, “No. He has no idea that Aashen read the vision in his mind. In fact, he even doubts the vision could be true.”

“Do you have any other proof?” Pryor asked, carefully controlling his breathing.

“Yes,” Maya closed her eyes, “Everything has transpired exactly as the Vaticanars foretold.”

“I see,” Pryor sighed, and balled his hands into fists. “So *they* came and told you?”

Maya nodded and took his hand in hers, “They visited Ihy over a week ago, carrying a warning from the Vaticinars themselves.” She sighed, and steadied her voice, “Don’t worry. This is the way things must be.”

Pryor nodded, “I know. We agreed to this, years ago. Are you sure Ianus won’t find out?”

Ihy thumped his fingers on the table, and looked up at Pryor with a cold, distant look on his face, “He suspects nothing.”

CHAPTER THREE: THE WAR MAIDEN

Ianus and Daru ran through the garden labyrinth hand in hand, laughing and giggling like little children. They reached the center and collapsed on a dark, wooden bench. They laughed, tears streaming down their faces, their breath quick and panting.

"It's good," Ianus gasped, "It's so good to see you again. How long will you be staying?"

"I have no idea," Daru muttered as she regained her composure, "Pryor just came in and announced his decision. I hope we can stay for at least a month, I'm so tired of sleeping in a different bed on a different planet every week."

"Well, at any rate, I'm glad you're here. I miss having someone here to talk to. What have you been doing?"

"We have been in the service of the Camarilla. Master Theron seems to believe that the Ual-leen are on the rise again. He has sent us from parish to parish investigating suspected bases."

"Have you found any?"

"No, not one. We have heard interesting rumors that the Enmadra are on the move again. We haven't found any proof for that either."

"Maybe that's what you are doing here? A large number of terrorists have been arrested in Shiloh lately. Maya told me that there is some evidence that they were involved in the Ual-leen."

Daru straightened her back, and looked away, "Then why wouldn't Pryor tell me? He told me before every other visit? He even gave me the case files."

Biting his lip, "Maybe Ihy told him not too— Ihy has been talking about the Great Machine much more often. Maybe they know for sure and they don't want to place you in danger."

"I can't believe Pryor would be trying to protect me! This is why I took on the order of the Predicant. No, that can't be it."

"Maybe he had a vision like the one I had at my day of Ascension."

"What vision?" Daru leaned in close to him.

"O, it's not important," Ianus hopped off the bench, "Forget I brought it up. It was just a side effect of the merging."

"Ianus, don't lie to me! You've never been able to lie to me. I've known you forever. What vision are you talking about?"

"Ihy says that I'm an augur. I had a strange vision. Blood, pain... it has something to do with the Ual-leen, I think. Look! I don't want to talk about it."

"Don't you believe in visions?"

"No! I know science and meditation. It was just an illusion! There is no such thing as magic!"

Daru jumped off of the bench and hurried over to a sapphire blue rose bush. She huffed silently. Ianus sat down, and looked pleadingly at her. Rocking back into the bench, he hummed a local folk song softly. Daru smiled. She forced her mouth flat. Ianus knew he was getting to her.

“I’m sorry Daru, but that’s all Ihy and Maya have been talking about for weeks. I’m tired of talking about it.”

“I can’t believe you’ve lost your faith.”

“I have not lost my faith!” Ianus covered his eyes with his hands, and forced himself to calm down. Taking a deep breath, he held it for a moment, then sighed, “My faith is as strong as it has ever been, but I know in my heart that I could never be a prophet!”

“Whoever called you a prophet?” Daru almost whispered, her voice crackling under the weight of her emotions, “Ihy called you an augur, an interpreter of times— and Ianus, you’ve always been able to see patterns in people’s actions.”

Ianus’ arms dropped down by his sides. “I’m sorry— it’s just that my vision cannot come true. I won’t allow it... Ihy can’t...” Ianus fell silent, barely stopping a tear from glassing over his eye.

“Can’t what?”

“Nothing— I’m sorry I freaked out... I’ve been under too much stress lately. Let’s just drop this discussion, and get back to just visiting... okay?”

Daru smiled, and nodded her head. “O,” she bounced, “I brought you something for your birthday.” Daru reached into a deep pocket and pulled out a palm-sized, parchment wrapped package, “I hope you like it.”

Ianus was surprised by the weight of the small package. Ripping it open, Ianus pulled out a small, stone obelisk, with golden letters engraved into one of its cold gray faces.

“It’s a Benben-stone?” Ianus mused, running his finger across the lettering. Fire erupted from the stone. The flames danced through the sky, slowly enclosing into a large red bird with purple frills around its head and tail.

“Doesn’t this make you believe in magic?” Daru asked longingly.

“It’s only an eidolon, Daru.” The bird squawked in protest, Ianus shook his head. “No Daru, this doesn’t make me believe in magic. But our friendship is greater than magic. When I look into your eyes, I can almost see myself as you see me. That does give me hope. It makes me want to believe.”

Daru entered the library, and looked around for Ihy, Maya, and Pryor. The room was so empty; the echoes of her own footsteps were the only sounds. Looking down the hall where Ihy had placed the To’asaa, the light was on, and the door was open. Daru approached the room quietly and reverently, so she wouldn’t startle Ihy if he was in the room meditating.

It wasn’t Ihy; instead, a woman stood with her back to the door. She had shoulder length, reddish blond hair and the white robe, and blue sash of an apprentice.

“Excuse me?” Daru asked firmly, “Does Master Khem know you are in here?”

The woman whirled about, her violet eyes wide, “O, you frightened me. He should know that I am here, but he was talking with my Master, Barami, when I asked if I could explore the library. So, I guess, I’m not sure if he knows I am in here or not.”

“A simple yes or no would have sufficed,” She watched the girl carefully, “I am Mistress Daru Shaheen, what is your name?”

“O, I’m sorry. I am Tara Lael, apprentice to Master Barami.” Her alabaster skin flushed a ruby red. “I haven’t done anything wrong have I? I was only admiring this lovely periapt.”

“You shouldn’t be in here alone!” Daru said sternly.

“I’m sorry,” Tara said sheepishly, “But the door was unlocked... there wasn’t a sign on the door saying keep out. I am so sorry, I had no clue.”

Tara’s response reminded Daru of an abused dog who had been caught doing something wrong. Daru sighed, “It’s all right. If the door was unlocked and unmarked...” she shook her head, “And that is not just a pretty periapt, it is the Holy To’asaa. Surely an apprentice in the Jade Moon would know that.”

Tara nodded her head, and then looked back over to the periapt. “Should I have heard of it?”

Daru’s eyes flared, “*Sit* down. We should talk. You have never heard of the To’asaa.”

Tara sat down at a small table. Daru took the To’asaa off the shelf, laid it down on the table, and sat down next to Tara.

“This is a relic of Tien Shaa, isn’t it?” Tara asked

“Yes, do you know the story of Tien Shaa?” Daru saw Tara shaking her head, “Tien Shaa was one of three disciples of the Enmadra, Jeriah Kamil. The other two were Adir Radd, and Dov Lavan.”

“Did they study like we do?”

“Yes, Jeriah taught them the Maker’s art, and he promised that he would instruct each of them in the use of the periapt. Jeriah himself constructed three periapts, and might I say the Enmadra periapts are far more powerful than the ones we use today.”

“Is that why the To’asaa is to be revered?”

“O no! The To’asaa is just a periapt. You shouldn’t revere any made thing. No, the To’asaa is a symbol of the work of Tien Shaa.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Tien Shaa was the son of Uma Nari,” Daru’s periapt flashed. The small room that they were in faded into an ancient, dusty street leading to a large temple. Multiple tiers sloped out of the ground one on top of the other into what looked like a large mountain. Tall trees, vines, and various flowering shrubs grew on each of the terraces, their verdant foliage stood out against the cream colored marble of the temple.

“Tien Shaa was the son of Uma Nari and the cousin of Adir Radd. Every day, he, his cousin, and Dov Lavan would hurry to the temple to receive instruction from Jeriah Kamil,” as Daru told the story, corresponding images moved across the wall to illustrate, “Each learned the Maker’s arts quickly, but Adir Radd had the additional burden of prophecy.

“Early in his training, he found his visions to be overpowering. He began making Eidolons to take his mind off them. The stronger his vision, the stronger the eidolon he created. His visions would often blind him, or leave him gasping for air. As the time for his initiation came near, he received a vision so frightening, he ran from his house screaming.”

“What was the vision?”

“At first, Radd refused to say, which caused him to become gravely ill. Even Jeriah came to his bedside and begged him to reveal what he had seen but he wouldn’t open his mouth.

“The days passed. Tien Shaa and Dov Lavan finished their lessons. During their initiation into the order of the Predicant, Jeriah gave them their new periapts.”

“And that’s where Tien Shaa received the To’asaa?” Tara said smiling.

“Yes, but it did not have a name yet. After their initiation, Dov Lavan founded the Te’nath Ual-leen, the order of the Black Moon, which was named after one of the three moons of Adrakaya.”

“And Tien Shaa founded the Cynath Bahn Se’leen, The house of the Jade Moon, after one of the other moons.”

“That’s right Tara, he did. Tien Shaa traveled around the countryside selecting only a few men and women to instruct in the maker’s art. Dov Lavan on the other hand quickly gathered a large following.”

“What happened to Adir Radd?”

“After spending close to a year in a sick bed, he received another vision. He could keep silent no longer. The color quickly returned to his face and he regained his strength. Then he disappeared. Meanwhile, Dov Lavan gained more followers by the day. Tien Shaa selected only seven people to instruct, although he would often give public talks.

“One day, while Dov Lavan was sitting on the steps of the temple teaching; Adir Radd appeared in the center of the crowd.

“‘Dov Lavan!’ He proclaimed, ‘You have been judged by the All Seeing, and all your works will be made known. You have deceived these people, and stolen their money to make it your own. Your ego is your god. You feed these people with your vain pronouncements, promising them rewards for their obedience and torments if they rebel. They serve you, not some greater power. Your end has been foreseen. Repent of your wickedness, and escape the calamity that awaits you.’

“Lavan was furious, but if he took action, he knew it would prove Radd’s charges. Radd followed Lavan from city to city, making disciples of his own, and even more powerful idolons. Eventually, Lavan could take no more. Even though Radd had engendered a large following, Lavan’s anger could not be quenched by anything other than Radd’s blood. In the middle of the night, he sent several of his men to capture him.

“Blinded by rage, he took Radd to Usekht Maati, the capital of the Enmadra republic. He beheaded Adir Radd and left his body on the steps of the temple.

“Word spread quickly about what Lavan had done. Jeriah sought out Tien Shaa to tell him. He was devastated when he heard the news. Jeriah improved Tien Shaa’s periapt. He knew that he had to stop Lavan before he attacked someone or something else. Radd’s followers went mad with grief, unleashing a terror upon the galaxy like no other before or since.

“Years passed before he found Lavan, who was hold up surrounded by thousands of his followers...”

“What did he do?” Tara burst out, “Did he have to fight all of them? What happened to him?”

Light flashed, and the room turned back to normal. “Well, yes, Tien Shaa had to fight his way into the stronghold alone. They say that when he struck Lavan down, he

received a mortal blow. They both lay dead for three days, until Jeriah found Tien Shaa's body. He lifted Tien Shaa's cold dead hand— water flowed from the To'asaa, restoring him to life. That's when this periapt received its name, To'asaa, the water bowl."

"I can't imagine having the courage to stand up against such odds. Wasn't he afraid?" Tara leaned in, enraptured by Daru's story.

"Of course, he was afraid, but fear was the only real power Lavan had. Fear and cowardice are the destroyers of worlds. He did what he had to do."

Ianus sat alone at one of the tables in the courtyard. Watching the small crowd strolling around in groups of threes and fours. 'I shouldn't have been so rough with Daru,' he thought, 'She was only trying to be helpful.' He pulled out the Benben-stone that she had given him. As he ran his finger down the golden letters one at a time, flames rushed out of the stone. The fire caressed his fingers like cool silk. A great Bennu-bird stretched her scarlet wings; the gold tips of the lead feathers glimmered in the sun.

A crowd gathered around Ianus, watching the large Bennu swoop across the courtyard. One of the men, a young monk in a proper navy cassock walked over to Ianus. His short, well-kept, blond hair stood firm against the wind that rushed from the Bennu's wings. A strange gleam in his crystal blue eyes attracted Ianus' attention.

"Excuse me, sir." The young monk bowed his head to Ianus, "I am Predicant Master Faroh Raanan. I serve the Camarilla of the Jade Moon under Lord Master Theron."

"Journeyman Ianus Akeru, at your service Master Raanan." Ianus bowed his head to his superior.

"Call me, Faroh. I've never been so fond of obligatory pleasantries."

"All right, Mast... Faroh, how can I be of service?" Ianus said, as he called the Bennu back into the stone.

"Master Theron has ordered me to take up temporary residence at this temple." Faroh handed Ianus his traveling papers, "I understand that Pryor Isann arrived earlier today. Is he here on business or on holiday?"

"Both, I believe. Shortly after he arrived he transferred guardianship of the To'asaa to Master Ihy Khem, but he did mention that he was wanting to take a few days off."

Faroh looked off toward the library, "Do you believe that Master Khem will make a good Guardian?"

"With all respect to the members of the Camarilla, but Ihy is the most powerful Maker alive today. No teacher, no storyteller can speak with his eloquence. He will be the greatest guardian that the To'asaa has ever had!"

"You believe that he is a greater Maker than the right honorable Master Theron?"

Ianus paused for a moment. He knew he had to choose his words about the titular head of the Jade Moon carefully. "Master Theron has been a noble leader, exhibiting charisma in all of his actions, and great power in the face of the Chimera incident on Adrakaya, but he is overly technical in his use of the arts. He lacks the fluidity and confidence of a great master."

"Unlike Master Khem," Faroh smiled, "Who stresses competence over technique?" Ianus nodded, "Do you ever feel that your training has been lacking because of this lack of emphasis on book learning?"

“Maybe a little, but Ihy always says, ‘Books can only tell you how something is done, not when and why to do it.’ He believes that practical experience is as important as pure study.”

“Well, he must be doing something right,” Faroh looked around at the crowds of people milling about the campus, flowing in and out of the temple and the library. “I have rarely seen a temple that so involves the community.”

“It’s late. An hour ago the campus was empty. People are off work now. The people do not come because of Ihy—they came because of their devotion to the Almighty.”

“And so they should,” Faroh responded, his voice trailing off at the end. Taking a deep breath, “Has everything been quiet. You haven’t been having any problems with the Ual-leen, have you?”

“Not that I’ve heard, but I haven’t taken vows yet, so I don’t hear everything.”

Faroh looked at him closely, then smiled, “You say, you are content, then, with the way this temple is run?”

“Yes, I mean, there is always room for improvement, but nothing stands out. Is that why you are here?”

“No, Master Theron has heard many stories about strange activities here at Shiloh. There have been reports that there have been Raewyn sightings. I am here to investigate the rumors and report back.”

“Why would the Camarilla be interested in Raewyn sightings? They are allowed free passage throughout the republic.”

“Yes, but they are a strange people, don’t you think? There have been rumors they are planning another insurgence. Most of these worlds used to belong to them, you know.”

‘Thousands of years ago,’ Ianus thought, but he nodded instead.

“It was good talking to you, but since I’m going to be spending several weeks here, I should get more accustomed with the place before I retire for the night. Could you, please, show me around?”

Aashen, Tuun, and their Ceeri went down the strange dirty hall on the Ymirin station. Windows on the right side of the corridor looked out on the many orbital dry-docks.

“Three days,” Tuun grumbled, “The horrid little wench kept us waiting for *three* days, and now we have to rush to meet her!”

“She was busy.”

“No she wasn’t, her schedule was blank!”

“And how would you know that, dear brother of mine?”

“This morning, I hacked into the station computer. Her last appointment was four weeks ago. She is not a good dealer. I’d watch out for her, we don’t want to get ripped off.”

Down the corridor a small Ymirin woman with a dull gray bandana around her head came trudging toward the two Sen Brothers. Her eyes rolled around, her haggard face scowled at them. Her oversized pointed ears jiggled up and down, flaring her large nostrils, “Are you two the Fallon brothers?” Her drawling voice called over the distance.

Tuun held back a laugh. She was no more than a couple of meters away, but she continued to howl at them like they were deaf.

“Yes,” Aashen said, before Tuun could say anything, “And you must be Hildred Nadir.”

“Of course I am, boy! Who else do you think would be looking for you?” She laughed heartily, “Are you here to buy or place an order?”

“We are here to purchase a ship for Master Ihy Khem.” Tuun said, looking hard at his brother.

Hildred’s eyes lit up, “We have some beautiful liners, if he’s looking for a way to make a little extra cash for your order. They are very popular.”

“No,” Tuun interrupted, “We have a list,” he elbowed his brother in the ribs.

“O yes, he desires a divisible frigate, with no less than three Kishanu. It must be well-armed, and able to make the jump into hyperspace on its own.”

“Kishanu, you say?” Hildred bellowed. “They have been out of fashion since the Chimera incident— I mean, after all those people died, and all. Your Master Khem wouldn’t be up to anything illegal would he?” Seeing a flash in Tuun’s periapt, “Of course, he wouldn’t be— it’ll be expensive though, you got the Gulden to be paying for all this?”

“You will be paid in full before the ship leaves the space dock.”

Aashen and Hildred haggled over the price of the ship for more than an hour.

Tuun, however, couldn’t take their clumsy attempts to bargain with one another. Sneaking away, he hurried back to the ship.

Maslin leaned up against a railing, looking out the window at the stars. As Tuun stormed passed him, he spun around, “Is it time to leave already?” Maslin called after him.

Tuun stopped outside of the docking port of the ship, “No! My brother is pretending he is a master salesman, he will probably be a while.”

“Should I go and help him?”

“Not if you value your sanity. He won’t allow you to help, and I think you are too good a man to be subject to that madness,” Tuun ducked through the door into the ship.

“Was that a compliment?” Maslin ran after Tuun. “I didn’t think you gave compliments.”

Tuun stopped, turned around, and walked slowly up to Maslin. Looking him hard in the eyes, “It was not a compliment. It was simply a fact. You have served Master Khem with honor on several occasions, and for that I give you respect. But you are, after all, a mercenary— so don’t construe any respect for your service with respect for you!”

“Sorry. If it means anything to you, I would never betray Master Khem’s trust.” Watching Tuun just walk away, Maslin shook his head. “He seemed rather concerned the last time I talked with him, is everything all right?”

“There have been an inordinate number of Raewyn sightings lately,” Tuun stopped, but kept his back to Maslin, “Two even came to Novice Akeru’s ascension celebration. He’s afraid that something terrible is going to happen.”

“But what good will a ship do against Raewyn, they aren’t exactly flesh and bone now are they?”

“No, they’re not. But even ethereal things like them have bodies— and home worlds, even if most of them are in hyperspace.”

“Hyperspace? There are no planets in hyperspace, if there were, they’d be on the charts!”

“I didn’t say planets, my dear boy, I said home worlds. There is a difference. Now, if you don’t mind, I am going to my room, please don’t disturb me until my brother gets back.”

Standing quietly outside of a room in the dormitory half of the monastery, Daru readjusted her robes, cleared her throat, and straightened her hair. She took a deep breath, and knocked on the door, as she exhaled.

The door opened. An old man, with short dark, obviously died hair, stood there, brushing crumbs off his robes, “Yes, may I help you?” His voice was higher than Daru would have guessed.

“I am Mistress Daru Shaheen. I’ve come to see Tara... You must be Master Barami. Tara has told me all about you.” Daru bowed her head reverently.

Barami bowed in response, “She didn’t mention that she was expecting you. We’ve just sat down for tea. Would you care to join us?”

Daru leaned back on her heels before she nodded her head. Walking past Master Barami, she entered a small sitting room. Every suite in this dormitory looked the same: Wood paneled walls, lightly stained; reddish brown tiled floors and several windows in each room. In the middle of the room, Tara sat at a small table, lost in the book, “The Holy Water of Tien Shaa.”

“Will you be going to meet Masters Tuun and Aashen when they return?” Barami asked.

“No, Master Tuun doesn’t like me, and I’m really not in the mood for Master Aashen’s infernal optimism.”

“I don’t think Master Tuun likes anyone.” Tara looked up from her book, “The first time I met him, I thought he was going to attack me. Come sit down, and have some tea.”

Daru sat down and graciously accepted a cup of jasmine tea from Barami, “Why did you think Tuun was going to attack you?”

“His periapt kept flashing, and I could hear metal clanging.” Tara pushed her chair back from the table, and turned to face Daru, “I had a very strange dream last night. I saw an enormous white stag. He was standing on a hill, silhouetted by the full moon, but the moon was red. What do you think it means?”

“It could have been the red moon Ari-leen of Adrakaya, and the stag... Peregrine. It could have been Peregrine. He has appeared to many a maker over the millennia.”

“That would be a dark sign,” Barami interrupted, “The last few times he appeared, it was a disastrous omen. He appeared to Master Theron five years ago, just before the attacks began.”

Daru had never heard that before. Images of the Chimera Incident flashed through her mind: the corpses of part machine, part organic monstrosities that had been paraded on the news. Shaking off the images, “You should talk to Ianus about it. He is an Augur, after all. He should be able to interpret it, if it is an omen.”

“O, I didn’t know that. So, does that mean he will be taking on the Order of the Presager?” Tara asked, her eyes opened wide.

“I expect not. He’s not very fond of the gift. Surely, he’ll take the oath of the Presager—he’ll have to do that. There are so few augurs these days. The Jade moon will want to avail themselves of his services. No, Ianus has always said he was going to take on the order of the Cenobite.”

“And you are you a Cenobite?” Tara asked.

“Heaven’s no, I’m a Predicant. I want to travel, see the galaxy. I don’t think I could stand being tied down to just one place. I need the adventure.”

Tara leaned in, cradling her head in her hands, “And have you had a lot of adventures? I bet you’ve seen some strange things out there, haven’t you?”

“Well, I haven’t really been traveling for all that long. But, Master Isann and I have investigated many suspected Ual-leen nests.”

Tara rubbed her nose, and looked out the window, “And did you find anything? Is the Ual-leen still out there? After all, there hasn’t been a confirmed sighting since Panthera was defeated.”

“I found some suspicious signs, but nothing solid. It’s been fascinating though. I remember this one abandoned temple on Ganeden, we did find a large group of Tengu,” Daru paused. Tara and Barami leaned in, wide-eyed and mouths agape. “They were all sitting around a fire cawing and flapping their large black wings. Suddenly, their leader jumped up, and shook his hands in the air. They had seen us.

“They swooped down on us from every side. Pryor and I fought back-to-back. All we could see were claws, fans, and feathers.”

“And did you get away?” Tara jumped out of her seat, knocking her chair into the wall.

“Well of course they did,” Barami laughed, “How else do you think she is sitting here today?”

Ihy and Ianus rushed out of the dormitory, passed the garden labyrinth, and down a small stone paved path that wound down the side of the hill, under hanging willow branches.

“Why are we going down to the beach?” Ianus asked, “Aren’t Aashen and Tuun returning to the port?”

“Heaven’s no, my dear boy.” Ihy ducked under a particularly low branch, “I’m not about to pay those exorbitant docking fees! Anyway, the beach down here is closer than the port.”

“Why would you have to pay the docking fees? Didn’t they travel with Maslin? He wouldn’t charge you for his berth?”

Ihy stopped at an abrupt turn on the path and smiled. “I forgot to tell you. I’ve bought a ship, or at least sent them to buy me one. They are delivering the new ship today. Isn’t it exciting?”

Ianus jumped forward and ran as fast as he could. Reaching the sands, he leaned back and slid feet first into the cold water.

The silvery blue sea stretched off into a distant fog that clothed the horizon. Dozens of small red and gold fish swam around his ankles. Looking back at Ihy, Ianus splashed water at him, and laughed.

“It’s a beautiful day isn’t it,” Ihy waded out until he was knee deep in the fresh water sea. “Maybe we could go fishing or swimming later.”

“Why don’t we do both?” Ianus nodded back at Ihy. He loved spending time with his father down at the Zacari Sea. Just last year, they spent the whole summer out in a boat sailing, swimming, and fishing. They traveled north up the coast, and circled the inland sea. Ianus still dreamed about those lazy days.

A titanic shadow loomed on the horizon, just beyond the edge of the fog. Draped in mist, a large silver and jade-green ship emerged into the light. It rose off of the surface of the sea. Shaped like a colossal manta ray, it swooped down into the water, submerging itself about half way. Light flashed from its engines. Coasting on its inertia, it turned and lined its bulk up along side the aged wooden pier that jutted out from the coast.

Ihy jumped with glee, and ran to the pier to welcome it. Ianus hadn’t seen him this excited for years. Hurrying to catch Ihy, Ianus ran up the pier as the hulking ship came to a stop along side.

Spying an airlock near him, Ihy rushed over, the door released and swung open. Ihy and Ianus entered. Aashen’s voice echoed over the intercom, “Stay there, we’re coming to meet you, then we’ll give you the tour.”

A short while later, Aashen, Tuun and their Ceeri came striding down the corridor. Both Aashen and Tuun had large grins on their faces. Ianus did a double take, yes, even Tuun was smiling.

“We did good, didn’t we?” Tuun blurted out. “It has everything you asked for!”

“O yes, you did very well,” Ihy said, looking past them down the hallway. The walls were the same color as well aged ivory, and the floors looked like a Jade stained slate. “Does the ship require a Helmsman?”

“No,” Tuun answered, “It can be flown manually or on auto-pilot, but it does have an interface for a Helmsman if you would like one— and I would be more than happy to train to be yours.”

Ihy shook his head, “Well, since this is the first time I have ever seen you excited about anything— go ahead, I would be honored. Aashen, what is the ships name?”

“The IRV Valkyrie, she is fully licensed and registered.”

“The Valkyrie!” Ianus gasped, “The war maiden?” The white dragon flooded his mind, blood, the tower falling. Shivering, the memory faded.

Ihy and Aashen just stared at him.

“It can’t be,” Ianus whispered, “Can we change its name?”

“Why?” Ihy asked, “If it has already been registered then it will be extremely hard to rename.”

“My vision!” Ianus shook remembering his Ascension Day, “In my vision... the voice said I should follow the War Maiden. A Valkyrie is a war maiden. It can’t be a coincidence. If this is the War Maiden then...” he looked at Ihy with tears welling up in his eyes. “Then, maybe the vision was true.”

“Don’t worry, my boy. I’m sure everything will be all right. It was your first vision. They can be very emotional, but don’t worry. This ship isn’t going anywhere for a long time, so there will be nothing to follow. Okay?”

Ianus wiped the tears from his eyes and nodded.

“Where are the Kishanu?” Ihy asked. Aashen pointed to a door down at the end of the passageway.

“But father!” Ianus tried to steady himself, Ihy’s face looked drawn, almost skeletal, “I can’t just ignore the vision can I?”

“You have this long. Let me explain something. Visions are nothing but patterns of light on a dark cave wall. They are a part of a greater system. Augurs see patterns in the world around them. They see what is happening, and what has happened. In their visions, these systems are projected forward to see what is most likely to happen. No vision is written in stone. They change as the pattern changes, but you have to be very careful. Every system is a machine— Visions, eco-systems, businesses, governments, cultures. Machines crave order and submission. That is all they know. Souls crave life and freedom. You have to find the balance between the two, or they will tear you apart.”

Ihy took Ianus into his arms, and embraced him tight, and smiled, “Now let’s go take a look at the Kishanu.”

They walked down the hall, and into the room. Three humanoid machines lay on tables in the corners of the room.

“These two are Mista and Sangrida Namid,” Aashen said pointing to the two on the left side of the room. “And that one is Arun Namid.”

“Namid?” asked Ihy, “The Star Dancer, what a good name. You did well.”

Ianus got the strangest sense of déjà vu looking at the Kishan. “Ihy’s time has past,” a voice screeched in his mind. Panicked, Ianus ran out of the room.

CHAPTER FOUR: DARK SIGNS

Bursting into the dining hall, Ianus struggled to breathe. Daru and Maya sat at a table near the door.

“The fool!” Ianus cried out, with tears streaming down his face, “The War Maiden is here! It’s really here!” Ianus collapsed onto the floor. “The fool won’t listen! He doesn’t care what I have to say!”

Maya leapt from her seat, her feet hardly touching the ground, as she ran over to her adopted son. “What vision?” she wrapped her arm around him, “What’s wrong?”

“Ihy’s new ship,” Ianus gasped between sobs, “It’s the Valkyrie, the war maiden... the vision I had at my Ascension. The pieces are coming together—and that Kishan... while I looked at it, just lying there on the table. It... it turned into Ihy! He wasn’t breathing! My God, I think he was dead!”

On his hands and knees, Ianus folded into himself, and rocked back and forth, chanting, “Why can’t he see? Why won’t he listen to me? Doesn’t he care?” Pulling his knees into his chest with his arms, he muttered incoherently. He looked up at Maya, and shook violently. She just stared at him, her eyes misting up.

Ianus looked over at Daru, who just stood there with her hands over her mouth. A distant pain filled her eyes. She looked past him, and out the door. Following her gaze, he saw Ihy, standing stoically, and beckoning to Maya with his hand. Her arms slipped away from him, leaving only a hollow, aching cold where she had been.

She walked over to Ihy and they left in the direction of the library, “It’s always work!” Ianus screeched, “Just go to your books, I’ll be all right!” Ianus sighed, “Damn it!” He lowered his head between his knees. “Damn it all!” He screeched. “If he doesn’t give a damn, maybe I shouldn’t either!”

He heard Daru’s feet stumble. Feeling her sit down beside him, he leaned on her shoulder. Gently, she ran her fingers through his hair.

“It’ll be all right. Everything’s all right. I’m here,” she whispered softly into his ear, “I will always be here. Forever and beyond.”

Ianus reached his trembling arms around her, “I know,” he whispered back. “I don’t understand. It doesn’t make sense.” He inhaled her sweet perfume, and nuzzled into her arm.

“What doesn’t make sense?” Daru rested her head on his.

Ianus sat up, and looked at her. “For over a month now, Ihy has been encouraging me to trust my visions, and believe in my *‘gift’*. But the moment I do, he acts like I’m... making it all up.”

“You don’t think he believes your vision?”

“I think he’s too bound up in his new toy to care what I have to say,” Ianus took her hand, “It’s like he doesn’t take me seriously.”

“What did he do when you told him?”

“He just gave me a lecture about the Machine, and how it tries to control everything.” He squeezed her hand. “What good is seeing the future if no one believes you?”

“Maybe he’s afraid the visions will control you?”

“Maybe... I guess. But, if the visions are true, then his life is in jeopardy. Why wouldn’t he care about that?”

Daru pulled Ianus closer, “Did you tell him that?” Ianus shook his head, “Look, he is an augur too. Perhaps he has seen the threat coming, and has a plan to avert it?”

“Then why wouldn’t he tell me?” Ianus shouted, stood up and began to pace around the dining hall. “If that’s true, then why wouldn’t he tell me? If this is another one of his damn tests... he has no right to treat me like this. He should tell me what he knows, even if for no other reason than to set my mind at ease!”

“Maybe he *is* testing you. Perhaps he’s curious whether you’ll see the same way out he did.” Daru’s lip trembled. “If he told you what he knew that would bias your visions. The stakes are high, and there’s little room for error. You can’t believe he would do this out of malice. Maybe he needs you to see for yourself.”

“That would be just like him. I’m distraught, and he’s *curious* to find out if I can help myself or not. You know, sometimes he’s the greatest father I could ever hope for, and other times... he just becomes so distant.”

“You know, you’re really lucky.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Daru turned her back to Ianus and faced the door, “Most of us just happen to our parents. Your parents *chose* you. They could have said no. After your birth parents died, they could have sent you away to an orphanage, but they kept you. They didn’t have to, you’re not blood related to either one of them, but they chose you. You *know* they love you, because they took you home, and raised you.”

Ianus stopped, looked around the room, and then walked up to Daru, putting a hand on her shoulder, “I know.” Drawing in a deep breath, he closed his eyes. He wanted to be mad at Ihy. He didn’t want to just let go. It was unfair, the way that he had been treated. He sighed and shook his head. There was no use arguing with Daru. Looking over at her, he shook his head, “You’re right. I may not act like it, but I know. They just make me so angry sometimes.”

“I know, I’m pretty mad at them myself, but maybe this is the path you have to walk?”

“I guess your right. I’ll just have to see this through. At any rate, my prescience book disagrees with me anyway.” Ianus laughed, “Thank you, I feel a lot better.”

“Just promise me one thing. If you must walk this path, keep your eyes open for detours.”

Daru stalked the Monastery grounds. She may have played it calm and collected in front of Ianus, but fury burned down in her soul. The sight of Ianus suffering was more than she could bear. She was blind to reason. A slight against Ianus, real or imagined, was a slight against her. Someone had to take Ihy to task for his carelessness. Ianus wouldn’t do it. Maya would never do it. She would have to be the one to do it.

Biting her lip to keep herself from muttering, she paused in the center of the courtyard. 'I've checked the dorms, the garden, the temple, and the beach,' she thought. A cold glimmer filled her eyes, her heartbeat quickened. 'That only leaves one place.'

Slowly, she turned around, and glared at the library. "You cannot hide from me," a sinister grin broke across her face.

A wild lion on the prowl, she strode across the courtyard up to the library doors. Stopping, she took a deep breath and held it. Slowly, she exhaled. A cruel smile on her face, she raised her right hand. The jade stone of her periapt illuminated. A shimmering haze issued from the stone. In the fog, she could distinctly make out Ihy's voice:

"What was I supposed to do? I have important work to get done before tomorrow night. Barami won't stand for another delay. No, I have to meet with him tomorrow."

"I don't see what he's in such a state about anyway. A couple of dead bodies, and a few scattered rumors about Ual-leen agents," Maya said.

"But, you know as well as I do what's been going on he's probably hoping that everything's on schedule with... well you know. I should go for a coffee. My head's feeling a bit foggy."

"What," Maya paused. "O, I see."

Daru pulled her hand away from the door. 'How did he know I was listening?' she thought. She stumbled a few steps backward, and ran off to the gardens. At the entrance to the labyrinth, she looked back in time to see the library door swing open.

Ihy looked suspiciously out the door, then turned around and went back in.

Catching her breath, Daru wondered, 'Dead bodies, why haven't I heard about any dead bodies?' Slowly, she left the garden and headed back toward the library. 'That's it! Pryor is coddling me, and Ihy is shoving Ianus aside to finish his precious work.'

Her hackles up again, Daru charged the library. Swinging the doors open, she marched up to Ihy and Maya, and slammed her fists down on the table.

"How dare you treat Ianus like that!" She roared, her fury now filling her eyes.

"Like what?" Ihy took a step backward, "Dear girl, what are you on about?"

"You know very well what I'm talking about! And *don't* call me '*dear girl!*' I've grown up, if you haven't noticed, and you've gone callous!"

"Now listen here, I haven't done anything wrong."

"The pair of you are neglecting your son when he's distraught, and you have the gall to say you haven't done anything wrong?"

"And what exactly have we done? He is eighteen after all, and soon he will be a cenobite. He has to start taking care of himself!"

"Anyway," Maya interjected, "He has you hasn't he? I'm sure you did everything in your power to comfort him."

"Don't try to change the subject!" Daru raged, "I'm not about to be flattered out of my indignation. I have a right to be angry!"

"You honestly haven't got a clue what I'm talking about, do you?" Maya sat down and grinned.

"He's been traumatized, you know!" Daru stared coldly at Ihy, "He thinks you're going to die."

"Well of course I will. We all will one day or another, won't we? Don't tell me he just figured out that I'm mortal."

“Don’t be sarcastic, he thinks you’re going to be killed, and soon by the sound of it. He’s distraught.”

“Look,” Ihy walked around the table and took Daru by the hand, “He has to learn how to deal with his gifts on his own. I did, and so did his birth mother and father. It was only a matter of time until he received his first vision. I can’t coddle him.”

“You could be more sympathetic.”

“No. I can’t,” Ihy sighed, “Prescience is both a gift and a curse. I remember my first vision. They can over power you, and crush your spirit if you’re not strong enough. There is nothing Maya or I could do for him. We’re his parents. You, on the other hand, you have always been in his heart. If he couldn’t find the strength in himself, he could find it through you.”

Daru’s mouth dropped open, and her eyes widened, “What are you going on about?”

Shaking his head, “We are his parents. We will always be with him, even if only in spirit. You, on the other hand, you are part of him. You were friends before you ever met. You are the strength he needs right now, not us. We do care, but sometimes that’s just not enough.”

Ianus sat alone in his cluttered, yet to his own mind well organized, room. Looking over at the unmade bed, he thought about just taking a nap; but the soft leather binding of his prescience book kept catching his eye. ‘There is nothing I can do. The dice have been cast,’ Ianus thought, ‘Who am I to question fate?’

A knock on the door; Ianus jumped at the sound. Opening the door, a sheepish Tara stood there. She fidgeted with her hands, and avoided making eye contact.

“Can I help you, miss?” Ianus asked.

Her breath was unsteady, and she glanced repeatedly between Ianus and the floor. “O, sorry... this was a bad idea.” She sighed and turned to walk away. Stopping, she tossed her head back and forth on her shoulders. “O, I’m Tara Leal,” she said, pivoting on her toes to face Ianus, “I guess you might call me a friend, or maybe an acquaintance, of Daru’s. I caught you at a bad time, didn’t I? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have come. I shouldn’t have bothered you. This really *is* a bad time, isn’t it?” Tara turned to walk away.

Ianus grabbed her by the elbow, “No, wait. Is something wrong?”

Tara stopped and turned around, “Are you sure this isn’t a bad time? I always seem to catch people at the wrong time. I have horrible timing. Am I interrupting anything?”

“Not unless you think I need to be bored. I wasn’t doing anything at all. Do you want to go down to the courtyard?”

“I’d rather talk in your room, if that’s all right with you.”

Ianus looked back at his open door, “If you are comfortable being alone in a room with a strange man?”

Tara smiled, “I know thirty-four ways to kill a person with a glance. I am a trained maker, months away from initiation. I think I can handle myself.”

“I meant, if you don’t think people would talk... but that’s good to know,” Ianus chuckled, “But I think I should warn, you I know fifty-eight ways to block a stare, so don’t get any ideas.”

Walking into the small, studio apartment, he pointed Tara over to the table and chairs. "So what's the problem?"

"Well, Daru said you might be able to help me. She said you are an augur."

Ianus shuffled uneasily in his seat, "Well? The jury is still out on that. I have had two visions, but I'm not too sure I even understand what they mean."

"O," Tara looked down, "I'm sorry I bothered you."

"No, no, Daru always knows what she's talking about. If she thinks I can help you, I should at least try."

"Well, I had a dream..." Tara stopped.

Ianus' eyes glazed over. He looked past her into what appeared to be like a distant fog. Fragments and shadows flashed through his consciousness. "You saw a giant, white stag, Peregrine, I believe. He had silver fur running across his face and back, and snow white fur down his neck and belly. His antlers, polished gold, and about three feet long." Tara stared at him, fascinated, "He stood before the Blood Moon, Ari-leen, somewhere on Adrakaya." Ianus' eyes began to water.

"Is everything all right?" Tara asked.

"Yes, why?"

"You're crying."

"No, my eyes are watering," Ianus rubbed his eyes but the image never faded or distorted.

"What does it mean?" Tara slid forward to the edge of her chair.

"Changes are coming. One will come soon and will make you choose the path that will lead you to greatness, or the path that will lead to certain destruction."

Tara sat up straight in her chair, "How will I know which path to take?"

"Two paths will present themselves to you, but it is not a new choice. You have made the choice already, and you will have to make it again."

"When did I make this decision?"

"Once when you were very young, and even now you are under its sway."

"Really?" Tara looked away, "So what should I do?"

"Stay the course. Do not be swayed from the path set before you."

"It is fate then? Destiny?"

"Yes, it is what was born with you. The path is a part of you. To deny it would be to deny yourself."

"Don't you feel like fate sometimes grabs us and bends us to its will?"

"Never! All things arise together, depending on a million other causes. You were born, just as we all are, with certain gifts, talents, and strengths. They set you on the path. You make the choices." Ianus shivered. He didn't know where the words were coming from; they simply fell from his mouth.

"I make the choices..." Tara muttered, "Thank you."

Ianus shook his head, and the room again became clear, the vision ended. "I hope I was helpful."

Tara shook his hand, "Yes, you were. Thank you so very much."

Ianus escorted Tara to the door. After she had gone, he looked at the prescience book. Lost in thought, he just kept saying, "We make our own decisions."

Faroh Raanan and another man walked down a street in Shiloh. The other man, Jago Modcearu, straightened his dark black tunic. His pale skin lit up brilliantly every time they passed under the light of one of the street lamps. His well cropped brown hair stood as rigidly as he did.

"I am glad to see you again," Jago said, his high pitched nasal voice barely traveled past them, "I wondered how long it would be before our lord sent me a helper."

"He is most pleased with your work here at Shiloh. You have done very well. All of the troublemakers have been taken care of before they have become problems."

"The work of an inquisitor is never done," Jago smiled, "I serve the order well."

Seeing another maker coming down the path, Faroh said, "Have there been any leads on the string of murders that have taken down so many members of the Jade Moon of late?"

They nodded at the other maker as he walked past. "No," Jago answered, "There have been a few rumors, but nothing reliable in any way."

"How is everything going with Osten?"

"He is progressing on schedule. He will be ready when we need him. And who are you working *with* now?"

"Ianus Akeru."

"The son of Elkan and Hannah Akeru?" Jago asked.

"The very same. He will be harder than I thought. He has no love for the machine, or for the song."

"Have you introduced him to the litany?"

"No, but he trusts Ihy to a fault," Faroh said, "He thinks the old fool's teachings will help him. Like there is anything that crackpot could say that is not in the song. Once he sees the glories of the song's words, and meaning, he will join us. He will bow to the One."

"Our Lord Pan... Our Lord has told you this?"

"He didn't have to. I know the truth, and the truth guides my steps. One day, Ianus will know the truth. Then he will be one of us." Stopping in front of a house, Faroh checked a note in his hand, "This is the place." He looked over at Jago and nodded.

He took a few steps back, and then leapt onto the roof over the second floor terrace. Flipping onto the hard cement balcony, he bent down over the terrace wall, and winked down at Jago.

Jago nodded back at him, and rang the doorbell. The sound of footsteps lazily made their way to the door.

"Greetings," the handsome young man said opening the door, "Can I help you?"

"Master Roman Elsu?" Jago asked in a formal tone.

"Yes," the man said, scratching his head.

"Is your wife Jenn home?"

"She is, can I..."

Jago lunged forward knocking the man inside, slamming the door shut.

Faroh jumped forward crashing his way through the glass door. A beautiful young woman, turned around quickly. Brilliant light flashed from her periapt and a large single edge sword appeared in her hand.

Faroh smiled broadly. Jenn charged him, raising her sword above her head. The sword came down... and inches away from his forehead the blade stopped. A flash of electric blue light deflected the blade, Faroh laughed.

A metal pole as tall as him appeared in his hand, "Come on then, try again," he taunted.

A quick thrust of the pole; Jenn blocked with her feeble blade. The sword shattered.

"O, that's not good," he scoffed. Rushing forward, he spun the pole down at Jenn's feet.

She jumped out of its way, but Faroh quickly brought it back, hitting her in the face. Stunned by the blow, she staggered backwards toward the stairs. Faroh ran up the wall to her right, and leaped over her head. Landing on the top step, he brought the staff up, and held it tight against her throat. She gasped for breath.

"Really now, you should have practiced more," rolling backwards, he pulled her off the ground, and over him. He let go of her in mid back flip. She crashed down the stairs, and with a loud snap landed at the bottom. Faroh caught the middle stair with his hands, and pushed off. He landed at the bottom of the stairs with one foot on either side of Jenn's body.

Applause erupted from a chair in the living room, "You always did enjoy your work," Jago chuckled.

Faroh, still breathing slowly, saw Roman's body laid out on the couch, "Be sure to plant the evidence on them. Then wait an hour before you anonymously report the crime to Osten."

Tara stood on the balcony of the suite she was sharing with her mentor Barami. Shiloh's city lights twinkled in the distance. Her eyes wandered over the starless night sky, 'Why did Barami have to go out tonight?' she thought, 'He knows Master Khem won't be able to see him until tomorrow night.' She rubbed her forehead with the back of her hand. 'He always comes when I'm alone... always when I'm alone. I really don't want to see him today.'

Startled, she looked down at what she thought was a shadowy figure creeping across the courtyard. 'Just a tree,' she sighed. Walking over to the small white metal table in the corner of the balcony, she picked up her wine glass and cast a longing gaze down on her book.

Slowly, she filled her mouth with the fruity wine. Closing her eyes, she savored the flavor. 'Maybe he won't come.' She tried to ease her own mind, 'After all, Ihy Khem presides over this temple. He wouldn't dare, would he?'

"I wouldn't dare what?" A cold, deep voice resonated behind her.

"Master?" Tara jumped, dropping her wine glass. The shattering glass startled her again.

Looking around with a hard, vacant stare, the corners of her mouth drew back tight. "I'm hearing things," she muttered.

"Of course, my dear," the lights in the suite went out, "You are hearing me."

Tara peered into the dark room, looking for signs of movement.

"What wouldn't I dare to do?" The voice asked again.

A dim red fire burst to life in the center of the room. Tara searched the now sanguineous room for a sign of her master.

“My Lord, they were just stray thoughts. Please forgive me,” Tara begged the unseen speaker.

“Stray thoughts?” The voice said. Tara looked over at a shadowy figure in black robes sitting in the lounge chair with his hood pulled over his face. “Since when do you have stray thoughts?”

“Please forgive me, master,” Tara exclaimed, running over to the humanoid form. She fell to her knees, and prostrated before him.

“I am not the one to forgive. Have you forgotten the song?”

“O no, master,” Tara sat up and shook her head, “I still listen to the song. I study its truth.”

“Good,” the hooded figure motioned for her to sit up, “You thought I wouldn’t dare come here. Not with Ihy Khem running the place. You thought I would avoid the one who defeated me. Me, Karu Panthera, the servant of the Great Machine. It is true that he and his *followers* drove me out of the Camarilla of the Jade Moon, but his followers are mostly dead now, aren’t they?”

“Yes, my Lord, it was a foolish thought, I should have...”

“Enough of your sniveling. I know what you’ve been up to. You’ve been spending too much time around that Daru girl. She’s nothing but trouble.”

“She’s a Master Predicant of the Jade Moon, and...”

“And you have been learning the song of Dov Lavan! Have you forgotten that the Jade Moon has betrayed the teaching?”

“Daru says that the Ara’lu betrayed the Enmadra and...”

“You believed her? Have you forgotten the truth so soon?”

“But she has found,” Tara struggled for words, “Freedom. The very same freedom you promised me when you taught me the song.”

“She’s a slave! The song teaches the way of life. Don’t let her seduce you with her quaint lies. You know the truth. Dov Lavan died for the truth, sacrificing himself so the way could be made straight.”

“But Tien Shaa also gave his life, and he returned to life again.”

“So did Lavan,” Panthera raised his hands, “I can take you to Tien Shaa’s tomb. I assure you, he’s still in it. And where is Lavan’s tomb? He became one with the machine. His body was never found.”

“But, I’ve met her. She really is free!”

“My poor girl, do you really think you’ll ever be free?” Panthera rose from the chair, and scowled down at her, “You still have fear, and that fear will haunt you like your own shadow. Only the power I offer can heal you.”

“But, I’ve been reading about the To’asaa. I believe it...”

“Just do what you’re told! Serve your purpose. You don’t want to become obsolete, do you?”

“O no... I...” Tara crawled away.

“You cannot question the song. The song cannot err. In the past four thousand three hundred and twenty years, the song has never been wrong. It is truth! Who are you to question the truth!”

Tara’s voice quivered, “No one... I am a part of the machine.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I hear the song, I know the truth. I serve the One. I will serve my purpose,” Tara closed her eyes and let her head hang down, “I will do what I’ve come here to do.”

Early in the morning, Ianus rolled out of bed. He hadn’t slept well the night before. Strange dreams haunted him all night. Strange creatures and armies clashing in the dark. He had read many books about the days of Tien Shaa, and even Samara the Rogue when such a battle waged across the galaxy. Augurs were prone to seeing the past as well as the future, but why had he dreamed about the ancients.

Splashing his face with water, he frightened the sleep away, but the anxiety remained. After he had gotten dressed, he ran down to the refectory for breakfast. Pancakes with peach calico jam made for a more than satisfactory meal. Chef had outdone himself today.

After he had returned his plates to the kitchen, he decided to ask Aashen and Tuun about the Valkyrie. The name of the ship still sent shivers up and down his spine.

He left the dining hall with a spring in his step and a smile on his face. Seeing the Fallon Brothers enter the garden, he turned to follow them. As he passed the labyrinth, he lost his train of thought.

“Two more murdered?” It was Ihy.

Ianus froze in mid-step.

“Yes, sir,” Ianus didn’t recognize the other man’s voice, “Roman and Jenn Elsu, but that’s not the worst part. Items were found in their house suggesting that they were... secretly members of the Ual-leen, but I can’t believe it.”

“I know... knew them, it does seem out of character for them, but at this point I don’t think we can rule anything out.” Ihy paused for a moment, then whispered, “What do they think was the motive?”

“They found an Ual-leen glyph branded into their forehead. It was a warning glyph. If all this is to be believed, the mark means they had betrayed someone, and that this was a vengeance murder.”

“If there was a mark on the bodies, that would mean they were about to meet another Ual-leen agent... How did we find them before the bodies could be removed? Who found them?”

“A neighbor called, they said they heard strange sounds at the Elsu house. As to who found them, it was Osten Moore.”

“Again? He has been very lucky lately. He has uncovered quite a few of these ‘secret agents.’ Has *he* been investigated?”

“He’s clean, by-the-way, I know his wife, Deryn, they are good people...” The voices faded off into the distance.

‘They must have walked off,’ Ianus thought. ‘What was I doing? O, that’s right. Aashen and Tuun.’

Heading off toward the labyrinth, Ianus noticed the Fallon brothers in the field off to the side. They were talking, very animated about something. As Ianus approached, they became very quiet.

“Hello, Ianus!” Aashen called out, “Come for a quick game? A duel perhaps?”

“O no!” Ianus shook his head vigorously, “I’ve come to ask you something.”

“No, no, *Not* business. *Not* now,” Aashen stood up, his Ceeri leapt on his back and spread his over size wings. “I’m not in the proper mood for, well, being proper.” Jumping into the air, the Ceeri flapped his wings and carried Aashen aloft.

“Get back down here and talk to me,” Ianus looked at Tuun who was still sitting on the ground.

“Don’t even think about it,” Tuun grumbled, his Ceeri crawled onto his back. With a minimum of effort, it flapped its wings and flew them both away.

“Beat me to the center of the Labyrinth, and I’ll answer your questions.” Swinging his body to the left, he flew toward the hedges.

Ianus ran after him. Faster and faster, with each stride he rose higher into the air. Bounding onto the first hedge, he looked at the marble statue of Uma Nari in the center of the Labyrinth.

Aashen swooped over the hedges, laughing, “You cannot catch me!” He shouted. “You don’t have wings!”

Ianus focused on his periapt, and leapt from hedge to hedge. His foot barely touched the branches as he kicked off each one.

Aashen had taken a sizeable lead.

Closing his eyes, Ianus knew he needed the answers. Aashen dove toward the center; Ianus bounded toward him.

As Ianus’ soared through the air, he reached out his hand. Grabbing Aashen by the ankle, Ianus forced his legs forward. His feet landed on Aashen’s chest. He kicked off, shoving Aashen backward. Ianus hit the ground, and rolled across the hard sod in the center of the labyrinth.

Landing on his feet, Ianus sprung from the crouching position and wrapped his arm around the statue.

“I win!” he shouted as Aashen landed with his arms crossed. “Well, are you ready to talk now?”

Aashen laughed and shook his head. “Good show! But next time, don’t kick so hard. That hurt.”

“This from the man who routinely wing buffets his opponents during a fight? I’ll try to remember that.”

“Ask your questions,” Aashen said.

“Why did you get the Valkyrie?” Ianus folded his arms.

“Because Ihy asked us to.”

“Why did Ihy ask you to buy it?”

“I don’t know. He said he needed a ship that fit certain criteria, so we found him one.”

“What criteria?”

“He asked for a divisible frigate that had Kishanu. O, and he wanted it to be able to make its own jumps into hyperspace.”

“Did he specify a name? Did he want it named the Valkyrie?”

“No, there were four ships to choose from, and Tuun like that one best. So are you done with me now?”

“Yeah, let’s do something fun.”

Off in a dark, forgotten corner of the library, Ihy Khem and Barami sat at an old, weathered table. Ihy set a black cloth on the table, and Barami fidgeted expectantly. Unfolding the cloth, Ihy revealed the brilliant jade stone and supple leather glove of the To'asaa.

"It's magnificent," Barami bowed his head reverently, "Where are you keeping it?"

"In a safe room across from my office, where I keep all of our precious collections."

"I was surprised when I heard that Master Isann had retired from his guardianship. It was a great privilege for him to have been chosen in the first place."

"Well, with all of the events of late," Ihy watched him carefully, "He thought it would be safer in the care of a monastery than with a traveling Predicant. Why? Did you think it would come to you?"

Barami sat back in his chair, "O no, of course not, but... well, with all respect to you Master, but I thought it would go to someone younger. Anyway, there has been talk that the Enmadra have returned to Adrakaya, and their servants, the A'nath-ari, are on the move again."

"I've heard, but don't worry. The To'asaa is safe here."

"But if the A'nath-ari take an interest in it..."

"Why would they?" Ihy chuckled, "They serve the Enmadra, as you put it, I'm sure if they wanted a similar periapt, they would simply ask the Enmadra for one."

Barami laughed, "You're right. I'm sorry. There has been so much going on lately. I heard that young Akeru is having visions. And if I heard correctly, he is predicting that the Ual-leen are rising again."

"The rumors come and go. Our intelligence office has rounded up several suspected Ual-leen agents."

"Don't forget about the murders."

"I'm not too sure about those. They have been all too... convenient. I'm not sure they are exactly what they seem. There is only one thing that bothers me more... If Ianus is right, then the only thing we can be sure of is that Ianus will be dead before this is over."

CHAPTER FIVE: VOWS

Three days droned past after Ianus had talked to Aashen about the Valkyrie. Each day was the same, wandering aimlessly around the temple grounds, avoiding everyone, especially Daru. He ground his teeth every time he thought about his father. Had he really bought a ship called the Valkyrie on purpose, or was it merely a coincidence? Had Ihy set him up? The fact that he had not shared the details of his first vision with anyone helped him calm down a little, but he still wanted someone to fight. It was easier to be angry, but it was ridiculous to blame Ihy for the name of the ship. After all, Ihy would never resort to sheer terror to teach him a lesson, would he?

Confusion filled his life. What would he do if something happened to his second father? ‘No,’ he decided, ‘I must not let anything happen! But what could I do to keep him from his fate?’

Ianus knew Ihy had been spending nearly all his free time down at the beach tinkering with his new ship. If he was going to do anything he was going to have to get over his anxiety about that ship. After making his way down the hillside, he stopped to stare at the haunting vessel. A strange feeling welled up in the pit of his stomach.

His vision twisted and blurred as his prescient gift forced itself upon him. Steadying his legs, he blinked his eyes rapidly. He reached up and rubbed his eyes. ‘Not now,’ he thought, ‘I don’t need this now!’ He swayed and moaned. Nothing was working. The portentous fog clouded his eyes. “Go away!” Ianus shouted to no effect.

“What?” Tuun’s voice echoed in his ears, “Why? What have I done?”

“Tuun? Is that really you?”

“Of course it’s really me! What’s the matter with... Oh! You’re suffering a vision!” Tuun said, taking Ianus’ hand, “Just take a deep breath, Breathe... That’s right... relax. Pray.”

“O Holy Mother,” Ianus panted, “Protect us all from evil, stand guard at the gates of our cities, and in the temples of our hearts. Pray for us Holy Mother, now and at the hour of our death.”

“You are devoted to Uma Nari?” Tuun said with surprise in his voice, “Good then, pray to the mother of our Lord. Just relax and pray.”

Ianus’ head began to clear; tears ran down his tired face. “Thank you,” he said catching his breath, “Thank you very much. How did you know what to do?”

“I...” Tuun’s smile melted away, replaced by his usual straight face, “I used to be an Augur.” Tuun walked off toward the Valkyrie.

“Used to be an Augur?” Ianus ran after him, “What do you mean you used to be an Augur?”

Tuun opened the door, and with a heavy sigh, he walked through the docking hatch and down the corridors through the ship. “I lost my gift.”

“I didn’t know that was possible. How?”

“Augurs must have faith in something. Without faith it is hard to see the future... If you’re bitter,” Tuun smiled curtly, “You can see no future at all.”

“What could have happened to you?” Ianus asked before he thought.

“Aashen and I used to be slaves!” Tuun thundered, and stormed off around a corner and out of sight.

Ianus slapped himself on the forehead. ‘That was stupid,’ he thought. Closing his eyes, he shook his head. ‘He had helped me, and all I could do was conjure up his most painful memories.’

“Hello, my boy!” Ihy shouted from behind him, “I’m glad to see you’ve come out of seclusion. Come take a look!” He led Ianus into a nearby room.

Ianus took a deep breath. On three tables, he saw the same three Kishanu which had provoked his vision the first time he had been on the Valkyrie.

Ihy ran over to one of the feminine Kishanu, and waved his periapt over its eyes. A golden light illuminated its soft round face. It’s light gray skin quivered and it sat up.

“Sangrida Namid of the IRV Valkyrie, at your service,” she said looking around the room, “May we assimilate current personality files, update our data bases, and resume normal operations?”

“Why does it speak in the plural?” Ianus asked.

Ihy smiled, “Currently, it is nothing more than a colony of nanites, once it is fully activated it will individuate. Would you like to activate it?”

“O, yes,” Ianus excitedly said, “How do I do that?”

“Call her by name, and tell her to activate.”

“Sangrida, activate!” Ianus said in the most proper and dignified voice he could muster.

The Kishan closed her eyes; her skin color warmed until it had taken on a healthy tone. Opening her crystal blue eyes, she said, “Thank you,” looking over at the single male Kishanu, “What is the matter with my brother?”

“He is not activating,” Ihy answered.

“Would you like me to repair him?” She asked kindly.

“O no,” Ihy said quickly, “I will work on him. I enjoy it.”

“Shall I go about my business?”

“Yes, please help prepare the ship.”

Faroh Raanan sat atop a hill to the north of the temple complex of Shiloh. Legs crossed, eyes closed, and hands folded in prayer.

“All glory and honor is due to the One, who subjugated all to its will,” he began to recite the Litany of the Machine, “Praised be the one, who gave the Song, may we ever follow its way. Praised be the Law Giver, who subdues the will and the mind, may we ever follow its way. Praised be the Law that controls our evil hearts, may we ever follow its way.

“We hear the hum of the machine, may we ever follow its way. We know its code and bow to it, may we ever follow its way. It shows us the way of truth and life, may we ever follow its way.

“We know its way, may it ever guide us. We know its truth, may it ever guide us.

“We are the way, the hand of the One. We are the truth, the hand of the One. We are the life, the hands of the One.

“May all be subdued under the One, for we are faithful and will persevere.”

“Are you really?” Asked a kindly voice into Faroh’s left ear.

“Who said that?” Faroh jumped into the air. He formed a long, double-edged sword with his periapt. His feet hit the ground and he looked around feverishly.

“I did,” said a balding man with a large nose. He was wearing bright blue robes, “I’m sorry. Did I frighten you?”

“No!” Faroh steadied himself, “Were you listening to what I was saying?”

“O, yes,” the man grinned slyly, “You were reciting the Litany of the Machine, as it was composed by Dov Lavan. Don’t be afraid. I know you are Ual-leen.”

“And that doesn’t bother you?”

“You didn’t answer me. I answered your question, now you answer mine. Are you truly faithful to the Song?”

“Did Panthera send you?”

The man laughed; his visage shimmered like a tree lost behind the heat waves of a mirage, “O no, he would not have sent me.” The man stepped closer, his skin faded from its former healthy hue to the ghostly blue pallor of a neglected dead body.

Faroh gasped. The man’s eyes were solid black swimming in a sea of pearly white, and his skin gave off a soft azure glow.

“You are a Raewyn!” Faroh staggered backwards and looked down to the ground. “Why would a Raewyn care if I were loyal to the Song...” Casting a piercing gaze through the man, “I am faithful!” He said sternly.

“You said you know the truth? Do you forward its cause? Do you enforce its mandates?”

“I serve well! I do as I am told, I obey!”

“What have you done?” The Raewyn giggled, then slapped his own mouth as if he thought of something embarrassing, “O, you mean killing those Predicants? That forwards the blood-feud against the Jade Moon, but do you lead souls to the truth or do you serve others?”

“I brought Jago to the cause!” Faroh protested

“And you serve Panthera! You claim to be the hand of the One, yet you serve a broken man!”

“Master Panthera...” Faroh was red with anger, but he had no answer for the charge.

“Do you want to serve in a place of order, or do you want to rule over chaos, making it submit to truth?”

“I will subjugate it! Master Panthera knows the Song. He knows the way to restore order.”

“My dear boy, we have evolved past our need for his petty, self-serving interpretation of ancient myth. One day, you will see. I can help you, you know. I can help you restore order to the universe.”

“And just who are you?”

“Hlachar Cythraul,” the old man stood proudly.

Faroh looked at him, that name was somehow familiar to him, but he couldn’t quite place it.

“If you ever need me, then just call my name.”

Late in the night, Ianus and Ihy finished their work on the Valkyrie. Ianus was glad he had gone down to see his father. They hadn't spent much time together over the last few months.

With a proud look in his face, and his arm around his son's neck, Ihy led him back up the dark path to the temple complex. Between the trees, something moved. Some eldritch form lurched from shadow to shadow. Ihy cast his gaze to the mossy steps under his feet and stopped walking.

Ianus took a couple steps forward, before he realized that Ihy's arm had left his shoulder. Turning around on his heels, “What's wrong? Did you forget something back at the ship?”

“No,” Ihy said mournfully, a distant look in his eyes, “I thought I saw something.”

Ihy turned his palm up, and gazed into his periapt. Vacuous, black lightning raged within his Jade stone. A protracted sigh escaped from his mouth.

Ianus began to get worried. He had seen his father weather many crises in the past, but he had never been silenced by any of them. Ihy's lips parted and closed regularly as if he was trying to speak; his eyes roamed over the forest desperate to find the shadowy figure that had made him stop.

There it was, at the top of the path, leering at them. Its venomous eyes scourged Ihy's soul.

Following Ihy's horrified gaze, Ianus' eyes came to rest on the great black silhouette at the mouth of a path. An eerie, red flame danced across the Shedu's eyes. It took a couple steps toward them. Crouching near to the ground, it sprang into the night sky.

Ianus steadied himself, and waited for the thing to attack. Searching the air, Ianus lost sight of it. It didn't come down. Startled, he glanced at Ihy, who was staring solemnly at his periapt again.

“What was that?” Ianus exclaimed, as he regained his voice, but Ihy didn't answer.

The shallow lines that ran across his face deepened. He suddenly looked older, even frailer. A solitary tear ran down his cheek.

“Dad?” Ianus squeaked, “Father, can you hear me?” Grabbing Ihy's shoulders, he shook him hard, “Are you all right? Dad!”

Ihy's eyes wandered from the periapt and came to rest on Ianus. Sorrow racked him, “I'm so sorry, my boy... I shouldn't have...”

“You shouldn't have what? You're really starting to scare me. Look at me? Who was that?” Ianus began to shiver.

Ihy straightened up, a severe look on his face. He muttered something strange. It sounded like gibberish. “You saw him as well, did you? I had hoped he was dead.” He waved his hand to keep Ianus quiet, “That was Karu Panthera.”

Feeling the blood rush from his face Ianus glanced around the treetops hoping to see the ghastly form again. “The man who killed my parents?” Nothing but a breeze rushed through the trees.

“The same. He killed many others too. Heru Dhouti and most of the Camarilla, until they stopped him.”

Ianus quivered with anger, I thought you finished him off. I mean you are the lauded hero of the battle of Lachesis. You were decorated for defeating him!”

“I was not alone, your grandfather, Nusair, rallied the army. He and I found Panthera, and, you see, there is something you don’t know— it has only happened once before.”

“What are you talking about? Just say it!”

“You know the story of our founding?”

“About Tien Shaa and all that? Of course I know it. What kind of a maker would I be if I didn’t?”

“Well, then, you know about his final battle with Dov Lavan. What am I saying, of course you do. Lavan, you see, not all of him died. The Ual-leen have the same implants that we do to control the periapt and its machines. But unlike us, they use them to achieve a limited hive-mind.

“When Lavan died, he uploaded his mind, and most of the techniques he had learned into the hive. From time to time makers have been seduced by power, and have allowed this remnant of Lavan to possess them.”

“That’s what happened to Panthera,” Ianus’ eyes widened.

“Exactly, he had risen to leadership in the Camarilla before anyone noticed there was a problem.”

“Yes, yes, I know all that, but you defeated him at Lachesis!”

Ihy kicked the step, “Officially we did. We defeated him and the galaxy celebrated, but— his hand was missing. We didn’t discover it until the body was inspected prior to internment. His periapt was also missing.”

“Why would anyone steal his hand and periapt?”

“Can’t you think of a reason?”

“To make a Chimera! The periapt shares the mind of its possessor, and the hand would provide the DNA... so you think that Panthera was behind the Chimera incident?”

“I had my suspicions at the time, but I couldn’t prove it. The Camarilla did investigate.”

“So why did that black lightning appear in your periapt?”

“We should get to the temple complex. If that was Panthera, he might come back for us.”

“But...”

“Not now. Get to your room. I have to talk to Maya. If that was Panthera, maybe will be able to catch him.”

“If? What do you mean if?”

“Just get to your room! I don’t have time for this right now.”

The night was darker, more oppressive than Daru could ever remember. The lamps that lined the courtyard had dimmed. A cool breeze came off the sea, stinging her face, freezing the trails left by her tears. On the steps of the library, a shiver shook her violently. She stopped and looked around. ‘It’s only the dim lighting,’ she thought, shrugging off the invading fear.

In the library, she welcomed the warmth with a smile and looked around for Maya. Finding her sitting at a far table with the Fallon Brothers and their Ceeri, she

swallowed hard. Slowly, she walked over to them. Tuun noticed her, and waved to Maya to break off the conversation.

“Hello, Daru,” Maya said, her voice full of pain.

Daru glanced fleetingly around the room, knowing that she was the cause of Maya’s anguish, “Mistress Isann?”

“Come now,” Maya interrupted, “We’ve known each other far too long for such formalities. I’ve known you since you were a baby, please... ” Tears welled up in her eyes, “Please, don’t distance yourself from me... any more than you already have.”

Aashen and Tuun leapt to their feet and scowled at Daru, “If you’ve been giving her trouble!” Aashen looked more serious than Daru had ever seen him before.

“That’s enough,” Maya motioned for them to sit back down.

“In truth,” Daru said, a sour feeling swelled in her stomach, “That’s what I came to talk to you about.”

“Could we have some time alone,” she rubbed Aashen’s hand gently.

They nodded, and after giving Daru a harsh look, walked off. Maya waved at the now empty seats beside her.

“Well, have a seat.”

“I came to say... I’m sorry. I’m sorry for yelling at you. I’ve been thinking about what you had to say and... I guess you’re right.”

“Apology accepted,” Maya put her arm around Daru, “I suppose you’ve already apologized to Ihy?”

“No! And I don’t plan to. You may have been right to treat Ianus the way that you did— but, well; he should have told Ianus the things he told me. He had no right to keep that from him.”

“That is not all that Ihy has been keeping from Ianus.” Maya avoided looking at Daru, “And I don’t know if I should tell you myself.”

“Tell me what? You can’t tell me you’re keeping secrets and not tell me what they are! I’ll go mad and I’m sure you don’t want that on your conscience.”

They both chuckled.

“Well, you know about Ianus’ parents, his birth parents, don’t you?”

“Who doesn’t?” Daru bit her lip.

“And you know that Ihy is an augur. Well, he made a prophecy, many years ago that Panthera would be driven from power. He had been summoned by the Camarilla to share his insight with them. He announced the prophecy in Panthera’s presence, calling him the great Red Dragon, the terror of the Jade Moon.”

“I don’t understand. That was all truth. Why are you so upset?”

Maya drew in a long, slow breath. “Ihy saw a great tower, with two dragons locked in combat at the base. He said that their struggle was destabilizing the order. One had to be defeated, or the Jade Moon would collapse under its own weight. And well...” she broke off and covered her face with her hands.

“What does that have to do with anything?” Daru asked. “You can’t believe it’s Ihy’s fault that Ianus’ birth parents were killed. Panthera was a mad man.”

“There was another vision,” Maya continued, “The Vaticinars, the Seven Eyes of Fate pronounced a second vision.”

“Who are the Vaticinars?”

“They are A’nath-ari...” Maya’s voice trailed off, “They are four members of the Order of Blood, ancient beyond measure, no one really knows how old they are. They appeared at Ianus’ birth. They pronounced a great prophecy over him. They said, ‘The black dragon’s time is waning, the red dragon has just been born, and a green dragon still sleeps in her maternal waters. Behold the child of centuries past, born to preserve the future.’

“He doesn’t know about the prophecy,” Maya looked gravely into Daru’s eyes, “And he mustn’t know. No one really knows what the prophecy means, and he’s got enough on his mind. I just thought you should know.”

Maya raised her hand, and turned it palm up. A thick golden liquid oozed from her periapt and solidified into a small, coin-sized disk.

“Take this,” she said handing the disk to Daru, “There are blank books at the desk if you need one.”

“What is it?”

“It’s a copy of the Psalter of the Mne Seraphin, and the full text of the prophecy I just told you.”

“Why?”

“Because you need to help Ianus. Don’t tell him, or show it to him. I have programmed the text to erase itself if he sets his eyes upon it.”

“How can I help him?” Daru asked. “It doesn’t make sense.”

“The Vaticinars are rarely seen. Their words are very important. Ihy has been wondering lately why they called Ianus a Red Dragon. He is afraid it has something to do with what happened to Panthera. We don’t want to loose him. If you know the danger, you can watch out for him.”

“I will,” Daru said, “But don’t worry about Ianus. He has a good heart.”

The doors to the library swung open, and Ihy frantically ran off toward his office.

Maya fidgeted in her seat and took Daru by the hand, “I should go see what’s wrong with Ihy. Just remember, say nothing. Learn well, and help Ianus as best you can.”

Ianus stood silently in the middle of the courtyard. He stared at the doors to the library, wishing that he would have chased after Ihy. It was too late now. He was probably locked away in his office. Ianus sighed and turned toward the dormitory. A dull anger pounded in his head. ‘Why wouldn’t Ihy tell me the whole truth?’ he thought, taking a few sulking steps forward.

The door of the library creaked open. Ianus waved at Daru as she skipped down the stairs, clutching a book in her hand.

“Hello, Ianus,” her voice cracked, “What are you up to?”

“I was just working on the Valkyrie with Ihy. Did you see him?”

“Yeah, he was quite out of sorts. He and Maya ran off to his office. What happened? He was very pale and I thought he looked somewhat blue.”

“We ran into a wraith... a specter,” Ianus took a deep breath, “He said it was Panthera... but he’s dead, isn’t he?”

Daru glanced from the book in her arms and to Ianus, “I, I don’t know. Maya said some pretty strange things. I’m... well... I’m planning to do some research on my own.”

“Research?” Ianus became distant, “The Bahn Se’leen central net would surly have information on this wouldn’t it?”

“I guess, but it would probably be heavily encrypted, why?”

Ianus circumambulated Daru, muttering under his breath, “You’re right of course. Yes, of course, you’re right.”

“Could you please stop that, you’re making me dizzy! What’s gotten into you, you are acting rather strange. Hey! Where are you going? Come back here!”

Ianus didn’t hear her. He ran as fast as he could up the dormitory stairs to his room. Throwing the door open, he ran over to his computer and began to type feverishly.

He opened the network connection and logged on to the Jade Moon Central Network. He began to search for Ihy Khem, and Karu Panthera. He didn’t read the information he found, he simply downloaded it to disk and went on to the next article.

A knock on the door. Ianus started the download of a very large file called, “The Panthera Controversy: The Rise and Fall of the Black Moon.”

Opening the door, “Hello Daru.”

“Boy, you need to get your eyes checked!” Aashen Fallon and his Ceeri Azi chuckled, “I saw you run past my room and I thought you looked troubled. I had no Idea you could no longer tell people apart!”

“Sorry, Aash, I thought Daru...”

“O, are you expecting her, should I go?”

“No, no! Nothing like that. We were just talking before I sprinted up here to— do some research.”

“Really, do you need any help?”

“O, no— I can, uh, do— handle it myself.”

Aashen cocked his head, and gave Ianus a sly grin, “You know I am a very good *‘Researcher’*. I help Ihy when he can’t *‘get’* the information he is looking for, you know.”

Ianus bit his lip, “Would you have to tell him you helped me?”

Aashen smiled, and Azi laughed, “My boy, I also make a great alibi.”

Ianus nodded, “Come on in.”

“Do you have a periapt node?” Aashen asked, “O, I see, Azi?” His Ceeri leaned back and unzipped a backpack between him and Aashen. He pulled out a small black box with an egg shaped depression on it, and a long matching cable. “Plug this in will you?”

“Is that legal?” Ianus raised his eyebrow.

“What do you mean by that? It is a beautiful piece of decorative art, resembling ancient Tech. Besides, we’re on Al-Benu. They don’t have the strictest laws here.”

Aashen winked, “We have friends in high places.”

Shaking his head, Ianus took the node from Azi, and plugged it into his computer.

“Now,” Aashen inserted his periapt into the node, “Hold on, don’t think I can’t see the way you are looking at me. I have to settle into the connection. There we go.”

The screen flashed and an input box appeared on the screen. Ianus gasped and sat up straight, “I can’t read the screen. I don’t recognize the language.”

“It’s a Sen/Ceeri interface, my boy, don’t worry about it. I’ll translate for you, just type in what you are looking for.”

Ianus did as he was told. The screen flashed again, Sen/Ceeri words scrolled up the monitor. "I can't download or translate any of the documents. The encryption is too good. Wait a minute."

Aashen closed his eyes. Less than a minute later, "Got it! I can download them, but I won't be able to break the encryption."

"What good will that do me?" Ianus watched the download meter appear.

"You have a prescience book don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"It will be able to read the files, it won't be able to display them, but I'm sure you will be able to get your questions answered."

"Thank you," Ianus patted Aashen on the back.

"No problem. Just don't tell Ihy I helped you out, all right?"

They said their good nights and Ianus rushed back to the computer to retrieve his disk. Slowly, he walked over to his bed, not sure that he wanted to know the answers. He picked up his prescience book from the nightstand, and stared at it. He inserted the disk into the spine, and opened the book.

The waxen page scrawled a prompt in scarlet letters, "Open public or private archives?"

Taking out his stylus, Ianus circled public. The book's pages again went blank. Suddenly words filled the pages.

Ianus scanned through the pages quickly, and came to the last written page and looked away in terror.

"Why! He can't die!" Ianus screeched, "I won't let Ihy die." Panicked he wrote, "Open private archive as well." The pages changed again. Now two columns ran down the page. One was written mostly in cipher, the other in Shedu.

Flipping back through the book, he found the page where the two columns started. Atop the column written in Shedu were the words, "Ianus Akeru takes on the Order of the Cenobite." Atop the one mostly written in code: "Ianus Akeru takes on the Order of the Predicant."

Scanning through the page that followed, Ianus came across the phrase, "Ihy Khem dies."

"So Ihy will die if I become a cenobite," Ianus muttered under his breath as he turned his attention to the other column. After a couple pages of pure code, he found the phrase, "Ihy Khem survived..." but couldn't make out the rest of the line.

"Then I will become a Predicant." He said.

Ianus didn't sleep well that night. He tossed and turned, anxiety eating at him.

When his alarm rang, he got up and ran down to the courtyard. Ihy and Maya were practicing.

"Father! I have decided it is time for me to take the initiation," he shouted.

Ihy turned, and gave him an approving smile, "You are ready to take on the Order of the Cenobite?"

"No, I will take on the Order of the Predicant."

"I'm afraid not," Maya almost tripped over her own feet, "We have discussed this. You will become a cenobite."

"No," Ianus paused and thought for a moment. "I want to serve like Daru, Pryor, and Aashen do."

“You don’t want to end up like your grandfather and parents did! It will be safer for you, here!”

“I will die as my fate dictates, but I will follow my heart while I live!”

Ihy raised his hand, “He is quite right. He must follow his heart.”

“But Ihy! We’ve already decided.”

“We cannot stand in the way of his calling. If that is what this is?”

“It is!” Ianus barked.

“Then, I will perform the initiation myself. The temple is free at the end of the week that is if you can wait five days.”

“I want it in the shrine of Uma Nari at the library.”

Ihy smiled, “Very well in five days then, you will become a Predicant.”

Daru hadn’t spoken to Ianus for the last five days. Every time she had seen him, he was practicing his art, or studying in the library. It was obvious he didn’t know what he would be facing at his upcoming initiation.

When she entered the dining hall that morning, she held out hope he might be having breakfast, but he was not to be seen. The room was empty except for the Fallon brothers, their Ceeri, and Tara.

Aashen and Tuun were, as usual, arguing. It was at times like this that she wished she spoke Sen/Ceeri. She caught what she thought were names she recognized, but not knowing any Sen/Ceeri words. They could have as easily been cursing at each other.

Tara sat, fascinated by them. Their dispute was quite animated, almost lyrical.

“I see you’ve decided to take in the Fallon song.”

Tara jerked around in her seat, “O... you mean them.”

“Yeah, they make it almost an art form don’t they.”

“Akin to opera,” Tara gave a feeble laugh, “Do you understand a word their saying?”

“No, but I could say the same about them when they’re speaking a language I do understand.” They both laughed.

Tuun shot them both a dirty look, “You shouldn’t laugh about things you have no hope of comprehending!” He barked.

“Would you care to enlighten us, O great and exalted Master Fallon?” Daru smirked.

“No, I would not! If you were half as wise as Pryor seems to think you are, you would not be looking into things that do not concern you!” Tuun glared at her.

“Now, now Tuun,” Aashen spoke up, “She has always been curious, even when she was a little girl getting lost in the streets of Shiloh.”

“That’s not fair! You know that only happened once.”

“Please stop fighting!” Tara screamed, her hands held tightly over her ears, “Please! I can’t take this. Not now. *Please!*”

The bickering ended. Aashen and Daru looked at each other, pain on their face. Tuun just sneered at Tara.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to cause you any distress,” Aashen said, sounding like he had a lump in his throat.

“That’s okay,” Tara whimpered, “I’ve been under a lot of stress lately.”

Tuun laughed, “Don’t lie! You are worried about something, but you are not stressed. I can read you like a book!”

“Tuun!” Aashen yelled, “Don’t do this to her.”

“He’s right!” Tara announced, “I’ve been worried about Ianus, about his safety tonight.”

“That’s better!” Tuun snarled, and then scowled at his brother, “At least someone at this table has been honest!” Tuun stood up, and for a moment loomed over Aashen, as if contemplating a duel. Turning, he stormed out of the refectory.

“I’m sorry about that,” Aashen reached out a hand toward Tara, “He’s mad at me, and you took the brunt of it. I’m terribly sorry.”

“O, don’t worry about it. I’m used to it.” Tara’s head hung low.

“Master Barami doesn’t...” Daru began.

“No!” Tara said brightly. “Master Barami is a great man— he treats me better than he should. No, I’ve... let’s just say I’ve had a rough life.”

Daru looked over at Aashen. She realized that this was not the time to push the subject. She stared at Aashen and nodded at Tara. He sighed and looked back. Maybe later they would ask about her life, but not now.

“Will you be going to Ianus’ initiation tonight?” Daru asked.

“No,” Tara sighed, “I have work to do this evening. I wish I could attend, but I can’t.”

“I could go ask Master Barami to give you the night off, if you would like?”

“No! O no. Please don’t. I have to do my duty. Even if Barami were to say otherwise, I must serve.”

“I understand,” Daru lied, not wanting to trouble Tara anymore.

“Well, if you will excuse me.” Tara stood and bowed. “I should be about my master’s work.” Turning, she walked away.

“What was that all about?” Aashen asked.

“I don’t think I want to know. What were you and Tuun fighting over this time?”

A grave look fell over Aashen’s face, “He thinks I made a mistake with Ianus. He thinks I shouldn’t have... Anyway, it is not important. At least, I hope it isn’t. I don’t want to talk about this, okay?”

“All right. Will you be at Ianus’ initiation tonight?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world— anyway, he’s like the happy little brother I never had. I have waited for this day for a long time.”

Ianus stood in the dark, torch lit corridor outside the shrine of Uma Nari. He was wearing his snow white robe and jade green surcoat with the seal of the Jade Moon emblazoned on its chest: a marbled, Jade Moon in a waxing crescent; rays of silvery light filled the circle of the moon like a star rising from behind the crescent.

Ianus tried to calm his mind. Singing echoed from the shrine, Aashen stepped out. Azi’s wings framed his jade robes and surcoat.

“Are you ready?” He said solemnly. Ianus nodded. “I will stand with you.”

They entered the shrine, which was lit only by candles. An unfamiliar incense burned on the altar, making Ianus a bit uneasy. Ihy stood behind the altar. The congregation was small: Daru, Maya, Tuun, Pryor, and a couple of people Ianus had

never met before. Aashen led Ianus to the altar, bowed, and stepped to the right. Ianus approached the altar, bowed, and then knelt onto both knees before the dais.

Ihy raised his arm and turned his palms up. After a brief pause, he said, "Our strength is in the name of the Holy One, the Maker of all that is seen, and unseen."

"Blessed be the Holy Name, forever," the congregation responded.

"O Holy One, hear and answer our petition. May the light be with you."

"And with your spirit in all the places you must go."

"Let us pray— Blessed Sustainer, may your blessings be upon this periapt, and your servant Ianus Akeru, who through the mystery of your Providence has come to this place to accept it. Protect him with your guiding hand, preserve him with your presence, and lead him through the troubles that may come his way. Through Tien Shaa, our messenger."

"Amen."

Ihy took water and blessed it. Besprinkling the periapt with water, "Take this periapt, in the name of the Holy one, and of his messenger, and of his holy Mother. Use it to defend all those in need to the best of your ability. Never use it unjustly or without cause. Do not burden yourself with more than is your capacity to bear."

Ianus bowed his head, and said, "Amen."

Ihy walked around the altar, and stood before Ianus, "What do you seek?"

Ianus lowered his head, "I seek admittance to the Cynath Bahn Se'leen, The House of the Jade Moon, serving in the order of the Predicant."

"This may be done, but what you ask is difficult, not to give, but for you to accept. You must not walk blindly. If you truly understand the life that you are now choosing, and vow that you will heed the wisdom past down to you, and if in your vital spirit you desire to aid the afflicted, the oppressed, all to whom you may go, even should your mortal life be imperiled in the course of your work."

Closing his eyes, Ianus nodded, "I pledge what power is at my disposal in service of the light."

Ihy handed Ianus the jade periapt, "At your word, you embark on this path to wherever it may take. As all of Predicant makers before you will have five guides with you on your journey. Honor stands before you, announcing your coming and going. On your right, prudence will give you advice. Temperance stands on your left, guiding you faithfully on your way. Justice stands behind you, prodding you forward. Like your own shadow, Fortitude will preserve you until the end. If you choose to walk this path, now you must show yourself approved."

Ianus closed his eyes, "I chose to walk this path, as Tien Shaa did before me. May I be found worthy." Placing his hand with the periapt onto his left arm, he held his breath. The sound of chimes resounded from the stone. Like a ripple in a pond his robes turned jade, starting under the periapt until they all changed. Pleasantly surprised, Ianus looked up at Ihy who was taking a candle from the altar.

With a broad smile on his face, Ihy handed Ianus the candle saying. "Take this flame, this flickering hope, and listen to the commission of our messenger. As it is written in Tides and Seasons, penned by Tien Shaa himself:

"Seek neither peace, nor safety, for both are illusory promises that yield nothing but pain and suffering, as does the path of war.

“Peace is preferable to war, and safety is better than trepidation, but none of these is greater than freedom and justice.

“So, my child, in all your ways; know the truth, stand for justice, and fight for freedom. Never choose the blade when diplomacy will win the day.

“Be peace makers in all your works, reserving your blade until all else fails. War brings with it much suffering, but not as much as an unjust peace.

“May we hear the words of our Messenger.”

All of those assembled responded, “May his memory ever be blessed.”

Ihy turned to face the altar. There he blessed a paten of bread, and a chalice of wine. Turning to face Ianus he said, “Water of life.”

Ianus took the chalice and drank.

Returning the chalice to the altar, Ihy came back with the paten. Three wafers sat upon it: One pure white, another half white, and half black, the third pure black. “The bread of life” Ihy said, “Choose wisely.”

Ianus chose the black and white one, and ate it. Reaching over his head, Ihy pulled up the hood of Ianus robe over his face.

Able to see nothing but the faint glimmer of the candle in his left hand, he felt Ihy take him by his right. Stepping carefully up onto the dais, he knew he must have passed the altar. They stopped.

Ihy whispered into his ear “There is no coming back.”

“I know.”

The room fell silent. In the distance a form flickered into the light. “I am Kahlil Vamu Shaa, come with me. The messenger awaits you.”

CHAPTER SIX: THE SUNDERING

Kahlil Vamu Shaa stood silently before Ianus. The candle light highlighted his chiseled features; compassion radiated from his childlike, blue eyes. “We have been waiting for you a long time, Ianus Akeru.” He said, stepping forward into the faint light of the candle in Ianus’ left hand.

“Vamu Shaa?” Ianus couldn’t move, “It can’t be you. You’ve been dead for more than four thousand years!”

Kahlil nodded, “I have served the Light. I learned at the feet of Tien Shaa himself, and I have slept for so long. O, Ianus, what dreams I’ve seen, since my body passed to dust. Prepare yourself, you will meet many dreamers this night. Guard your heart against the nightmares that may come.”

“What Nightmares?”

“You must be awake now, one day your sleep will come. Now is the time for living. Be alert,” a lamp and a red periapt appeared in Kahlil’s hands.

“Now listen well,” Kahlil said sternly, “Be sure to see into its heart.”

Kahlil handed Ianus the crimson periapt and the lamp. The candle that was in his hand had disappeared. Ianus stared at the rich, blood colored stone of the periapt.

“I don’t understand,” said Ianus, “How do I see into its heart?”

“Be open to it and it will be open to you,” Kahlil smiled. “Patience opens many locks.”

Out from the shadows behind Kahlil, a beautiful woman with olive skin, green eyes, and curly black hair walked up to Ianus. She carried a leather wine skin over her shoulder.

“Seraphin?” Ianus exclaimed.

The woman nodded, “Follow me.” She led Ianus off into the darkness. Ianus smiled tentatively as he walked past Kahlil.

“What is in the wine skin?” Ianus asked.

“The sky,” lightning flashed. A lamp flickered to life in the hand of a red haired girl, standing beside a golden throne. On the throne sat an older woman with a kindly face and a brilliant glimmer in her eyes.

“Uma Nari!” Ianus stared at the throne. Slowly, he looked back at the younger woman by her right side, “Phaedra?”

“Yes, my dear,” Uma said softly, “I have been pleased by the devotion you have shown to my son, and the service you have paid to the Light.”

“O holy Mother!” Ianus face brightened, and tears welled up in his eyes, “I have done what I’ve had to do, to save my father.”

Uma turned and looked at a raven that stood on her right shoulder, "I know, but that is not why you have come here. You have always wanted to walk this path, your vision gave you a reason to defy the expectations that have been placed upon you."

"Do you mean this will not work?"

"O no, my child, you must pay attention to what is said. Your father must walk his path, and you must follow yours." She motioned to Seraphin, who approached Ianus, and offered him the wine skin.

Ianus drank. Suddenly, he felt lighter. A peace draped over him. Opening his eyes, a lady in shimmering white dress and luminous, pale blue skin walked toward him. "Atarah!" He muttered.

She raised her hand and blessed him.

Everything went black, save for the small perimeter illuminated by the lamp in his right hand.

"Holy Mother?" Ianus squeaked, not sure if he had done something wrong. "I can not see anything! Where am I supposed to go? What am I suppose to do?"

Slowly, he began to walk toward the throne. There was nothing there. The throne was gone. Ianus was alone. Glancing around, he scanned the darkness, then the floor. Again, nothing, he had hoped to see some mark, some sign to guide his stumbling through the blackness, he began to pray. He reviewed what he had said and done. He had not done anything wrong that he could tell.

A light flashed. An elderly man with long, white beard and hair stood smiling. "You have found your way, my boy. Surely you know me."

"You are Omer Yul, the uncle of Tien Shaa and one of his most devoted disciples."

"Good! Good! I don't know about that most devoted part, but you do indeed seem to know me. I am proud of you, my boy. Very few could have found their way to me."

"You honor me. I do not deserve such praise from you." Ianus lowered his head. "I have done nothing to get here."

"You breathe," said Omer, "You had the courage to walk when you could have run. You have chosen to stand when you could have remained silent. Your humility is refreshing, but you do not understand the power you hold in your hands."

"Master Yul, I have no power in my hands."

"You lack but one thing," holding up his periapt, "You must learn to see." Light, brighter than the sun burned Ianus' eyes.

Electric tingling stormed around his body. It was hard to breathe. A cold pressure beat down on him. His body seemed suddenly frail, and he feared he might just snap.

Relief was followed by an icy chill. Blue lightning swirled by like ominous storm clouds. Twisting, Ianus felt the ground give way under his feet. Thunder crashed, and air rushed past. Ianus resisted the urge to scream.

In his room in the dormitory, Faroh Raanan looked out of the glass door past his balcony at the library. He couldn't stop thinking about what Cythraul had told him. Opening the door, he walked onto his balcony. The brisk night air welcomed him. Something was wrong, something was out of place.

“How astute of you to notice,” Panthera’s artificial voice pronounced behind him. “Master,” Faroh quickly turned and bowed, “I was not expecting to see you this evening.”

“Plans change. We may be having a problem with Tara.”

“Do you think she’s getting cold feet?”

“I’m afraid she may not have the courage of her convictions. Her faith has wavered recently. She may not be able, or willing to carry out her purpose to its logical end.”

“And what would you have me do, my Master?”

“Follow her, and do what she will not. Make sure that everything that must happen, happens.”

“Of course, my Lord, but...”

“What? You are not becoming lost as well?”

“No! No, my Master. It is this young Akeru. He may not turn as easily as we thought. He may be more of a problem than we planned.”

“Then kill him! He cannot be a problem if he’s dead!”

“Yes, it will be done.”

“Is there something wrong?”

“No. I know the truth. Obedience is required. Not only mine, but all others.”

Lost in the coruscant nimbus, Ianus craned his neck toward each shadow he caught out of the corner of his eye.

“Hello,” he screamed, “What am I to do now?”

“Can’t you remember?” A voice said on his right.

“I do believe he has forgotten,” came a voice on his left.

“It is a shame. Omer must not have thought him ready.”

“A great shame, too bad we cannot show him.”

Ianus thought quickly, he did not wish to lose his chance. “He told me... he said I needed to learn to see.”

“And that you do,” said the voice on the right.

To the left, “Lost in the cloud? Seek, and you will find.”

“Seek what?” Ianus asked.

“The Light of course,” the voice on his right grew closer.

“No, No,” came the voice on his left, “Not the light in the cloud.”

“O, no, the one that hides itself in darkness.”

“What better place to hide the light than in the shadows?”

“Who would think to look for it there?”

“I know who you are!” Ianus exclaimed, “You are Rohan and Makarios, the attendants to Tien Shaa.”

“Very good,” said the voice on his right.

“Yes, Yes, very good indeed.”

“But I am afraid, one problem remains.”

“You only see with your eyes.”

A raven blacker than a moon and starless night flew over Ianus’ head, and stopped right before his eyes.

“This belongs to one of us,”

“Choose wisely. You get one chance,” the voice on his left said.

“If you are wrong, you can not stay.”

Ianus paused for a moment. “May I have a clue?”

“One clue you’ve got,” came the voice on his right.

“You will get no more.”

“Unless we give you another.”

“Which we were not supposed to give.”

Ianus focused on the raven. “You are Rohan and Makarios, twins, telepathic from the womb. You are identical in every way but one. Master Rohan, you were marked by the Raewyn. They made you immortal. You cannot die. So, Master Makarios, this raven belongs to you. But which one of you is which.”

Ianus paused for a moment and thought. Bowing to his left, “Master Makarios, this raven belongs to you.”

“Are you sure?” said the voice on his right.

“Certainty is a fleeting thing.”

“I am sure,” Ianus smiled. “I listened to your words. Master Rohan, you stand on my right. Your words are unencumbered by time. Master Makarios, you are to my left. You told me that I have but one chance, and that I would get no more. These are words that limit. What did you just say? ‘Certainty is fleeting.’ Those are not the words of an immortal. Master Makarios,” Ianus bowed again to his left, “This raven belongs to you.”

The nimbus cleared to a light mist. Two men with black hair and jade robes came into view.

“Very good,” said Rohan, bowing on Ianus right.

“Now you can see,” said Makarios. He waved behind Ianus.

Ianus turned and saw the glowing center of the nimbus. Radiance surrounded a kindly old man who stood motionless with his arms out stretched.

“Tien Shaa!” Ianus exclaimed, running toward the old man.

“What do you seek?” Tien Shaa asked.

“I seek the truth.”

“O no you don’t, you seek to save your father’s life. You seek to stand in the face of prophecy and strike it down.”

Ianus froze; he didn’t know what to say.

“You remind me of myself, when I was younger,” Tien Shaa continued, “What you seek may be done, but it will not be easy for you. Seek, first, to preserve all life, and your motivations will be pure.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Ianus bowed.

“Stand up! Do not bow to anyone, lest you forget they are made of the same materials as you are. Show them courtesy, but never deference.”

“Thank you, I will.”

“The road here has been a difficult one. The loss of your birth parents, and the traumas of your youth, but do not expect the path to become easier. It never will. Trials and tribulations come to all who walk under the stars, but you can choose to find your joy through them.”

Ianus looked away, “So, the vision...”

“No more about the vision. You cannot live by prophecy. The twists and turns of time are more than any could read completely, besides, you may misapprehend the words.”

Ianus opened his mouth to speak, but before anything came out, Tien Shaa began to sing. The other eight members of the Holy Ennead behind him joined in the song.

‘The song of life,’ Ianus thought as the melody carried him away.

Struggling, Ianus tried to make out the words, but there were no words to make out. The rhythm, the melody, the harmony, these were all that mattered. Soon, Ianus could no longer think. The song had entered his mind, blinding his senses to everything else.

Ianus opened his eyes. He had never left the dark room behind the shrine. His hood was still covering his face. In his left hand, he held the candle Ihy had given him. He held the periapt Kahlil had given him in his right. Closing his eyes, he could still hear the song.

Tara sat at one of the tables in the courtyard meditating, or at least trying to. Tears leaked through her closed eyes, and her breath was anything but calm.

“All glory and honor is due to the One, who subjugated all to its will,” she stuttered under her breath. The Litany of the Machine always calmed her, but not tonight. A frosty weight lodged itself in her chest; her eyes were heavy with tears.

The breeze ripped a shiver over her body. Opening her glossy eyes, she listened for the song of the machine. It was distant, but present.

Slowly, she stood up. The chill in the air made her fingers ache. “There is nothing left for me,” she muttered, “There is nothing left but duty and honor.”

Stepping around the table, she stopped to look at the library.

“Don’t think about the consequences,” she told herself, “Serve your purpose, or you will become obsolete.” Panthera’s words echoed behind her own.

Step-by-step, she slowly inched her way toward the library. “Tonight is the night, they will all be distracted, I cannot put it off any longer.”

Baby steps grew into adult strides, but the door was still a barrier. Not that it was locked. She had watched several people come and go over the past couple hours as she sat, mustering up the courage to continue. No, the door was the only thing between her and her mission. Once she stepped over the threshold, there could be no turning back.

The door swung open. Aashen, Tuun, and their Ceeri exited. Tuun shot her a dirty look and walked past, Aashen stopped.

“Are you going to join the vigil for Ianus?” He asked her, “I’m afraid only Ihy and Daru are left in there now. I would wait, but I have a lot of work to do in the morning.”

Tara couldn’t speak. She nodded quickly, though, hoping not to have raised suspicion.

“Well, have fun, peace be with you.” He bounced slightly, and ran off after his brother.

That had done it. If Ihy, Daru, and Ianus were in there, she couldn’t possibly proceed.

Opening the door, she looked around the library. To her great disappointment, it was empty except for a figure kneeling in front of a corridor at the opposite side of the room.

Unable to find another excuse, she pulled a black, silken mask out of her pocket, and tied it on. Slowly, she crept over to the hall to the side of the main desk.

'It is in the room, just down there,' she thought to herself. 'There is nothing to hold me back. I must do my duty.'

Ianus stood, with his eyes closed, still listening to the song. Opening his eyes, he took seven steps forward, and then turned around to look at the place where he had stood. He lifted his eyes to where the door must have been that he entered through, but there was nothing there. The wall was smooth.

"Where is the exit?" He said out loud, sure there would come an answer.

Silence.

Putting the periapt Kahlil had given him in his pocket, he began to follow the wall looking for an exit.

"It is not your time, boy!" An oddly insubstantial voice bellowed.

Ianus spun around, "Who said that? Show yourself!"

"Don't you think you have seen enough strange things for one day?" Came the voice again. It echoed from the walls themselves.

"Who are you?" Ianus demanded, continuing his hunt for a door.

"I am he who walks to and fro among the worlds. I am the accuser. I am the one who stood closest to glory, and was repaid with treachery."

Ianus mouth went dry, and his palms began to sweat.

"Surely, you know who I am boy. You knew the others, or have I fallen out of fashion these days. Are the great Makers of the Jade Moon afraid to speak my name?"

"I'm sorry, sir," Ianus walked on. "If you tell me your name, I'm sure I have heard of you. I must apologize. I am tired. I have had a full day."

"I am Hlachar Cythraul. It is my hand that guides so many to their fate."

"I have heard of you. You were once great. In the time before Tien Shaa, you were quite something to behold."

"I still am!" The walls creaked under the thunderous weight of the voice. "Do not flatter yourself. You have heard the song, but did they share its words with you?"

"The song is a mirror of life. It is the music that matters, not the words."

"You fool!" A large crash.

Ianus flew against the wall, his breath escaping his lungs. Desperate to inhale, he called out for help. Nothing but a cold vacuum.

"It is not your time! Turn from the vain conceits of your heart! Turn to the One who can help you. To the One who will answer your feeble prayer!"

"No!" Ianus screeched, suddenly able to breathe, "You are nothing!"

"It is not your time!" Cythraul taunted.

"Unfortunately, I was born all the same. I guess I will have to make do."

"The time has come, you foolish boy, the tower falls now!"

Ianus heard a loud crash upstairs. Running around the room, he groped in the dark for an exit.

"You will be too late, it is already done," Cythraul hissed.

There it was. A door and stairs to the library. "As I said, I will just have to make do!"

As fast as he could, Ianus ran up the stairs. An eerie silence followed him. Emerging into the library, he saw Ihy standing with a blade drawn. Beyond him, Daru, leapt through the air.

She landed in front of the entrance. Another woman, masked, and dressed in black stopped within arms reach of her.

Chinking of metal, and flashing like lightening. Both Daru and the other woman brandish single edged long swords at each other.

The masked woman sprung into the air. Before she could reach a window, Daru clashed blades with her. Pressing down with all of her weight, she knocked the masked woman to the ground.

Daru landed with her back to the door. The masked woman stirred desperately, rocking on her heels. The sword in her hand melted into a staff, easily her own height.

The masked woman charged the door. Daru transformed her blade into a staff, and knocked the other woman back.

"Give yourself up!" Daru yelled, careful to maintain calm breathing.

"There is nowhere for you to go!" Ihy added, "If you turn yourself in now, we will show you mercy."

The masked woman's staff vanished. She lowered her head, and knelt down on one knee.

"That's it," Ihy said, "Daru, go, take her periapt."

Cautiously, Daru approached the other woman.

Before Daru could react, the masked woman lunged forward, a bright flash from her periapt. The luminous wave struck Daru flinging her to the side and wrenching the air out of her.

The masked woman flew through the door into the courtyard.

Ihy followed, his feet barely touching the ground. With a quick step, he threw himself through the air. His staff slammed into the back of the woman's head, causing her to stumble.

"Yield!" He thundered.

The woman's periapt flashed again.

Ihy waved his hand, deflecting the wave back on her. Lunging out of its way, the woman scurried across the pavement.

"Yield! You cannot hope to best me, if that is the best you can do. Better to surrender now, I think."

The woman's periapt again began to glow. She leapt into the air, a halberd materializing in her hand. Ihy met her in mid-air. Metal scraped on metal.

The woman kicked. Ihy intercepted each foot in turn and forced them toward the ground.

Before they hit the pavement, the masked woman flipped backwards, and landed on her feet at a safe distance.

"Run!" An oddly familiar male voice called out, as a masked man attacked Ihy from behind.

Ihy parried the blow, knocking the new assailant off balance.

The masked man laughed as the blade of his sword sharpened on both edges, “I said run!” He yelled at the woman, who bowed timidly, and ran off into the gardens.

Ihy spun through the air, his staff shattered on impact with the stranger’s sword. “Exotic metals, you old fool! Now fight harder!”

The stranger ran at Ihy, who reformed his staff. The two men clashed. Neither made the other move. Each man pressed with all his strength, sparks rained down from their weapons.

Lurching backwards, the masked man’s feet flew into the air. Suddenly, he twisted at the waist. Blades extended from the soles of his boots, with a quick kick, he slashed Ihy’s stomach open.

Blood splattered onto the pavement; Ihy staggered backwards.

The masked man caught himself with his hands and sprang to his feet. Flourishing his blade with a maniacal laugh, he slashed Ihy’s throat open.

“No!” Ianus and Daru screamed in unison. Their voices echoed throughout the complex.

Together, they attacked the masked man. Still laughing, he clutched his blade with both hands, and divided it in two.

Ianus and Daru each struck a blade. The masked man twirled his blades, forcing each of them to dodge.

Doors clattered open, the courtyard began to fill.

Mindlessly, Ianus hacked at the masked man, who simply parried each blow.

A red mist leaked from the man’s periapt. Ianus fell to the ground, screaming as though someone had set his blood on fire.

Daru’s blade deflected the stranger’s inches above Ianus’ neck.

The courtyard was filling quickly.

Darting around anxiously, the masked man melted his blades back into his periapt. Light flashed as bright as the noonday sun.

By the time her sight had returned, the masked man was gone. Rushing to Ianus’ side. She helped him sit up.

Ianus looked over at the blood stained body of his father. Quickly, he ran over to him, and lifted his head onto his lap.

Blood bubbled from Ihy’s mouth, “Take... care... of... Maya...” he gasped.

“Be quiet,” Ianus said, fighting back tears. “Get a doctor!” He yelled at Daru, “You are going to be all right. I did what had to be done,” he sobbed, “Everything’s going to be all right.” Ianus rocked uncontrollably.

The crowd gasped; Ianus’ eyes widened.

Ihy’s breathing became more labored, his eyes rolled back into his head, and his skin began to glow soft blue.

“What’s going on?” A voice in the crowd muttered.

“Don’t die!” Ianus chanted, “Everything’s all right. Just breathe. Don’t die! Everything’s all right.”

PART TWO: DIVIDING SOULS

CHAPTER SEVEN: ORIGINAL SIN

Ianus awoke on a cold, hard bed. Sitting up, his eyes slowly focused in the bright light. Daru's face broke into a smile.

"Good, you're awake," she said, brushing her hand across his forehead.

"Where am I?" His throat was soar.

"You are on the SRV Kanthaka. It had just come into orbit to pick up Barami and Tara. They had the best medical facilities in the system."

"Where's Ihy?" Ianus glanced about the room.

"He's in a bed next door. The doctors are doing everything they can for him."

"He's still alive?" Ianus threw off the blanket. He was still in his initiatory robes and surcoat. "I have to see him."

"No, you don't!" Daru held him down. "Just sit down and listen to me." Ianus gave her a hard look, but settled down to hear her out. "They had to sedate you just to get Ihy away from you. It's understandable given what had just happen. You were in a terrible panic, which your system doesn't need. You still have some of that torturous gas in your system. You need your rest."

"I have to see him. I have to see with my own eyes that he is still alive."

Daru's lips quivered. "Do you think you can keep yourself calm?"

Ianus sighed, "I won't do anything rash, if that's what you are afraid of. I just have to know I did the right thing."

Daru gave a defeated huff, and stepped out of the way. Taking Ianus by the hand, she led him to Ihy's bedside.

Pryor sat with his back to the door, and his arms around Maya. They both turned and nodded at Ianus. Maya wiped a tear from her eye. Her eyes were red and a bit puffy.

The doctors had cleaned Ihy up considerably. Various tubes ran into him from every side. One obviously delivered blood, another some strange aquamarine fluid, Ianus guessed was medicine. His skin was radiating a brighter blue than it had the last time Ianus had seen him.

"How is he?" Ianus asked, afraid he already knew the answer.

Maya stood up and sniffled into her handkerchief, "I think I need to pace about for a while."

As Maya left the room, Daru looked out after her, "I think I'll go with her." Smiling at Ianus, "You don't do anything I would disapprove of while I'm gone." Daru left the room.

"Well," Ianus said to Pryor, "How is he?"

"That is hard to say. He keeps muttering to himself. Maya's just beside herself."

"You avoided my question."

Ihy gasped. He squirmed uncomfortably. "I am Ihy," he mumbled, "The jackal of the light, the luminous wind. I am Hike, the Divine word that cannot be destroyed. This I call my soul. I am the first to emerge from darkness."

Ianus was confused, he glanced at Pryor. Something grabbed his arm. Ihy tugged on Ianus' arm, pulling him closer. A sharp pain tore through Ianus' right arm. The hematite colored Sukallin mark began to shimmer with an electric, silver light.

"This is the voice of Hahu, who separated the waters of the sky, who divided the abyss. It is now for you. Go to the grove of the A'nath-ari at Usekht Maati. Stand between the earth and the sky."

Ihy's arm fell limp, and his breath became less labored.

"Now, that's new," Pryor said, standing up.

"What's new? What was that all about?"

"He has been rousing from time to time and saying that first bit about the Jackal and Hike, but he would soon just drop back off to sleep."

"I didn't understand that. What was he talking about?"

Pryor avoided looking into Ianus' eyes. "There is something you should know. Ihy's parents. Ihy's father."

"What about them? Speak plainly."

"You know that Ihy is the only son and heir to Auset, the Lady of Ammaau. O, how can I put this? His birth was an accident. His father, you see, was a Raewyn. He was a close friend of Auset's, and well, the Raewyn aren't exactly like the rest of us are they. Somehow, the Lady of Ammaau became pregnant."

"He's half Raewyn? That is why his skin began to glow."

Pryor sighed, "Yes and no. You see when Ihy was born, his tiny body couldn't maintain the balance between the Shedu and the Raewyn. His very cells did not want to maintain cohesion. Lady Auset entrusted him to a young maker. After seven days of intense effort, he was able to stabilize him. That's the problem you see. He is becoming unstable again. The doctors, well, they don't know what to do. They have given him two weeks to live."

"So what was that chant about?"

"It is a prayer he was given to help him maintain his composure."

"What was that other part then? What did he call himself?"

"Hahu. That is the name of his Sukallin. I suppose it was trying to tell you something."

"I will find who has done this to him," Ianus began to shake, "I will repay them for this."

"Beware of vengeance. It has a way of destroying the avenger worse than the target. Uncloud your mind. Now is the time for seeing clearly."

Daru and Maya entered the lobby at the end of the hall and sat down. Maya took long deep breaths. Daru took Maya's hand and tried to look hopeful.

"Is there anything I can do for you?" Daru asked.

"Just being here is enough. Is Ianus taking this," she stopped and lowered her head. "How is Ianus taking all of this?"

"He's angry, but I think that's understandable. I will have to watch him carefully to make sure he doesn't do anything rash."

"Good luck," Maya laughed weakly, "He has always been a handful. It was all Ihy and I could do to keep his passions reigned in."

"You love Ihy, don't you? Why didn't you ever marry Ihy?" Daru closed her eyes, "I'm sorry. That was not a very delicate question."

"That's all right. I wanted to marry him, but the law would not allow it. He is part Raewyn. If we went in for a license, that would come out. The Raewyn have never been accepted. 'They are untrustworthy.' 'They are a threat to our civilization.' 'They are *freaks of nature*.' I'm sure you are quite familiar with what people have to say about them."

"Yes, but I've met many Raewyn in my travels with Pryor. I don't know where those ideas come from."

"We did have a service in the temple, Pryor presided. That was one of the happiest days of my life. It's all over now isn't it?"

"I'm sure you've been through worse than this."

"But never before has Ihy's secret come out. Even if he survives this, he will have to fight to keep his position."

"I'm sure Master Theron would never take action against his most popular Predicant."

Maya sank down in her seat, "I'm not so sure about that. Master Theron has become erratic lately. More and more he tries to speak *ex cathedra*."

"But the Camarilla would never allow him to concentrate power in just one person!" Daru protested.

"They have allowed him to become politically active!"

"That is forbidden! The spiritual authority vested in the Makers gave them too much influence."

"I know, but he has been actively supporting '*reform*' of the government of Adrakaya. He rallied support for the term limits act, and the right to popular referendum."

"But, why is the Camarilla letting him get away with that?"

"They are afraid. Master Theron is powerful and popular. Just last week Ihy received notice that he was being considered to replace Master Betzalel. He was so excited."

"He would have made a great addition to the Camarilla. What am I saying? He *will* make a great addition to the Camarilla."

Maya lifted her head and smiled gratefully. "Thank you for trying to help me through this, but if Ihy doesn't make it. If his light goes out, my world will become darker than I've ever known. Daru, if you ever find someone who completes you, who lights up the world around you don't ever let them go. Hold onto them with every ounce of your being."

The elevator doors swished open. Tara wandered out and looked around for a sign she was in the right place. Seeing Daru and Maya, her face went pale. Slowly, she walked up to them.

"I am so sorry Maya," Tara's voice trembled, "I am so sorry that this had to happen to you."

"Thank you, but this didn't happen to me. It happened to Ihy. It happened to that sweet, overly heroic man lying in a bed down the hall."

"I'm sorry," Tara stammered, "I didn't mean anything by it. Do they know who did this?"

"No, there are theories. The cities police have gotten involved, but they don't have a clue what our life is like. They think it was simple vandals. Like any mundane thief could have taken Ihy down!"

"Will he survive?" Tara's voice cracked.

Daru looked at her carefully. She looked distracted. 'She didn't know Ihy very well, if at all,' she thought, 'What is she so troubled by?'

"These *doctors*," Maya answered, "They don't have a clue what to do to help him. What makes this all worse, is that the To'asaa was stolen. Not only has someone killed Ihy, but they have tarnished his memory. He will not be remembered as a powerful orator, but as the man who lost the most holy relic of the Jade Moon."

"You don't know that! Ihy might pull through," Daru said indignantly.

"And if the To'asaa is never found?"

"It will be. It has been lost before."

"And dark times followed."

"What's to say that a new golden age is not at hand?" Tara asked.

"You poor girl," Maya said, "There has never been a golden age and there never will be. Tien Shaa said, 'Beware those who come to you preaching the glories of a utopia, or the current state of distopia. Neither has ever been realized, and none ever will.' The worlds have always teetered between order and chaos. Now the balance has shifted again."

Ianus sat alone in his room, nervously fidgeting in his bed. 'They have no right to keep me here,' he thought, 'I'm fine. I should be out there trying to find those two attackers.' He huffed loudly, but there was no one there to hear him.

'I wonder how long they think they can keep me in this bed. I bet Maya put them up to this. She's probably afraid I would do something foolish if I was allowed to run free. I'm not a child. I can take care of myself.'

"And Ihy couldn't?" Tuun demanded coldly.

Ianus looked up. Pryor, Aashen, and Tuun were carrying in the things that Ianus had asked for them to bring him.

"Don't look at me like that!" Tuun continued, "If you want to maintain your privacy you should learn to control your emotions."

"I was hoping someone would hear me!" Ianus said defiantly.

"Then why were you so shocked that my brother overheard your thoughts?"

Aashen stepped between Ianus and Tuun. "Calm down, both of you. This isn't a contest, Ihy is like a father to us, and he *is* your father. Now relax!"

“I think we got everything you asked for,” Pryor changed the subject, “But it wasn’t easy. Your room is a mess.”

Everyone laughed, Pryor was extremely happy that the mood had lightened.

“How are you holding up in here?” Aashen asked.

“I’m not imprisoned here, am I?” Ianus chuckled, “All in all, pretty well. I’m getting stir crazy. You no how I feel about keeping still and quiet.”

“You are a lot like Aashen in that,” Tuun smiled, “I’m sorry. They won’t let me in on the investigation.”

“Not that it’s stopping you,” Aashen said, “Me either. I haven’t been able to find much. No one has a clue what’s going on. I think I might though.”

“Well?” Ianus asked, sitting up in the bed.

“I think it had to be an inside job.”

“A traitor in the Jade Moon?” Asked Pryor.

“Yes. That is the only way they could have known the To’asaa was here, where it was being kept, and what night we would all be distracted. I don’t think it’s just a coincidence that this robbery took place on the night Master Barami was holding a conference in the temple, and Ianus was taking his initiation.”

Pryor and Aashen looked at each other. Tuun glanced back and forth between them. They each exchanged strange expressions. This confused Ianus. His eyes widened.

“That’s not fair you know,” He said, “I may not be a telepath, but I can tell what you’re doing.”

“I’m not a telepath either,” Pryor said. “So don’t feel left out.”

“Yeah, but both of them are, and they can read your thoughts.”

“Well, we needed to make sure we wanted to go through with this.”

“Ihy wouldn’t support this decision,” Tuun said.

“He didn’t,” Aashen responded, “We can’t know what he would do under these circumstances.”

“It’s three against one,” said Pryor, “Maya agrees with me.”

“She never understood Ihy’s reasons for keeping it from him. If she had her way, she would have told him years ago.”

“True, but we have to tell him now. I’m not going to continue to argue this. We have voted. Ianus, listen to me very carefully. When you were born, the Vaticinars came and, well, they pronounced a prophecy over you. They said, ‘The time of the old black dragon wanes, his slumber is at hand. The Red Dragon of the promise is born this day, while the green still sleeps in her maternal waters. Behold, the child of centuries past, born to preserve the future. This child will see without eyes, and will wander through the dark nights to come. We have sealed the words of this prophecy. No augur shall know it’s interpretation until we make it plain.’ And then they just left. No one has seen them since.”

“I am the Red Dragon?” Ianus muttered, “In my first vision. I saw a Red Dragon, then a voice said it would kill Ihy.”

“But you weren’t the one who attacked Ihy!” Aashen said.

“But I didn’t stop the attack either.”

“This is all pointless speculation,” said Tuun, “The Vaticinars have sealed the words of the prophecy. There is no way you could interpret what they have sealed.”

“So we are all bound by prophecy?” Ianus voice trailed off.

“Every thing is connected.” Pryor explained, “Augurs only read the patterns they can see. So many things influence us all that we are unaware of. They move us forward along the path that we were born to.”

“Born to?” Ianus said sarcastically. “Ihy gave me this speech before, but if everything is so interconnected, do we really have any choices?”

“Every action we take is a choice,” Tuun answered, “Don’t ever forget that.”

Pryor handed Ianus a book. “The Psalter of the Mne Seraphin,” he said, “Many believe the interpretation of the prophecy is in there.”

“What are we going to do about Ihy?” Ianus asked, “We can’t just let him die.”

“He survived this once, when he was born, he’ll survive it again.”

Faroh danced around his room, grabbing his clothes out of the dresser, and throwing them into his bags. He hummed a jovial tune. The lights in the room dimmed.

Panthera’s shadowy form slid in through the open balcony door. “You are right to rejoice. You have done very well,” he said.

“Tara did lack the courage of her convictions, but I did as you asked. It was easier than I thought. I would have finished Ianus and that woman off as well, if that infernal Akeru hadn’t screamed so loud.”

“I was not aware that Ihy had died.”

Faroh stopped packing, “Don’t worry, he will. I’m told the doctors do not have a clue how to save him. He will be dead soon.”

“And if he should recover?”

“Then I will have to finish the job, won’t I? I didn’t think it would be a good idea to attack him on a ship swarming with Jade Moon Makers.”

“Did I say anything about doing that? What has gotten into you lately? Your voice is becoming distant in the song.”

Faroh turned his back to Panthera

“Don’t think you can lie to me!” Panthera roared, “I can see through you. The Machine judges the world. Surely it shall judge rightly.”

Faroh fell on the ground, clenching his teeth to keep from screaming. A cold, acidic pain leeches the thoughts from his mind. The room went black; he could not see. It felt like something was crawling up his spine, sinking at least one-inch long talons into his flesh. Chills racked his body. He dug his own fingernails into the palms of his hand to keep himself focused.

The pain faded into a dull ache. His vision returned.

“You have been judged and found wanting. Blessed be the One who judges rightly.”

Faroh struggled to his feet, “I have done nothing wrong!”

“You have been judged. Do you dare to question the One who sees all?”

“I do not question the song or the machine.”

“But you question me?”

“No, my Lord, I do not question you.”

Panthera laughed, “Do not lie to me! You have been tempted, but by who? No. You don’t honestly believe that you have met Hlachar Cythraul, do you?”

“I met a man who said that was his name.”

“Cythraul has been dead for over four thousand years.”

“The man I met was a Raewyn.”

“Even so, no Raewyn could live that long. Someone is trying to deceive you.”

“Maybe you’re right, but if it is Cythraul, shouldn’t I find out for sure?”

“But you are letting him have undue sway over you. He even has you questioning me.”

“I do not question you. I know where my allegiances are. They are to the song alone. I respect any who share my loyalties.”

“I see now, you wonder if I am as loyal as you are.”

“Obedience is required.”

“And you will enforce that obedience?”

“If I must!”

Panthera reached out a thin, gloved hand, and placed it on Faroh’s shoulder, “Good. I am pleased to hear it. Soon, Ihy Khem will be dead, and with him all opposition to me will be removed. I will be able to return to public life.”

“But what about this Akeru?”

“He could be a problem. Take him out.”

“And how am I supposed to do that?”

“Watch him. He has to leave that ship sometime, and when he does, kill him.”

“It will be done.”

Aashen walked around the bridge of the Valkyrie, overseeing Mista and Sangrida.

“You are aware that we were born to this vessel?” Sangrida asked.

Aashen was hovering behind her, “I know but I have to do something. Ihy wanted this ship space worthy as soon as possible. At least, when I am working on it I don’t have time to think about him.”

“Master Khem is a wise man,” said Mista, “He will have made plans to survive any crisis.”

Aashen walked over to Mista slowly. He was lost in thoughts. A faint hope rose into his mind. “Mista are you saying that Ihy told you this was coming?”

Mista looked up from her station, “Master Khem could see storm clouds on the horizon. He would talk to us about concerns, and his hopes.”

“And? What did he say?”

“He said that he had done all that he could to weather the hurricane to come.”

“What did he do? You have to know what he was working on.”

“He did not tell us.”

Aashen squinted at her, “You mean to tell me that Ihy was down here working on some provisions to get through this tragedy, and you don’t have a clue what it was?”

“It is not my place to push myself into Master Khem’s business.”

“So how are these plans suppose to help him if no one knows them?”

“He did say that everything was set into motion.”

“O! Get back to work,” Aashen commanded, pointing at the console she was working on.

Mista shrugged her shoulders.

“We do what we are told,” said Sangrida, “I think you should know that Shipmaster Fallon and two others I do not recognize have just boarded. They are approaching the bridge.”

The door slid open. Tuun, a very large woman, and a man wearing a burgundy liripipe coiled and wrapped around his neck.

With a flourish and an over exaggerated salute, he bowed in call, “Hail and salutations to the newly crowned Shipmaster of the republic fleet!”

Aashen and the two strangers laughed.

Tuun scowled at the lot of them, “You think that’s funny? I have just succeeded in the trials to get my license and entrance into the Helmsman guild.”

Aashen noticed a metallic glimmer in Tuun’s eyes, “They gave you more implants? How much flesh is left on those old bones?”

“They are mandatory. A helmsman must be able to fully integrate his thoughts into the system. You have your implants, all makers do. I don’t see why you can’t share in my joy.”

“I was trying to. I thought it was funny.”

“You never take anything seriously. Every time I get a smile on my face, something happens to take it away.”

“I’m sorry. I really didn’t mean to upset you. I’m proud of you, you know. You are trying to realize your dream. I don’t know that I even have one.”

“How can you be so strong?” Tuun asked. “With Master Khem laid up in the hospital, and our very future in jeopardy, how can you be so upbeat?”

“I have to be. If I just sat down and thought about everything that has been happening, it would probably destroy me,” a tear ran down Aashen’s face, “But as long as I am working for their future, there is hope.”

“Hope. It has been a long time since I let myself believe in anything. I doubt myself daily. You are right,” Tuun forced a laugh, “Ihy needs our help, not our sorrow.”

Tuun shook as he suddenly remembered that they were not alone. “I brought these two to help us. This is Khensu Min.”

The dark tan man in the burgundy liripipe, bowed his head and smiled.

“And this is Sakkara Corazon.”

The large woman bowed her head, her wild, curly hair fell off her back and covered her face. Her dark, cinereous skin captivated Aashen.

“Sakkara is pleased to meet Master Fallon,” she said smiling, “Master Fallon thinks I look strange? I am Kahraman. Very few of us have become Makers, but I am strong.”

“She is seeking a master to finish her training,” Tuun said, “and Khensu is an oblate. He serves in the local magistrate’s office in Shiloh.”

Aashen nodded to show that he was paying attention, but he couldn’t take his eyes off Sakkara. She must have been at least seven feet tall. Her massive arms hung down by the side of her round body.

“Aashen,” Tuun called, “I have another piece of good news.”

Reluctantly, he looked away from the Kahraman, and did his best to look interested.

“The Guild pulled some strings, and marshaled a change in the status for this ship. We are now classified as a Sovereign Republic Vessel.”

“Meaning what?”

“Under interstellar law, the Valkyrie is now considered a sovereign state. It generally takes years to secure the upgrade. We are now standing on foreign soil. In other words, in the eyes of the law we must be extended diplomatic courtesy, whenever we travel.”

“Simplify that for me.”

“This ship is now a legally recognized province of Al-Benu, and an official envoy of the Jade Moon.”

“Master Khem sought this honor before he was attacked.” Sangrida said.

Silence filled the room. Tuun walked up to a console near Mista. He pulled a gold card out of his pocket and inserted it into the console.

“Verify, Shipmaster Tuun Fallon Ken-Leor.” The computer beeped, “In honor of Master Ihy Khem, I confer authorization to the SRV Valkyrie, as of this date.”

Ianus sat alone in his hospital room. He could hear the doctors roaming up and down the hall. He was upset that they wouldn’t let him leave his bed. “You still have dangerous levels of toxin in your blood. Just rest and you will get out soon,” they kept telling him.

‘How am I suppose to rest in a strange bed, with my father dying in the next room?’ He thought.

Picking up his prescience book again, he thumbed through the pages. He knew the answer had to be in there somewhere, but more than half of the pages were still encrypted in some strange script.

A sudden pressure hit him between his eyes. His vision blurred.

“Not now!” Ianus said, trying to hold the vision at bay.

Silver mist flooded the room. Ianus felt as though his entire body began to vibrate. Shifting violently from hot to cold, his skin tingled and twitched. His stomach felt as if thousands of leaden worms wriggled within.

Darkness intertwined itself throughout the silver haze. Dazzling lights flashed on either side of him.

“Stop, go away,” Ianus screamed, “I don’t have time for this.”

The fog lifted, and Ianus looked upon himself lying motionless on the hard ground.

“Burn him!” A hissing voice cried out behind him.

“He is of no use anymore, let him pass,” said another voice.

“Yes, yes, better dead than a failure,” said the hissing voice.

The scene went black. Strange glyphs burned into Ianus mind.

“Let me out!” He screamed.

“Ianus? What’s the matter?” Daru’s voice broke through the darkness.

Pain, like a knife, trusted through his right shoulder. The vision shattered, and faded from sight. Daru’s hand rested gently on his right shoulder.

“What’s going on?” Daru asked.

“I had another vision. Another vision I could not contest. Strange signs and voices. I have to learn how to quiet my mind.”

“You will be all right. Everything’s going to be all right.”

“I hope so.”

“I do have some good news. Aashen and Tuun almost have the Valkyrie ready for service.”

Ianus struggled to smile convincingly, “So Tuun is a Helmsman now.”

“Yeah, he is so happy. I’ve never seen him so light on his feet. He has wanted to be a Helmsman for so long.”

“It’s good that someone’s dreams are coming true.” Ianus opened his mouth to say something, but closed it quickly.

“What is it? Is it your vision?”

“In a way. Last night I had a dream. Threads wove themselves together, but they weren’t ordinary fibers. They seemed to be made of thoughts, words, and some were like strips of film showing peoples actions.” Again Ianus fell silent.

“Did you see the future?”

“No.”

“The past?”

“No.”

“Please tell me. You can’t leave the story like that.”

“Several of the threads have been cut. They will not lead to anything. The problem is, I don’t know what paths continue and which ones have ended.”

“Don’t let that bother you. No one really knows the future. Just rest. The doctors say you will probably be able to go home tomorrow. But if you don’t relax, that won’t happen.”

Ianus looked hard at her, his eyes full of scorn.

“Go ahead. Get mad at me if that will make you feel better, but all I can do is help you, and tell you what the doctors tell me.”

Daru stood up, smiling at Ianus. She left the room.

Ianus shook his head, and noticed his prescience book out of the corner of his eyes. Picking it up, he thumbed through the pages again.

‘These glyphs,’ Ianus thought, ‘They look like the one that appeared in my vision.’

Out of curiosity, Ianus turned to the front page and scrawled the strange glyphs he had seen to the best of his ability.

The encryption suddenly vanished. He could read the book in its entirety now. Thumbing through the pages he looked for any mention of Ihy’s birth.

There it was: “His mother, fearing him beyond hope, consigned the dying child to the care of the Camenae Maker, Selwyn Avrum. After seven days of desperate effort, the child’s life was saved.”

Looking up from the book, “We have to find this Selwyn Avrum.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: ABDUCTION

Ianus stood by his father's bedside. Ihy's skin was now a morbid blue, and the Raewyn luminescence cast a ghostly hue over his body and the room. Ianus picked up his father's hand. His skin was cold and clammy.

"Aashen and Tuun are working on the Valkyrie." Ianus said quietly, "It is almost ready for launch. You would be so pleased. As soon as it's prepared they will come to tell us."

Ianus gently laid his father's hand over his heart. Setting it back down, he began to pace around the room.

"The doctors gave me a clean bill of health this morning," Ianus continued, "They said they would have liked to keep me in for observation for a few more days. But since they had no legitimate reason to hold me, I was free to go. Well, they didn't have to tell me twice. I had my bags packed and sent down to the surface in fifteen minutes."

Ianus glanced back at Ihy, smiling, expecting some kind of response. None came, and Ianus' grin quickly melted away.

"Why didn't you ever tell me about the Vaticinars' prophecy? Were you afraid of my reaction, or were you just being sensible? After all the prophecy had been sealed so that no interpretation could be rendered by any but the Vaticinars themselves. It was just prudent. I can hear you now, 'Why burden the boy with nonsense that can neither help him, nor hurt him.'"

Ianus laughed, "It was probably for the best. If I had known I would have driven myself mad. 'You need to focus on your studies not some old prophecy,' you would say. I do tend to become obsessed with mysteries.

"But the Vaticinars called me a Red Dragon. My vision warned me that a Red Dragon would kill you. But I didn't kill you. I tried to save you. I wonder if I wasn't the only one. 'Prophecy is a very fluid thing.'" He quoted Ihy with a tear in his eye, "How many times did you say that? What was going through your mind when you said it?"

Ianus stopped pacing, and looked at his father, "Do you know a Camenae named Selwyn Avrum? What was it you said about the Camenae? O yes, 'The Camenae sing in search of enlightenment.' They are a strange bunch. I did some reading about them. They tamed the Ubasti, turning them from their warrior ways. They are centered on Kur-gal. Have you ever been there?" Ianus paused, he wasn't waiting for a response, but he thought it was the right thing to do.

"Of course you wouldn't tell me if you had. 'I have been to too many systems to remember them all.' Sometimes I wonder if you didn't trust me. You kept so many secrets."

"It was for your own good," Tuun said entering the room.

“I know.”

“It is good that you are talking to him. They say it can help,” said Aashen. “The Valkyrie is ready for departure. There’s only one problem. The doctors will not allow Ihy to be transferred,” said Tuun, his Ceeri flexed his wings menacingly.

“Well then,” said Ianus, “I suppose we have no other choice.”

Aashen and Tuun nodded.

They stood very close to Ianus and each of them raised their right hand. Light flickered between the three periapts. A silky, silver fluid poured from each periapt. The three knelt, slowly lowering their hands. Standing back, Ianus was pleased with the highly polished tripod.

Aashen reached over, and slid his finger across the back panel. The single shaft split open. An electric arc flashed opening a gate through which Ianus could see the corridor of the Valkyrie.

“Aashen, you and Tuun take Ihy through the Nexus, I will clean up here and meet you on the ship.”

The Fallon brothers nodded, and pushed Ihy’s bed through the luminous portal. After they had passed safely through, Ianus ran his finger across the back panel, the light went off, and the shaft closed. Ianus touched it with his periapt. The shaft and tripod melted into the silver liquid and flowed back into his periapt.

Collecting himself, he left the room. He waved at the doctors as he passed. Quickly, he made his way to the Kanthaka’s nexus room. He set one of the gates for the Valkyrie’s bridge.

He emerged from the gate, turned to shut it down, and smiled at Daru, “He’s on board. Do we have a full crew?”

“We have all the people we will need,” replied Maya.

Moments later, Tuun ran on to the bridge. Touching his palm to one of the doors, he smiled at Ianus, “We are about to take off. Tell the crew to prepare for our maiden flight to Kur-gal.”

Faroh sat at one of the nicest café’s in Shiloh enjoying a hot tea. The memory of his last encounter with Panthera haunted him. ‘Why did he seem so afraid of Cythraul?’ He thought, ‘He was just a silly old man—there was nothing special about him. Well, he did seem to be able to conceal the fact that he was a Raewyn. That was quite a feat in and of it self.’

The whole town seemed to be in mourning for Master Khem. Posters hung in the window of every shop in town asking people to pray for his quick recovery. Faroh had stolen one from the Temple. He fancied it a grand trophy.

‘All of these poor simpletons spending their time praying for that half-witted traitor. They have no idea what is really going on,’ he thought to himself. ‘One day, they will understand. The time is coming for these *wrongs* to be righted.’

He was very pleased with the work he had done. Every day Jago Modcearu met him at the café with an update on Ihy’s condition, which, to Faroh’s delight, worsened day by day.

Staring at the bottom of his now empty cup, he wondered what could be holding Jago up. ‘Maybe it’s good news,’ he thought, ‘Maybe the old fool is dead and Jago is waiting for confirmation.’

Jago entered the café, but didn't order a drink. Instead he walked straight over to Faroh's table and sat down.

"I'm sorry I'm late," said Jago, lowering his eyes.

"Good news, I hope."

"Not exactly. Master Khem has gone missing."

"What do you mean, missing?" Faroh hoped Panthera hadn't heard the news. Echoes of torture taunted him.

"About an hour ago, the doctors entered his room and found that the bed was empty."

"Well, where is he then? Don't tell me you took him."

"O no, I know how important it is not to draw attention to myself. But that is what took me so long. I was sure you would want to know who took him and where he was."

"Are you gonna to tell me, or am I gonna have to take the information from you?" Faroh sneered, his patience worn thin.

"It seems Masters Akeru, Fallon, and Isann have taken him."

"What do you mean, it seems?"

"Ianus and the two Fallon brothers were his last registered visitors, and they have departed for Kur-gal."

"They wouldn't leave him behind."

"Exactly, and they wouldn't risk taking him from the hospital unless they thought they knew a way to heal him."

Faroh's face became ashy, almost corpselike, "They are taking him to Kur-gal to cure him? Does Panthera know?" He held his breath.

"It is hard to tell. He always seems to know things that he had no way of knowing."

Faroh closed his eyes and sighed, "Do you have access to a ship?"

"I'm afraid not, but if you go down to the port there are always pilots looking for fares."

Faroh rose from his seat, "Should you encounter our Master, let him know I have everything under control."

Jago nodded.

Faroh quickly left the café, and made his way through the busy streets to the port. Several pilots stood around talking to the passersby. Just beyond them, Faroh caught sight of a black-feathered Tengu, with its wings held tight against his back.

When he approached the pilots, they all started shouting. "Best ship in the fleet."

"A faster vessel you'll never find."

"I'm looking for passage to Kur-Gal!" Faroh shouted over the din.

The pilots responded by barking out prices.

Faroh pointed to a well-dressed pilot, near him who had called out a rather low fare.

"When would you like to leave?" The man asked, grinning from ear to ear.

"Now!"

"Very well, follow me," the man beckoned to Faroh to follow him.

They walked down winding paths off toward a ship. They were far away from the crowds.

Faroh felt a strange jerking in his right hand, and his periapt flew off. Lunging forward to catch it, a large black wing buffeted him. As he fell to the ground, he could hear a great bird screech.

Five Tengu emerged from the darkness. Their raven-like heads stared down at him.

“Defenseless, surrender or we kill you now!” One of them demanded.

Faroh looked over at a Tengu pulling his periapt off a fan made of black feathers. He was unarmed and outnumbered. ‘This is not the time to fight them,’ he thought. He relaxed his muscles and sighed.

“Dressed like that, someone will pay a hefty ransom for you.”

In the main dining room of the Valkyrie, Ianus, Tuun, Khensu Min, and Sakkara Corazon sat around the table talking.

“I do hope it was a wise move to leave my brother at the helm,” said Tuun, “He has never flown so long before.”

“He is an accomplished pilot, I’m sure there is nothing to worry about,” said Ianus, “So, you are Khensu Min and Sakkara Corazon. Khensu, you are an oblate?”

“Yes,” he fiddled with the trailing tail of his violet liripipe, “I also serve in the civil government at Shiloh.”

“Your voice is familiar. You used to meet Ihy in the labyrinth to give him his updates, didn’t you? I overheard you once. You really should be more careful.”

“And Sakkara, here,” said Tuun, “Is looking for a master to complete her training. I would take her under my wing, but I have my studies with the guild now. I’m afraid I wouldn’t have time to help her fulfill her talent.”

“What do you think about me training her?” Ianus asked.

“You?” Tuun asked skeptically, “You have only just taken your initiation, but it is a matter between the two of you. Once you have taken vows, you are a Predicant. You can teach whoever you want.”

Ianus looked at Sakkara, “Would you be interested in becoming my apprentice?”

Sakkara grinned, “Master Akeru? To be taught by the son of Master Khem? It would be a great honor. Too great an honor for a lowly Kahraman like me.”

“O,” Ianus cupped his face in his hands, “Please, don’t say things like that. There is *absolutely* nothing special about me.”

“Master Akeru should not be saying such things. Master Akeru is an Augur.”

“Well yeah,” he peeked between his fingers, “But that makes me abnormal, maybe even bazaar, not special.”

“Master Akeru should think more highly of his talents.”

“How about this—you teach me to respect my talents, and I will complete your training for the vows.”

Sakkara clapped her hands vigorously, “That can be done. Sakkara will serve Master Akeru well.”

Ianus nodded his head, and zoned out as Tuun began to lecture. He pulled the red periapt out of his pocket, and began fidgeting with it under the table. “How is Ihy?” He interjected mindlessly.

“I’m afraid,” said Khensu, “He appears to be getting worse. Not because we brought him with us, though. He is following the prognosis the doctors gave him.”

“I hope this works,” said Tuun, “Should something terrible happen the Camarilla will blame us.”

“It has to work!” Ianus said, “It is the only path left open to us. I don’t believe he is without hope. If this Selwyn helped him before, I’m sure he can do it again.”

“Master Akeru has to be right,” said Sakkara, “Master Akeru’s gifts have shown him the ways. If he has chosen this one, then this one must be correct.”

“It is as simple as that?” Ianus asked.

“As simple as that,” Sakkara smiled, “Master Akeru has embraced his destiny. There is no reason fate should turn against Master Akeru now.”

Ianus smiled and looked away.

“What are you doing under there?” Tuun asked, glancing under the table.

Ianus set the red periapt on the table, “I was just looking at this. It intrigues me.”

“Where did you get it?” Khensu asked.

“Kahlil Vamu Shaa gave it to me during my initiation.”

The room fell silent. Tuun’s mouth gaped open. Khensu glanced between Tuun and Sakkara, whose eyes were open so wide they began to bulge out slightly.

“Is something wrong?”

“Where did you say you got that periapt?” Tuun asked, leaning forward.

“After I was lead into that dark room, Kahlil Vamu Shaa appeared to me. He gave it to me.”

“You mean you brought something back from the simulacrum?”

“What do you mean? Was I supposed to leave it in that room?”

“I’m not talking about the room, you silly boy, I’m talking about the *simulacrum*. The field of illusion you found yourself in after you had taken your vows. The illusionary realm that stands between our minds and the ultimate source?”

“You mean Hike.”

“No. I mean what is ultimately true. I’m talking about what exists beyond all names. Propaganda, media, religion, they all mask what is real. They make up the imaginal world that you think is real.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The vision occurred in your mind. There is no way you could have brought something back with you.”

“But here it is,” Ianus said, “I have it right here. I know where I got it. Kahlil gave it to me before I saw the rest of the Ennead.”

“Master Akeru saw the whole Ennead?” Sakkara asked. “Then maybe he is more special than he thought!”

In the heart of the Valkyrie, Tara walked around in the large practice room. The floor responded to her steps. The harder her feet hit, the more cushioned it became. Running across the room, she leapt onto the wood paneled wall. Up the wall, she curled her knees into her chest. She flipped off the wall, and landed on all fours.

Curling her back like an animal about to pounce on it’s prey she lifted herself onto her hands, and began to walk around the room. Finally, she noticed someone’s feet. She pushed off the floor, twisted through the air, and bounced onto her feet.

“Hello Daru,” she said, “Have you come to practice?”

“No, I’m impressed at your agility. You are amazingly light on your feet.”

“Thank you,” Tara bowed her head, “That is a great compliment coming from you.”

“Why? You’ve never seen me fight, have you?”

Tara turned, and walked over to get a towel, “Your opinion means a lot to me. Don’t get me wrong, Master Barami is a great teacher, but I have never respected him, the way I respect you. You are the ‘me’ I would like to be. O, that sounded wrong.”

“I understand. Your art is well refined. I’m sure if you keep practicing, you will achieve your goal.”

“Do you ever feel like the forms hold you back?”

“No one likes discipline, but without the skills it provides we would all be lost.”

“Lost,” Tara wiped her forehead with the towel, “That’s an interesting way of putting it.”

“Are you beginning to doubt your vocation? Formation is a long process, people do change,” Daru smiled understandingly.

“I’m not sure what my vocation is anymore. There once were so many voices calling me, clawing at me. If I do not choose quickly they will destroy me, or maybe they already have.”

“What’s bothering you?”

“Master Barami was the first person I ever met who treated me like I was more than a bit of dirt that had gotten stuck on his shoes. And Master Khem, he was so kind to me. Grant it, he didn’t know me very well.”

“Do you think that would have made a difference?”

“I don’t know. I have wondered about that quite a lot lately. Maybe I didn’t know him well enough,” a cold chill ran down her spine, echoes of nightmarish pain.

“Are you all right?”

“Memories are my greatest enemies, and strongest allies. I’m rambling now.”

“No, your not. I know what you mean. I became a predicant because I wanted to make a difference. Pryor, though he is a good man, he has is own flaws. He thinks I have to be protected. Our mentors only want what is best for us.”

“Yeah, when I joined the Jade Moon, I thought I would have a life of adventure. But now I feel trapped. Cold hands holding me in my place.” Another shiver ran through her bones, “Sometimes I wonder how I can escape my fate.”

“Life is nothing but choices. Don’t ever forget that.”

The lights were intentionally dim on the Tengu ship. Faroh had resisted laughing when they tied him up in the chair and adjusted the lighting. The ropes were tight, but oddly smooth. They were designed to restrain him, not to cause him undue discomfort. Sitting relaxed in the chair set in the small alcove off to the side of the bridge, Faroh planned his escape.

“Captain,” one of the Tengu with a large patch of white feathers under his right eye said, “Do you think it is wise to hold this man?”

“Why wouldn’t it be?” The captain clicked his beak.

“He is obviously a maker.”

“What makes you think that?” The captain laughed, “O, the periapt we took from him. It is no more than a prop. If he was a maker we could not have captured him so easily.”

“I may only be a Helmsman, but I can tell that he is a maker. You can see it in his eyes. The guild has expressed their concern about our ‘activities’ before, but if they find out we have kidnapped a maker, they will revoke our license.”

“They will not find out, because you won’t tell them.”

“You are assuming we survive this. Don’t forget, the guild has a way of learning about things without asking.”

The captain clapped his wings against his side, and turned to face Faroh.

“What is your name, boy?”

Faroh smiled, and tugged on the ropes.

“Now, now, boy, you can’t escape. Better to cooperate. It will keep your stay with us short,” the captain leaned in closer, “What is your name?”

“Faroh Raanan, I serve the Camarilla of the Jade Moon under Master Theron.”

The captain laughed, “Do you expect me to believe that? I cracked my shell a long time ago. Well Faroh, if that is your real name, do you have any family that would pay for your safe return?”

“I am of house Raanan, and you ask if I have any family?”

“Yes, of course, House Raanan is quite large, and wealthy if memory serves. I will check out your story,” the captain turned to walk away. “O, yes, one last thing. If you are lying to me, you will come to know pain like you can not imagine.”

Faroh laughed. The bridge crew turned to look at him.

“Don’t worry about him,” said the captain, “He’s obviously mad.”

Faroh watched the crew go back about their business, and started tugging on the ropes again. Nothing, they wouldn’t give.

‘There has to be a way out of here,’ he thought. ‘There is no trap that doesn’t have a way out.’

He closed his eyes. “If you ever needed me, just call on my name.” The silky Raewyn voice filled his mind.

‘That old fool. Panthera was right. There’s no way he could be who he claimed to be. He’s a fraud.’

Faroh continued to struggle with his bonds for close to an hour, his patience wore thin. The number of Tengu on the bridge were increasing. They had obviously taken flight, and broke orbit by now.

‘I have a mission,’ Faroh repeated to himself, ‘That Akeru boy could be a problem. He must be removed. I must complete my mission.’

“If you ever need me, just call my name,” the voice returned to his mind.

‘What could it hurt,’ he thought, ‘They already think I’m mad. Besides, they wouldn’t recognize the name.’

“Hlachar Cythraul, if you are who you say you are, reveal yourself to me. If you are who you say you are, show your power, and I will be your most faithful servant.”

“My child,” a loud voice echoed throughout the bridge, “I have heard your prayers.”

Flames engulfed the Tengu on either side of the captain. They howled with pain, but couldn’t move.

“Be free, my son,” the voice thundered.

The ropes around Faroh’s arms and legs snapped. He looked down, his periapt had returned to his hand.

The captain screeched as he flew up into the air, his arms extended far above his head. He reeled in agony, as several other Tengu dropped to their knees gasping for air.

Faroh pointed at the helmsman, "Spare this one. He spoke in my defense."

Light flashed in the vacant captain's chair, Cythraul folded his hands together, and tapped his index fingers on his lips, "And the rest? What would you have me do with them?"

"Do with them as you see fit."

Cythraul waved his hand, everyone vanished except himself, Faroh, and the Helmsman, "Atoms to Atoms, dust to dust," Cythraul laughed. "Now, what is our next move?"

"We must go to Kur-gal, destroy Ihy Khem, and make sure that Ianus will never be a problem again."

CHAPTER NINE: VOICES IN THE NIGHT

Daru walked aimlessly down a corridor on the Valkyrie. Her conversation with Tara troubled her. She paced up and down the halls. ‘She has a guilty conscience, but about what? She couldn’t be one of the attackers,’ she thought, ‘I saw her practicing. She was too fluid, too confident. The woman I fought that night was shaking. Could she really betray us like that?’

She sighed, and looked around to get her bearings, ‘I’m not too far from Ianus’ quarters, maybe he can help.’

Turning to the right, she walked down the corridor to Ianus’ room. She knocked on the door. “Ianus?”

The door slid open. She looked inside; the room was empty. She took a step over the threshold and looked around. The door should not have opened on its own like that. Ianus was nowhere to be seen. A leather bound book sat on his nightstand, opened to the middle, a stylus lay between its waxen pages.

‘I should leave,’ she pondered for a moment, but she couldn’t take her eyes off the book. ‘That’s his prescience book. I wonder what he’s been looking up. No, I should leave.’

Standing beside the small table, she glanced down at the book.

Written in Ianus’ handwriting she read, “What if Ianus Akeru goes to the forbidden lands on Adrakaya to find the A’nath-ari?” Quickly, Daru snatched the book off the nightstand. ‘What is he thinking?’

“Through the gate he would go,” she continued reading, “The dark woods stretching out as far as he could see. He may survive many of the trials and tribulations found within. Eventually, the forces designed to protect the holy lands from intruders will destroy him.”

Again, Ianus had entered a query, “What if Ianus manages to survive?”

The book responded, “Irrational presupposition. Please restate query.”

Nothing more was written. ‘What could he be thinking?’ Daru thought, returning the book to the nightstand.

Marching out of the room, she stretched out her right arm, and pointed it toward the wall. A soft whistle emanated from her periapt.

“Sangrida!” Daru barked.

“Here Ma’am,” a tinny voice responded from the periapt.

“Where is Ianus?”

“He is currently on the bridge.”

“Is he alone?”

“At the moment, yes ma’am.”

“Good! Thank you,” Daru closed her hand.

All the way to the bridge she tried to calm herself down, but it was no good. Once her anger was kindled, it was close to impossible to relieve. That is, until it was properly vented.

“Ianus Osanna Akeru!” She yelled, stepping onto the bridge, “What in the name of all that is sacred could you possibly be thinking?”

Ianus blushed, “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“I saw your prescience book!”

“My what? How did you? You were in my room!”

“Well, yes,” Daru shook off her embarrassment, “I went to your room to talk to you, and the door opened. I was afraid something was wrong. I had no idea you were planning suicide.”

“Suicide?” Ianus surveyed the bridge to ensure they were alone, “Now wait just one minute, why were you snooping around in my prescience book?”

“This isn’t about me. O very well, I was curious what you were thinking about. I thought you might have been dwelling on happy things. Instead, I find that you’ve been looking for a creative way to go to your death!”

“That’s not it at all. Ihy said I should go.”

“When? When would he have said anything as insane as that? Going to the Forbidden Lands is suicide!”

“He said it on the Kanthaka.”

“After the attack?” Daru rubbed hard on her temples, “After he was put into that dreadful state? I’m sure he was really clearheaded when he said it.”

“I wasn’t sure,” Ianus plopped down in the captain’s chair, “That’s why I asked the prescience book. I thought he might know something that I didn’t.”

“Ianus, the A’nath-ari don’t ask questions, and they don’t take prisoners. They just execute trespassers.”

“I know! I was curious to see whether Ihy was telling me a way to save him. That’s all. I don’t want him to die!”

“No one does. Anyway, we will be at Kur-gal soon, and this, what’s his name, Selwyn, will help him. Everything will be all right. There’s no use pursuing these insane notions about the Forbidden Lands.”

“I know. I know. Will you feel better if I erase the query as soon as I get back to my room?”

“Yes,” Daru stated firmly.

“Then that’s what I’ll do,” Ianus tried to look innocent, “When my shift ends, I have responsibilities here on the bridge.”

“I’ll stay with you. As long as we’re together, nothing can stand in our way.”

Ianus’ shift on the bridge dragged on. If Daru hadn’t come to join him, he would have been horribly bored. After Tuun arrived, Ianus said good night to Daru, and headed off toward his room. Sleep hungered for him.

On the way, he passed Sangrida. ‘I wonder where that third Kishanu is?’ He thought. Ihy was having problems activating it, but he had spent most of his free time working on it. ‘He probably left it in his workshop.’ Walking passed his room, he made his way to the small room just down the hall from the hatch. He saw the Kishanu on a table in the center of the room as he entered. He staggered backwards at the sight of

Sakkara hunched over the far corner table. She was such a large and imposing woman, bigger than anyone Ianus was used to working with.

“I didn’t expect to see you here,” said Ianus.

Sakkara jumped, “O! So sorry. Sakkara couldn’t sleep, thought she would make herself useful.”

“I know the feeling. I had the same ideas as you. Have you been able to get the other Kishanu online?”

“No,” She looked frustrated. “Thy seems to have been modifying it. Sakkara cannot figure it out. She spent the last few hours trying to understand what he was doing. It doesn’t make sense.”

“What doesn’t? He said it wouldn’t activate.”

“That’s odd. There doesn’t seem to be anything wrong with it, apart from the work he did on it.”

“What do you mean?” Ianus leaned over the lifeless form, “He said the integration system was faulty. I was helping him work on it.”

Sakkara looked behind her at a collection of silver and blue parts strewn across the workbench up against the wall, “That makes sense. There seems to be parts of it missing, or at least not visible.”

“Well, knowing Ihy, he was probably trying to improve it. He always improves his things, you know the sort.”

“Why is Master Akeru having problems sleeping? Is it his father?”

“In a manner of speaking,” Ianus ran his fingers over the smooth basin hollowed out in the Kishan’s chest. “Daru and I had words about something she read in my prescience book.”

“Master has a prescience book? It is Sen, isn’t it?”

“Yes, and please stop calling me Master, my name is Ianus. All my friends call me Ianus, except for the few brave souls who dare to call me Ian.”

“Sakkara has only just met Master Akeru. Certainly, she is not a friend yet?”

Ianus sat down across the table from her, “You don’t have a lot of friends, do you?”

“Master?” Sakkara hung her head down low, “Sakkara is a Kahraman. Many of her kind are not the best behaved. They lack manners, and the basic concerns the Jade Moon has for others. Many think them monsters. Sakkara is not a monster. She was shocked when Master Khem invited her to study at the Shiloh temple. He is a great man. She would do anything to help him.”

“Please don’t take this the wrong way, but before I met you I never heard of the Kahraman.”

Sakkara looked up, a large toothy grin stretched across her face, “How could she take that the wrong way? Master has never heard about the horrors of the Kahraman warlords, and Sakkara is supposed to be upset. This is good news, great news. This explains why Master trusts her.”

“No, it doesn’t. I trust you, because my father and Tuun trust you. You have to earn their trust. So please, stop calling me, Master, and call me by my name.”

“Ianus is wise,” if it were possible for her grin to widen, it did. She looked as though her face were about to split in two. “So, what was in the prescience book that started the row?”

“Strange the way thoughts come to you when you least expect them,” Ianus was distant, “A week before the attack he said something odd. He said that there was a technological nightmare haunting the Jade Moon. I can’t help but wonder what he meant.”

“He probably meant the Ual-leen. Tuun used to give us long lectures about them. He said they returned even after being completely exterminated.”

“Exterminated, that makes them sound like vermin.”

“The way Tuun described them, they are more like a plague. He said the desire to control others is too strong for everyone to fight. He said that sooner or later someone would discover their secrets, and they would return.”

“It is hard to believe that... what year is this? Right, in the last four thousand three-hundred and twenty years that lure of such monstrous power is still alive.”

“Greed is natural,” said Sakkara glumly, “As long as there are positions of power, there will be people seeking to abuse them.”

“And with every new defense there come new ways of getting around them. Listen to us, we sound like two old people lamenting the sorry state of the world.”

“Yes, Ianus should cheer up. Go to bed, he will feel better in the morning.”

Tara was late to breakfast the next morning. By the time she reached the galley, it was empty. She wasn’t really hungry, so she ordered a hard boiled egg and a slice of buttered toast. Taking a seat in the corner facing the door, she sat down and stared at her plate.

The door slid open. Daru walked in and waved.

“I see I’m not the only one who forgot to set an alarm last night,” Daru mustered a pathetic laugh. “It’s the same problem every time I’m on a new ship.”

“I know. I told the computer to get me up at seven, I thought I had done everything right. Then I wake up at nine. Why Master Barami didn’t wake me, I don’t know.”

“He has been in his room since we left. According to the ship systems, he’s been making calls and sending messages the whole time. I tried to see who he was talking to, but he has masked the signals.”

“*Daru*,” said Tara in a motherly tone, “You really shouldn’t have done that. What if Master Barami finds out?”

“You won’t tell him will you?” Daru monitored Tara for any signs of deceit.

“Don’t worry. I’m used to forgetting things that I’ve heard.”

Daru smiled and ordered four slices of buttered toast and strawberry–rhubarb jam. Sitting down across from Tara, she took a bite of the toast, and smiled. “The ships food service is excellent,” she said, and took another bite.

Tara sat quietly, and nibbled her toast.

“Is something wrong?” Daru asked.

“Nothing really. I was just thinking about my first year of study with Barami. It was so exciting. I had just left temple and this legendary master wanted me for an apprentice.”

“I felt the same way when I began with Master Isann, but lately, he’s been sheltering me. I know he thinks of me like a daughter, but I have taken vows.”

“Yeah, well, I haven’t taken on orders yet, but Barami has grown more and more distant lately. He’s been running all of these conferences, and he’s always on the line to someone. Since Master Khem was attacked, he’s been busier than ever.”

“Is he neglecting your studies? Because if he is I can help you practice.”

Tara took another bite of her toast. “My training seems to be going well. It is just hard when your mentor ignores you.”

“I don’t mean to be disrespectful, but you didn’t even know the story of the To’asaa. I have to admit, that bothers me.”

“Barami doesn’t like talking about history. He thinks the past belongs to the past. He even told me once that it can be dangerous to dig up the past. When I was younger, I was a devotee of Tien Shaa and Kahlil Vamu Shaa. My mother used to read me the parables before I went to bed every night.”

“Then how did you not know about the To’asaa?”

“Our Predicant was nothing but doctrine. Tien Shaa said this, Vamu Shaa wrote that. He spent very little time talking about their lives.”

“Didn’t you ever read the Holy Books?”

“Tides and Seasons, the Parables of Vamu Shaa, the Voice in the Darkness. Never once did I read any of the histories. That is not until recently. After you shared that story with me, I have started reading them.” A cold pain shot through her head. “But I had to stop. With everything going on, it just didn’t seem right to be spending my time reading ancient history.”

“Do you mean the attack on Ihy?”

Tara took another bite of her toast. “Yes. With the attack, and the investigation, and now here we are whisked away to a world I had never heard of before.”

“Are you starting to doubt your faith?”

“I doubt everything, but I know my place. I will do what I’m told.”

“No!” Daru slapped the table, “You should never blindly follow orders. Questions are the heart of faith. If you loose the questions, what are you left with? Nothing. Our questions are what makes our faith real.”

“But questions have consequences,” Tara shuttered, “Terrible consequences. It is not wise to ask too many questions.”

“Who told you that? Is that something Barami said to you?”

“O no! Master Barami is very kind and generous, even if he has been a little distant lately.”

“Then why would you say something like that?”

“Experience. Every time I have asked questions I’ve gotten my self in trouble. Everything goes smoother when I just step in line.”

“But don’t you ever think about what’s better for you? What do you want?”

“Freedom.”

The bridge was quiet. Mista and Sangrida where huddled over one of the displays whispering to each other. Ianus had reluctantly taken the captain’s seat. Periodically, he would scowl at Pryor, who talked him into taking the seat. Maya had just left to visit the engine room. She was fascinated by the ship and had been talking about making it her permanent base of operations.

Tuun entered the bridge, and smiled. An event becoming more frequent.

“We should be arriving at Kur-gal in about four hours. If there’s no objection, I’m going to take control and pilot us in.”

The room remained silent.

“Very well then,” Tuun opened a door on the right of the bridge. A dim blue light flooded the room. The barrier across the threshold shimmered as he passed through. Closing his eyes, he raised his arms, his hair began to float as if suspended in water. “I have assumed control,” his voice came from the intercom, his lips did not move.

“I don’t think I could do that,” said Ianus, looking away from the ghostly sight.

“Doubt any of us would have the necessary concentration,” Pryor responded, “You’ve never been to Kur-gal before, have you?”

“No. Ihy never took me away from Al-Benu. I always wanted to travel, but he said he thought it was too dangerous.”

“Probably afraid of pirates, knowing him. At any rate, you’ll like Kur-gal. It’s the home world of the Ubasti. A feline people entirely dedicated to the Camenae way. They used to be warriors, terrorizing the galaxy until about five hundred years ago.”

“What could have stopped a warlord from continuing conquest?”

“He got married, their Emperor that is. He married an off-worlder who practiced the Camenae faith. He built her a grand temple and brought in the best Camenae predicants in the galaxy. What can I say? Their ideas caught on and the people converted. They are a peaceful people now. If you ever get the chance to hear them sing. Take it.”

“I’ll be sure to do that.”

“So where are we meeting Selwyn?”

Ianus’ face went blank. “I knew I was forgetting something.”

“Don’t tell me you haven’t contacted him.”

“I did confirm he was on Kur-gal, but no. I haven’t spoken to him in person. I was so focused on getting Ihy to him, it just slipped my mind.”

Ianus jumped up from the seat, and ran over to the door, “I will call from my room, if that’s all right with you.”

“Hurry up,” Pryor chuckled and shook his head, “We only have four hours you know.”

All the way to his room, Ianus muttered, “How stupid could I be?” To himself. Rushing in, he grabbed his prescience book.

“Computer, contact the Camenae Mother temple on Kur-gal and patch the signal through to this station.”

The monitor on his desk flashed to life, “Establishing connection. One moment please.”

“Temple of the Most Holy Ennead on Kur-gal,” a voice came over the speakers, but no picture followed.

“This is Master Ianus Akeru of the Bahn Se’leen, I have urgent business with Master Selwyn Avrum.”

“Jade Moon?” The voice laughed, “What does the noble Jade Moon need with the Camenae.”

“That is private. Could you please connect me with Master Avrum.”

“He is not here. He serves at the Temple of Samara the Rogue on the southern continent, but surely you already knew that.”

“Could you please connect me through?”

“One moment, please.”

The silence bothered Ianus. It seemed to last too long. ‘What could be taking them so long?’

“This is Master Selwyn Avrum of the Samara Temple. I’m told you have business with me, but I’m afraid, I’ve never heard of you.” Again there was no picture.

“I have to ask you. Do you remember an Ihy Khem?”

Selwyn was quiet for a moment. “I have not heard that name for many years. Is everything all right?”

Ianus explained the attack at the library and Ihy’s current condition. “I heard you helped him before. Do you think you could do it again?”

“I may be able to help you. I can’t make any promises, but I will try. But before we agree to anything, there may be consequences.”

“Anything you could do would be welcome.”

“Is Maya or Pryor Isann with you? I really need to talk to them.”

Ianus told him that they were, and patched him through. Flopping into his bed, he smiled. Soon he would be at Kur-gal. Soon someone who could help his father would be tending his wounds.

Reaching over to his nightstand, he picked up his Benben-stone. He ran his fingers across the golden lettering and watched with amazement as the Bennu burst into life.

It flew around the room twice, and landed at the foot of his bed. It looked at him with its large green eyes.

“You really are a beautiful thing,” he said, “I wonder if you even know what I’m saying.”

“I do, sir,” the bird responded, bowing its head.

“You can talk?” Ianus sat up in the bed, and scooted himself back against the headboard.

“Why, yes sir. All of my kind can talk, if we are made well.”

Ianus looked at the bird’s feet, which left indentations in the covers, “But you’re just a hologram.”

“Begging your pardon, sir, but I am an Eidolon, much more than a mere hologram. I have my own awareness, and I am able to interact with my surroundings.”

“I can see that. Do you have a name? I am Ianus Akeru.”

“O, I know who you are, sir. I am called Nahimanna, and to answer your next question— Yes, I am female.”

“Can you read minds?” Ianus’ eyes widened.

“No, sir. I cannot read minds, as you say. I could see the question in your eyes, and on your face. You are an augur, I am sure you can do the same.”

“I don’t know. I’ve never really tried.”

“Try sir? Why would you need to try? Have you been, how shall we say, less than open to your talents?”

“Let’s just say, I haven’t been the most friendly.”

“You seem quite personable to me.”

Ianus laughed, “Really? That’s a good thing, who made you?”

“I cannot tell you that, sir. My maker was quite adamant about that.”

“Why?”

“Modesty, I suppose, sir. He did not give me a reason why. He only said I was not to tell you, or anyone.”

“How old are you?”

“Age, sir? I am afraid I am not good with time. One day seems to be a thousand years, and a thousand years feels as one day. Time is a very relative thing when you examine it closely. I’m sorry. I do wish I could tell you, but I’m really not sure.”

“I know what you mean. I’m not very good with time myself. My father says it’s one of my failings. Personally, I see it as a strength. I am unconstrained by time.”

They both laughed. Nahimanna was nothing like Ianus had imagined. She was more than a toy. She was almost alive.

“Are you ever lonely in the Benben-stone?”

“How? I am never alone.”

“There are more of you in there?”

“O, no. I am the only one in the stone, but that does not mean I can’t talk to others of my kind.”

“You have a transmitter?”

“No, sir. I don’t need one. Every eidolon shares a strong bond with others made by the same hands. I can hear them singing, and sometimes I join them. We are all more connected than your kind likes to think we are.”

“So you just sit in the stone, and occasionally sing? That doesn’t sound like much of a life.”

“That is not all I do, sir. I also spend my time waiting for you to need me. I am more than a toy you know.”

“So I am coming to realize. I hope this isn’t as insulting as it sounds, but what could you do for me?”

“That is not an insult sir, you are asking for my services. I am here whenever you may need insight or inspiration. I may not be a great conversationalist, but I am rather talented at giving advice.”

“Advice about anything?”

“Whatever your heart desires. I am here for you. Ask for my help, and you shall receive it.”

“You are not my slave, you know.”

“I am no one’s slave, nor will I ever be. I am in your service. You called me, and I came.”

“So you have. Tell me, do you know what is going on?”

“I think any who are sensitive to the tides know what is going on. It is time for me to go. Not for long, I will return when I am called. One thought I leave you. Have you seen the eyes that watch you?”

With that said, Nahimanna erupted in flames and returned to the stone.

Ianus wondered what she meant about the eyes watching him. Nervously, he looked around the room. Laughing, he fell back into his bed. If someone was watching him they wouldn’t leave cameras out in the open now would they.

Soon they would arrive at Kur-gal, and Selwyn would heal his father. Excitement filled him, his legs began to tingle. He had to walk. He couldn’t just lie around all day.

Once outside his room, he didn't know where to go. Most of the people he wanted to talk to would be on the bridge. Lazily walking through the halls, he tried to memorize all of the labs and workshops that he passed. For a while, his mind wandered.

'How are we going to make this ship self-sufficient. The order will never fund a ship like this,' he thought out as many moneymaking ventures as he could that would not violate the rule. It wouldn't be easy. Ihy must have had a plan; and as soon as Selwyn restored him to full health, then he could tell them. That is if he woke up. Ianus shook his head.

He found himself standing outside the bridge. On the other side of the door, Ianus smiled at the sight of Pryor in the captain's chair. Daru sat with Maya at one of the science stations on the right side of the room.

"Do you want your seat?" Pryor asked.

"I told you, it's not my chair. And no, I'll take the tactical station if you don't mind. I think it suits my personality better."

Daru laughed, "Maybe if you call it a Weapon's station, but tactics have never been your strong suit."

"Laugh it up," said Ianus, "You know you've never been able to beat me at any duel."

"You're faster than I am. That does not mean that you're a better tactician."

"Now you two," Maya said, "You're not going to start squabbling again. I am not in the mood to play referee. You're almost as bad as Aashen and Tuun."

"I heard that," Tuun's voice broke over the intercom, "Just because I've joined with the ship, doesn't make me deaf."

"Sorry about that," said Maya, "I didn't mean anything by it. You and your brother do bicker often."

"Hey Tuun," said Daru, "You don't listen in on people in their quarters do you?"

"No. That is not possible. I cannot hear someone unless their voice is caught on one of the security monitors, and as you know, there are no monitors in the private rooms."

"But the computer can hear us in our rooms."

"I am not the computer am I," Tuun paused, "We are going to exit hyperspace outside the system. The gravity wells of the exterior planets make hyperspace too risky in this region of space."

Daru's station flashed to life. "That was the smoothest exit I believe I have ever experienced," she said.

"You are a great Helmsman, Tuun," said Ianus.

"Thank you," said Tuun, "Your sentiments are welcomed."

Daru shifted in her seat, "There is another ship exiting from hyperspace. From the markings on the vessel—it's a Tengu ship!"

"Pirates?" Ianus asked.

"They are arming weapons," said Daru.

Ianus' hands fluttered across the console, "Shields up. Weapon systems active. They are firing on us!"

"This is shipmaster Kesin," a voice came over the Comm. System, "Lower your shields, and prepare to be boarded."

"Shipmaster?" Ianus gasped, "Why would their Helmsman be hailing us?"

The ship rocked. “The guild will hear about this,” said Tuun.

The bridge shook again.

“If you ever need me,” a ghostly voice filled Ianus mind, “Then call my name.”

“Aft shields at fifty percent,” Daru shouted.

“Who are you?” Ianus muttered under his breath.

“Ianus!” Daru yelled holding on to her seat as the ship lurched violently, “Fire back!”

“Who are you?” Ianus muttered again.

“Transfer weapons control to my station!” Daru shouted.

“What are you doing in my head?” Ianus said under his breath. “I remember you. On the day of my initiation, and just afterwards. You hit me. Who are you? Why are you in my mind? What do you want from me?”

“I am Hlachar Cythraul, the shining one. If you ever need me, just call on my name.”

“Their shields are failing,” said Maya.

“Their weapons system is damaged,” said Daru.

“What are you doing in my head?” Ianus growled.

“I am offering my services to one of my children. If you ever need me...”

“I know, just call your name. I got it!”

“Their weapons are down,” said Daru, “They’re backing off. They are opening a gate to hyperspace.”

Ianus shook his head, and wiped his eyes. He felt like he had just woken from a disturbed night’s sleep.

“What happened?” He asked dizzily.

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” said Daru.

CHAPTER TEN: THE MESSENGER

The bridge was silent. Everyone stared at Ianus, obviously curious about his inability to act, even though they did not ask. They could see the distress clearly on his face. Whatever had happened, they knew better than to pry it out of him. He would explain when he was ready.

“We are receiving a signal from Kur-gal,” said Tuun.

Pryor looked over at Ianus, but he was trapped in his own mind, “Put it through,” said Pryor, hoping his nephew would be all right.

The main view screen flickered to life. The lion-like face of an Ubasti surveyed the bridge. “Kur-gal station here,” he said, rolling his R’s in the back of his throat. “We have monitored weapons fire in your vicinity. Do you require assistance?”

“We were able to fight off the ship, but you should send out a patrol, they may come back,” Pryor glanced back at Ianus.

“What is your business on Kur-gal?”

“We are here to visit Selwyn Avrum, may we have clearance for the landing gate?”

“Clearance granted.” The Ubasti punched something into the console in front of him, “Continue your approach and please, enjoy your visit.”

The screen went black.

Daru transferred her monitor display to the main viewer.

The image of a bright blue orb grew larger. A silvery white dot expanded into the gleaming station. Three concentric rings spun around; lights flashed brilliant reds and blues around the outermost ring. Below the station, a thin line hung down, suspending three concave dishes back to back. Lightning swirled and danced around the dishes.

Tuun directed the Valkyrie toward the dishes.

“Transmitting clearance code,” said Tuun.

A red beam shot from the Valkyrie’s starboard wing.

A cerulean bubble swelled in the heart of the dish, splattering open, the entire dish went deep blue.

Lightning flashed around the Valkyrie as she entered the vortex. The image on the view screen went deep blue and melted away into the beautiful scene of Kur-gal’s southernmost ocean and cloudless sky.

In the distance, the verdant green coastline came into view, followed by the golden wood of the docking berths.

“We are receiving a message from the port,” said Maya. She quickly looked over at Pryor, who excused himself and left the bridge. Selwyn is waiting for us at the dock.”

Relief engulfed Ianus, “We should prepare Ihy to move.”

“Aashen has already taken care of that.” Maya said, her eyes fixed on the view screen.

The ship glided into its berth and came to a full stop. The docking hatch opened. Ianus and Daru walked down the ramp.

“Is Ihy with you?” An Ubasti man with a long black mane, and black striped fur wearing dusty tan robes asked.

“Are you Selwyn Avrum?” Ianus asked hopefully.

“Yes, and you are Ianus Akeru and Daru Shaheen. I’m sorry for not introducing myself, but if Ihy is as bad off as you said, then we don’t have a lot of time for pleasantries.”

Aashen came down the ramp pushing Ihy on a stretcher. He was followed by Pryor pushing another stretcher with a blanket covering a humanoid form.

“Take them up to the temple,” said Selwyn, “I have acolytes up there waiting for you.”

Aashen and Pryor nodded, and walked past them.

“If you don’t mind me asking,” Daru said, “Selwyn isn’t an Ubasti name is it?”

“No, it’s not. I was orphaned as a baby during a border skirmish with the Uridimmu. Thankfully, I was found by a group of Raewyn who were traveling through the sector. They named me and raised me. Taught me everything I know about medicine and the maker’s art.”

“That’s how you were able to help Ihy,” Ianus said.

“Yes, I have a very good understanding of the Raewyn physique,” said Selwyn.

“I was raised on one of their worlds. You cannot imagine the things I have seen. I can speak seven languages, and yet I’m still incapable of finding a word to describe it.”

They walked up a small path lined by weeping willows. On a knoll in the clearing, the gold and jewel encrusted onion domes of the temple came into view. Amazingly detailed murals and mandalas were painted on the exteriors, and large stained glass windows glinted in the sun.

“Not a bad post is it?” Selwyn grinned.

“Not at all,” said Daru.

“Selwyn?” Ianus said, desperation filling his voice, “Will you be able to help him?”

“I should be able to, but I can’t make any promises. Don’t get your hopes up too high. A lot will depend on him. He may not want to live. If he gives up, there is nothing I can do for him. Pray for his quick recovery, and that I will know what to do to save him.”

After Selwyn had left to help Ihy, Ianus and Daru roamed around the Temple grounds. The dark red masonry harmonized with the vibrant green grasses, and the violet leaves of the trees.

“I’ve never seen anything quite like this before,” Daru said, marveling at the spires, minarets, and domes.

Behind the temple was a small garden full of Vermillion lilies and violet daffodils with twinkling stamens. Several stone benches with ornately carved legs were scattered among the vibrant foliage.

Pryor sat in the center of the garden counting his prayer beads. Across from him, Ianus and Daru took a seat on another bench and smiled at him.

"I haven't seen you this happy for a long time," Daru said, prying her eyes away from the temple.

"Well, I've been worried about my father. Now that he's here, there are less uncertainties."

"Don't forget what Selwyn said. There are no guaranties that he will be able to help Ihy."

"I would rather focus on the positive. That's all I have, especially with all the strange things that have been happening lately."

"Like the attack by the Tengu?"

Ianus stood up and began to pace in front of the bench. "Yes, like on the bridge."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"So many mysteries," Ianus shook his head. "I heard a voice, friendly, calming, oddly inviting. It offered me help. Part of me wanted to say yes—to take whatever it was offering. But there was another voice, quiet, deep in the recesses of my mind keeping me from saying yes."

"Do you know whose voice it was?"

"It said it was Hlachar Cythraul."

"Cythraul?" Daru stuttered, "Are you sure?"

"Yes, I think so. Why? Do you recognize the name?"

Daru stood up and joined Ianus in his pacing, "I hope not. According to legend, a Raewyn named Hlachar Cythraul incited Dov Lavan to rebel against the Enmadra, but that was over four thousand years ago. He couldn't still be alive, could he?"

"Who knows? The Raewyn aren't exactly like the rest of us, are they? For all we know he could be. But why would he be interested in my initiation?"

"What do you mean?"

"I heard that voice once before, just after my initiation. It said, 'This is not your time,' and threw me across the room. If he is who he says he is, why would he be so interested in me?"

"I'm sure if Sakkara was here, she would say, 'Ianus is more important than he thinks.' As for me, I just don't know. Maybe it is just someone playing tricks on you."

"Not even Tuun is that cruel. Maybe it is Cythraul."

"And what if it is him? It doesn't matter. Samara recorded many stories about people being harassed by others claiming to be Cythraul. She portrays it as one more peril of being a Maker."

"So she says he was still alive over a thousand years ago, that might mean he is still alive."

"No," Daru sat back down, "She doesn't take sides. She leaves it up to the reader's interpretation. They could have been imposters. This could be an imposter."

"But what if it isn't?"

"But, but, but, just let it go. If it happens again just fight it off. We have enough to worry about without searching for more. Please, forget about it, for me."

Ianus stopped walking. He took a deep breath, and rocked on his heels.

Daru's eyes were full of tears. Ianus held her gaze. Pain filled him, he could not stand to see her cry. He tried to look away. He had to look away or he would fold, giving in to her.

"I'm sorry, Daru," Ianus knelt down in front of her, "But I can't let go of this. If Cythraul has returned, I have to find out what he's up to. Please understand."

"If I have to, I will. But you have to let me help you."

"Maybe that's what he meant?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Maybe I should go to Adrakaya to find the A'nath-ari? Maybe dad knew about this, and that's why he said I should go?"

"Ianus, I thought we had settled this. No one who enters the forbidden land has ever returned."

"That's not true," Pryor said, looking up from his prayers, "Ihy did."

"What did you say?" Ianus and Daru said in unison.

"What? O, forget I said anything, and don't bring this up again. There are some secrets that kill. I have to go." Pryor stood up and walked away.

After five days on Kur-gal, the crew of the Valkyrie had settled in. They lived aboard ship, but came and went as they pleased. Tara spent most of her days and late into the night exploring the creeks and gullies around the temple and beach.

It reminded her of her home on Adrakaya, and the old creek she used to play at when she was a child.

The water was cold on her bare feet, but refreshing. Splashing through the creek, Tara stopped, and stared at the gnarled trunk of a large tree. She scrambled up the muddy bank. She reached up and grabbed on the low branches. Pulling herself into the tree, she found a sturdy limb to sit upon. She sat comfortably and rested her back against the trunk.

"Is it really time to play?" The ghastly, metallic voice of Panthera broke the silence.

"Master?" Tara exclaimed, steadying herself on the branch.

"Have you forgotten me? It has not been that long since we last talked."

"No, master, I am just surprised to see you here." Tara watched the black mass of fluttering robes in the shadow of the tree. "I did not know that you were coming."

"Plans change. We may be having a problem with Faroh. His thoughts have become distant. I cannot hear him anymore. I fear he may have betrayed us."

"Faroh? I don't believe it. He is loyal to the song."

"He was," Panthera's voice rang like a cracked bell, "But now he is under the influence of another. Someone who claims a great name for himself. Another ghost from the past, much like me. This one, though, I have my doubts about him."

"Who is it?" Tara shivered.

"That is none of your concern. He is my problem not yours."

"Your problems are my problems, my Lord."

"Good answer, but I assure you, he is my problem alone. I have been too focused on revenge, too concerned that Ihy Khem would stand in my way and prevent me from my return to power. A great darkness looms on the horizon, a darkness that I had not

foreseen. Things are changing. The tapestry weaves a new picture. Everything falls apart, the center cannot hold.”

Tara climbed down from the tree and bowed. “What is the matter?”

“I can only tell you what I see.”

“Then I will listen.”

“The eagle that once flew free is now bound, and the wolves howl in the distance. The sabers rattle and the drums are being beaten with a fury unmatched for millennia. The crowds close their eyes and cry out, ‘Faith, we have all we need.’ Again, the wolves howl. The people gather in the streets and call out, ‘Peace, Peace.’ The dreamer will have his day. The three sisters serve their fate. I am laying dead on the ground, a sacrifice to an unholy terror. I will not die this way!”

“What does it mean?”

“I do not know,” Panthera sounded concerned, “My prescience fails me. No interpretation comes. Have you been reciting the litany?”

“Not as often as I should.”

“At least you’ve stopped lying to me. You have stopped, haven’t you?”

“Yes, it is futile. You will know the truth anyway.”

“You are troubled about your complicity in the attack on Ihy,” Panthera wrapped his cold, hard arm around Tara.

“Yes. I can’t keep the image out of my mind,” Tara leaned into his frosty, metallic chest.

“It hurts you to see others suffer. I understand. Unnecessary pain is troubling. His death was meant to be quick and painless. It is unfortunate that he was made to suffer.”

“Pardon me, but it is strange to hear you say that. I thought you wanted him dead.”

“I do, but he is an honorable man. He deserved to die with honor. That troubles you, doesn’t it?”

“It does. I do not have your strength.”

“Just remember your place. You are like me, merely a cog in the machine. Serve your purpose or the machine will replace you. It is as simple as that.”

“I see. I will try to remember that.”

“Good. There are others who need to be sorted out before we proceed. We still have a lot of work ahead of us. Our time is coming closer.”

“What do you mean sorted out?”

“I have to know where they stand. It is time I made my presence known. I cannot stay in the shadows forever. It is time I start gathering more followers.”

“Are you sure that’s wise.”

“It is the only option open to us.” He gave her two beautifully embellished envelopes, with black wax seals holding them closed, “You will take these letters and deliver them to Master Isann, and Master Barami,” handing her a plain white envelope, “This one is for you. You will, of course, not tell them where the messages came from.”

Tara flipped through the three sealed envelopes and looked at the names printed on them, “I will obey.”

In the galley of the Valkyrie, Pryor and Barami were playing cards.

“I am surprised you aren’t exploring the city or the countryside,” said Barami as he discarded.

“You forget, I’ve been traveling throughout the galaxy hunting down the Ual-leen. I just want to sit back and relax before I go back out on the prowl.”

“O yes, the order does keep you on the move. Me on the other hand, they like to keep me in the thick of the bureaucracy. I do not know why. I guess they think I like it or something.”

“Maybe they think you’re good at your work.”

Barami discarded.

“Don’t you think you could use that king?” Pryor asked.

“O, sorry. I wasn’t thinking. I have a lot on my mind. I was hoping that a quick game would get my mind off business.”

“What have you been working on?”

“I can’t say. Master Theron has been clear about that. All I can tell you is that rumors have been circulating, and there is much unrest between worlds. Something is happening. We’re not sure what it is yet, but be ready for a storm. Thunder rumbles on the horizon. It won’t be long until the lightning strikes.”

“Are you sure?”

“It is all the Camarilla can talk about. I wish I could tell you more, but I can’t.”

“So, that’s why we haven’t seen you at all on this visit. I hope you are at least getting some rest. It sounds like you are going to need it.”

“We all will.”

The door to the galley opened. Timidly, Tara walked in, her head hung low and her breath stilted.

“Hello Tara,” said Barami, bowing his head, “I was hoping to see you before I had to go back to my meetings. How have you been?”

“Honestly,” said Tara, not taking her eyes off the floor, “I have been better.”

“Is there anything I can do?”

“No. There is nothing anyone can do,” Tara held up two sealed envelopes, “A messenger delivered these for you.”

Barami took the envelopes from her hand. Passing Pryor the one with his name on it, Barami opened and read the letter:

Master Barami,

Your service to the Light of Truth is an example for your brothers and sisters in the Order. The time has come to make a stand for the truth, before the window of opportunity passes us by.

Meet me in the temple courtyard in three days at midnight to discuss the future. Do not be late, and do not tell anyone else. I will know if you do and will not come.

A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

When Barami finished reading, he looked over at Pryor’s letter. It was identical.

“It’s beginning again,” Pryor said, closing his eyes.

“Where did you get these letters?” Barami demanded.

“I was on the temple grounds,” Tara stuttered, “And a messenger gave them to me.”

“What did they look like?”

“He wore a cloak, I couldn’t see his face.”

“Did you notice anything strange about him? Do you know who it was?”

“I am sorry, I didn’t pay close attention. I didn’t think it was important. I’m sorry, Master, if I could answer your questions, I would, but I can’t. I’m sorry to fail you.” Tears streamed down her cheeks.

“Sit down, girl,” said Barami, pain etched on his face, “Don’t blame yourself. You couldn’t have known. How many letters have you delivered to me in the past few months? I don’t blame you for not seeing the significance of one more.”

Tara slumped into the chair, and collapsed onto Barami’s shoulder.

Barami wrapped his arms around her, and rubbed her back, “It’s all right. It’s not your fault. Calm down. Calm down and don’t cry. It’ll be all right.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” Pryor asked.

Tara sat up and dried her eyes, “No, I’ll be fine. I’m sorry, I’ve been having a hard time controlling my emotions lately.”

“Don’t bother with apologies, my girl,” said Barami, “There is much to do, and little time for all of this. I know it’s hard to do your work when you don’t feel like it. Believe me, I know, but the work has to be done. You’ll get through it. I know you will. Now promise me you will tell no one about these messages.”

“I promise.”

“Good. We have to make arrangements.”

“If this is what it looks like,” said Pryor, “Then I am afraid we should practice for battle. It could be an ambush.”

“Either way,” said Barami, “We have to go, and come what may, we have to find out what’s going on.”

Early the next morning, Ianus awoke to the sound of an incoming message. Scrambling out of bed, he pulled on a bathrobe and answered the call.

Selwyn’s face appeared on the monitor, “I’m sorry, I didn’t wake you did I?”

“Don’t worry about it, what can I do to help you?”

“Please gather the others, I’ve done all I can do. Meet me at the temple, there is a lot to discuss.”

“We will be there in thirty minutes.”

After getting dressed, Ianus ran around the ship waking people up and telling them to go to the temple.

Ianus sat on the steps of the temple. He cradled his forehead in his hands, as he pumped his legs to relieve his anxiety. The morning fog was still thick on the ground, and long lines of sunlight danced through the trees. One by one, the others emerged from the mist. Aashen, Tuun, and their Ceeri arrived first. Then Maya, Pryor, and Daru arrived. Finally, Tara, Barami, Sakkara, and Khensu walked out of the fog.

“Are you sure about this?” Tara asked, “Ihy is all better.”

Ianus shook his head, “I hope so. I’m sorry. I was too excited, I may have said things I shouldn’t have.”

“I can understand,” said Daru, “Believe me I can understand.”

The doors to the temple opened. Selwyn stepped out with his hands folded over his heart. "It is good to see you are all punctual."

"Where's Ihy?" Ianus asked.

"One thing at a time," said Selwyn, "Some things have to be said slowly."

"Is every thing all right?"

"Patience. Please let me say what needs to be said. When you brought Ihy to me, he was very close to death. The three parts of him were at war. The Shedu, the Sukallin, and the Raewyn are very different from each other. The Shedu and the Sukallin have learned to live together, but the Raewyn is not used to being burdened with flesh. It was never meant to have blood coursing through it. I was able to help, some, but I wasn't able to save all of him."

"What does that mean?" Ianus said, jumping to his feet, "What do you mean?"

Selwyn lowered his head, "Arun!" He said in a loud voice, "Please join us."

The doors of the temple opened, and a man walked out wearing black robes. His skin was ash white, colorless, and his eyes were solid black, but his face was familiar. It was Ihy. Somehow he was younger, but it was him.

"Father!" Ianus exclaimed

The man stared at him and furrowed his brow. "I know you," he said, a metallic ring in his voice, "But I do not know you."

"What have you done to him?" Ianus scowled at Selwyn.

"I did what I had to do," said Selwyn, "I saved what I could save, but he was pretty far gone when you arrived. He still lives, but he has not acclimated to his new body yet."

"*New body?*" Ianus said, "By all the stars in heaven, he's a chimera. You have blasphemed the holy rule, and made him one of those horrors."

Selwyn looked away, "I did not blaspheme Rule of the Bahn Se'leen, or that of the Camenae," he said quietly, "Both rules forbid submitting oneself to the machine. Once the systems acclimate to one another, he *will* be in control. He *will* not fall to the machine."

"If you will forgive me," said Tuun gravely, "But no chimera has ever withstood the temptation of its new body."

"But none of them were Raewyn, were they," Selwyn responded. "The part of him that is Raewyn will assert itself once the Kishan in him settles itself."

"So why did you call him Arun, and not Ihy?" Ianus asked.

"Because he is something new. The Kishan is now mediating the differences between the other three. Besides, it will be safer to pass him off as one of the three Kishanu that came with the ship. No one will question a Kishan, but a chimera could draw unnecessary questions. Just talk to him. You will find he is the same person you always knew."

"Why are you talking about me like I'm not here?" Arun asked looking back and forth at them, "You look familiar." He said, his eyes settling on Ianus.

"I was... am your son, Ianus, don't you remember me?"

Arun walked closer to him and ran his fingers down Ianus' cheek, "I'm sorry. It is distant. I can almost remember, but I remember you having other parents. I was not your first father."

Ianus' eyes glistened as tears welled up in his eyes, "This is not what I expected. I wanted to help, but not like this. I wanted my father made whole, not made into an abomination."

Arun turned around to face Selwyn, "Am I an abomination?"

"No," said Selwyn, "You are the boy's father restored to him."

"This thing is not my father!" Ianus shouted, "This thing is an abomination, a horror! If this is what has become of my father, then my father is truly dead!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN: THE RED DRAGON

Ianus couldn't take his eyes off of Arun. It looked so much like his father, even sounded like him. What was it? Fear, anger, and hatred churned inside him. Arun took an unsteady step toward Ianus; Ianus grimaced. He turned his back on the chimera, and ran. Down the steps, around the temple, and past the garden, he ran with only one thought in his mind, away from that monster and his ship. Dodging the tree trunks and the low-lying branches, his feet pummeled the ground. Harder, faster, must get away, must escape.

The forest opened to the grassy shore of a lake. Ianus didn't stop. He ran out into the water, splashing and thrashing about in the blue-green lake. He let go and fell flat into the cold water. Rising out of the lake, he screamed. Birds leapt from the treetops and circled the lake.

"This was not supposed to happen!" He yelled with all his strength. "I did everything I had to do. He was suppose to survive," he began to cry, "He was suppose to survive."

Ianus collapsed, and began to float. The water was refreshing. He rolled onto his back.

"Holy Maker of all that is," said Ianus, still crying, "Why did it have to happen this way? I did all that was asked of me, except one thing. Should I have gone to Adrakaya? Should I have sacrificed myself to the A'nath-ari? Would the loss of my life restore his? A life for a life, debt and payment, is that it?"

"Where are the visions now that I need them?" he cried out. "Where are the visions now? Where is the voice to whisper in my ear? Have you forsaken me? Have I forsaken you? Help me! O please, God, help me!"

Ianus folded his knees into his chest and submerged himself under the water. In the cool embrace, he forgot his pain, forgot his life, and forgot to breathe. Splashing out of the water, he gasped for air. He treaded water for a moment, and then swam to shore.

Slowly, he walked out of the lake, and sat on a large rock looking at the mist, he felt the sorrow again. He heard footsteps in the forest behind him. Two sets of footsteps, both women, both makers, Ianus could tell by the way their feet delicately landed on the leaves and twigs without crushing or snapping them.

"Hello Maya, hello Daru," Ianus said waving behind him.

Daru and Maya walked around, and stood before him. He could see the concern in their eyes. Daru reached her hand toward his shoulder. He pulled away, and stared at the water.

"How did you know it was us?" Daru asked. She rested her hand on Ianus' shoulder.

"A good guess. I was sure you would come after me."

“For what it’s worth,” said Maya, “Tuun read him, Arun I mean. Tuun said it was Ihy’s mind he saw.”

“And you believe him? Tuun’s loyalty was always to Ihy, even though he is trapped in that monstrosity.”

“You have to face the fact that Arun is your father.”

“Then my father is truly dead. He would never allow anything like this to happen to him. He knew the rule. He obeyed the rule.”

“The rule has not been broken. Selwyn is right, as long as he maintains his control over the machine—the rule has not been broken.”

“And our covenant,” said Daru, “Our covenant with Tien Shaa is all we have. He promised that the machine will never overcome his children, as long as we are faithful. We can not abandon him now, or he will loose the fight.”

“So I should just pretend that nothing’s changed. I should just imagine that this Chimera is my father.”

“It... He is your father!” Maya said.

“Maybe it is, but how am I suppose to accept this?”

“Why don’t you try talking to him? Letting your emotions get the better of you and running off... How childish? Please, try talking to him.”

“And what? Reminisce about the good old days before he was in danger of becoming an abomination?”

“Ianus!” Maya said, sternly, “If you can’t accept what is, pretend he is a new friend and get to know him better.”

“How?”

“Come now, you’ve made friends before, don’t play coy with me. Why don’t you do something with him that you used to do with Ihy? Maybe you will find that your father has always been with you.” Maya patted him on the shoulder and walked away.

“We’ve been through bad times before,” said Daru, sliding her arms around Ianus. “We can get through this.”

“We were children then. Other people did all of the hard work.”

“I’m not afraid to get my hands dirty.”

“But how dirty will they be before this is all over. I will talk to the abomination, but I make no promises.”

Daru stayed with Ianus for the rest of the day. She tried to comfort him. She even tried to get him to be in the same room as Arun, but Ianus would not pass the threshold. By that evening, she had convinced Ianus to think about talking to him.

The next morning, she could not find Ianus on the ship. She asked around, and found that he had returned to the lake to go fishing. She thought about joining him, but she decided against it. He needed time to heal.

She spent most of her day running diagnostics on the ship, she had to make sure everything was ready for flight. They had finished what they had come to do, and Ianus was acting as though he was more than ready to leave.

With the diagnostics finished, Daru left the bridge and went out to the pier beside the Valkyrie. On the end of the pier, she saw Tara sitting with her legs dangling over the water.

“So,” said Daru as she approached, “How are you taking all of this?”

“You mean Arun? Well, if it means that Ihy survived, then I’m happy.”

“It does. You took the attack on him really personally, didn’t you?”

“An attack on the one is an attack on all. Isn’t that what the rule says?”

Daru thought for a moment, “I guess your right. I think Ianus is taking all of this a little too hard. We set out to save Ihy’s life, and we did. We may have to call him Arun Namid from now on, but I’m sure he’ll be strong enough to fight off the machine.”

“I’m not so sure. The song can be very seductive... I’ve been reading a lot lately, and the stories make it clear that once the machine calls, few have ever been able to refuse.”

“Well, if anyone can, he can. I’m sure of that. Honestly, I’m more worried about Ianus than I am about Arun. He’s always acted on impulse rather than rational thought, but lately he’s been even more erratic.”

“In what way? You told me that his talent as an augur only recently asserted itself. That has to leave your head spinning. Can you imagine waking up one day and having visions? If it were me, it would turn my life inside out.”

“Yeah, Tuun said his visions were becoming uncontrollable. That could be worse than what Arun’s going through. It is one thing to loose to the machine, then you only become submissive. But when you loose control to the spirit, your only thought is the assimilation of all life. There aren’t enough worlds to sate that appetite for control. The machine controls you. The spirit controls all. What is left?”

“Only the middle way, going past fear, desire, and duty to the place where only honesty remains.”

“Honesty? What are you being honest to?”

“Life. Fear, desire, duty, they all make you lie, or at the very least pretend. Tien Shaa said, ‘When you can stand at the center of the fire, with only sincerity in your heart, the flames can no longer touch you. Only then will you see that you are not alone, and never were. You will emerge unharmed and will not even smell of smoke.’ Don’t you remember?”

Tara rubbed her hands together, “Can that really be done? It sounds like a dream, a phantom on the horizon always out of reach.”

“Pryor says it can be done. He says he’s seen it in many of the people he trained with.”

“Then why are you so afraid for Ianus? Doesn’t that mean you’re just blinding yourself? Why should I believe you when you don’t believe yourself?”

Daru lost her words. She watched the waves roll in under the pier. “I’ve never thought about it that way before.”

“He’s always on your mind. You hardly ever talk about anything else. There has to be a reason. You two grew up together, didn’t you?”

“Yeah, I came to temple when I was six. That’s when I first met Ianus.”

“So would you say he’s like a brother to you?”

“No, I have a brother. He used to visit me in temple.”

“There has never been another person who took up most of *my* thoughts,” Tara kicked her feet.

“He does,” Daru paused, and furrowed her brow. “I can’t get him out of my mind. I can’t imagine my life without him. Maybe that’s what Maya was talking about: I think I love him.”

The next night, Tara carefully made her way out of the Valkyrie and into the forest beside the temple.

“Are they coming?” Panthera asked from behind one of the trees.

“They are. They took your note quite seriously,” Tara looked around, “They didn’t tell anyone, and they’ve been nervously watching the clock all day. They will arrive on time.”

“Good,” Panthera looked past her. “They are coming, and will arrive soon. I want you to wait here. If I need you, I will call for you.”

Tara bowed, and donned her mask. Crouching behind a small bush, she watched Panthera glide into the shadow of one of the spires.

Midnight, Pryor and Barami arrived in the courtyard.

“It is good to see that you are still punctual,” said Panthera from the shadow. “I am glad you are not late. I really wanted to see you again.”

“Do we know you?” Pryor asked, “I don’t recognize your voice. Maybe if I saw your face, it would jog our memory.”

“One thing at a time. We cannot go out of turn. The method is the message. You have served the Jade Moon well. Loyalty means a lot to you, but I have to ask: What has it given you in return? Your families are dead, and madness consumes your wise leaders.”

“We have proven our loyalty to the order,” said Barami, “We are repaid in kind.”

“You mean they pay your loyalty for loyalty? Is that all? They hide the meaning of the Song from you. They tell you to listen to the rhythm, that the words are unimportant. They have betrayed their covenant with the One who is. They teach you heresy, but since you do not know the words of the song, you do not even know.”

“What you ask is forbidden by our covenant with Tien Shaa,” said Pryor. “He knew the words seek to control, while the rhythm brings freedom.”

“So you fall back on your broken messiah? How touching! I offer you a better way. A sure way, that if you follow it, it will guide your every step. You will never be lost again.”

“I am not lost now. I know who I am, and where I came from.”

“But do you know where you are going?”

“I go where I am moved.”

Panthera laughed, “You can only move, you have no where to stand. You reject the grace I offer you?”

“I reject the slavery you offer me!”

“You fool!” Panthera leapt into the light, sword in hand, “If you reject life, there is only death!”

Panthera ran at Pryor, who dodged. Spinning around behind him, Pryor formed a double-edged sword. Panthera’s robes fluttered in the breeze.

The blades clashed, sparks flew from them. Panthera kicked, hooking his foot behind Pryor’s knee. As he lunged forward, he pulled his leg back.

Pryor fell on his back, and rolled quickly to the right to avoid Panthera’s sword.

Barami charged Panthera, a staff in his hand.

Panthera leapt over him, and landed laughing, "You dare challenge me? My boy, that was a mistake you will regret!" His periapt flashed, a dark cloud enshrouded Pryor. "One at a time."

Pryor struggled against the darkness, but could not move.

"Don't worry about him, Master Barami. If I wanted to kill him, I would not resort to magic tricks. I would simply slay him."

Barami stared at Pryor for a moment, but quickly turned his attention to Panthera's shadowy form descending upon him. Barami rolled hard to his left, and flipped across the courtyard.

"Is this how you fight now?" Panthera asked, "You simply run until the battle is over?"

Barami spun the staff in his hand, blades curled from each end. Slowly, he walked toward Panthera. Their weapons struck each other with a loud crash.

Barami was pushed back. The sheer power behind each blow was more than he could block. With each strike, he stepped backwards, and Panthera hit harder. Finally, Barami's staff shattered.

Dodging the blade, he tried to run, but Panthera flew through the air and pounced upon him. With a sinister laugh, he turned his sword into a club and struck Barami on the back of his head.

Tara turned away; she couldn't watch her masters fighting. She could hear Barami's anguished cries behind her. The only one who ever treated her with respect was being killed by her other master.

"Whose side am I on?" She muttered.

Meanwhile, Ianus was roaming the halls of the Valkyrie. Again, he couldn't sleep. The nightmares wouldn't stop: armies of Eidolons marching against each other, leaving nothing behind them but death and destruction.

"Maybe some fresh air," Ianus muttered under his breath.

He opened the hatch and stepped out into the cool night air. Looking up at the full moons, he sighed. The last few nights were hard. He hadn't slept well since Arun came into his life.

"What was that?" He spun around on his heels. Weapons clashed in the distance. Someone was fighting, near the temple.

Ianus ran toward the sound. There it was, in the courtyard in front of the temple. Pryor was trapped in some kind of cloud. Barami lay on the ground, blocking the ferocious attacks of a black robed maker.

The dark figure laughed, "You never dreamed your end would come so soon, did you? You have neglected your practice. I am most disappointed."

Ianus felt dizzy. His vision blurred. The black robed Maker shimmered and turned into a Red dragon.

"It was him!" Screeched a voice in Ianus' mind, "He killed my former host! He killed Heru Dhouti!"

"Who are you?" Ianus asked, "You sound different."

"Osanna, your Sukallin!" Replied the voice, "That is Karu Panthera. He killed my former host, Heru Dhouti, and your parents! He was responsible for the attack on Ihy!"

“What?” Ianus yelled, his mind filling with the knowledge of his Sukallin.

Panthera turned, “And who do we have here?”

Ianus stumbled, “Ianus Osanna Akeru!” He mustered the strength to say. “You will pay for your crimes.”

“Pay? I already have! I have had my life reduced to a living hell, for the past two decades. I have suffered my purgatory. Now is my time for glory!”

Panthera jumped into the air. Quickly, Ianus formed a scimitar, and parried.

Ianus grabbed Panthera’s wrist, and twisted him around, pulling his arm tight around Panthera’s neck.

“Before you die,” said Ianus, “You will know fear. I will break you before the end.”

Hitting Ianus in the gut with his free elbow, Panthera broke free. Light flashed, and dozens of arrows flew from his periapt.

Ianus anchored his feet, and spun his scimitar, deflecting the arrows away. Suddenly, a dark cloud engulfed him. It was hard to breathe.

“You are a good fighter, young Akeru,” Panthera crept toward him, “The first person to survive my arrows. They never missed before. I remember your father, Elkan. He was a great warrior too. Unfortunately, he lacked vision. Do you share that flaw?”

“I have seen more than you have,” said Ianus, struggling against the darkness. “I can see you are an augur, but the future hides itself from you.”

Flames flashed from Panthera’s hand, striking Ianus in the chest. Pain coursed through Ianus’ blood; he gritted his teeth to keep from screaming.

“Nothing hides from me! I have seen your fate, long ago, you will die a most terrible death.”

“But not by your hand.”

“I am the hand of destiny! The universe itself bows to my will.”

“I will never *bow* to your will!”

“But you already are. Don’t try to escape. The cloud constricts the more you struggle against it.”

Ianus closed his eyes. He began to breathe slower. Panthera continued to talk, but Ianus wasn’t listening. Sinking into his mind, he calmed his thoughts. He felt a strange tingling sensation rush over his body. A cold breath blew through him.

He couldn’t hear anything anymore. He felt a soft pressure between his eyes. Sorrow clouded his mind. He wanted to cry, to let out all of the pain that he felt. A dreamlike haze enraptured him.

Slowly, he opened his eyes. A soft luminescence surrounded him, the cloud was gone. Panthera’s steps floundered.

Ianus opened his mouth; a deep growl broke the silence. Silver claws formed around his fingertips and a double bladed axe in his right hand.

Rushing Panthera, he swung the axe at the murderer’s head.

Panthera caught the axe with his sword, but could not deflect it. Falling to his knees he scowled at Ianus from beneath his hood.

Ianus kicked off the ground, and pushed Panthera down. Bringing the axe around, Ianus slashed his chest open. Blood and sparks sputtered from the wound and he collapsed on the ground.

Standing over Panthera, Ianus smiled, "It seems the universe can no longer hear you."

Daru ran into the courtyard, "What's going on here?"

"Not now," said Ianus, "Tend to Pryor and Barami." Turning his attention back to Panthera, "Now what should I do with you? Should I turn you over to the authorities, or should I finish you off here and now?"

"Neither! Girl, save your master!"

A woman in black wearing a mask emerged from the edge of the forest.

"I know you!" Ianus screeched, "You were there the night my father was killed!"

The woman bowed her head, and drew her sword.

"I see you still need a mask. What are you afraid of?"

A chain with a hook on the end, flew from her periapt and wrapped itself around Ianus' axe. A sudden tug and the axe flew out of Ianus hand and clattered to the ground.

Ianus threw himself after it. The dark lady lunged at him, feet first. Planting her feet on his shoulders, she rolled herself up, and shoved Ianus to the ground. A quick flip and she landed on the ground next to him. She swung her sword at him.

Like a rock across a pond, Ianus skimmed the pavement. He grabbed the floor, and stood on his hands. Up into the air, he somersaulted to his feet in time to hear the woman's blade hit the ground.

Extending his hand, a chain flew from his periapt. It grappled the axe and returned to him.

The dark lady stared at him.

"Yield!" Ianus said, "And I will see you get the help that you require."

"No!" The woman said, "I will not yield."

The dark lady waved her hands in front of her chest. A vortex opened between her palms full of lightning and fire. Darts, arcs of lightning, and fireballs shot at Ianus.

Ianus dodged, and watched in horror as they turned to follow him. Running, he headed towards the forest.

Barami's jaw dropped, "I didn't teach her to fight like that!" He whispered.

Daru looked at him then at the masked woman.

Ianus stopped at the edge of the forest, turned, and knelt. A shimmering blue sphere surrounded him. The barrier absorbed the fire, lightning, and even the darts.

Looking up at the dark lady, "You must realize by now that you can not harm me. I can see through you, you know. I can see the chains that bind you. The dark fetters that even you want removed."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"O, you don't. You don't want to fight me. I can see the tension in your muscles, hear the anxiety in your breath. You are his slave. Set down your sword and be free."

The woman looked at the blade in her hand. "And then what? I have heard the song, it will ever be in my ears."

"Then listen to the rhythm, not the words."

The dark lady lowered her sword, and began to pace.

"You know in your heart what I say is truth."

The masked woman charged Ianus. He easily caught her blade with his axe.

"Why do you continue the attack?"

"I must save my master!"

“But where *is* your master?”

The lady looked over to the pool of blood where Panthera once laid.

“This can’t be,” she stammered, “Where did he go? He wouldn’t leave me here. He wouldn’t abandon one as loyal as me.”

“He has!” Ianus said, “Can’t you see you are alone? Your own master won’t even stand with you.”

“No! This isn’t right. I’ve done everything he ever asked of me.”

“So where is the To’asaa? Do you still have it? Or did you give it to him?”

“The To’asaa?”

“Return it to me, and help me find the man who killed Ihy Khem. All will be forgiven you.”

“But... I heard Master Khem survived.”

“Give me the To’asaa!”

The woman sneered at him, and leapt into the treetops.

“Aren’t you going to go after her?” Daru asked.

“No, she has some thinking to do. In time she will see the light.”

“I hope you’re right, and this isn’t a huge mistake.”

“I’ve seen this. What must be done, must be done.”

“So you know who she was?”

“No, even in my visions I see her with the mask on. Do you know who she is?”

“I have my suspicion. I only hope that I am wrong.”

CHAPTER TWELVE: AN ANGEL OF LIGHT

Daru slept well after she heard that none of Pryor or Barami's wounds were serious. The next morning, she met Ianus at breakfast. She felt a little odd in his presence. After all that she had seen last night, she didn't really know what to say.

"Are you going to sit down, or are you just going to stand there?" Ianus asked, pointing to an empty seat across the table from him.

"O, sorry," Daru sat down, and stared at her tray, "I was just thinking about last night."

"I know, I can't believe you let Karu Panthera escape."

Daru pushed her seat back, and drummed her fingers on the table. "I was a little busy. There were two injured makers, and you were on *fire!*"

"On fire? What do you mean, on fire?"

"Your entire body was engulfed in flames—I've never seen anything like it. How did you do that?"

"I didn't realize..." Images flashed through his mind, "I noticed a slight glow, but I had no idea. It started when I was fighting Panthera. He had trapped me in this cloud."

"I've heard of that. The old stories are full of tales about it. Dov Lavan was famous for it. He used it to kill everyone who got in his way, but I've never read about it affecting someone like that. In fact, I've never read about any maker who burned like you did."

Ianus rubbed his chin, "My talent was especially strong last night. Everyone I looked at was part of a web. I could see their past, present, and future."

"Even the woman in the mask?"

"Yes, I could see right through her. Her path was particularly clear."

"Could you tell who she is?"

"No. All of the faces on her path were clouded. I have no idea who she is."

"Well, I do," Daru held her tongue, "But I can't prove it."

"You can't make such allegations lightly. It could destroy her reputation."

Daru laughed, "You can't be serious, you of all people are telling me not to do something rash."

"The voice of experience. Look, I have trouble when I follow my head, and when I follow my heart. I mean. I did everything in my power to save Ihy, and look what happened."

"You're not still going on about that, are you? You haven't even talked to Arun yet."

"No, I haven't, and I don't expect to any time soon."

"You don't honestly believe that he will become an abomination. I'm tired of hearing about it."

“He already is an abomination.”

Barami entered the galley, the effects of the battle clear on his face: two black eyes, and a cut lip. He sat down next to them and rested his head in his hands.

“How are you feeling, today?” Daru asked.

“I’ve been better. And to think, I was complaining about having too much paper work, and not enough action,” he gave out a pathetic laugh.

“I guess a night like that would make bureaucracy look like a heaven,” said Ianus. “Why were you and Pryor out there in the first place?”

“We received a letter. I don’t want to believe what I’ve seen and heard. It can’t be true.”

“I know, as if we didn’t have enough trouble without Karu Panthera returning from the dead.”

“Panthera? O, yes, he and his... disciple. They attacked like nothing I’ve ever seen before.”

“But I thought you fought along side Ihy to remove Panthera from power,” said Daru.

“I did. I was there the day he was defeated. He is quite dead!”

“But you fought him last night,” said Ianus.

“Last night? That was Panthera? O, yes, the hooded figure in the black robes. He said he was Panthera, if you can believe that.”

Tara walked into the galley, got herself some juice, and sat down on the other side of Ianus and away from Barami.

“Good morning, Tara,” said Daru, “I suppose you heard about the happenings of last night?”

“Yeah, I heard,” Tara sipped her juice.

“It was the *same* mystery woman that stole the *To’asaa* on Al-Benu.”

“Really.”

“Ianus pleaded with her to *return* the *To’asaa*, and I hope she does, because if she doesn’t, she’ll be caught. And with everything that’s been going on, it won’t go well for her.”

“I hope she does, too. We need some peace around here.”

Tara waited until late in the night before she made her move. She checked to make sure that only the Kishanu were roaming around the ship. Pulling a small wooden chest out from under her bed, she opened it, and looked at the jade orb and supple leather glove of the *To’asaa*. Next to it the soft black fabric she had worn to obscure her face the night she stole it. She picked it up, and held her breath. Full of trepidation, she tied the mask. Pausing, she ran her fingers over the gem and picked up the *To’asaa*.

Quietly, she crept out of the ship onto the pier. The ocean mist loomed all around her. The cold ache of anxiety filled her chest, and rippled down her arms. Her eyes felt heavy. This had to be done. There could be no turning back.

She walked down the pier and up to the Temple doors. Cautiously, she pushed the door open. The statue of Samara the Rogue stood with her Red cape hanging from her shoulders and her red cowl silhouetting her face. The smell of incense from the day’s rites lingered on the air. Dim light in a kaleidoscope of colors cut through the darkness.

Approaching the altar, her eyes fixed on the statue of Kahlil Vamu Shaa.

“I wondered when you would get here,” said Ianus, standing up from the back pew, “You are a little later than I thought you would be.”

Tara closed her eyes, and touched her mask. “Do you know who I am?”

“A better question would be, do you know who you are.”

Tara’s face paled, “I came to return the To’asaa.”

“Have you spent much time with it in the time that you’ve had it, or have you just been hoarding it like a plundered treasure.”

“It is not my place to...”

“Open yourself. Listen with all your heart— let the power of the To’asaa wash over you.”

Tara looked down at the To’asaa in her hand. The Jade stone had a strange iridescence in the moonlight. It glimmered and gleamed, attracting her attention deeper and deeper into the heart of the gem. A smile forced itself across her face; her heart warmed. She felt like she was lost in the comforting embrace of a parent.

A cool breeze brushed across her right ear, “Resist evil, and it must flee.”

Tara screeched, and jumped back, dropping the To’asaa, she formed a sword with her own periapt, “Who said that?”

“Who said what? Did you hear the voice from the cloud? Did it open your eyes? Can you see more clearly?”

“What kind of trick are you trying to pull? You are just like the *others!* You want to control me too! It won’t work. I have seen through you. It won’t work.”

“It isn’t wise to lie to an augur. We can see behind your words. What are you so afraid of? Haven’t you faced your fears by now?”

“I fear nothing! I am the heart of the machine. I turn as it does, and the whole world turns with us.”

Ianus laughed, “I’ve heard it before, when I defeated your Master. Please don’t waste my time with litanies and false words.”

“At least I know where I stand.”

“Do you? Do you know what you want, or does guilt own you? O dear, shoulders slumped, head down. I would say it must be guilt.”

“Are you talking about me or you? I hear you are forever haunted by guilt. Don’t push your inadequacies off on me!”

“Then why did you bring the To’asaa back?” Ianus asked. “If it wasn’t guilt, then what was it? Was it shame? Your great master destroyed so easily on the eve of his return to power. Is that it? Does shame hold you down? It will steal your power, you know. Maybe that is why you don’t fight as well as you could.”

“I am not ashamed of anything I’ve ever done,” immediately Tara looked away. She couldn’t look him in the eye and lie like that.

“What’s the matter? The truth too uncomfortable for you? Do you even know who you are? I can see many things before you. Why do you wear the mask? Who must you hide from?”

“Everyone!” Tara exclaimed, “No one must ever know who I am, or what I’ve done! No one!” She began to walk toward the door, pointing her sword at Ianus.

“Are you going to kill me? I won’t resist. If it is my time, I could not stop you if I wanted to. Listen to your intuition. Walk through the illusion that surrounds you. Free

your mind, and let your imagination run free. Let go, be in the present moment. You are there, and there your true strength lies.”

Tara ran past Ianus, out the temple doors, and into the forest.

She could just hear Ianus call after her, “Your secret is safe with me!”

Leaping into the branches of a tree, she escaped into the canopy: The only place she ever felt at home. What to do now? Questions flooded her mind, she had to think.

Ianus walked back into the temple, and picked up the To’asaa off the floor in front of the altar. He bowed to the altar. As he left the temple, he made a mental note to tell Daru not to press Tara for information. This was Tara’s struggle and he knew only she could fight these demons.

Back in his room, he placed the To’asaa in his desk drawer. Remembering what Tara said to him, Ianus sat on the floor. He rested his back against the wall, and closed his eyes. He had never tried this before, but his Sukallin had made contact with him, why couldn’t he make contact with her.

He felt himself falling away from his senses. The room was more and more distant. An electric tingling in his right arm. His hematite colored Sukallin mark wriggled in his arm.

“Osanna?” Ianus said in a faint whisper, “Osanna, can you hear me?”

“I can always hear you,” the Sukallin replied, a soothing feminine voice filled his mind. “And you always hear me, even though you often don’t realize it.”

“The other night, you recognized that man I was fighting, how?”

“He killed my former host, Heru Dhouti.”

“You told me that, but why did he kill him?”

“In those days, Panthera had lost control of the Camarilla of the Jade Moon, and Heru Dhouti had taken his place. Panthera couldn’t allow that. He sent a letter to Dhouti, and to your grandfather Nusair Akeru. He said he wanted to discuss a cease-fire. Nusair didn’t believe him, in fact, I don’t think he believed anybody. He had a strong suspicious nature... Any way, they went to meet him, hoping that they could at least capture him. As you guessed, it was an ambush. Nusair was able to fight Panthera and his men off, but Heru Dhouti was mortally wounded. He died not too long after that.”

“But that would have been ages ago. My grandfather died when I was an infant. Why weren’t you given a new host then?”

“Ihy knew that I had seen and heard too much to be allowed to rejoin the sea, and should I be given a new host, their secrets could be compromised. As you will learn, over time as our memories will begin to mingle. You will come to know all that I know, and vice-a-versa. So, Ihy engineered a device to keep me alive, and sent me away to a place where I would be safe until the time was right.”

“So why were you given to me? Why after all this time were you brought back and placed in my care?”

“Well, you must understand it was for the best intentions. Every host I’ve ever had was an augur. For the last two thousand years I have witness countless prophecies, I was even there when the Vaticinars prophesied over your cradle. That changes a Sukallin — it bestows the gift upon us, and our children. You’ve got the talent and the disposition, but the talent had not awakened. It was your eighteenth birthday and you’d never had a vision. So I gave you a nudge in the right direction.”

“You what?”

“I... I shared my talent with you, it helped yours awaken. Soon our gifts will combine and you will be able to see more than any other living augur.”

“You shared your talent with me! What do you mean by that?” Ianus shivered, “My vision on my ascension day, that was from you! You put those images before my eyes! It was a fraud!”

“No! The vision was real. At least it was real for me. You were so fixated on making your father proud, it triggered the vision. I simply shared it with you. Ihy had said something like that might happen, but neither one of us thought it would happen so soon.”

“That’s why Ihy was so cavalier when I told him I had a vision. He was expecting it. It wasn’t a surprise. He planned the whole thing. I was set up!”

“No! You are the hand of prophecy. Ihy did what he had to do to fulfill the Vaticinars’ prophecy. These things had to happen.”

“No, they didn’t. That is what none of you understand. If we know what is ahead of us, we can change it. Damn all this secrecy! If either of you would have told me what you knew, we could have avoided a lot of suffering.”

“And caused more than you could imagine— there were two paths stretching into the future, one would have lead to a full scale war. House against House, world against world, a nightmare the likes of which the universe has never known. We chose the other path, and all that has transpired has lead us down the safer road. There has been much suffering, and there will be more, but know this is better than what would have been.”

“No future is safe, no prophecy inerrant, but you have chosen. I will walk the path set before me. I will see where they want me to go.”

Faroh stalked around the small cottage like a rabid dog in the pound. It was long into the night, and he and Cythraul hadn’t left the cottage since they had arrived on Kurgal.

“Sit down,” barked Cythraul, “You need to learn patience.”

“Patience? I’ve turned my back on my master, and you want me to be patient. I heard his voice over take the song, and then he became silent. Maybe he knows I’ve betrayed him.”

“Betrayed him,” Cythraul scoffed, “What have you done to betray him? Even while you are in my service, you have been carrying out the work that he commanded. My dear boy, you have nothing to fear from him, you can be sure of that.”

“Then why can I no longer here him? If he hasn’t cut me off I should be able to hear him.”

“Perhaps he’s dead. The fool was always impatient, maybe he has rushed to his own death without ever realizing it. No, I suppose not. That would be more good fortune than I have ever been afforded.”

“Good fortune, whose side are you on? Karu Panthera’s the most loyal servant the Holy One has ever had.”

Cythraul grinned, a sinister sneer filled his voice, “That is not exactly true. Where reality is concerned, you will soon see, Panthera has been deaf, blind, and dumb. One day soon, the scales will fall from your eyes, and you will know more than you ever wanted to.”

“You sound wise, but I don’t even know why I’m here. You said you would give me power, but you were not even capable of defeating young Akeru. If you really are who you claim to be, how could this pathetic little man defeat you?”

“Yes, that’s been worrying me as well. Someone must be helping him. It’s the only way he could have escaped me. The question is, who is helping him, and why?”

“Of course someone must be helping him, why didn’t I see it before? *Just* who do you think you’re fooling? I’m not stupid, you know!”

“Then prove it! Have you forgotten what I did on the Tengu ship? What more do you need?”

Faroh stopped pacing, “Yes, a wonderful trick. You were able to destroy the entire crew, save one that I asked you to spare, but this Akeru is a problem for you.”

“He is not the problem. *He* is no more than an ant to me, but someone is giving him support. I had not foreseen this. I knew of the prophecy of course, but this is out of the rules. Someone is acting undercover. This troubles me.”

“You keep saying that, but what does it mean?”

“One thing at a time. First, I must be sure you are who I think you are.”

“Really funny, turning around my concerns about you.”

“Who’s being funny? I am old, my visions are not as reliable as they once were. My memories’ bias is too strong. Soon you will be tested, and only then will I let you see more of the picture.”

“Tested? How? By who? Will you challenge me?”

“Not everything revolves around combat,” Cythraul shook his head, “Soon you will understand— satisfy yourself with that for now. That is all that I will tell you, that is all that you need to know.”

Faroh sat down by the window, and stared at the minaret of the temple of Samara the Rogue rising above the trees. “So when will we finish this?”

“Itching for a fight? Good, that fighting spirit will serve you well, but this is not the time.”

“Yes, yes, I have to calm down, and be more *patient*. You’re beginning to repeat yourself, old man. Maybe your augury isn’t the only faculty that you’re losing. It looks like you’re memories are going as well.”

Cythraul laughed, “If you are wise, you will come to rely on my experiences. I have seen and done more than you ever will. Remember that.”

“So what? You’re an old Raewyn. Find me a young one and then maybe I’ll be impressed.”

“Don’t talk about things you don’t understand.”

“You do. Why shouldn’t I?”

“When? I have never... No, you won’t provoke a fight that easily. My talent may be limited by my age, but I can still read you. You are not as complicated as you think you are. Neither are you as powerful.”

“Then why did you pick me?”

“I have my reasons, that should be good enough for you.”

“And this Akeru? What about him?”

“We can’t touch him now. Someone is helping him. Someone is guiding him to...” a devilish smile broke across Cythraul’s face, “We can use his faith against him.

He will fall to his beliefs like so many before him. I will get rid of this menace once and for all.”

Tara waited until late into the night before she returned to the ship. As soon as her head hit her pillow, she drifted right off to sleep.

Her alarm woke her up early the next morning. Even though she was exhausted, she forced herself out of bed and down to breakfast.

The room was full, and everyone was talking about what they should do next. They didn't seem to know about what transpired last night. Ianus had evidently kept his promise. They didn't even know that the To'asaa had been returned. He must have put it in his room for safekeeping.

After breakfast, she went back to her room. She had too many adventures of late, and more on her mind than she ever wanted to think about.

Things were not going the way she had hoped. In fact, she wasn't ever sure she knew what she hoped for anymore. The only thing she knew for sure was that she had gone past the point of no return. Panthera would never forgive her for returning the To'asaa, and if her complicity in the attack on Ihy became public knowledge, she was sure she would be ostracized.

There was nowhere for her to go. She had betrayed everyone. She could see no way to atone to either side.

To make matters worse, Ianus knew it was her. He was not the puzzle solving type. If he could put the pieces together, anyone could.

What to do? What to do? She was trapped between her sins and her attempt to expiate them. Now, more than ever, she felt alone. No one could help her now.

She rummaged through her papers. She wasn't sure exactly what she was looking for, but she needed some hope. Any chance she could find anything to help herself, but what could help her? Daru had once told her that no one was ever beyond hope. Maybe if Daru knew about her present situation, maybe she would change her story.

Nothing in her notes, perhaps in one of the books. Desperate, she flipped from index to index, skimming the pages looking for anything relevant to her situation. With over four thousand years of history at her fingertips, she knew she had to be able to find something. Anything that would help.

Tara glanced feverishly around the room. She was sure she heard a book fall somewhere. There it was again.

It wasn't a book it was a feeble knock on her door. Opening it, she smiled at the sight of Master Barami.

“May I come in, Tara?” He asked, shyly.

“Yes, of course you may.”

Barami walked past her, and after he was sure the door was completely closed, he said, “I know that was you the other night on the temple courtyard. I know you are one of Panthera's disciples. Don't try to deny it. You'll only be wasting your breath.”

“Your right,” Tara lowered her head, “It was me.”

“What are you thinking? Do you really want to live in the shadows of the Chian'niu?”

“To be honest, I'm not sure what I want any more.”

“You must know the fate that awaits all who join the Ual-leen,” Barami didn’t blink.

“I didn’t, but I do now.”

“Then you will leave them and come home? Home to the Jade Moon. Home to me.”

“I don’t know. I don’t know where my home is anymore. I don’t belong anywhere anymore. I am alone.”

“You have committed yourself to me and to the order. Submit to our authority, and come home. In time, I’m sure we will forgive you.”

“Submission?” Tara winced, “That’s how I got into trouble in the first place, do you really think it will get me out?”

“Obedience is required of all who take the oaths.”

“But I haven’t taken the oaths, have I? You kept postponing my initiation, remember?”

“Then submit to me, I can help you. Believe me, I can do more for you than you think I can.”

“I will live my life, my way! No one owns me! I am not chattel! I will find my own way.”

“Impudent girl!”

“Listen. I got myself into this mess, only I can get myself out again. I’ve returned the To’asaa to Ianus. I’m doing the best that I can. Just give me some time. All my life I’ve done what was expected of me, what other people wanted. I have to find out what I want. Until I do that, I’ll never find redemption.”

Barami sighed, “I understand. I will give you one week to sort everything out, but after that I have to take action.”

As the afternoon fell to the evening, Ianus was exploring the forest around the temple. The sun loomed ever closer to the horizon, and Ianus found himself in an expansive field. On the hillside, small village cottages punctuated the grass and trees.

He turned around, and could just barely see the minaret of the Temple of Samara the Rogue over the treetops. For the first time in weeks, Ianus had peace of mind. All of his problems were so distant to him. They no longer forced their weight upon him.

There was a clarity that came with knowing the truth. He was being used by so many, but he was content knowing the truth. The game had begun. The rules had changed; he was no longer their pawn. Even though he couldn’t see all of the faces, he could see the hands that sought to control him. There was power in knowledge, especially in the knowledge of one’s weaknesses. Ignorance kills, but weakness can be overcome.

He sat down on the bough of a fallen tree, and began to meditate in hopes of reestablishing contact with his Sukallin, Osanna. He found it hard to keep his eyes closed. Something was weighing on his mind, holding him back.

A presence forced itself onto his mind. A powerful personage was making itself known. A dark shadow passed before his eyes; the soft touch of a cloak brushed against his cheeks.

A furious burst of brilliant light knocked him to the ground. Thunder and lightning crashed around him. A woman in a soft sky blue robe and cowl hovered inches off the ground. Her skin was milk white, and large silver wings stretched out behind her.

“Uma Nari!” Ianus exclaimed.

Again thunder and lightning flashed, and a breastplate appeared on her body and a spear in her right hand.

“My child, I have seen your pain.”

“My lady? Why have you come to me? In all these years, why now? Why not before?”

“This is the time, there could be no better. I have a message for you. It is very important. All of the answers you seek are at Usekht Maati.”

“What did you say? Usekht Maati! What is there for me?” Ianus stared at the apparition, and listened for an echoing voice inside. None. This was not exactly what it seemed.

Closing his eyes. He concentrated on the voice of Osanna, he remembered.

‘Osanna, are you doing this too?’ He thought.

Time froze, his lungs seized up.

‘Osanna! Stop this!’ He thought, ‘This is not funny!’

“This isn’t me,” Osanna’s voice filled his mind, “I couldn’t do this even if I wanted to.”

‘What is going on?’

He looked up at Uma Nari. The image shimmered like a mirage. Just for a moment, Uma Nari broke into the ghastly form of an old man with ashy blue skin.

Ianus gasped, everything began to move again. The spectral lady smiled at him. Ianus wondered what caused it to do that.

“Go to Tai-wer and seek out Usekht Maati,” it said.

“Tai-wer? That is in the Forbidden Lands,” said Ianus with a good imitation of horror in his voice. “No one who goes into the forbidden lands ever return.”

“I will protect you, as I always have. Have I ever abandoned any of my devotees?”

“No, Uma Nari has never forgotten her children.”

“Then I will not forget you. Go to Tai-wer, find Usekht Maati.”

The phantom disappeared.

Ianus rubbed his eyes. ‘Everyone wants me to go to the forbidden lands, but why?’

Walking down the paths through the forest, he made his way back to the Valkyrie.

‘What was that thing? Was it the same thing that has been haunting me? The voices that came at my initiation, and when we arrived at Kur-gal. It has been trying to control me. It must have been.’

‘Yes, it must have been the same thing, but why would it want me to go to Tai-wer? Maybe it wants me dead.’

‘It must know the dangers it is asking me to face. Everyone knows about the horrors of the forbidden lands. If it wants me to go, then maybe I should, after all what’s the point trying to fight inertia. You have to lean into the turn to keep from falling, now might be the time to lean into the turn.’

‘If I go, I might die. Maybe my death shall serve a purpose. Maybe if I give it what it wants, I can find out what it wants. If it wants my blood, it can have it. If it wants my death. Then so be it. I don’t really have anything to live for anymore.’

PART THREE: BACK FROM THE DAWN

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE OLD WOUND

Ianus sat on the corner of his bed. The ‘vision’ still haunted him. Had he acted too rashly? He was always getting too hot under the collar and running off into danger. He needed to talk to someone, but who? If he told Daru, they would have another pointless argument about going to the Forbidden Lands of Adrakaya. He didn’t want another argument. He wanted to talk to Ihy, but that was out of the question. Neither Pryor nor Maya would give him objective advice, and he didn’t know any of the others well enough to ask them.

Stretching over the bed, he picked up his Benben-stone. He sat up. Motionless, he stared at the strange writing and inlaid gold across the top. He ran his finger across the lettering.

Flames spiraled out of the obelisk in his hand, and Nahimanna, the Bennu, swooped around him. She landed on the bed and looked at him.

“Remember you said if I ever needed insight or inspiration I should come to you... well, I need someone to talk to, and I really don’t have anyone.”

“You don’t need to be so gloomy about it, Sir,” Nahimanna said, her voice almost lyrical, “I am not an imaginary friend. I *do* have a mind. I think. I can even reason with people when given half a chance.”

“I’m sorry. You are the first Eidolon I’ve ever, well, known. Until I met you, I had always thought of your kind as toys.”

“You know, in the old days, makers would call on us for wise counsel, and summon hordes of my kind to serve as armies.”

“I’ve read the stories,” Ianus said, forcing the nightmares out of his mind, “They refer to eidolons as spirits, how was I supposed to know they were the same thing.”

“I’m sorry, sir, I did not mean to get you angry. I hear a great many things, and the things I’ve heard lately have rather ruffled my feathers. What does sir need of me?”

Ianus scooted himself up onto the bed, and folded his legs. “I’ve had another vision, but there was something wrong with it. I saw Uma Nari wearing a breastplate and carrying a spear. The funny thing is in the middle, she looked like a dead old man.”

“It couldn’t have been Uma Nari, she would have never been dressed for battle. That much is certain. You said, it turned into a dead old man?”

Ianus struggled to remember the face, “An old man with ashy blue skin.”

“Did you, perchance, feel something brush against your face?”

“Now that you mention it, I did.”

Nahimanna walked over to Ianus, “I was afraid this might happen,” her voice trailed off.

“What are you talking about? What’s wrong?”

“You were touched by a Raewyn. It would have had to be a very old Raewyn to pull it off.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The Raewyn have the ability to cast people’s minds into a simulacrum, everything they experience there is quite real to them.”

“A simulacrum, you mean like the one when I was initiated into the Jade Moon?”

“After a fashion, you see, a well trained maker can place someone into a simulacrum, but very few can control what the person sees. To the Raewyn, this comes naturally. But if you didn’t actually see the Raewyn touch you, they must have been very old.”

“He could have come up from behind me.”

“Still, he would have had to put his hands over your eyes, unless, of course, he was extremely ancient. Did the apparition say anything?”

“He asked me to, well, told me to go to Tai-wer, to find Usekht Maati.”

“Usekht Maati? That was the Enmadra’s capitol city! It would take you deep into the forbidden lands. It sounds to me like someone wants to get you killed, sir. What do you plan to do about it?”

“I will go!” Ianus announced before he lost his nerve. “Everyone has told me to go, then, I’ll go.”

“I do not think that is wise. If you wish to find Usekht Maati, it would be better to find an A’nath-ari who could take you, then to run around on your own.”

“How, exactly, would I do that?” Ianus asked.

“Let it be known that you are looking,” Nahimanna straightened her posture. “If you are subtle enough, one will find you.”

“And in the meantime, I have to put up with people telling me to go.”

“You don’t know that, sir.”

“Nahimanna, if you knew that your father’s last wish was for you to go somewhere that you could go, would you?”

“I think you want to go, sir. You are looking for an excuse to explore the forbidden lands, and you only want me to approve your decision.”

“Maybe,” Ianus slumped in the bed, “I have been dreaming about it. Ever since Ihy told me to go, I haven’t been able to think about anything else. I have to go.”

Nahimanna sighed, “Will you tell the others?”

“No. If I did they would want to come with me, and I can’t allow that. It’s all right if I die, but I won’t endanger them for no reason.”

Nahimanna rested her head on Ianus shoulder. “You will at least talk to everyone before you go. If I may say so, sir, you should at least say some sort of goodbye to them before you go.”

Ianus stroked her under her chin, “Don’t worry about me, I will. I can’t just leave them after all.”

Daru looked around the ship for Ianus. No one seemed to know where he was. Sakkara and Khensu thought they had seen him in the temple gardens, but even they weren't sure. A lead was a lead, so Daru went up to the gardens to look for him.

He was there, sitting on a bench.

"Hello Ianus," she said as she approached, "How are you doing today?"

"Better than I have been. I can see the path clearer."

"The path? Where does it lead you?"

"Into the future, of course," Ianus chuckled. "We all have a destiny. We can only choose whether we fight it, ignore it, or follow it. The problem is we rarely get a glimpse of it. I have seen, at least, a part of mine. I will follow it for now."

"You didn't answer me. Where does it lead you?"

"I would rather not say, and with everything that's been happening lately, do you blame me. You never know who's listening."

"Your not getting paranoid, are you?" Daru asked. "We don't need two Tuun's on the ship."

"I quite agree," Ianus laughed, "I will not become another Tuun Fallon. Aashen on the other hand, that could be fun."

"Infuriating, but not fun. I've been worried about you. You've been through so much lately."

"I knew what I was signing up for when I took my vows. This is the life of a maker."

"Well, I've been under vows longer than you have, and I must say, my life was never like this."

Ianus patted the bench, "Sit down. I have something I need to ask you."

Daru sat, and crossed her legs, "What is it?"

"Please, don't bother Tara anymore. She needs time to think."

"Are you saying I was right about her?"

"All I am saying, is that she is having a lot of problems right now. If you want to help her, then help her, but don't push. She too is at a crossroads. She must decide for herself which way she will go."

"I'm not sure I understand."

"Listen carefully. I have retrieved the To'asaa. It is in my room. I did not have to take it, but it was not given to me. I'm sorry for the riddle, but it is not safe to discuss such things openly."

"That, I can understand. Maybe if we changed the subject."

Ianus nodded.

Daru placed her hand on his shoulder. "I've been thinking about you a lot, lately. You know you are always in my prayers."

"Thank you. I pray for you, as well."

"I keep wondering where *we* are going to go after we leave here, what are *we* going to do."

"I don't know. I've thought about that too. I haven't reported our progress to the Camarilla, but I'm sure Barami has. They haven't issued any instructions. The crew seemed to be looking to me for leadership. I'm no leader."

"Why would you say that? You are a natural. I've never seen anyone more capable. You know you are going to inherit the ship, and in turn receive the position."

“It is,” Ianus closed his eyes, “Was Ihy’s ship. Maya should inherit all of Ihy’s possessions, including the ship. She was practically his spouse, and if the law was different, she would have been.”

“You know about that do you.”

“I’m not blind. They are the only parents I can remember. I saw the way they looked at each other, held each other. In every way that matters, they *were* married.”

“Except in law.”

“Yes,” Ianus quickly looked away from Daru.

She smiled. He had tried to hide it, but she saw the warmth in his eyes.

“I wish Ihy was still with us,” Ianus said.

“He is, in a way.”

“Don’t start, I don’t want to have this conversation again. Not today.”

“Have you tried talking to him? I have. He’s a little confused, but he talks like Ihy did. You should at least try to talk to him.”

“About what?”

“Talk to him about your childhood. Talk to him about your life. Tell him all the things you want to tell Ihy. He will listen. It’ll be good for him. It will help him assimilate his former life.”

“And then what? I suppose you want me to talk to him until I run out of words, and have a tender moment of reconciliation and healing.”

“If that’s what happens. Just go, and do something with him that you used to do with Ihy. It’ll do you both some good.”

Tara approached the temple slowly. She had watched several Camenae practicing in the courtyard earlier in the week, so she thought it would be all right for her to practice her art there too. She had looked into the relationship between the Jade Moon and the Camenae, just to be sure it wouldn’t cause offense. Relations had been good for millennia. She even asked Selwyn, and he had given his approval. He even gave her a note to give anyone who disturbed her.

Taking a deep breath, she formed a sword with her periapt. A step forward and slid backward. She thrust. Quickly, she pivoted on her left leg. Bringing the sword over her head, she slashed the empty space in front of her.

“Hello, girl,” the memory of Panthera’s voice echoed in her ears.

‘I was too young,’ she thought, ‘I was only ten. How was I supposed to know?’

She turned, slashing behind her and thrusting the blade forward. She drew the sword up sharply.

“Hello, girl.” The memory returned, “What are you doing?”

“Practicing to serve,” she had replied.

Tara shook her head, “Concentrate,” she said to her self.

She leapt into the air, and turned her body. Shoving the tip of the blade between two of the paving stones, she balanced on the sword.

“What do you serve?” The memory of Panthera asked.

“The truth.”

“What is the truth?”

“We are all one, and must submit to that one.”

Tara wobbled, her balance faltered. Shaking, she barely managed to land on her feet.

“Not now,” she muttered, “I don’t need this, I don’t want this. I must keep control.”

She steadied herself. She focused her mind and turned the sword into a spear. Twirling the spear in her hand, she began to move in a rhythmic pattern around the courtyard.

“Do you still serve the truth?” She remembered Panthera say. The second time she met him.

He seemed so powerful, beyond anything she had ever seen before. He was so enticing, he was like a kind friend of the family who would come over and visit bearing gifts.

“Do you still serve the truth?” He had asked.

“I do!”

“Do you wish to serve with all your being?”

“I do!”

“Do you really?”

‘That’s when it started to go wrong,’ she thought, ‘That’s when he taught me the litany of the machine. It was such an innocent prayer, but the absolutism. I didn’t realize at the time what I had done.’

She threw the spear and did cartwheels after it. The spear landed, and Tara grabbed it as she swung past it, but she grabbed it in the wrong place. The tip snapped off.

Tara sighed and shook her head. ‘I should have done that better.’ She thought.

She turned the remains of the spear into a footman’s lance. She ran her hand down the handle and the long flat blade.

Tossing it from hand to hand, she spun in place. A deadly twister, she ran from one side of the courtyard to the other. She did a quarter turn with each step.

“Have you practiced the litany?” Panthera had asked on their third meeting.

“Yes, it is quite soothing.”

“Do you understand it?”

“Not really.”

“It means that we are the sole possessors of truth. Everyone else is on the path to destruction.”

“Everyone?”

“Do you ever hear the song of the machine? Have you ever paid attention to the words?”

Tara dropped the lance, and fell to the ground. “Why?” She exclaimed as she prostrated herself. Pain shot through her. “This is a nightmare.”

The song of the machine crackled in the back of her mind. The voices of unknown masses of people all sharing their experiences at once. There was no dominant voice, and none of them agreed.

When Tara had first heard the song, she thought it was a brilliant unstructured symphony. She had trained her mind to hear only the voices of specific people. Only then could she hear the words. She had never realized so many had to be silenced to hear

just that one voice. Now, the song was nothing but a droning cacophony. She tried to push them to the back of her mind.

“This can’t go on, this can’t continue! I can’t take it any more! There has to be a better way.”

Ianus walked around the corner of the temple. He and Daru had just finished talking and Daru wanted to explore the forest, Ianus was going to the ship. He hadn’t practiced his art for over a week, and wanted to use the ship’s gym.

He came down the hill, preparing his mind for his practice when something caught his attention. There was a boat down off the edge of the pier. Someone was fishing. Ianus couldn’t tell who it was. They had evidently noticed him because they were rowing to shore. As the boat got closer, Ianus began to see more details. It was Arun! What should he do? Ianus thought about running, but would it chase after him?

The boat reached the shore before Ianus could move.

“You are Ianus,” said Arun, tentatively, “You are his... my son, aren’t you?”

Ianus felt trapped. He didn’t know what to do. Should he answer? Should he run? The questions raced through his mind. If Daru found out he had past up an opportunity to talk to Arun, she would kill him before he ever got to the Forbidden Lands.

“Yes, I was Ihy’s son.”

Arun furrowed his brow and was obviously in deep thought. “Selwyn told me that I was Ihy. He showed me pictures. I look like him. Sometimes, I can even remember being him. I feel so lost. Out of place, do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Yes,” Ianus said, slowly, “I understand completely.”

“I just don’t know what to do with myself. So many people are asking so many things of me. They all have their own plans for my life. They don’t care, or at least they don’t ask what I want. The worst part is, I don’t know what I want. They won’t even give me time to figure that out for myself.” Arun looked up at Ianus, “Would you like to come and fish with me?”

Ianus felt a lump in his throat, and a stinging in his eyes. He never dreamed that Arun had emotions. He knew all too well what it felt like to be pulled in a thousand different directions by people with their own agendas for you. He knew what it felt like to look in the mirror and see a stranger looking back at him.

Without answering, he climbed into the boat. Arun smiled and rowed the boat out past the end of the pier. They both cast their lines into the water.

“Do you remember?” Ianus asked, “Do you remember, we used to go fishing all the time?”

“Part of me remembers. It feels like such a long time ago. I do remember the first time you came into my care. Maya was so sad. She had been a friend of your birth mother for a long time. It was such a sad day. You were so young and innocent. You didn’t understand what had happened. Your smile helped us through those dark days. I remember that quite clearly. Your cherubic smile was such a blessing to us.”

Ianus blushed.

“Did I say something wrong?” Arun asked.

“No. You said something very right. I’m sorry I treated you so badly. I was upset, and if you remember, I have trouble controlling my emotions.”

“I remember that,” Arun laughed, “I don’t think I could ever forget that.”

“You are not what I thought you would be Arun Namid,” said Ianus, choosing his words carefully. “When I first saw you, I thought I had lost my father forever, but now that I have met you. I’m wondering.”

“But you’re not sure.”

“One can never be sure, one can only believe and see. That’s what you taught me.”

“So I did.”

“Do you remember what you said to me in the hospital. You told me to go to Usekht Maati. You told me to find the A’nath-ari. Do you know why? Do you remember why you said that?”

Arun glanced around, “You will find your rest there.”

“What does that mean?”

“I don’t know, that’s all I remember. Are you planning to go?”

“I haven’t decided yet,” Ianus lied.

“Then I thought you should go, but now I think you should stay. It is too dangerous. If anything I need stability right now.”

“We all do, but change is the only constant in the universe. You will have to learn to rely on that.”

“I don’t know if I can. My programming is designed to handle constants and variables. Uncertainty is a problem.”

Something tugged at Ianus’ line; his fishing pole arched. “Well think about it this way. I just caught something, I don’t know what it is yet, but I know it’s on the end of the line.”

Three hours later, Ianus went up to his room to retrieve the To’asaa. It was such a nice day, he thought he would enjoy practicing in the courtyard at sunset. He put the To’asaa on his right hand. Before he left, he grabbed the red periapt he had somehow gotten during his initiation, and put it into his pocket.

On the courtyard, he stretched, and took a deep breath. He centered himself. He could feel the raw power pulsating through the To’asaa. It was different from the one he regularly used. It had a subtle wisdom, almost as if it knew what to do before it was asked.

He formed a double bladed battle-axe.

Something felt wrong. The weapon formed easily, but there was some kind of resistance to his thoughts.

Ianus closed his eyes, and focused on the implant that allowed him to communicate with the periapt. A soft display flooded his vision.

‘Perform diagnostic, right hand, periapt connection, he thought.

The display flickered and read, “Processing.” After less than a minute, the display read, “Performance is optimal.”

Ianus sighed, and closed the display. Opening his eyes, he looked down at the To’asaa. “You are not for me,” he said, glumly. “At least that rules one thing out.”

He took off the To’asaa and put it in his pocket. He pulled out the red periapt. It fit perfectly. A mild euphoria swept over him.

He ran towards the temple, and leapt toward the wall. Rebounding off the stones, he flew across the courtyard into the trees on the other side. He hooked his foot on one of the branches, and flipped around. As he plummeted to the ground, he formed a smooth staff.

The tip of the staff hit the paving stone, and he twisted his body around so he was right side up. He fell forward. He twirled the staff with his right hand. The staff tapped the ground and carried him across the courtyard until he reached the other side.

Ianus landed on his feet and spun the staff in his hands around his body: Front to back, and back to front. He stopped holding the staff in line with his arm.

Amazed at the ease with which the periapt responded to his every wish, he laughed, and melted the staff back into the periapt. It was like an extension of his body. It was like he had a strong relationship with it. It was far better than the periapt that he had been using.

His mind wandered, "I wonder who gave this to me?"

He heard footsteps approaching behind him.

"Hello, Daru," he smiled.

"How did you know it was me?" Daru said, walking out from around the temple.

"I recognized your footsteps— you have a very regular pattern. Did you have a good time in the forest?"

"Yeah, it reminds me of home. I ran into a couple of Camenae, they were very nice. We had a long talk about everything you could imagine— the arts, philosophy, and politics. They were very concerned about the direction the Camarilla of the Jade Moon has been going. They said they didn't think any of the orders should be that involved in politics. I have to say I agree with them."

"Me too. No one with as much influence as we have should be allowed to sway the populace like that. Pryor says he thinks Master Theron is planning something."

"Like what? You don't think he would violate the rule, do you?"

"Well, according to my reading, he already has. The rule strictly forbids making political statements on behalf of the order, and he has already done that. Pryor also told me that he's heard there is a growing movement to have him either disciplined or expelled from the order."

"Do you think it will really come to that? No member of the Camarilla has been censured or impeached since Panthera's time."

"I don't know. I think he's setting himself up to take political office."

"But that would get him excommunicated."

"Not if he renounces his vows."

"Do you think that's likely?"

"I really don't know anymore. If you would have asked me a month ago if I thought Panthera was alive and positioning himself to return, I would have said no."

"I wanted to talk to you about that. Do you think that was Panthera who attacked Ihy back on Al-Benu?"

"No. Their fighting styles were too different."

"Then that means there is someone else still out there. Maybe I should ask Tara about it."

"No! She will volunteer that information when she's ready. It's late. I really need to get to bed, I have a long day planned for tomorrow."

Ianus went down to the ship. Daru followed right behind him. After boarding the ship, Ianus carefully said his goodbye. She was reluctant to leave him, but eventually she saw the wisdom in getting a goodnight sleep. She told him goodnight, and that if he couldn't sleep, she would be on the bridge with Maya, Pryor, and Khensu.

Relieved and a little saddened that she had finally left him in peace. Ianus went to his room.

All of his possessions were packed away into two bags. Sitting down in front of his terminal, he drummed his fingers on the desk.

"Computer. Show me the locations of the three Kishanu," he said with some hesitance in his voice.

A map of the ship appeared on the monitor. Three dots flashed; two on the bridge and one in the aft.

"Computer. Are any of them alone?"

"Yes," the computer responded, "Mista is in hibernation, conserving power."

"Awake her, and have her meet me here."

Ianus bit his lip. He knew this decision would change the course of the rest of his life. For better or worse, he could no longer tell. Someone had to do something.

They had spent too much time reacting, someone had to step up and take an active role in the future. No longer would he allow his life to be controlled by so many unseen hands.

He had spent the day saying his goodbyes, but he knew that no one knew what he was about to do.

He wished he could have told them what he was doing. He knew they wouldn't understand. He had done a good job of avoiding Tuun. With all of his gifts, he would have known immediately what Ianus was going to do.

Ianus picked up his Benben-stone. 'Should he open it? Should he talk to Nahimanna one more time before he passed the point of no return? No, she could not help him now.'

The now familiar pressure of his vision weighed on his forehead. Again, he could see a tapestry being woven. The threads were winding tightly around each other. He could see shadowy hands moving quickly between them, cutting some threads and introducing others. Something had changed. A new force was woven in with the others.

Maybe it was what he was doing. Perhaps he was the hand that changed the pattern.

The doorbell rang, painfully dragging him away from the vision. A dull headache replaced the tapestry in his head.

"Come in," he said and sighed.

Mista walked in with a broad smile on her face.

"Hurry now," Ianus picked up his bags, "We have a lot of work to do, and very little time to do it."

Daru entered the bridge and the discussion abruptly stopped.

"Am I interrupting something?" She asked.

Pryor, Maya, and Khensu all had a curious look on their faces.

"You know Ianus better than any of us," Pryor said, "Do you have any idea how he got the To'asaa back!"

Daru hesitated; she didn't know what to say. "How do you know he got the To'asaa back?" A safe question that didn't let on how much she knew.

"He gave it to Aashen earlier today," said Maya. "Just handed it to him like it wasn't a big deal. Aashen pushed him for information, but he wouldn't say."

"Where is it now?"

"It is in the chapel," said Pryor, "Thought it would be safer on the ship then it would be anywhere else."

The ship rocked violently, Daru braced herself against the door to keep from falling.

"What was that?" She exclaimed, as she ran to her post at tactical. "Are we under attack?"

"Sensors didn't register weapon's fire," said Khensu, "The automatic systems would have engaged if they had."

The ship lurched again to port.

"O no!" Maya said.

"What is it?" Daru looked down, "I don't believe it. He wouldn't!"

"The Mista has separated from the main ship," said Maya, "It is requesting clearance to depart from orbital control."

"Do the same!" Pryor shouted, "Khensu, do a role call, I don't care if their busy or asleep, we have to know whose on that ship."

"I believe I do," said Daru, "Khensu, try Ianus first. O please don't be him." She looked over at Pryor, "May I have the con until Tuun gets up here?"

Pryor nodded.

Daru powered up the engines and began to back the ship away from the land.

"We have received clearance to depart the planet," said Maya, "We can depart as soon as we've reached the dish."

"Ianus is not answering," said Khensu.

"By the stars that birthed us, he is going to Adrakaya. We have to stop him, before he kills himself."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: BLINDED BY THE LIGHT

The Valkyrie broke out of hyperspace in orbit of Adrakaya. Daru studied the sensor display for the Mista.

“We’ve beat him,” she said. Her shoulders relaxed, and she sighed. “The Mista will have to use the gate. We should position ourselves to intercept him.”

“Why did he come here?” Maya asked.

Daru didn’t know if she should say anything. It was hard enough for her to hear Ianus’ plans, much less to have to explain them.

“He had said something about exploring the Forbidden Lands,” said Pryor, “He wanted to find the A’nath-ari for some reason.”

Maya’s face went pale, “The A’nath-ari?” She said in a whisper, “Why would he want to find them? He doesn’t,” she nodded at her brother, “Does he?”

“No,” said Pryor, very assertively, “That isn’t the reason. I’m sure he would have mentioned that.”

Daru glanced back and forth between Maya and Pryor, “What are you talking about?”

“What do you mean?” Maya asked, in a cold steady voice, “I can’t answer a question without knowing the subject.”

“What did you just ask Pryor about?”

“I shouldn’t say this,” Maya closed her eyes, “And I’m sorry I can’t tell you everything, but just remember this. The A’nath-ari have not been in hiding. They move in secret, never being seen by the eyes that watch all. Sometimes it is better not to know some things, than it is to know them.”

“Is that it?”

“I can’t tell you anymore, I’ve already said more than I should.”

“More than you should? You haven’t said anything.”

Pryor shook his head, “If you are going to make your life in the Chian’niu, you must learn to see the words between words. We have chosen to live our lives in the shadows, subtlety is the trademark of our kind.”

“Subtlety?” Daru rolled her eyes, “You mean being down right enigmatic. The more time I spend around you older makers, the more I feel like I’m trapped in a labyrinth of misleading words.”

“You’ll learn,” said Maya, “When I first joined the Jade Moon, I thought the people were incapable of coherent speech. Eventually, I got used to it. You will too.”

Khensu Min looked up from his displays, “The Mista has just received gate clearance. They should be emerging any moment now.”

“Hail her,” said Maya, “It’ll be easier to start a dialogue now.”

Daru signaled the ship, and waited for the reply.

Ianus' voice broke over the intercom, "You shouldn't have followed me. If I had wanted you to come, I would have asked."

"If you didn't want us to follow," said Daru, "You should have talked to us before you ran off to Adrakaya."

"You won't stop me. I have made up my mind. I have to do this."

"The Mista is exiting the gate," said Khensu.

"Move to intercept," said Maya, "Keep us between him and the planet."

"You are aware I can hear you?" Ianus asked.

"We have no secrets from you," his mother said gently, "We are not against you. We are your friends and family. You can talk to us."

"You will just try to talk me out of it again. I have to do this."

"Then let us come with you," Daru spoke before she thought.

"I'm not going to risk you. You all know the likelihood of returning from Tai-wer is slim to nil. I can't ask you to take that kind of risk."

"You haven't!" Maya's voice quivered, "We're volunteering! We can either go in with you, or go in after you. That is the only choice you have in the matter."

"No one gives me *any* options anymore!"

"We just did. 'Where one is in danger, all are in danger.' That is what Tien Shaa said. We care for you. Please come aboard. We'll talk about it, and I give you my solemn word, we will allow you to do whatever you decide to do. But you have to give us the same courtesy."

There was silence. Maya scratched at her eyebrow, and watched Daru's lips move in silent prayer.

"The Mista has stopped her approach to the planet," Khensu expected jubilation, but there was only relief.

"Please, Ianus," said Daru, "If this is how it ends, we can't let it end like this."

"Very well, prepare for docking," Ianus sounded defeated, "I was only hoping to spare you from whatever unpleasantness lies before me. I was at least, well intentioned."

Faroh paced around the bridge of the Tengu ship. Cythraul sat comfortably in the captain's chair in the middle of the room.

"Where are we going?" Faroh asked, anger filling his words.

"Adrakaya, my dear boy. We are going to Adrakaya."

"Are we going after that Akeru?"

"No, his fate is in his hands now. No, we have our own business to attend to."

"You seem quite sure that he won't survive Tai-wer."

Cythraul leaned back in his chair, "He won't be able to get past the gate, and even if he does, he won't survive what lurks behind them."

"You sound like you know from experience. Have you ever been to Tai-wer?"

"I have," Cythraul grinned, "Many times over the centuries."

"You made it back unscathed. What makes you think he won't?"

"He won't. My prescience may fail me from time to time, but I don't need to have my talent to know that. I am allowed to come and go as I please. They won't even allow him entry."

Cythraul stared at Faroh.

Faroh felt like something was tearing through him. His mind rested heavy within his tingling head. He wanted to close his eyes, but he resisted.

Cythraul smiled, "What first attracted you to the teachings of Dov Lavan?"

"There is too much anarchy in the galaxy, and the immorality of the public is getting worse. There are so many people flaunting their abominable lifestyles. So much wickedness, and it is spreading like a plague. They have turned liberty into license. This can't be allowed to continue. Someone had to do something."

"And you are the one to make things right?"

"Not necessarily, I know the way. I can show the way to others. They are the ones who insist on having a democracy. In time, we will have the majority, and when that happens we will set things right."

"And the people who get in your way?"

"They are not in my way, they are in the way of the Holy One. Ara'lu Lavan pronounced their sentence ages ago," Faroh stared at Cythraul with cold, bloodthirsty eyes, "If I am the instrument of justice, then so be it. The law is quite clear: 'Suffer not a heretic to live amongst you, or their poison will spread among the people. Cut out the cancer! Better the heretic should die, then for the righteous to fall from faith.' I know the way."

Cythraul sat up, "I see that you do. You are faithful, quite faithful. You hold to every word, don't you?"

"There can be no error in the words of the Holy One. Every word is there for a reason. We must obey. Submission to authority is the greatest sign of faith. Lavan's interpretation of the song is the only way."

"Your periapt, it is a replica of Ara'lu Lavan's, is it not?"

Faroh held out his right hand, "Yes it is. It is one of six replicas."

"Do you know what happened to the original?"

"The real one was lost when that lunatic Tien Shaa murdered the Ara'lu."

"What if I told you that I know where the real one is?" Cythraul leaned forward in the chair.

Faroh laughed, "I would say you are crazy. No one knows where it is. After Lavan was martyred, his body disappeared. He was taken into the heavens with all of his personal effects."

"I'm sorry to tell you, but that isn't exactly true. I know where he's buried, and where his periapt is. That is, if you're interested."

"Heresy!" Faroh thundered, "The Ara'lu was translated after his death. There is no tomb. I knew you were a fraud. I should kill you now." Faroh formed a sword and leered at Cythraul. He couldn't move. His muscles were locked in place."

"Well, come on boy," Cythraul mocked, "I don't want to wait too long to die." He laughed, "What's the matter? Can't you act on your petty little threat? I told you who I am and you have seen what I am capable of doing. Don't throw your life away over a minor detail of your faith."

"Minor?" anguish filled Faroh's voice, "If there is no ascension then my faith has been in vain!"

"My poor child, you know the truth. What does the fate of one man affect the truth?"

Faroh was dumbstruck. He wanted to argue, but he couldn't. "The Holy One is greater than anyone person."

Cythraul smiled, "Then your faith should not be in jeopardy. I will take you to the tomb. You can see for yourself."

"How would you know where the tomb is?"

"I told you, I am Hlachar Cythraul. After he died, I stole his body and placed it in a tomb that I had prepared for him. You still don't believe me, do you?"

"You are a powerful maker, that much is clear, but it is hard for me to believe that *the* Hlachar Cythraul would show so much interest in me."

"Who would ever believe that the great Faroh Raanan would have a humble streak in him? Are you telling me that you are not interested in having it?"

Faroh held his breath. He didn't believe Cythraul for a minute, but this was an opportunity he could not pass up.

"I have been looking for someone for a long time," said Cythraul, "If you are not interested, I wish you would let me know. I have work to do."

"I'm not saying I don't want it, but..."

"Look at it this way. If I can bring you to the Ara'lu's periapt, I am who I say I am."

"Then take me to it. If you really are Cythraul, then you must know what you're doing. If you are not, you will die by my hand."

"Good. If that's the way you want it, so be it. There is one thing that we have to do before I take you to it, but it is on the way."

Ianus stood outside the door to the bridge. Every fiber of his being cried out against going in. He wanted to run back to the Mista and dart down to the surface, but he knew that they would follow him. Their loyalty was commendable. He didn't want to be responsible for what might happen.

Even if he wanted to, he couldn't wait outside forever. He entered the bridge and waved at them.

Daru ran up to him and threw her arms around his neck. Stepping back, "I'm so glad you came back to us."

"I had to. If you are going to risk your lives for me, the least I can do is be there with you."

"So, you have accepted the fact that we're coming with you?" Maya asked.

"No, but what else could I do? I suppose Daru explained everything to you."

"She said that you wanted to find Usekht Maati," said Pryor, "A foolish thing to do, but it sounds like a lot of fun. A great adventure to find the place where it all began. I wouldn't miss it for the world. I've spent so much time on passenger liners lately, a good jolt of life-threatening danger will be a wonderful change of pace."

"He's always been an adventurer at heart," said Maya, shaking her head. "But he is right. Do you have any idea where Usekht Maati is?"

"No," said Ianus, "I was hoping one of you did."

Khensu stood up from his station, and hesitantly raised his hand, "If I might. No one knows the location of anything in Tai-wer. The Enmadra decreed that all maps of the region had to be destroyed before the wall around Tai-wer was finished."

"There's really a wall?" Ianus asked, "I thought that was just a legend."

“It encloses all nine point four million kilometers,” said Khensu, “There are only four gates, one by each of the rivers.”

Ianus looked up at the image of the planet on the main view screen. “Maybe we can narrow down the search area. Scan Tai-wer, and display the results on the screen.”

Everyone took up their stations. A flat map replaced the image of the green and blue orb. The wall appeared on the map, snaking through the mountains and around the countryside. It made a rough square in the heart of the largest continent, but the interior was black and shapeless. There wasn't even any topical data on the map.

“Is something wrong with the sensors?” Ianus asked.

“They seem to be all right. I'll run a diagnostic,” said Khensu.

“What's going on?” Ianus asked, “How come we can see the walls and the surrounding area, but nothing on the inside?”

“I don't know,” said Daru, “Let me try something. I'm pulling up the visual sensors. There we go.”

“We can see everything. Zoom in.”

The image grew larger and clearer, then the screen went black.

“That's odd?” Daru furrowed her brow, “Why did the sensors black out?”

“They seem to be jamming us, to keep us from getting details,” said Maya.

“How could their system be so precise?” Ianus asked.

“The Enmadra are a much older race than any of our peoples, some say they were flying between the stars while we were still living in caves. No one really knows for sure. They are powerful makers.”

“Are they still on Adrakaya?”

“Maybe,” Daru said, “When I was young, we heard stories about people who had claimed to have seen them, but there is no evidence that they are still around.”

“They are so mythic,” said Pryor, “Many people see them in visions and confuse that with real life. When something is part of your religion, they became part of your life whether they are there or not.”

“Diagnostic complete,” said Khensu, “The sensors are operating within normal parameters.”

“Scan the planet again,” said Ianus.

Again, nothing appeared within the walls.

“I have an idea,” said Daru, “I'll be right back.”

Excusing herself, Daru left the bridge.

Ianus sat down in the captain's chair and stared at the viewer.

“We'll find a way,” said Pryor, “This is important to you, isn't it?”

“Yes. It was the last thing Ihy asked me to do. I have to know why. Something is waiting for me there, even Arun remembers that.”

“So you talked to him,” Maya smiled, “That's good to hear.”

“All of the paths of my life go here. Maybe I am running off to my death, I don't know.”

“You are following your destiny. We can all understand that, but don't forget. Your choices make your destiny.”

Tara wandered the corridors of the Valkyrie, trapped behind a wall of doubt and fear. Her every instinct told her to run, to escape, to get as far away from everyone as she

possibly could. The darkness clouded her mind. Obedience challenged her newfound sense of independence.

She hadn't slept well for weeks. She felt guilty for all that she had done, but she didn't know what she should do. Even worse, she didn't know who to trust.

Rounding the corner, she stopped.

"Hello, Daru," she said, bowing as Daru marched past her.

"Tara," Daru nodded, "You were raised on Adrakaya weren't you?"

"Yes, I grew up in a little town on the shore of the river Gihon. Why?"

"Follow me," Daru charged off down the hall, "We are trying to find Usekht Maati, and I thought maybe you might have some ideas where to look."

"No, I'm sorry. The Holy Books say that it is in the place from which the four rivers flow."

"I know, but with over nine million square kilometers of area to search. We have to narrow it down, or it'll take forever."

"No it won't. The A'nath-ari will find you before you find them."

"That is precisely what I want to avoid."

"What? Do you think they'll treat you any differently if you find them *before* they find you?"

"I don't know, but maybe if we can meet them on our terms we'll be in a better position to negotiate with them."

"Where are we going?"

"I am going to prepare a probe for launch. They are jamming our sensors, so I thought I could equip a probe to broadcast on all frequencies, maybe one signal will get through."

"What if they're blocking the sensors instead of the signal?"

Daru stopped and turned to face Tara. "If that's the case, then we'll have to try something else. I don't know what, but if that's what they're doing we may just have to try to land somewhere within the walls. What other choice would we have?"

"Do you need my help?"

"If you have time. I don't want to keep you away from what you were doing."

"I was just trying to think through some things."

"Aren't we all?" Daru said and started walking again. "What's the problem?"

"I was just wondering what I should do. I feel trapped, caged. The world has passed me by, and I don't know how to catch up."

"What's wrong? Is Barami still ignoring you?"

"No," Tara hung her head low, "He has been paying *much* more attention to me lately, but I doubt my vocation. I'm not sure whether I am where I should be. Maybe this wasn't the life I was called to."

"If you weren't here, where would you be?"

"I don't know. There is so much going on here, I need to be somewhere quiet. I have to find myself."

"Can I give you a piece of advice? Nothing in this universe is permanent. Everything changes, even you. If you set out to find yourself, you will be searching for the rest of your life. It is a quest without end. Seek out friends and family, you will find them."

"Why would you say that?"

“A couple of years ago, I went out to find myself. Pryor saw what I was doing and thankfully intervened. If he hadn’t, I know I would still be looking. I know who I am now, but I know that I will grow and change.”

“Evolution must be served.”

“Something like that. The only way to define something is to freeze it in time, but after a while it will break out of its cage and be undefined again.”

“Break out of its cage,” Tara muttered under her breath. “All my dreams have turned into nightmares. I don’t look forward to anything anymore.”

“Just let go.”

“Let go?”

“If nightmares are holding you down, you have to just let them go. Go past them, or they will control you for the rest of your life. If you are not in control, you will always be a slave to someone else. You have to get past them. Face your fears, you will survive.”

“But what if I don’t?”

Daru smiled, “You will. I have faith in you. You will be stronger on the other side.”

Tara smiled and hugged Daru, “Thank you. I have to go. I have a lot to do. Thank you, I will see you on the other side.”

Ianus sat in the captain’s chair, staring at the empty black void in the large continent. Maya and Khensu were huddled over the sensor displays.

Pryor sighed, and turned to Ianus. “What are we going to do if we can’t narrow down the search area?” He asked.

“I don’t know. We have to go down, we’ll find a way. Fate would not have lead me to this place only to abandon me now,” said Ianus, desperate to believe the words.

“Tien Shaa taught us, ‘Silence is the voice of fate when we must look into the heart of darkness. The darkness empties our hearts and prepares us for the new harvest.’ Maybe this is our time to face the darkness,” said Maya.

“I can see the darkness,” Ianus pointed at the main view screen, “Now what?”

Daru entered the bridge, “I’ve prepared a probe for launch.”

“Will it work?”

“What other choice do we have?”

“We could always fly in closer, and take a look,” said Khensu.

Ianus bit his lip, “Launch the probe. I don’t want to have to fly blind. If the probe doesn’t work, we’ll have to think of something else.”

“Probe launched,” said Maya.

The door slipped open, and Aashen ran in gasping for breath, “The To’asaa... the To’asaa has been stolen again!” He yelled.

Ianus’ and Daru’s eyes met. “Tara,” they said in unison.

“What did you say?” Pryor asked, “Why would Tara steal the To’asaa?”

“She is the one who stole it before.”

“Did she attack Ihy!” Maya roared, venom dripping from her words.

“No!” Ianus and Daru said together.

“The probe is entering the atmosphere!” Khensu shouted over the murmuring. The ship lurched violently.

“What was that?” Daru asked.

“The Sangrida has separated, and is departing,” Pryor answered.

“Hail her!” Ianus shouted.

The display began to flicker.

“She must have put a virus in the system,” Maya gritted her teeth.

“The communication system is down,” said Pryor.

Ianus slipped out of his chair, but he didn’t hit the floor. He floated in the air, so did Daru and the others.

“Gravity has failed,” Khensu held onto his station, “The engines have lost power.”

Everyone began to drift toward the port side of the bridge.

“The ship is listing!” Pryor’s voice cracked.

“Our orbit is decaying!” Khensu pulled himself closer to his station.

“Somehow we have to get the engines back online!” Ianus ordered.

They all swam to a station, and struggled to get the computer to respond.

“How could Tara have caused all this?” Aashen asked, “That is why Ihy wanted the Kishanu, they’re as good as having backups. If something fails in the main system, they can take over those ship functions.”

“Well,” said Ianus, “If the Sangrida just departed it stands to reason that the Kishan Sangrida was aboard, and Arun is hardly in any condition to take over.”

“But that still leaves Mista.”

“Give her time. She’ll restore function.”

“But how could Tara have done all this?”

“She didn’t!” A raspy voice broke over the comm, “We did! This land is forbidden to all outsiders. Intrusions will not be taken lightly. Leave now! This is your only warning.”

“We have business with the A’nath-ari!” Ianus yelled.

“The A’nath-ari do the business of the Enmadra, we do not know you! Leave now, before it is too late for you.”

“We must see you!” Ianus said, “Or at the very least speak with you. We have come so far, do not send us away now.”

“The Bahn Se’leen should know better than to send probes into our land! Do not try our patience young one. We do not serve you! We walk these lands alone. Turn back or be destroyed. We will not tell you again!”

Suddenly the gravity returned. They all fell to the ground with a terrible crash.

“I don’t think they want to talk to you,” said Daru.

“For once in my life, this is not about what they want, it’s about what I want. They will talk to me!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: HOUR OF NEED

“We have to get in there,” Ianus began to pace around the bridge.

“After that display of power, I suggest we don’t try to land within the walls,” Maya returned to the communication station.

“According to legend, there are four gates into Tai-Wer located near each of the four rivers,” said Khensu, “One in the north, another in the south, and one in the east and the west.”

“But how are we going to get past the guardians?” Daru asked. “They have successfully stopped people from passing for millennia.”

“We’ll deal with them when the time comes,” said Ianus.

Confused, he listened to the swirling suggestions and arguments that surrounded him. He wondered where Tara had run off to. Why had she stolen the To’asaa again? Sorrow overwhelmed him, and he saw her in pain.

She struggled with a great darkness. Ianus understood the war waging through her mind. It was the same in his own. Minor choices had swelled into titanic forces that threatened to devour them both. In everyone’s life the time comes to decide whether to be controlled by their past, or to take control over their own life. Things that seemed so trivial at the time had developed into so many nightmares and vicious chills that hunger for every bit of available free time.

Ianus could just go home to Shiloh and live a comfortable life. There was no reason for him to go on except for his own curiosity. The voices had told him to go, but was that really a reason to dare the darkness ahead? He had taken up vows, and done everything in his power to save his father. Why risk everyone for a blind quest into the unknown?

He stared at the vacant territory within the walls. Now, he could make up his own mind. There was only the nagging desire to unmask the phantoms that had lead him to this place, and revenge. They had murdered his father, after all.

A sinister grin crept across his face.

“Unless there are any arguments,” Ianus said, “We should land at the south gate, and travel north into Tai-Wer. If you are going to do something foolish, you might as well do it right. After we land, we will split up and explore the city. Hopefully, we can find out where we’re going. We’ll meet at the gate at sunset to figure out our next move.”

There was no argument.

“Aashen, please come with me,” said Ianus, “The rest of you take the ship down.” Ianus and Aashen left the bridge, and made their way toward the docking hatch.

“What did you want?” Aashen asked.

“You know I’ve always trusted your advice.”

“I don’t know why? I am a silly sort of person. I guess it is kind of funny that anyone would take me seriously.”

“I suppose it is. After all, you are the closest thing I have to an Uncle.”

“Would that make Tuun an aunt?”

“No, he is more the grumpy uncle that you don’t talk about often. Anyway, I’ve been giving a lot of thought to the future. Since the ship has been designated a sovereign vessel, I thought we might petition the Camarilla for a monastic charter.”

“Really? There hasn’t been an itinerant monastery in the order for at least a century. It is an interesting idea, but I’m afraid you’re not ready to be abbot, and I won’t take the job. So if that’s why you wanted to see me, forget about it.”

“No,” Ianus laughed, “That isn’t what I had in mind. I was wanting to ask Maya to be the Abbess. She has more than enough experience, and I think she would be perfect.”

“And we could ask Pryor to be the Prior!” Aashen chuckled.

Ianus shook his head, “We are a sovereign vessel, we would have a castellan or seneschal, depending of course on how we organize ourselves.”

“Don’t you think all of this is a little premature. We don’t even know if we’ll survive Tai-Wer yet.”

“Dad always said that the first mark of failure is neglecting to make future plans. I have to believe we’ll come back. It gives me strength.”

“Courage can overpower just about everything.”

“Quite right. I will forward the proposal to the Camarilla before we disembark. I’ve been wondering why Ihy spent so much money on this ship. I think he knew it would give us all a place to call home, wherever we are.”

The streets of South Gate were packed full of pilgrims and citizens, rushing around, milling about the carts and tables of the open-air market. Maya, Pryor, and Daru filtered through the crowd.

One of the tables was full of statues and sculptures, probably Eidolons. Two men stood behind the table unpacking merchandise. Daru noticed the fine workmanship on their deep red robes. One of them looked familiar.

“Excuse me,” she said, tapping the table in front of him.

“Hello, miss, can I help you? We have eidolons of all sorts, and if we don’t have what you’re looking for just let me know. We do make custom models. Mind you, it will take time.”

“This is going to sound weird, but have you ever been to Garm?”

“Yes, Miss, we are traveling sales men. We left there a couple of weeks ago. Why?”

“I think I bought a Benben-stone from you when I was stationed in Balder on Garm.”

The man’s face went pale, “You bought it for a friend’s birthday. Did he like it?”

“Yes, he loved it.”

“Good, would you like to purchase something else? We have a marvelous series of sphinxes that are brilliant in their advice.”

“No, thank you, it is strange running into you again all these light years away.”

“It’s fate. We have wonderful merchandise. My name is Rasmus Dyre, but most people call me Ras or Rasi. Here, take this.”

He handed her a carved, tiger’s eye unicorn pendant.

“Thank you, but I really don’t have the money to spare.”

“It’s on me, don’t worry about the money. Wear it in good health. It is guaranteed to bring you good fortune.”

Daru smiled, and put the necklace on. “I will, thank you Rasi. My name is Daru.”

“You’re looking for something aren’t you?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact, how did you know?”

“You’re friends are trying to attract your attention.”

Maya and Pryor were waving their arms. Daru said goodbye, and weaved through the crowd to meet them near the wall. Pilgrims were praying and stuffing little notes in between the sand stone blocks of the wall. The river Gihon flowed under an arch near the gate itself.

There was an excited whisper among the pilgrims. A man was emerging from behind the gate.

“I know him,” Pryor muttered, “That’s Valeryn Kamau, we trained together years ago.”

“He’s a Raewyn!” Daru exclaimed, “He’s a member of the Jade Moon?”

“Yes, we used to be very close. I wonder what he’s doing here.”

“Are you blind? He just strolls out of Tai-wer, and all you can say is you wonder what he’s doing here.”

Pryor conceded the point, and they went over to him. Valeryn and Pryor hugged. Pryor introduced everyone.

“So what are you doing here?” Valeryn asked.

“I should be asking you that,” said Pryor, “We are here to support a friend, and you?”

“I’m here on business. Master Theron wants me to investigate some persistent rumors.”

“Is it dangerous in there?” Daru asked.

“Why? You’re not thinking of an expedition into Tai-wer, are you?” Valeryn sighed, “O, I see. Beware the gates, they are guarded by idolons. They almost killed me the first time through, but I’ve learned their secret. They don’t like strangers. Once they get to know you, they can be quite helpful.”

“How did they get to know you? Could you introduce us?”

“I would rather not talk about this right now. I hope I’m not being rude, but all I’ve talked about for weeks, is Tai-wer. I would prefer to talk about what you’ve been up to all these years,” he put his arm around Pryor’s shoulders.

“Only if you do the same.” Pryor said, “I wouldn’t mind catching up with you, but I will not prattle on about myself if you don’t.”

“Are you a teacher now?”

“I have an apprentice, but other than that, no. And you? You always wanted to work in the security service.”

“They put me in the Intelligence service,” Valeryn laughed, “It’s close.”

Maya nudged Daru, with her elbow, and they walked away to give them some privacy.

“I can’t believe he’s found Valeryn again after all these years,” said Maya, “After temple, they were posted on different worlds and lost touch.”

“He used to tell me stories about their adventures in temple. Excitement and adventure around every corner.”

Faroh and Cythraul arrived at East Gate, and commanded their helmsman to wait on the ship. The sun was beginning to set on Adrakaya. Bells were sounding all over the city, inviting the faithful to evening prayer.

By the time they reached the wall, all of the pilgrims had departed.

“This is the gate to Tai-wer!” Faroh said, “It is forbidden. No one who enters will survive. Everyone knows that.”

“Are you afraid?” Cythraul snickered.

“I fear nothing!”

“We shall see.”

Cythraul bowed toward the gate. The torches on either side of the gate burst to life.

“Hail, o August Guardian of the East, who is born of the morning sun.”

Mist flooded the opening. A silver and black figure appeared on the threshold.

“Hail to you, great Hlachar Cythraul, why have you returned?” The guardian’s eyes fixed on Faroh.

“I have come to reclaim my former estate.”

“You have said this before, is this your new champion?”

“Maybe, I wish to take him to the Parcae.”

“I am sorry. You may pass, but I cannot allow him to enter. You know the law.”

“I do. I also know that you must allow him entry, if I demand it.”

“You are allowed this right, according to the covenant, but I must know if you demand this. The Enmadra must be told.”

Cythraul walked past the sentinel into Tai-wer, “I’m afraid I can’t allow that. Faroh! Take him out, if you want what I promised you.”

The guardian turned to face Faroh. “I would advise against attacking me. No one has ever survived.”

Faroh closed his eyes, and formed a halberd with his periapt. “Let me pass,” he steadied his voice.

The sentinel forged a short sword and a dirk.

Delight filled Faroh, it had been a while since he had been in a fight. He longed for combat. Twirling the halberd around his body, he cautiously approached his adversary.

The guardian stood his ground.

“This is your last chance!” Faroh exclaimed.

The sentinel remained silent.

Faroh swung the halberd’s blade at him.

Thrusting the dirk into the air, the guardian deflected the halberd, and slashed at Faroh with the sword.

One step back, Faroh leaned his weight into the fulcrum of the halberd and dirk. He rolled away from the edge of the sword, and flipped into the air. Falling back, his feet pounded the sentinel's shoulders.

The guardian slid to his right, quickly.

Faroh lost his balance and fell to the ground. Looking up, he saw a diamond lodged in the keystone of the arch.

"You're an eidolon!" He exclaimed, and jumped to his feet.

The sentinel lunged forward. Landing with his hands on the ground, he wrapped his ankles around Faroh's throat, and tossed him like a rag doll.

Faroh caught the ground with his right hand, and rolled to his feet.

"Cease this pointless combat!" The guardian yelled, "You cannot defeat me. Yield."

"Never, I will win!"

The sentinel charged Faroh.

Blocking every punch, Faroh focused on his periapt. He intercepted each fist, then grabbed his arms. With all his might, Faroh shoved the guardian to the ground.

Faroh ran toward the gate. The sentinel was right behind him. Jumping, Faroh ripped the diamond out of the keystone.

The guardian punched him hard in the back.

Faroh dropped the gem. Struggling to breathe, he dodged the sentinel's kicks. Faroh focused into his periapt.

A cold, black flame shot from Faroh's hand, engulfing the diamond. Sparks showered from the gem, and it exploded.

The sentinel vanished.

Cythraul laughed and applauded, "You may in fact be the person I am looking for. He should have killed you."

"He would have if Panthera hadn't taught me how to destroy eidolons. I am getting tired of your tests old man."

"There is one more, should you survive it, I will deliver on my promise."

Ianus sat on the steps of the Nar'han Inn. The rest of the Valkyrie's crew was inside preparing for dinner. Ianus wanted some time alone under the stars. He missed the quiet of Al-Benu. He missed laying out under the star laden sky until he could barely keep his eyes open. Then he would crawl up to his room and collapse onto his bed, and sleep until the bells rang for Morning Prayer.

Sakkara exited the Inn, "They are about to serve the food," she said, "Ianus should come inside, he will need his strength."

"Sit down," Ianus patted the stair next to him, "How have you been?"

"Sakkara has been spending most of her time reading. She wants to know everything that she can about the forbidden lands. She wants to help Ianus. Sakkara is a good apprentice."

"That you are. You know, you don't have to come with us."

"Sakkara knows, but where Ianus goes, his apprentice will follow. Ianus shouldn't worry about Sakkara. She is a mighty warrior."

"And I'm sure you will be an excellent maker. The next few days will be hard."

“Sakkara knows, Daru is worried about Ianus. Sakkara told her, He is powerful and wise. He will prevail over all his adversaries. She is still worried. Sakkara doesn’t think Daru believed her. Sakkara doesn’t think anyone but Ianus and Tuun believe her.”

“Tuun thinks I have a chance?”

“O yes, he has faith in Ianus, too.”

Ianus stood up, “Thank you, Sakkara, I needed that.”

He and Sakkara entered the inn. Pryor beckoned from the head of one of the tables. Ianus walked over, and sat next to him, and a Raewyn, Pryor introduced as Valeryn.

The food was brought out, and they started to eat.

“So, what are you doing here?” Ianus asked.

“Master Theron has been in a craze, lately. There’s something wrong with him,” Valeryn said.

“You are the third person to tell me that he’s been acting strange. Do you know what’s going on?”

“He believes that something bad is about to happen to the Jade Moon, or at least that’s what he says. Personally, I think he’s more afraid of losing power. He sent me here to talk to the A’nath-ari, but I can’t find any proof that they are even there.”

“But you’ve braved Tai-wer and returned. I would love to hear what you know about the place.”

“He doesn’t want to talk about it,” said Pryor protectively.

Ianus didn’t like it, but he wanted to get on Valeryn’s good side, so he filled his plate and dropped the subject.

After dinner, the wine was served.

Valeryn stood up, and raised his glass, “May I have your attention. I would like to congratulate Master Barami on his appointment to the Camarilla to take the seat left vacant by the untimely death of Master Betzalel. A toast; peace and long life to the Camarilla, and all who serve her!”

The others raised their glasses to Barami.

Ianus watched him blush at the other table.

“Ihy was suppose to have that seat.” Maya whispered in Ianus’ ear, “He received his notice the night before the incident.”

“He would have served well,” said Ianus.

“I agree,” said Valeryn as he sat down, “It is a shame what happened to Master Khem.”

“That’s why we’re here. The people responsible for his death are in Tai-wer.”

“Are you sure?”

“Well, no, but they did tell me to go there.”

Daru walked up behind Ianus and rested her hand on his shoulder, “May I have a word with you in private?”

Ianus excused himself from the table and they went outside.

Daru stared at the three moons. The tortured black moon loomed close to the horizon. The Jade Moon was beginning to wane, and the red moon was high in the sky. “I don’t know why you have to do this, and don’t worry— I’m not going to try to talk you out of it again. I know you have your reasons, and that’s good enough for me.

Before we go, there is something I have to tell you.” She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “Ianus, I love you.”

All of the color flushed from her face. Ianus brushed a tear away from her eye.

“I love you, too,” he said automatically. “I always have, and I always will. No matter what happens.”

Daru threw her arms around Ianus’ neck, and he wrapped his arms around her waist. He held her so tight, he could almost feel himself melting into her. He had longed for this moment for years, he was not going to let go.

Tara had Sangrida land in the small village of Achates on the other side of Adrakaya from the forbidden lands. She knew that the small monastery of Rohan was used to Predicants making retreat. She wouldn’t draw too much attention showing up unannounced, and she could stay as long as it took to figure out how to get her life straightened out. It was safer to be surrounded by strangers than to be alone. If Panthera came after her, he would be more cautious around a group.

The village of Achates was nothing more than a series of small cottages built of mossy, gray stones and thatch roofs. The monastery was built in the same way. A large building with an expansive cemetery surrounding it.

Tara had studied a map of the campus before leaving the Sangrida, so she went directly to the prior’s office. A man was sitting behind the desk. He had short brown hair and green eyes. His skin was quite fair. He didn’t look much older than Tara.

“Hello, madam,” he said looking up from his book, “I am Kanu Vasin, may I help you?”

“I am Tara Leal, I would like a room.”

“Are you here for retreat? How long will you be staying with us?” Kanu wrote her name into the guest book.

“I don’t know. I need some time to reflect on my life.”

“Doubting your vocation? We get a lot of that. People love to go to the country when they have doubts about what they should do. I have to warn you, just because it is quieter here than it is in the city, that doesn’t make it any easier to concentrate. The distracting clatter is always in your mind, not your environment.”

“I understand that. May I stay here?”

“I also have to warn you, that almost everything in the monastery has been enchanted to aid seekers in their quest for truth. So, don’t be shocked if anything strange happens. The beds will enhance your dreams, the mirrors will show your mental states, and several of the doors will not open if you are not focused or prepared for what lay behind them. If you understand these warnings as I’ve explained them to you, please sign here,” Kanu pushed the ledger toward her and pointed to the signature line.

Tara signed the book, “Are the doors a problem?”

“I wouldn’t call them a problem, but I did get locked in the chapel of self-reflection once. I ended up fasting for three days. Only after I received a vision did the door unlock and release me.”

“Has anyone ever died in any of the chapels?”

“Not in about a century. Some thieves once broke into the chapel of hope and charity,” Kanu chuckled, “Unfortunately they refused to reform and starved to death, but

that was an exception. Okay, you will have room forty while you're here." Kanu stood up and rifled through a drawer looking for the key.

"You are very young for a prior, aren't you."

"O, no, I'm not the prior. I'm just filling in for Prior Lasse. He's at a regional conference until the end of the week."

Finding the right key, he led her out of the office, and over to the abbey. They took a spiral staircase up three flights of stairs, and down the hall to room forty. Kanu unlocked the door.

"The bell is rung before prayers," he said, "And meals are served after services. If you need anything, just ask. We are all here to help."

"Thank you. Have you ever questioned your faith?"

"When I was young, my parents died, and I was left to an orphanage. The monks and nuns tried to console me. They kept saying that everything happens for a reason. That only made me angry."

"What did you do?"

"I rebelled, of course. I was a real troublemaker, but something deep inside me kept calling out for more. Both of my parents were makers. I longed for the magic and the ritual. Soon, I just couldn't take it anymore, and I went to the monastery and began my training. I couldn't say why, but it was something I had to do."

"I hope we can talk again later."

"Any time."

Tara entered her room and closed the door behind her. It was good to be somewhere no one knew her. She was free from her past, if only she could free herself from her present.

She walked over to the dresser, and gazed at her reflection in the mirror. The image was sad and stooped over. Suddenly a tear ran down its cheek, and the image shattered and crumbled to the floor. The mirror was blank.

It was midnight, and Adrakaya's three moons lit the cobblestone road in front of South Gate. The group had assembled with all of the supplies they needed for their excursion into the forbidden lands.

Valeryn pulled Ianus aside, "I have to ask you before we enter— Are you sure you have to do this? I can do my best to get you past the guardian, but the risk is more than you can imagine."

"I know, but I have to do this. My destiny awaits within these walls."

"That's what I'm afraid of," Valeryn patted Ianus on the arm, and went off to join the others, "In a moment we will be passing through the gates to Tai-Wer. If you are not absolutely sure you want to be with us, leave now. Once we are past the threshold there will be no turning back."

Everyone stood their ground. Ianus hoped that some of them would turn back, but he was in part grateful that none of them left him. Their loyalty and curiosity was too strong.

Valeryn turned, and bowed toward the gate, "Hail, o August Guardian of the South, child of the noon day sun."

Mist flooded the gate, two hooded figures in black robes emerged from the threshold. "Hail Valeryn," their voices thundered in unison, "Have you brought others to challenge and slay us?"

"No! Why would you even ask such a thing?"

"Hlachar Cythraul has. He brought another with him to slay our brother. Now the east gate is unprotected."

"Why are there two of you? If one is dead, why are there more of you now?"

"We thought it was better for us to multiply, so this travesty can not occur again. There are now three of us at each gate. Our third is helping the others repair the east gate." They lowered their heads and held hands. The Raewyn betrayed their allies, we cannot let you pass. The covenant is broken."

"No!" Valeryn shook his fists, "Are you sure it was Cythraul? He should be dead by now."

"We are sure that Cythraul is the culprit. He is not dead."

"But he was banished from the Emyrean. There is no way he could have survived this long on his own."

"He was banished? Then he was not acting on behalf of the Emyrean?"

"No, he revolted against the throne, he and all of his followers were banished. They cannot return to the Emyrean ever. He was working on his own."

"If what you are saying is true then you will be allowed entry."

"Might I make a suggestion. Allow us entry, then verify my story. If it isn't true then do not allow us to leave."

The two guardians looked at each other, "You know the rules, we can allow you to enter with your guests, but we must inform the Enmadra of their arrival."

"We have nothing to hide."

"Then you will allow us to read each of you before you pass. All who agree may pass. We will report everything that we find."

"Agreed," Valeryn walked between the guardians.

They laid their hands on his shoulders, then released him, "You may pass. Lord Barami, we have heard much about you, you are next."

Barami stumbled forward; beads of sweat ran down his face. They stared at him.

"Interesting," they said, "You may pass."

Barami sighed, and joined Valeryn on the other side.

"Ianus Akeru," the sentinels chimed, "We wondered when we would see you."

Ianus walked between them. He felt something like a cold breeze blowing through him.

"You are different than we expected," the sentinels said, "Strange, you seem to be born of two fathers and two mothers, but do not worry, Ihy will always be with you. He is more a part of you than you know."

"What do you mean?" Ianus asked.

"Your reasons for coming here are your own, do not wonder anymore. The hands that seek your end are blind to what they have done. We will allow you to pass."

Ianus was confused, but went to join Valeryn and Barami.

"Lady Daru," the guardians bowed, "You may pass."

"Why aren't you going to read her!" Barami protested.

“There is no need to read what we already know. If you doubt our judgment we will scan you again to see if we missed anything.”

Barami scowled at the implication.

The two sentinels bowed again to Daru, “You may pass my lady.”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: THE SEVEN EYES

They followed a well-worn path that snaked along side the river Gihon under the trees and into the heart of Tai-wer. Creatures rustled through the undergrowth just out of the range of their lamps.

“Do you mind explaining what that was all about back at the gate?” Ianus said to Valeryn, who looked just as confused.

“The Raewyn have a long standing covenant with the A’nath-ari. As part of the covenant, we can come and go as we please. You, I’m afraid, will have more trouble.”

“Who exactly is this Hlachar Cythraul?”

“He was once the greatest of us. He stood before the throne as a sort of viceroy. Not satisfied with a position at the top of the Emyrean hierarchy, he led a rebellion so long ago. It is hard to remember. When he failed to topple the throne he fled to Adrakaya. It was here his plans changed forever. Finding refuge in Usekht Maati, he studied the Enmadra ways, and befriended one of their young disciples. He tempted Dov Lavan to join his cause. He figured, if he couldn’t rule the Emyrean, he would at least rule the Enmadra. He failed at that too, as you well know. What I don’t understand is how he could have survived for so long away from the Emyrean.”

“Why?” Ianus had been taught that the Raewyn were immortal. “I don’t understand. Why couldn’t he survive away from his people?” Ianus asked as he ducked under a low branch.

“We don’t usually talk about it, but the Raewyn share a sort of common life. You know that we are not flesh and blood like you are. Well, if we don’t share our energy regularly, we sort of stagnate and die.”

“If that’s true, how could he still be alive?”

“He could be stealing the life of other Raewyn. I can’t believe that he could do something like that. It is a crime worse than murder. If the energy taken isn’t replaced, the victim will become feeble, and die a slow, painful death. He may be a traitor, but I can’t believe anyone would do that.”

“Why would you give him the benefit of the doubt?” Ianus was shocked, “After all that he did, he sounds just like the kind of person who would do that.”

“The screaming,” Valeryn said with a sad look on his face.

“What screaming?”

“When someone does...” Valeryn could not say the word, “when someone does that, the sound of the victims screams will never leave their ears. Cythraul is a monster, but even he would know the consequences of his actions.”

Ianus wasn't entirely satisfied by the answer, but he didn't want to offend the only person he had with him who actually remembered traveling through Tai-wer. "So what have you been doing for Master Theron?" He asked.

"To be honest, he wanted me to spy on the A'nath-ari. I can't violate the covenant, so I've been going to a campsite I prepared up ahead. After a few days, I would just leave and tell him I couldn't find anything."

"You have been lying to the Camarilla?" Barami exclaimed.

"No worse than you have!" Valeryn gave Barami a sly grin. "I know what you're up to."

"I assure you I have know idea what you're talking about," Barami said, swatting away the small flies that were following him.

"Ihy Khem is dead is he?" Valeryn chuckled, "Then who is that? It isn't wise to cast stones, they have a way of coming back at you!"

Ianus slowed down and let them pass. The last thing he wanted was to get caught in the middle of a political debate. He started walking again when Arun passed him.

"Hello Ianus," Arun smiled, "I bet you are excited you're finally here."

"A little. Do you remember ever being in Tai-wer?"

Arun looked down at the path, "I remember a temple full of light... but I'm not sure it was here. I'm sorry."

"Is it getting any easier?"

"I am growing more accustom to it," Arun's smile faded. "I have had some strange urges lately. Nothing I can't handle."

"What kind of strange urges?"

"Nothing I could put into words. There is a hunger deep down that I've never felt before. A craving that I've never known before. It's manageable."

Ianus felt a chill run down his spine, "Is there anything I can do to help you?"

"Not that I know. I don't think there is anything that can be done except fighting it off. Knowing that you care about what happens to me."

They continued their walk. A couple of times, Ianus was sure he heard someone following them. He kept looking, but he didn't see anyone.

Night birds screeched, and wolves howled. The insects chirped. It somehow flowed together into a wild melody.

Ianus' vision kept weaving in and out. His gifts were aroused by something but the vision would not come. The fog obscured the path, and then receded. Nothing clear, there were no discernable forms. Nothing but phantoms and shadows. 'Maybe it is all of the stories I've heard about this place,' he thought.

"We're watching you," the wind whispered in his ear.

They arrived at the campsite just before dawn. The wood was already stacked for the fire. Daru was tired and sat down on a log away from the rest of them.

Valeryn lit the fire, "This is where I come and wait before I go back to report to the Camarilla. We should spend the day here, and travel at night. It will be easier to avoid any patrols."

There was a silent consensus.

Daru sat quietly as the group split up for the night.

Ianus walked over and sat down next to her, “You’ve been awfully quiet today. Anything bothering you?”

“Not really, I have been wondering why the guardians bowed to me.”

“I’ve learned to expect people to behave odd. I mean, normal people aren’t often drawn into the whole conspiracy and secret society thing, are they?”

“I resent that! I’m a very normal person.”

Ianus laughed, “You’re sitting by a campfire within the borders of the Forbidden Lands, where people routinely disappear, and you are wondering why someone bowed to you. Do you consider that normal?”

“It is for me. Both of my parents were makers, we used to do similar things for family vacation. Some of my happiest memories involve dodging ancient traps in ancient ruins all over Adrakaya. Yeah, for me this is pretty normal.”

“And I thought I had a bizarre childhood. That’s better. I’m glad to see you smile. The world is gloomy without your smile.”

“You’re not very good at this are you?”

Ianus blushed, “No, but at least I try. May I point out it takes more courage to embarrass yourself than to run off into battle. Fighting is easy compared to eloquence under pressure.”

Daru laid her head on Ianus’ shoulder, “I don’t know about all that, but the effort is welcomed. Have you figured out how we are going to find Usekht Maati?”

“No, I was hoping to see some landmark that I would recognize from the stories. So far, there’s only the river.”

“We’ll find something.”

“I hope so. I don’t want all of this to be for nothing.”

“What do you think is waiting for you there?”

“Independence! Have you ever felt used? Like every action in your life has been dictated by someone else? What would you do if you thought you found a way to take your life back?”

“I guess I would take it. I saw you talking to Arun earlier. How is everything with him?”

“We need to watch him very carefully. He is doing all right for now, but he might slip.”

“Where do you think Tara is?”

“I don’t know, she could be anywhere, I just hope she’s working her problems out.”

“You have an awful lot of compassion for her, why?”

“She reminds me of me. I can’t help it. She is as lost as I am. In a way, I know what she is going through.”

Daru looked up at the stars through the tree branches. Her eyes were heavy. She drifted off to sleep.

She found herself standing on a terrace over looking a vast forest. It reminded her of Kur-gal. War ships broke through the atmosphere. The sunset.

The light of burning cities glimmered all across the countryside.

“Help us!” A voice called out, “Please Daru, help us!”

“How can I help you?”

Fire flashed in front of her. The sound of a terrified crowd deafened her.

“Stop this!” Said an unseen man.

“How?” Came a female voice that Daru recognized as her own.

Several Ubasti men were running down a dusty street. They were bandaged, and obviously terrified.

A cackling laugh boomed in her ears and was suddenly silenced.

“Does she understand?”

“No, she seems to be confused.”

“To her this is just a dream.”

“She does not know.”

“She never did.”

“What should we do with her?”

“Perhaps we should let her sleep.”

“But she is the one.”

“No, she could have been, but that was before.”

“I understand, but her future is uncertain. She could still be.”

“I doubt that very much.”

“I can see it is possible, but the pain could blind her to the path. We will have to wait and see.”

Faroh sat on the ground and stared at the horizon. The fire of the morning sun burned the sky, but the sun had not yet risen. His mind was troubled. For the first time, he believed that Cythraul was who he said he was. Why would a being of such power need him? Why couldn't he just take what he wanted?

He saw himself as a pawn, but he couldn't see the game. All of this was too good to be true. There had to be a price for this: A great price, perhaps one too high to pay. Faroh was no one's servant, and he would never be a slave. Never again! He had not escaped the slavers only to throw himself into bondage.

“Leave then!” Cythraul said. He stood behind Faroh. His anger warmed Faroh's back.

“I don't know why you would say that!”

“Yes you do! You think I want to enslave you! I don't! You can come with me if you want to, you can leave if you want. I do not own you.”

“Then why are you doing this? Why do you need me?”

“Because I am tired of being alone!” Cythraul walked away.

Faroh stood up, and joined him.

“You are right,” Cythraul said mournfully, “I could do it all myself. I have the power to take whatever I want. I could show the entire galaxy the truth, but the Empyrean would come against me. If you know anything of my power, it is nothing compared to a thousand equals. Do you see? I cannot act, but you can. If you act, the Empyrean cannot. Do you understand?”

“I think so. Who or what is the Empyrean?”

“The throne and powers of the Raewyn.”

Faroh took a couple steps away. He dragged his foot in a line back and forth across the dusty ground. “So why me? Why did you choose me?”

“Because you are a man after my own heart. I can see myself in you. You are just the kind of person I can see myself sharing power with.”

“And what happens if I ever stop being useful to you?”

Cythraul grinned and fought back a chuckle, “You really don’t get it, do you? Do you know why Dov Lavan was seen as such a threat?”

“Because he taught the truth, and messengers of the Holy One have always been persecuted.”

“No. He was hated for his doctrine, but he was a threat because of his periapt. You know that Raewyn are the most powerful makers. The periapt I gave him made him even more powerful than they are. That is what I am offering you. Once you master it, your power will equal my own. There will be no one who can stand in your way, not even me.”

“And should I decide to turn on you?”

“You won’t. Besides, I said you would be equal, not greater. I’m not a fool. Does that ease your mind?”

“For now.”

“That is what I love about you. You don’t trust anyone.”

‘I trust the Holy One, and the words revealed by Dov Lavan,’ Faroh thought, managing a polite smile.

“Words that I gave him. Teachings that I inspired.”

“Why won’t you give me any privacy?”

“Your voice is part of the song. I hear the song as you do. I hear your voice in the song. One day, your voice will be the song.”

“My voice? The song is the voice of the Holy One.”

“And all those who are devoted to him. That is why the Bahn Se’leen and the A’nath-ari fear the words. They do not want to be reminded of their wickedness.”

“I know my sins. I know I can never please the Holy One. Only obedience and faith are acceptable to the Most High. They prefer freedom to obedience. They have perverted the way, and damn many with their poison. I am faithful. Letter for letter, word for word, I know and I obey!”

Faroh closed his eyes and began to recite the Litany of the Machine, “All glory and honor is due to the One, who subjects all to its will.”

“Good, good,” Cythraul waved his hand, “Let me teach you the litany I gave to Dov Lavan. I will ascend, I will arise. I will be like unto the Most High.”

“I don’t understand why you would want me to say such a thing.”

“You know the code, and the litany. ‘We are the way, the hand of the One. We are the truth, the hand of the One. We are the life, the hand of the One. May all be subdued under the One, for we are faithful and will persevere.’ I will teach you to judge righteously, so all might be subject to the One.”

“I will ascend.” Faroh said cautiously. “I will arise. I will be like unto the Most High.”

Tara couldn’t sleep. She tossed and turned all night. The warm rays of the morning sun broke over the horizon and caressed her cheek. She sighed. Sitting up in bed, she looked out the window.

The green grass shimmered in the sun as a breeze rolled down the hill. It was so beautiful, calming. She missed nature. The stars were beautiful, but they were not

comforting. She had never felt at home in space. She needed trees, grass, and flowers to feel at home.

After getting dressed, she went downstairs. She had lost her appetite, so she walked past the dining hall and went out to the countryside.

Falling onto her back, Tara inhaled deeply. The sweet smell of the grass lifted her heart. This was home.

“I love the hills too,” said Kanu.

Tara sat up quickly, “What did you say?”

“This is my favorite place too. I can see it on your face. You look so much better than you did when you checked in.”

“It’s quiet here. I need the silence right now.”

Kanu sat down next to her. “We all need silence, but we don’t have to change our location to find it. Unless you learn that, your problems will return when you go back to your ship.”

“I know,” Tara looked off to the mountains, “I just haven’t been able to meditate lately. The anxiety will not leave me alone. When I close my eyes, I see such horrible things.”

Kanu paused. He lay back on the grass. “I know what you are talking about. I’ve had that problem before. The darkness can be overwhelming, but it cannot overcome you. You just have to fight. It won’t be easy. Just don’t give up.”

“How can you fight your own mind?”

“Fight fire with fire. When the darkness comes, shine the light into it. Struggle to see what is really there. In the end, that is all we can really do.”

“Why? What good does it do to fight off the night, when it will only return stronger than it was before? It is futile to struggle.”

Kanu sighed, “I know. The lies are strong, but after all they are just lies. We have to see through them.”

“Why? It’s pointless. Life is meaningless. We are born only to die. Why shouldn’t I just stop thinking and do whatever I want to do? It doesn’t matter anyway.”

“It does matter! Life itself may be without meaning, but that doesn’t mean you have to give in to it. You want meaning. You crave it. I can see it in your eyes. Seek out some purpose for your life and hold on to it.”

“I know,” Tara sighed, “Pretend I’m good at something, and do that.”

“You don’t have to pretend. You were born with something in your heart. Something you love more than anything else that is what your talent is. Find that. Hold on to it. Your talents are your destiny. They will show you the way.”

Tara pulled her knees into her chest, and wrapped her arms around them. “I’m not good at anything. I keep trying and failing.”

“Are you doing what you want to do or what others want you to do? No one can show you the way you must walk. You have to find it for yourself.”

“I’ve never done anything I wanted to do,” Tara muttered, “Except come here. I don’t even know what I want to do anymore.”

“You have taken the first step—you’re here. Now take your time to find out what you want for your life. It probably will not come to you all at once, but you will start to see the path.”

“So I will find the path that is right for me?”

“No. You will see the way you must go. It is up to you to cut the path out for yourself.”

When Ianus woke up, a thick fog covered the ground, and the last embers of daylight broke through the trees. The rest of the party was already awake. They had packed up most of the camp, and were planning their journey for tonight.

Daru looked nervous, she kept glancing into the forest and biting her lip.

Ianus walked over to her, “Are you feeling all right?”

“I had really strange dreams last night,” she avoided Ianus’ eyes, “I can’t help it, I feel like someone was in my head.”

“I’ve had dreams like that, and a couple of visions. It’s a hard feeling to shake.”

“The worse part is, I feel like they’re still watching me.”

“Really?” Ianus thought for a moment. “Tuun! Could you come here for a minute.”

Tuun’s Ceeri flexed its wings as he turned around. Walking over, he looked Ianus in the eye.

“Could you please scan the area to see if anyone is out there?”

Tuun covered his eyes with his hands. An icy wind rushed from behind him, blowing away the mist. He staggered backwards and dropped his arms to his side. A stream of blood trickled from his left eye. He opened his mouth, but instead of his voice, a polyphonic chorus said, “You have trespassed where you should not be! Your time of testing has come. Stand your ground, unless you have something to fear. We see only truth, lies will be punished severely.”

A short man, with long gray hair and brown robes stepped out of the forest, “I am Haven. Stand firm on the solid ground and you will be approved.”

Beside him came a woman with short brown hair and blue robes. “I am Quinn,” she said softly, “Navigate the tides of justice and compassion, and you will have my support.”

Next, a tall woman in white robes and hair, scowled at Ianus, “I am Greer, the winds of change are at my back, and you stand in their way.”

Finally, a battle scarred man with red hair, and blood red robes stepped into the light of the campfire. He wore a harsh expression on his face. His left eye was missing, “I am Cathal, the flame of truth.”

Ianus looked over at Daru. He could tell from the expression on her face she recognized their voices too. They had haunted his visions, and apparently her dream.

Valeryn rushed over to them and bowed. “Hail, most holy Eyes of Truth. I extend the hand of friendship on behalf of the Raewyn Empyrean to you, o most august Vaticanars.”

“The Raewyn are suspect,” said Cathal.

“As are their motives,” said Greer.

“We know your heart, Valeryn,” said Quinn, “Do not fear, we have nothing against you.”

“Or the rest of your band,” said Haven, “It is this Akeru we must test.”

“I must protest,” said Valeryn, “He has done nothing to warrant your scrutiny.”

Cathal shook his head, “He presumes to be special.”

“He only remembers our words from his birth,” said Haven.

“But he does not know why he is here,” said Greer, “If he does not understand, we may have been wrong.”

“Our error, if we made one, can not be counted to him as sin,” said Quinn, “Valeryn is right. Ignorance is not a crime.”

Cathal thrust his hand toward Ianus, and lightning flew from his fingers.

Ianus clenched his teeth and reeled back in pain.

“I would resist the urge to draw a weapon,” said Haven.

“Cathal can not resist a challenge,” said Quinn.

Greer laughed, “But if you want to die quickly, the choice is yours.”

“It is all the same to me,” Cathal smiled.

Ianus relaxed, “What do you want from me? Tell me. How can I pass your test if I don’t know what it is?”

“I am sorry,” said Haven.

Quinn bowed her head, “I wish there was another way.”

Greer stepped closer to Cathal, and took him by the hand. “The only way we can be sure, is to test your mind and spirit,” they said in unison, “Courage and wisdom are your only allies— Pain and fear, your worse enemy.” Should you not survive our test, you will not survive what is to come.”

Pain struck him like an axe through the back of his skull, and Ianus fell to his knees. He could taste blood in his mouth. Agony racked his body. He fought the urge to scream. Darkness stole his sight. He could no longer feel his body.

“No!” Daru screamed, and ran to catch Ianus’ limp body before he hit the ground. He was barely breathing. “What are you doing? He did absolutely nothing to deserve this!”

“We are sorry,” said Quinn.

“He chose the path that was born for him,” said Haven.

“But you have not yet chosen,” Greer sneered, “You are blind to your fate.”

Cathal stomped his foot, “Maybe she pretends not to see. Perhaps we should test her as well?”

“What?” Daru stammered, “Do you want to kill me as well? Just do it! I don’t want to live without him.”

“We can not test her!” Haven said.

“Her fate is not certain,” said Quinn, “Decisions have yet to be made.”

Greer nodded, “The motion has started, but the path can still be avoided. We can not judge until the fate is unavoidable.”

Cathal made a fist, “But we may not get another chance.”

Ianus howled with pain.

“Explain yourself!” Tuun came to his senses and formed a sword, “We can not allow you to show up, and attack one of our own without a challenge.”

“A challenge?” Cathal smiled. “This from the man who can no longer see. You have blinded yourself, you foolish man don’t blame us if you can not see.”

“Cathal!” Greer jumped in front of him, “We cannot test him.”

“Poor Tuun,” said Quinn, “We mean no disrespect. We cannot tell you what we see. That is the Law.”

“We are the Vaticinars. The Seven Eyes of Fate.” Haven said, “We test those who are placed before us. There is nothing personal. This was not an attack. We must be sure this Akeru is the one needed for the time to come.”

“Says who?” Aashen joined his brother’s side. “Who or what gives you the right to judge?”

“We do not judge,” said Haven.

“His fate is not in our hands,” said Quinn.

“We present the test. The Enmadra send us where we should go,” said Greer.

“He will judge himself,” said Cathal, “This is between him and his destiny.

Everyone has a destiny, but some presume they are greater than they are. These are the ones we challenge. It is better for all that the wrong people do not stand in the way.”

“But how can you say who the right people are?” Tuun asked, “What if he is the right person, but he is not ready yet? If he dies before his time, you have damaged the future.”

“We have considered this,” said Haven, “But we must all serve our purpose and do what is in us to do.”

“We do not act blindly.” Cathal said, “We weigh the risk against the benefit for everyone. We do not act unless the risk is minimal.”

“He could have avoided our test,” said Greer, “But he did not stay on Kur-gal.”

“In a way, he chose this,” said Quinn, “He knew the dangers before he came, and yet he is here. Did he not choose to risk dying in Tai-wer, rather than be safe on your ship?”

Daru held Ianus tight. His skin was growing cold; his breath was very shallow.

“Nothing gives you the right to do this,” Daru said laying Ianus down gently on the ground, “Life is sacred. All life is sacred. To risk the murder of an innocent man just to satisfy your own perverted sense of curiosity is a blasphemous action, and I can not allow it!”

“What if the other person is your enemy?” Haven asked.

“Are you saying Ianus is your enemy?” Daru asked and formed a halberd with her periapt.

“No!” Quinn said, “He is not our enemy. We were simply asking is the life of your enemy sacred?”

“Yes!” Daru pronounced and began walking toward them. “All life is sacred, regardless of who possesses it.”

“So you would always spare your enemies life?” Greer asked, “No matter who they are?”

“If they yield, it is dishonorable to slay them,” Daru raised her halberd.

“You must always spare them,” Cathal asked, “In every circumstance?”

“Life must be served!” Daru said, “Some tyrants can not be allowed to keep what they take from others. The life of every one involved must be preserved as best as possible.”

The Vaticinars smiled, and vanished.

Ianus screamed. Daru dissolved her halberd, and ran over to him. Tears streamed from her eyes. She picked Ianus’ limp body up, and laid him across her chest, “Don’t worry. We’ll get through this somehow. Just breathe, it will all be fine.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: FUNERAL PYRE

Daru laid a blanket over Ianus' body. She brushed her hand over his cool forehead. She didn't know what to do. Not knowing what was wrong with him, she could not help him. She walked over to Ianus' bag, and rifled through it, looking for his prescience book.

Slowly, she thumbed through the pages. The sheer number of worse case scenarios that filled the book amazed her. Hundreds of horrid deaths and nightmarish imprisonments but she didn't find this. In fact, she couldn't even find a reference to the Vaticinars at all in the book.

Arun walked over and crouched next to Daru, "This is all my fault, isn't it?"

"No," Daru forced a smile, "He wanted to come here. He knew the risk that's why he didn't want any of us to come with him."

"He asked me why I told him to go to Tai-wer. I don't remember saying it. I don't remember a lot of things, but if I did say it... I can't let him die."

"Do you know what we need to do?"

"I thought we could take him back to South Gate for medical treatment."

"I wouldn't do that," Valeryn called out, "If we move him, he will never wake up."

"Do you know what's wrong with him?" Daru asked.

Valeryn walked over to her, "I've seen this before. They imprisoned him within a simulacrum, which means they're still around here somewhere. If we take him away from them, he will never escape. He will become a mindless drone, or worse, die all together."

"Is there anything we can do to help him?"

"We can sit vigil and pray. This is something he has to do for himself. We can't do it for him. You did do a good job standing up to the Vaticinars. I don't think they were expecting that."

"But Valeryn, they *see* all," Daru giggled, "I just don't think what they do is right. Why would the Enmadra employ people like that?"

"You can't imagine how many people think they have been chosen to serve the Enmadra, or even the Raewyn for that matter. You have to discourage the charlatans. You know, separate the wheat from the chaff."

"What if you loose some wheat with the chaff?"

"What would you do if millions of people were running around impersonating members of the Jade Moon, raising armies, leading revolutions, and committing terrorist acts all in the name of the Bahn Se'leen, what would you do?"

“I guess I would do anything in my power to stop them, but I’m not sure I would do the exact same thing the Enmadra are doing,” Daru sighed, “I guess I see your point though.”

“Why do you think the Raewyn and the Enmadra are so secretive? It makes people suspicious when someone acts overtly in their name. This is a hard lesson to learn, but life in the Chian’niu isn’t exactly like temple.”

“I’m learning. I’ve read about it in the histories.”

“There are many things that don’t fit in a history book.”

“So I see. How have you kept your sanity?”

“I have served the Empyrean for six thousand five hundred and twenty-three years. I have seen more than I care to remember. You get used to it. The Chian’niu has a logic of its own. The winds blow, and the waters change. You have to be able to sense, which way the wind is blowing. It’s something you learn with time.”

“I hope this isn’t an inappropriate question,” Daru bit her lip, “Did you know Tien Shaa?”

Valeryn pulled back and his cheeks began to shimmer, “Yes, I knew him, and Adir Radd. I wouldn’t say I was a friend of either one, but I did meet them. They were very nice.”

“I’m sorry,” said Daru, “I didn’t mean to make you blush. I’ve never met anyone as old as you before. At least, not that I know of.”

“That’s all right. It’s refreshing to meet someone who still has some curiosity.”

Ianus moaned.

“Don’t worry,” said Valeryn, “If anyone can survive this, he can. Listen, if the Vaticinars found us so quickly, they must have been looking for him. If they were looking for him, that means he’s been on their minds for some time. That means he must be who they think he is.”

“Do you really think so?”

“Yes, sit and pray if you want to, but don’t be worried.”

“He’s not breathing,” said Arun, holding onto Ianus’ wrist.

“What?” Daru screamed.

She ran over, and rested her ear on Ianus’ lips. “Don’t die,” she whispered, “Stay with us, we need you.” She laid her hand on his chest. “I can feel him breathing! It’s very faint, but he’s still breathing.”

Cythraul lead Faroh down a narrow path obfuscated by brush and tall grasses carefully bent and twisted to look like one continuous field. At the end of the path stood a small, wooden shack.

“Now listen to me very carefully,” said Cythraul in a hushed tone, “This is your final test. We have come here to consult the Parcae. They are the three most gifted augurs in the galaxy. They will see for me. They will see if you are worthy of the gift I wish to give you.”

Cythraul knocked on the door.

“Enter Cythraul,” three female voices intoned together, “And bring your companion with you.”

Cythraul opened the door, and walked inside. Faroh followed him.

Three ancient women with dirty, gray hair sat behind a battered table.

“It has been a long time since we last saw you, Cythraul,” they said, “We see you’ve found another candidate. Welcome Faroh. We have awaited your arrival for many years.”

“You have?” Faroh asked, “Why have you been waiting for me?”

“You were the one Cythraul would choose to bring to us. We saw this at your birth. We have been very interested in you. Did you know, you have defied your fate three times? You are very interesting.”

“Will you see for me?” Cythraul bowed.

“He has potential,” the Parcae looked at each other, “We can tell you what we see, but remember the future is nothing more than patterns of shadow dancing across the wall. Do you understand? We will tell you what we see, but we cannot force the vision. We can see only what we can see.”

“I understand,” said Cythraul

“Do you, Faroh? Do you understand what has been asked of us? After this there can be no turning back. This is your last chance.”

“My last chance for what?” Faroh asked.

“You stand at a crossroads, but once you have heard what we have to tell you, you will have no other chances to walk away. If there is any uncertainty in you, you should speak now.”

“What are my choices?”

“That we can not say. The forces that propel you forward will take hold of you again once we see for you. This is your last chance.”

Faroh glanced over at Cythraul and held his breath. He thought about all Cythraul had told him and promised him. He knew that every thought was plain for everyone in the room to see. All of his doubts, all of his concerns came down to this one decision.

He was blind in the face of fate. Which decision lead to salvation and which lead to damnation he did not know. He had no way to find out.

Cythraul knew the truth. He had taught the truth to Dov Lavan. Faroh wondered if he might succeed where the Ara’lu had failed. He knew all his life that he was destined for greatness. This was his time to embrace his future, not to run. Cythraul had chosen him. He was the one to finish the great work.

“Tell me all you know!” Faroh said, “Tell me everything.”

“Very well, then,” the Parcae closed their eyes. The candles on the table before them burst to life.

Cythraul fell to his knees and tugged on Faroh to do the same.

A thick fog swirled around the three Parcae, images danced through the mist. Shadows and light, that was all that Faroh could see, nothing clear, nothing certain. It was like the projection of a dream.

“We see three sisters, each born of a different mother. They hold the future in their hands,” the Parcae said, “This one, this Faroh Raanan, he is a key that will open doors thought locked forever. He is the fire that will ignite the world.

“Beware Cythraul, the future is in his hands for now, not yours. He is the key that will unlock the gates of Usekht Maati, without him, your future is uncertain.

“He will be the vehicle of the Ara’lu’s return. That much is certain. He has potential, there is no doubting that. What will be, will be. By his hand, the worlds will be changed forever.

“If you give him what he desires, the galaxy will quake, and the one thought dead will be reborn. Do not neglect the future. Flee from the darkness to come, embrace the light that will follow.

“This is all we wish to see. The future set before us is what will be. We can not interpret the signs, they will interpret themselves.”

Darkness as far as the eye could see. No sky above, no ground below, Ianus floated in the blackness. He opened and closed his eyes, hoping each time that a world would come into view.

He had lost all sense of time. He could have been floating for minutes, hours, days, even years, he would never have known. Time didn't seem to matter. Nothing seemed to matter anymore.

This place was a sweet nepenthe. No desire entered his mind, only the fading hope that he would see Daru again. Everything else was so far away. They were part of a different world.

“Do you know where you are?” Said a familiar, female voice.

“No, does it matter?” Ianus replied to the void.

“Yes, my dear boy, it does matter. Do you know why you're here?”

“The Vaticanars! They were ‘testing’ me. Am I dead?”

“You may be dead, that is for you to decide. This is the abyss, the house of despair. You have been judged and found wanting, hollow.”

“What have you found wrong with me?”

“You came to this place seeking nothing, and you've found oblivion.”

“Would it make a difference if I told you I didn't know I was coming?”

“A joke? There may be some hope for you yet. Everyone comes here sooner or later. Everyone comes to know emptiness. Now is your time.”

“But I did not come of my own free will.”

“No one ever does. If given a choice they would prefer a happy life to a real one.”

“A real one?”

“A life of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain, gain and loss. You cannot have one without the other. If no shadow is cast, there is no form— only light. To choose life is to embrace death. To seek wisdom is to profess ignorance.”

“What do you want from me?”

“Why are you here?”

“I want to stand on my own! I want to live my own life, free of others control.”

“How would you achieve that?”

“I would be strong. I would do what I want to do.”

“Would you free yourself of all responsibilities?”

“No, I have my duty.”

“Duty is submitting to the control of others.”

“I want my own choice.”

“You want to go beyond fear, beyond desire, beyond what is expected of you, so that what you have is really yours.”

“Exactly!”

“But are you really your own? Or do you belong to the universe that gave you form.”

“I do not know.”

Fire filled the horizon, undulating like two wings. Suddenly, a Bennu appeared in front of him.

“Nahimanna?” Ianus gasped, “That was your voice?”

“I told you I am never alone. I told you that if you ever needed me, I would be there for you.”

“How did you get here?”

“I am always with you. Wherever you go, whatever you do, I am there.”

“How do I get out of here?”

“I do not know. You are here to face yourself. Until you can answer that question, you will stay here.”

“How can I find the answer?”

“This test was devised by your mind, you will know the answer when the time comes.”

“What should I do?”

“First, you have to find out if you are alive or dead.”

“How would I know that?”

“Do you have anything to live for? Is there any reason or purpose in your life?”

“Daru!”

“You love her don’t you?”

“She is my life. Without her, there is nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“I can’t imagine my life without her. She has always been there. I’d drift aimlessly without her.”

“Then that is your reason, but it may not be strong enough.”

“She promised she would always be there for me, and she has never let me down.”

“Then focus on her. Listen for her voice, the tender beating of her heart. This is your only chance.”

Kanu Vasin exited the temple and strolled across the grounds. He noticed a large crowd gathered outside the abbey. They were oddly excited. Whispering amongst themselves, Kanu felt that something was wrong.

He walked over to them and recognized the gaunt man standing in the middle of the crowd. “Master Parr,” Kanu said, suppressing his disgust with the man, “What is all of the excitement about?”

Master Parr grinned wickedly, “I was just telling them what I found out about our new visitor?”

“Do you mean Tara? What could be so interesting that you’ve gathered such a crowd around you?”

“She is a murderer! She killed Master Ihy Khem.”

“How would you know that?”

“When I was cleaning her room, I came across an old periapt with strange markings on it. When I was done I looked up the symbols. It was the To’asaa.”

“How do you know it wasn’t a replica?”

“I checked, she was in Shiloh when the attack happened.”

“That hardly proves your case,” Kanu looked around at the others, “I will go and talk to her. Do you know where she is?”

“The last time I saw her, she was returning to her room.”

“Now I want you all to stay here. I will go up and talk to her. This has to be handled calmly and according to the rule. Any accusation of impropriety must be handled one-on-one if the problem persists, more people can become involved. All right?”

With a deep sigh, he pushed his way through the crowd and into the Abbey. He went up the stairs. Stopping in front of her door, he thought about what to say. He knocked on the door.

Tara opened the door, and shifted her eyes, “I know why you’re here, come in.”

“How do you know what I’m here for?”

“I spent yesterday in the Chapel of Prescient Dreams. I got lost, I was looking for the Chapel of Holy Remembrance. I wanted to light a candle for Ihy Khem.”

“I warned you. The signs probably changed.”

“That would explain a lot. To answer your questions, yes, I have the To’asaa in my possession, but I did not kill Master Khem. A man named Faroh Raanan did that.”

“Then why do you have the To’asaa?”

“I stole it... twice. I returned it to Ianus Akeru, and then stole it again.”

“Why?”

“The first time, I had no other choice. I was an associate of Karu Panthera.”

“You are too young. He’s been dead for almost two decades.”

“He’s not dead. He is still kind of alive. I had to steal it, or he would have killed me. I had no idea he planned to assassinate Master Khem. You have to believe me.”

“I do. So why did you steal it again?”

“I can hear it singing to me. It calls me by name and offers me help. I thought, if I took it, it would help me find a way out of the mess I got myself into.”

“Has it helped?”

“Some, it has good advice. It told me I could trust you, that you would help me.”

“It should be good advice. The To’asaa contains all of Tien Shaa’s memories, just as your periapt contains yours.”

“That is the voice of Tien Shaa?”

“It might be better to think of it as his shadow. It contains his memories and personality, not his soul.”

“Panthera said he possessed the memories of Dov Lavan. Does that mean he has Lavan’s periapt?”

“No, Lavan’s periapt is forever lost, but before he died Lavan downloaded his memories into the periapt of each of his remaining followers. It persists among the Ual-leen to this day.”

“I was never good with the stories.”

“Don’t worry, I am. If there is anything I can do to help you?”

“I have to make restitution for my crimes.”

“You will return the To’asaa to Master Khem’s family.”

“I have to find them. They are some where on the planet.”

“I will help you. I can log on to the net and look for their tracking signal.”

“You don’t have to help me. It’ll probably get you into trouble. Everywhere I go I seem to do more harm than good. One thing is certain. I have to leave.”

“If you are planning on running away, I can not support you. If you honestly want to set things right, I will do everything in my power to help.”

“I’m tired of running, I can not escape my problems. I have to do something better.”

Ianus floated in the blackness, staring at Nahimanna. She nodded, and began to fly circles around him. The gentle warmth of her flames caused Ianus’ flesh to tingle.

Nahimanna flew into Ianus chest.

Ianus gasped, cold air filled his lungs. He could taste the sweet mist of Tai-wer. A muffled whisper, and distant rustling entered his ears. He could feel the hard ground under his back, and the soft linen blanket over him.

He struggled to open his eyes. Slowly, he saw the night sky and the upper branches of the trees. He could hear sobbing and the repetition of prayers. Fire rose all around his body.

He sat up, and watched with horror as the flames rose with him.

“Ianus!” Daru screamed, “You’re alive!”

He saw her through the curtain of fire, “Yes, I am alive,” he was dizzy, and almost collapsed.

“I was so worried, yesterday, the flames erupted around your body. We didn’t know what it meant, or what to do.”

“There was nothing you could have done,” he could hear his heart pounding in his ears. “Was I still breathing?”

“Barely, what happened?”

“Not now, this is not the time,” he turned his head from side to side. The muscles were painfully stiff. His lungs burned like he had never used them before, and cold aches racked his body. “Death,” he whispered, gathering the strength to speak, “We have nothing to fear. I have stared in the face of death, learned at its feet. I have seen the enemy and know that we can persevere.”

“What are you talking about?” Daru asked.

“I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to explain what I saw, or the things I heard. I could write for a thousand years and never exhaust the horrors and wonders beyond the veil.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying that you died? Is that why the flames engulfed your body?”

“They were protecting me,” Ianus looked down at the few remaining wisps of fire that danced across his hands, “Without Nahimanna I would have been trapped there forever.”

“Who is Nahimanna?”

“The Bennu you gave me for my birthday. She is so much more than I could have ever imagined.”

“She’s an eidolon, isn’t she?”

“A very ancient one. She was forged before the Jade Moon came into being. She is not limited to the Benben-stone.

“She can travel and see things far and near. She can see into the heart. She has guided the followers of the Holy Enmadra for millennia. It was no accident you bought her. It was planned for a long time.”

“So I was set up?”

“In a manner of speaking, they knew I wouldn’t come here without a nudge in the right direction.”

“So they used me? Who are they? Who set all of this up?”

“The Enmadra have been guiding events to suit their plans. They have been busier than anyone had realized.”

“But why?”

“They sense a new darkness coming and are trying to stop it. So far, they have not been very successful. The future is a very malleable thing. By the time many of their plans were put into place, the players had changed.”

“Nahimanna told you all of this?”

“This and so much more. I understand what has been happening, for the first time. I wish I could explain, but we don’t have enough time. Events are fast getting out of hand.”

Valeryn walked passed them, and stopped, “You’re back?”

Anger flooded Ianus; he scowled at Valeryn, “I know who you are, and what you’ve done! I will not be your puppet!”

“I’m sure I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“O yes you do! The day of my ascension, you came to visit Ihy!”

“You were the Raewyn the crowd saw!” Tuun exclaimed.

“You and one other came to visit him, to make sure he had done everything you had asked him to do, and to ensure that he was willing to see the plan through. My father died because of you!”

“He was born because of me!” Valeryn snorted.

“O, yes, you are his father, was that part of the plan too. How did it feel to use Lady Auset like that!”

“I loved her! And she loved me. The Emypyrean recalled me...”

“Save it. I was buying your story about the Emypyrean. Who would have ever guessed that you are A’nath-ari!”

After Tara had packed her bags, she and Kanu left the abbey and headed toward the Sangrida. Nervously, she stroked the To’asaa in her right hand. What possessed her to put it on, she didn’t know. She needed to be closer to it. She would be leaving the To’asaa behind soon. As much as she loved being in its presence, she had to do what is right.

She didn’t know where to go or what to do. Kanu said he would make sure she got out of the city without incident. He was concerned for her safety. In a way he reminded her of Ianus. He was as concerned about her welfare as Ianus was. It felt good to have someone care for her. No one had ever cared for her before, except for her parents.

The monastery was extraordinarily quiet, and the village lacked the expected foot traffic. Past the village was the field, and the Sangrida.

Four men stood in front of the ship.

Tara could tell by the way Kanu sighed that he recognized them.

“Master Parr,” said Kanu, “I didn’t expect to see you down here.”

“That’s your own short sightedness,” said Parr, “I knew you would try to help that murderer escape. You always were soft hearted. Give her to us, and there won’t be any trouble.”

“She doesn’t know you, I don’t think she would be comfortable with strangers,” he said, looking at Tara, “That is unless you want to go with them?”

Tara shook her head, “I would rather not. I suspect their table manners would disgrace me in public.”

“*Table manners?*” Parr said, “It’s obvious you don’t understand what I’m talking about, so shut up, and let the grownups talk.”

“I don’t think you should talk to the lady like that,” Kanu stealthily positioned himself to strike. “You should apologize and return to the abbey. You have work to do.”

“Don’t make me laugh! There are four of us, and two of you, it would hardly be fair.”

“I agree, now please return to the monastery before anything happens you will regret.”

Parr and his three companions formed swords with their periapts.

“I would advise you to put those away,” said Kanu, “I do not want to fight.”

The four men advanced.

Tara and Kanu raised their periapts.

Parr and his men stopped advancing.

“What is this?” Parr staggered.

Tara felt something breathing on her neck. She turned around slowly.

A large translucent warrior in full battle armor and a bull’s head on his shield stood with a double-headed battle-axe in each hand. It bowed to her, then scowled at Parr.

“We are not afraid of you,” it snarled.

“We?” Parr squeaked, “I only see one of you.”

“There are more coming if you don’t leave, now!” The warrior snarled, and gave out a thunderous roar. “Leave now!”

Parr reached out for his companions, but they had already ran. “Don’t think, I’m going to forget this,” he mustered before he turned and ran toward the village.

Kanu laughed and said, “Why didn’t you tell me you could summon eidolons.”

“I didn’t know. I mean, I’ve never done it before.”

“You haven’t? This was an accident?”

“I am no accident!” The warrior said, “Good lady Tara called for help, and I came.”

“I am sorry,” Kanu bowed, “I meant no disrespect.”

“None taken,” looking at Tara, “What would you have me do with this one.”

“Leave him,” said Tara

The warrior nodded.

“Do you want to come with me?” Tara asked, “Even after all I’ve been through, and all I’ve done.”

“I know what you’re going through. I’ve had my own share of problems. I will not leave you. Even if you killed me, I would not leave your side.”

Tara blushed, “We should do something about our friend here.”

“You need to dispel him.”

“I don’t know how, I told you I didn’t even realize that I called it.”

Kanu smiled, and raised his hand. Light flashed from the red gem of his periapt. The warrior dissolved into a fine mist.

“You know,” Tara said, “My friend Ianus has a periapt just like that one.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: THE ORDER OF BLOOD

“A’nath-ari?” Valeryn said, “My dear boy, I am a student of the Parcae. I may wear the red robes, but I do not serve the Enmadra.”

“You are A’nath-ari and Bahn Se’leen?” Daru said, “You are a traitor!”

Valeryn laughed, “A traitor is someone who serves two masters. I do not. I am a student of the Parcae, I serve the camarilla of the Jade Moon, and I am a member of the Raewyn Empyrean. It isn’t as rare as you might think. I know you are new to the Chian’niu, but you shouldn’t be so naïve.”

“Who are the Parcae?” Ianus asked.

“They are three of the greatest seers in the galaxy. They read the future for A’nath-ari.”

“Listen,” said Pryor. “Why are we fighting? There is nothing abnormal about any of this. Ihy had many contacts within the A’nath-ari. He helped many of them get documents saying they were in the Jade Moon. His actions helped them travel more freely and helped him gather valuable intelligence.”

“My father wouldn’t do something like that!” Ianus looked at Arun.

“Remember when I slipped up and told you that Ihy had once been in the Forbidden Lands?” Pryor stepped closer to Valeryn, “He did so to establish communications with the A’nath-ari. They asked him not to tell anyone. He kept his promise. They respect that. You have to remember that nothing is exactly what it seems.”

“And don’t lay the attack on Ihy on my shoulders,” said Valeryn. “That was unforeseen. If we would have seen that coming, we would have stopped it.”

“Why do you trust him?” Ianus asked Pryor, his muscles tensing for an attack, “You seem to be very friendly with him.”

“I have my reasons,” said Pryor. “That should be good enough for you. You either trust me or you don’t.”

Ianus closed his eyes. Events were quickly spiraling out of his control, not that they were ever really in his control.

“I trust you, Pryor,” said Ianus as he opened his eyes, “So I guess I have no choice but to trust you, Valeryn, but there is one condition. No more lies, no more half-truths. I will be honest with you, you will be honest with me.”

“Deal,” said Valeryn, “As a sign of good faith I have to warn you. The A’nath-ari will be coming soon to abduct you and take you to Usekht Maati. It will be better for you if you do not struggle. They will be coming in large numbers.”

“How is that a sign of good faith? ‘You are about to be kidnapped, *don’t* resist,’” Ianus mocked him, flapping his arms about, “What do you take me for?”

Valeryn sighed, "Well, you can fight them if you want to. That is your choice. I didn't have to tell you they were coming, but I trust that you will do the right thing. You are too curious to let an opportunity to get to Usekht Maati pass you by."

"If you think he's lying," said Pryor, "Call Tuun over, he will be able to tell you."

"Tell the others," said Ianus, "We will give up without a fight. This has to end. Besides, it is a good sign of trust on our part." He nodded toward Valeryn.

"I'm sorry for all of the double-speak," said Valeryn, "It was necessary. Maybe, after all this is over, I can come with you. I'm tired of being in a different town every night, and not having a place to call home. If I was with you, I would at least have a room on the ship."

"I think that would make Pryor very happy."

"Is that a yes or a no?"

"It's a yes. It's been a very long time since I last saw him this happy. That's what's important."

"Family means a lot to you, doesn't it."

"It's all I have."

"I never had a family. The Raewyn don't have mothers and fathers like you do."

"Why didn't you stay with Lady Auset?"

"Duty. The Emyrean ordered me to leave. I had no other choice. Now, I have to warn you. The A'nath-ari will be expecting me to act a certain way. I apologize in advance."

Light flashed from behind the tree, striking Aashen, Tuun, and their Ceeri.

Valeryn raised his periapt, Daru fell asleep. The sounds of the A'nath-ari, forcing their way through the under brush, filled the air.

"Blindfold them!" Valeryn yelled, "And call a ship. We have to hurry. There is little time left."

He stepped closer to Ianus, and whispered in his ear, "Remember, nothing is exactly what it seems."

Ianus could not keep his eyes open. Everything went black.

Valeryn disembarked from the ship, and watched Ianus and the others being lead away blindfolded. He huffed at the guards, but they didn't pay him any attention. This was wrong. They shouldn't be treated like criminals. Valeryn wondered why the Enmadra were allowing this. Something wasn't right here. There was a strange sense of fear and urgency in the air.

The sunlight glittered on the blond sandstone buildings of Usekht Maati. Brilliantly painted statues and bas-reliefs adorned the buildings and streets. The numerous life-like statues celebrated the many just leaders of the Enmadra.

The Enmadra prized justice and liberty above all other virtues. They would never condone such actions.

Valeryn looked up and down the streets, but he didn't see one Enmadra. Where were they? This was their capitol city. They should be visible. Maybe they had gone away.

Over the centuries, Valeryn had heard many rumors that the Enmadra had departed Adrakaya. The Emyrean had always told him that the stories were propaganda, but they never substantiated their claims.

He needed to talk to Marnin Akeru, the Prelate of the A'nath-ari.

Walking toward the golden dome of the Basilica, he rehearsed what he would say. Through the door, he bowed toward Adir Radd's tomb. The carved wooden sculpture of Adir Radd stood proud with his hands folded over his chest.

"What would you think if you were here?" He whispered. "They hardly remember you these days. Don't worry old friend. I will do whatever I can to set things right."

Valeryn lit a candle in front of the shrine. Bowing his head, he sighed. What was going on? Where were the Enmadra?

He looked around for Marnin. He was up by the altar instructing one of the acolytes. The man had thin graying hair, and an aquiline nose. Valeryn would recognize him anywhere.

Valeryn approached quietly and bowed at the altar, "Master Akeru, we need to talk."

"Yes, Master Kamau," Marnin said, "It is good to see you again. Is everything taken care of?"

"Your goons have taken them into custody, but I don't understand why. He passed the Vaticanars test. This is his time."

"Is it really? I know the prophecy as well as you do—but unlike you, I realize that the future is malleable. If he is the red dragon, and I cage him, there is no way for the cataclysm to come."

"You're mad! If you take him out of the picture the storm will be worse. I demand to see the Enmadra!"

"No one sees the Enmadra unless they ask... they have *not* called you."

"They have left, haven't they!"

"No, they are still here."

"Then why haven't I seen any of them in the streets? Where are they?"

"That is not for you to know!"

"I wear the crimson robe of the A'nath-ari. I remember the day Master Radd was murdered! I helped turn the order of blood from the path of revenge, and helped negotiate your covenant with the Enmadra. I am a member of the Raewyn Empyrean! By the rights granted through our covenant with them, I have a right to speak with them whenever I wish!"

"We will consult with the Enmadra. Should they accept your request, we will call you. Is that all? I have a lot of work to do."

"No, that is not all! You sited the prophecy. The prophecy states that the red dragon will be a Shedu without the name of the arts. It turns out that he is a maker. He has been initiated and received by the Jade moon."

"So, he is a maker. What does that matter?"

"It means that the future has changed! The prophecy is no longer reliable. If this has changed, who knows what else has?"

"The Parcae would have notified us if the future was in jeopardy."

"Don't be naïve, the Parcae can not interpret their own prophecies. If they did they would lose their gifts. You know that. They record their visions and pass them along. I would bet that you have not read any of their recent books!"

Marnin looked away, "Is that all?"

“You really don’t care do you?”

“I do what I am told. I have not been told to care.”

“Don’t you have a free will? I’m sure you make a great servant, but the A’nathari need a leader. What good are you if you cannot do that?”

“That is enough, get out!”

“O before I forget. The Red Dragon is an Akeru. Ianus Akeru, the son of Hannah and Elkan. I thought you should know.”

“Why?”

“Because he is your family! I hoped that you might have the common decency not to do this to someone you share blood with.”

Faroh was less than thrilled by the sight of the small tree and grass-covered tomb.

“Is this it?” He said, “It’s not exactly what I expected.”

“What did you want, a large marble mausoleum, with a gilded sign proclaiming Dov Lavan? The only reason it’s still here is because no one knows it’s here. After we succeed, we can build him an appropriate tomb.”

Cythraul waved his hand, and the stone rolled away from the entrance. Cythraul waded through the small stone archway.

Faroh followed, the torches suddenly ignited. Inside was a small antechamber with a couple of dusty stone benches. Through another door he could see the bones of Dov Lavan. The air was musty and thick with the scent of death.

He couldn’t take his eyes off of the dusty skeleton. Raising his periapt, he held his breath. He could feel the presence of the Ara’lu’s periapt. It really was him. The Ara’lu had died; he had not been translated.

Pain filled Faroh’s heart. What did this mean? Had his faith been in vain? Watching a spider crawl across the skull, he sighed and bowed his head. This Raewyn was Hlachar Cythraul.

“Here we are,” said Cythraul, “I thought you would be more excited.”

“This is a time for reverence. I am trying to show my respect for the Ara’lu. I hope you can understand that. When I was a boy, I used to dream I would come face to face with Master Lavan. This is the closest I will ever come to making that dream come true.”

“O no, soon, you will come closer than you ever thought possible.”

Cythraul walked into the sepulcher. Faroh heard a latch click, and he turned around. In his hand was a dusty black periapt.

“I believe this is what you’ve been waiting for,” he said, as he handed it to Faroh.

Faroh sat down on one of the benches, and rested the periapt on his knee.

Carefully, he took off the replica and replaced it with the original.

He gasped, his mind reeled with information as the periapt shared it’s wisdom with him. His muscles twitched as he learned new and better ways to fight, block, and move. A searing pain tore through his hand as the periapt perfected its connection.

Lunging forward, he shot lightning from his fingers striking Cythraul to the ground, “You betrayed me!” Faroh roared, “I served you flawlessly, and when I needed you most you left me to die.”

“The time was not right,” Cythraul said, as he pushed himself to his knees. “You have no idea what would have happened if I would have saved Lavan.”

“You left me there to die, begging for my life from that heretic predicant!”

“I left Lavan to die, not you! Separate the memories. Do not become lost in them! You are Faroh Raanan!”

“I am... I am...” Faroh spun around and looked at his hand. He closed his eyes and struggled to remember. “It is so real. Like it happened to me. I can remember everything. I can remember the first time I met you. Both times.”

“Breathe, just breathe. It may take a while, but you will remember.”

“Don’t try to weasel your way out of this! You have to pay for what you’ve done.” Faroh’s face distorted with rage.

“I will pay for my sins, but now is not the time. Wake up, Faroh, come back to me.”

Lightning cracked from the periapt again throwing Cythraul up against the wall.

“I’m not afraid of you anymore, but you might still be useful to me. Serve me and I will spare your life.”

“I wouldn’t serve the Empyrean, what makes you think I’ll serve you?”

“Because I don’t have an ethical problem with killing you right now.”

Cythraul’s naturally luminescent skin dimmed.

“I can suck the life right out of you,” said Faroh, determination in his eyes.

“You wouldn’t dare kill me! I am the source and inspiration of all your power, you are nothing without me!”

“Then stop me. Raise your hand and stop me. If I am so powerless without you, why can’t you stop me!”

“You are nothing! Not even a ghost. You are a memory. Smoke in the mind, now let him go.”

“Isn’t this what you promised? The Ara’lu has returned. I will finish what I started, and you are going to die.”

“Faroh!” Cythraul screamed, “I know you can hear me. You have to stop this or he will destroy you too. Wake up my boy! End this madness now.”

“I want to,” said Faroh with a weak voice, “But I won’t allow that. He will die before I release him. Bow to me!”

“Faroh! You are stronger than he is, that’s why I chose you. Sort through all this. I know it’s confusing, but you have to win or a worse terror than you can imagine will be unleashed on the galaxy. This creature has no thought of anything except for vengeance. It cannot think on its own. You have to stop it.”

“Is that fear in your voice? You are afraid of me. You’re right. It isn’t enough for me just to show people the truth. They have offended all that is sacred. I will bring judgment upon them. They will pay for their sin!”

Faroh staggered, “Master, help me! Please help me! It is tearing me apart!”

Two guards woke Ianus up in the middle of the night. They told him that Marnin wanted to see him. They wouldn’t answer any questions. Down the hall from the cell was a small room in which Marnin was waiting for him.

“Have a seat,” he said in an almost cordial tone. “You two can go.”

The guards bowed and left the room.

“So you are Ianus Akeru. I have heard a great deal about you, that’s why you’re here. I have to decide what to do with you.”

“I thought I passed your test.”

“You may have survived the Vaticanars, but you haven’t satisfied me. Before I trouble the Enmadra with your presence, I have to make sure you are important enough.”

“What more do you need? I have nothing to prove. To be honest, I’m not even sure why I’m here. I got tired of being pushed around. Everyone told me to come here, so I’m here. I don’t know what you want.”

“Don’t play coy with me. No one faces down the Vaticanars for thrills.”

“I promise you, that was the last thing I planned to do.”

“What do you take me for! Valeryn tells me you are a maker. If that’s true, you might have enough training to get past them. I don’t believe all this.”

“Why are you doing this to me?”

“Why? You want to know why? Because I don’t believe you.”

“Look, I’m really getting tired of all this. You’re sitting up here in your pretty little castle, playing king of the hill. Well, this is my life! I don’t want to be a part of your games. Tell me you don’t believe me. Kill me, do whatever the hell you want, because I don’t care anymore.”

Marnin smirked, “You are not quite what I expected. Your type usually eats up all this melodrama. You’re different.”

“Well thank you. I appreciate the star treatment, but I just want to go home.”

“Home?”

“Back to the Valkyrie, back to Shiloh, just back with my friends.”

“Really, maybe I misjudged you. Valeryn thinks I am being too heavy handed with you... Are you the son of Hannah and Elkan Akeru?”

“Yes.”

“That would make you my cousin. Valeryn thinks I should be nicer to you because you’re family.”

“Why won’t you just let me go?”

Marnin grabbed Ianus by the wrist, “Why did they leave you with your periapt?”

“It wouldn’t come off. Besides, after a while, I think they realized that I don’t have the will to escape. My entire life has been turned upside down. One nightmare after another. I like the cell. It’s quiet.”

“Where did you get this periapt?”

“Why?”

“This is an A’nath-ari model.”

“Look, I’m very tired I would like to go to bed.”

Marnin backhanded Ianus across the face, “I can’t believe you’re talking to me like that. Don’t you realize I hold your life in my hand?”

“I’ve already died once this week,” Ianus chuckled. “What can you really do to me?”

“O I haven’t started with you, boy.”

Ianus closed his eyes. Warmth filled his chest. He opened his eyes and saw Nahimanna flying around the room.

She swooped down and landed on Ianus’ shoulder.

“My lady,” Marnin dropped to his knees, “What are you doing here?”

“I could ask you the same question. You know what is suppose to be done. You have treated Ianus and Valeryn poorly.”

“But I didn’t have any instructions. I have never had any instructions. How am I suppose to tell them that I don’t know where the Enmadra are? I’m the Prelate of the A’nath-ari!”

“You didn’t seem to have any trouble telling me. There is nothing shameful in not knowing. Honesty is what matters.”

“You’re right, I’m sorry.”

“You should be. You have to undo the damage that has already been done.”

“I will let them go free,” Marnin bowed slightly.

“That is a good start, but you also need to be careful to repair the relations with the Raewyn.”

“I did make Valeryn very angry. What are we going to do with Ianus?”

“Take him to the Sanctum Sanctorum,” Nahimanna said grimly.

“What? You can’t mean that. No one returns from the Sanctum. Do you want me to kill him?”

“Just do what I tell you. He may not even be able to get inside. No one has in a very long time.”

“Very well, I will do as you say,” Marnin bowed and left the room.

“What are you doing to me?” Ianus asked.

“I am giving you what you want— an end. In the morning you will go to the temple and surrender to your fate. I’m sorry, but that is all I can offer you. This is the end.”

A guard entered the room,

“He will take you to Valeryn, you will spend the night with him,” said Nahimanna.

The guard bowed. He led Ianus out of the jail, and down the street to a beautiful house. He knocked on the door.

Valeryn answered the door. “Ianus?” He said, “Marnin let you out? Come in, come in.”

Ianus walked in and sat down on the couch, “I’ll be sleeping here tonight, if that’s all right with you?”

“That’s fine with me. Why did he let you go?”

“Nahimanna showed up and told him to let me go. She told him to take me to the Sanctum Sanctorum tomorrow morning.”

“What? You didn’t agree to that, did you?”

“Yes, why? Nahimanna promised it would put an end to all of this.”

“That’s not necessarily a good thing. I saw someone try to enter the Sanctum once, it wasn’t a pretty sight. He burst into flames and died screaming.”

“If that’s what it takes, I just want this all to be over.”

“I understand, the Chian’niu can be hard on those new to it, but that’s no reason to run off to your death.”

“What do you care?”

“To be honest, I think it would be a waist for you to die for no reason, but it would really upset Pryor. I don’t want to see that.”

“I’m glad you are being honest with me.”

“Are you sure you want it to end this way?”

“I just want it to end,” said Ianus, laying down on the couch.

“As long as you are sure,” Valeryn said, as he stood up, “See you in the morning.”

Valeryn left the room. Ianus got comfortable on the couch and went to sleep.

The next morning, Ianus woke up and got ready.

He and Valeryn made their way to the temple. The streets were narrow; only four or five people could fit through at a time. Ianus searched himself for strength. He had no idea what would be waiting for him. Marnin would not allow this to be easy.

Around the corner, he saw the mammoth temple. Two high towers stood on each side of the building. Statues and gargoyles lined the roof. Brilliantly painted mandalas were over the doors.

“You don’t have to go in there. Marnin has no right to challenge you, you have passed the Vaticinars test.” Valeryn asked Ianus before they entered.

Ianus smiled and nodded. “This was Nahimanna’s idea. She would not lead me wrong.”

“How can you be so sure of that? She is an Eidolon, you have no way of knowing what she’s planning.”

Ianus nodded, and pushed the large wooden doors open. The floors were finely polished marble. At first, he thought they were wet, they held the reflection of everything above them. Candles and lanterns illuminated the dais. Ianus bowed to the altar, and saw his friends in the front row.

Daru jumped up. “Are you sure you want to go through with this?”

“Yes. I dreamed about this last night. This is where the path leads me. I told you I’m going to see this through. I have to know why all this has happened.”

“Good luck, I will be praying for you.”

“Thank you,” he looked at Valeryn, “Do you have any idea what I’m suppose to do? Am I just suppose to go up there or are we waiting for the usual pomp and circumstance.”

“I would put my money on the pomp and circumstance. I know the A’nath-ari, they like all of the ceremony and ritual. I think it’s on the application for membership.”

Ianus heard a noise by the altar. The Vaticinars stood there in front of the veil.

“We are pleased to see you again,” said Haven, “We didn’t think it would be so soon.”

“You have come here to enter the Sanctum Sanctorum,” said Quinn.

“Before we continue,” said Greer, “We have to know that you are doing this of your own free will.”

Cathal said, “You may not pass us until we know for sure.”

“I do this of my own free will,” said Ianus.

“You are seeking an end to the journey,” said Haven, “I have to wonder if you know what you are asking for. Every end is a beginning. Everything moves in circles.”

“Even death is the beginning of the afterlife,” said Quinn, “Energy can not be created or destroyed. It merely changes from one form to another. There is no end, there is only change.”

“As long as you understand this, you will not be disappointed. There is no blackness before you this time,” said Greer. “This is the end you have been seeking. The rest that awaits your weary soul.”

“No mere animal can pass through the Sanctum Sanctorum,” said Cathal, “You must aspire to be something better than what you are. Within these walls, you will stand

naked before the truth. You cannot hide anything. Beware the chest, within lies the wrath of the A'nath-ari."

"I understand," said Ianus.

Marnin opened the gate to the Sanctum Sanctorum, "Do not do this out of a false sense of duty. This is your choice. If you want to do this then do it. If there is any doubt in you then turn back now. I have much penance to do, without your death on my conscience."

Ianus walked up the steps onto the dais. "My life is not mine to give, or yours to waste."

Taking a deep breath, he approached the veil. He parted the curtain with his hand and walked inside. He could feel his skin beginning to burn. A blinding light engulfed him.

"It is the light that kills," a voice whispered in his ear.

He raised his hand to cover his eyes. Pain ripped through his muscles. He couldn't breathe. Heat rushed over his skin; ice filled his bones. He pulled his arms in tighter.

"You will not tear me apart!" Ianus gritted his teeth. Something constricted around his chest.

He felt a jolt go through the periapt. The golden chest opened. A scream knocked Ianus to the ground

"It can't be," he heard Marnin gasp.

He felt a tremendous weight pressing down on him. Sorrow, anger, and hatred swirled within him.

"No!" Ianus yelled, "I will not kill them! I am no murderer!"

PART FOUR: NEMESIS

CHAPTER NINETEEN: EMAN SARAD

Two figures, one male, the other female, appeared on either side of the small gold chest. Ianus marveled at their sheer splendor.

“Can you help me?” Ianus shouted through the pain.

Together, they bowed their heads and covered the chest with their wings. The pain lifted. Ianus gasped for air.

“Hello?” He shouted at the Celestials. “What do I do now? Can you even hear me?”

A brilliant light blinded Ianus.

“Behold the Mother Light,” a familiar voice said, “Hold on, hold on!”

Suddenly, Kahlil Vamu Shaa appeared in front of the chest. “You lost it,” he spoke again, “It is a sad thing, but not unexpected. You have made it here at last.”

“I remember you, from my initiation. You gave me this periapt,” Ianus looked down at the shimmering red stone inset in the soft leather glove. “It confused Marnin to no end.”

“I suspect a great many things would confuse him,” Kahlil laughed, “He is a good man, but the shadow of your grandfather haunts him. He means well, but he lacks the courage to be himself. You two are a lot alike. In time, he’ll learn.”

“Is that true for you as well?” Ianus asked.

“What do you mean by that?”

“I mean no disrespect, but I am sure that you are not really Kahlil Vamu Shaa. I’ve given it a lot of thought since we first met. I was lost in a place between reason and truth when I saw you, and you gave me this periapt. In the simulacrum, there is only imagination and creativity. Someone else had to be in the room with me. I know this is an illusion. Who are you?”

The image of Kahlil faded. A tall, willowy man took its place. He must have been nine or ten feet tall. His long, black hair trailed down his back. Wearing little more than a tan leather kilt over his ruddy-complexioned skin and his toned muscles, he was a very imposing figure.

“My name is Eman Sarad,” he said, grinning widely, “And I am very pleased that you saw through my disguise. You are the first person to lay eyes on one of my kind in millennia.”

“I seem to be the first person in a long time to do a lot of things,” said Ianus, “You are an Enmadra? I have read so much about your people.”

“I am honored to hear it. I am sorry you had to go through so much to get here. I wanted to tell you to come, but our enemies can read your thoughts. If they would have known about our interest in you, they would have opposed you ferociously. As it is, they think you are dead or close to death. That gives us an advantage.”

“Why did you give me this periapt?”

“It was necessary to get you where you are. It is a good match for your personality. It has given you wisdom and inspiration, no doubt.”

“No, it has never spoken to me. I think I would know if it had, wouldn’t I?”

“You would hear it’s voice, distinct from your own. I am surprised you have not yet heard it. That is very unexpected.”

“Why have you brought me here? You and Marnin have both made a big deal out about me getting here. I am just a Maker, and a young one at that. There is no reason for you to be so interested in me.”

“Just a maker? Why would you say such a thing? You are a very special person — all makers are. The Makers are not a simple group of monks and nuns. You are poets and storytellers, predicants and teachers. Your words give form to thought. You are not an illusionist. The things you breathe into being have real substance to those who encounter them. It is sad that you and your kind have spent so much time practicing the arts and the forms, and never look at their meaning, or power. A maker is a powerful being.”

“Then why me? Out of all the makers in the galaxy, what attracted you to me?”

Eman sighed, “Honestly, we have been interested in your family for a long time because he was.”

“Who is he?”

“Hlachar Cythraul, the one who fell. He became interested in your grandfather, Nusair. He tried to convert him, but he resisted. He joined with us in the fight against Panthera and Cythraul. So did your father and mother.”

“But who is this Hlachar Cythraul? I keep hearing his name. I read about him, but there doesn’t seem to be any reason or logic behind his actions.”

“Have you ever believed in something so strongly that it blinded your mind to the consequences of your actions.”

“Yes, when my father was attacked.”

“Exactly, he believes that he has found the truth about the very nature of reality, and the nature of what must be done. His belief has over powered him— he can only see his goal. He is blind to the consequences of his actions. He believes that obedience and submission are more important than liberty and life itself. Over and over again, he has raised up powers that will serve his purpose. From the early crusaders to the armies of the Twisted Cross, he has spread his poison into the galaxy. Now he has formed another.”

“So, I am here to stop this from happening?”

“We are all here to hold back the darkness. We have called you here because you have the ability to rally others to your cause without realizing the power of your words. You are a natural leader, who does not seek power. Your kind is exceedingly rare. Many people would lie, cheat, kill, and steal to have the loyalty you inspire in others.”

“So, I am the one who has to save the world?”

“Don’t think too highly of yourself. If it wasn’t you, it would be someone else. Sooner or later, all tyrannies fall under their own weight. But I’m glad it was you. You have hope, not fear. Too many warriors fight against things, and not for something. The true mark of a hero is not what you are willing to die for, it’s what you are willing to live for. Death comes to us all sooner or later, but life—to be truly alive is something that involves a great deal of struggle.”

“What about the Holy Martyrs? We honor them for giving their lives for the cause?”

“Exactly, we honor them for giving their lives. They did not seek death. There is no honor in seeking to end your life. They stood for their beliefs and were killed for it. They sought out life, and the preservation of life. If they would have harmed others, they would have betrayed everything for which they died. Battle does not make heroes. War does not make heroes. The courage to stand for what is right, even at the risk of your own death. That, and that alone makes a hero.”

“How do I know what’s right? There are so many voices. How can I discern the truth?”

Eman put his hand on Ianus’ shoulder, “My dear child, that is not an easy question. The truth is often beyond words, and the facts can be forged. Everyday, you must struggle to find whatever truth you can. Never deceive yourself by thinking that your work is done. The honest and continual search for truth is the most important part of your life. What is right? All that preserves life and serves liberty and justice.”

Ianus held his breath. This was all too much for him. This was not what he expected to hear. He had never dreamed he would be standing before an Enmadra hearing why he was important in their plans for the galaxy. He wanted a quiet life, nothing special, definitely not this. “Why me? What makes you think I won’t just walk away?”

“You have too much of your grandfather in you. It is your destiny.”

“So, I’m nothing more than a cog in the machine?”

“Your grandfather chose his life, your parents chose their lives, and you chose yours. It is true that others conspired to get you here, but you made the decision every step along the way. You know if you were not here now, you would have come later. You know you could not tolerate the coming absolutism.”

Ianus knew what Eman was saying was right, but he wanted to blame someone else. He didn’t want to believe that he had chosen to come here. It was easier to blame others. It was easier to think that others had hijacked his life, but it wasn’t true.

All his life he had read the stories about the great freedom fighters, and knew that he would have stood with them. The more he heard about Ual-leen activity, the more he wanted to do something. He had watched in horror as Master Theron had encouraged the people of Adrakaya to betray the basic principles of their democracy. He could see their civil liberties slipping away from them. They felt safer. They didn’t understand the beast they had unleashed upon their land.

“You’re right,” Ianus said, “I know you’re right, but what can we do? How can we stop the darkness from coming?”

“It may be too late to stop the darkness, but we may be able to stave off the night. First we have to prepare the city. I will awaken my brothers and sisters. You need to prepare your friends.”

“The Enmadra are hibernating?”

“O no, they have been hidden, and many of them are unaware of what all has transpired. Even now, my people are beginning to return to this city, and our other cities.”

“Will you make your presence known?”

“No, the time is not yet right. There would be panic and mayhem in the streets. Don’t forget, many of those people out there believe that our return is the first sign of the end of days. We have to prepare them or our problems will increase. Any way, the Raewyn have to make their presence known first. The rumors are already in their favor. It will be easier to accept their return, then ours. Are you ready? It is time to go back. They are waiting for us.”

Ianus smiled, “I am ready. We have a lot of work to do.”

Ianus staggered backwards; the light burned his eyes. The winged eidolons on either side of the small, golden chest had disappeared. For a moment, he wondered if all that he had just seen and heard had really happened; but then the light faded, revealing the giant form of Eman Sarad.

He was smiling with his arms outstretched.

The crowd gasped. Marnin, the Vaticinars, and the other A’nath-ari rushed toward the high altar and prostrated on the marble floor.

“Stand up, stand up,” said Eman, “There is no reason to bow to me, or to anyone. Save your prostrations for the Holy One who deserves your adoration.”

Slowly, they stood up, and began to whisper and chatter softly among themselves.

“Hail,” said Marnin, nervously bowing his head, and looking for any sign of disapproval, “We welcome you, we are pleased that you have chosen to reveal yourself to us again. We have waited faithfully, and we will do all that you ask for.”

“Stand up, Marnin.”

“You know my name?”

“Yes, I have watched you for a long time. We have watched you all for a long time. The time has come for us to act again. It is time for us to rise up, and stand for life! The darkness is coming. You have seen it on the horizon. You know the storm beyond the mountains. This is our time, the time that we were born for. Send out the call to all the A’nath-ari: The time for action has come, tonight, we revel in the joy of the day! Send out the call!”

The A’nath-ari bowed and left the room.

“Marnin!” Eman called out, “Go to the Basilica. You will find Hinun Dabir by the shrine of Adir Radd. Tell him to prepare for the feast tonight.”

Marnin bowed three times, muttering various accolades each and every time. He, then, quickly ran out of the temple to do as he was told.

“He is eager to serve,” said Ianus, shaking his head.

“Yes, but is he eager to serve us, or the cause,” said Eman, “That is much more important. One day, he’ll learn,” he turned and faced the pews, “Hail to our honorable friends in the Jade Moon. You are welcome to join us. For tonight, be merry. Tomorrow, well, let us leave tomorrow to tomorrow. I have to go. I have so much to do.”

As the day went on, more and more Enmadra filled the streets of Usekht Maati. There was a festive mood in the air. The smell of spices, cooking bread, and cakes floated around the city. Musicians brought their instruments to the street corners, and began to play. Even the somber A'nath-ari had an extra spring in their step.

At twilight, bonfires were lit in the city square, and the drums intoned the beginning of the dance. The crowd moved as one mass to the beat of the song. The dance was infectious, no one could resist the rhythm.

Even Maya, Pryor and Arun found themselves drawn to the heart of the crowd.

Maya laughed when she saw the smile on Arun's face. It was so familiar, like Ihy was back in their midst. She had missed that smile, and his companionship.

She took Arun by the hand, and they began to dance. Around and around each other, they twirled and moved to the rhythm of the song. With each step, Maya's heart leapt. A warm mirth swirled through her chest. She thought for a moment she could feel his soul stretching out to her. Her smile broadened.

An effervescent laugh broke out of Maya. She threw her head back and rolled to the dance. Embracing Arun, she felt his skin on her cheek.

"Do you remember the last time we danced?" She whispered in his ear.

"Yes, I remember the sensation of you held tight in my arms," Arun said softly, "It brings back so many memories. I almost feel like myself again."

"You will be, in my heart I know you will regain all of your faculties. You will be yourself and so much more."

Maya ran her hand down Arun's back, "And soon we can be together again."

"This could be difficult. Before, my Raewyn nature stood in the way. Now, as far as anyone knows, I am Kishanu. People could frown on our relationship."

"Why? Everyone knows the Kishanu have emotions, and you are not my bondservant. I have never cared what others thought about us before, why would I start now?"

"I may not be all myself anymore, but I know that I don't want anything bad to happen to you. I want your life to be perfect."

"But no one's life is ever perfect. No matter what happens, I will always be by your side."

Working her way out of the crowd, Maya found a seat near one of the tables. Arun and Pryor came over and joined them.

"You seem happy," Pryor said as he sat down next to his sister.

"I am. The tide is turning, I can feel it."

"I've been thinking about what we did to Ianus. We should have told him what we knew."

"I know," Maya watched Ianus dancing, "We did treat him poorly, but he has survived the trials."

"There are more to come. I just hope we did the right thing."

Maya caught Ianus' eye. He stopped dancing, and walked over to them.

"You look very somber. Tonight is a night for revelry. Come on, join the party," he said, and motioned toward the dancers.

"We were out there," said Maya, "But we started thinking we treated you badly. We should have told you everything up front so you could make an informed decision. Because we manipulated you, you almost died."

“The night is still young,” Ianus laughed. “Look, you messed up. That’s true, but there is nothing you can do about that now. I’m not upset, so you shouldn’t be either.”

“You are being very understanding. If you don’t mind me asking, why?”

“Because you’re family. That’s what matters. That’s all that matters. There is nothing you could do that could change that.”

“But Ianus,” said Pryor, “We are not your family by blood. You have to remember that.”

“Why? Because that’s what’s important to other people? What about blood makes a family? It may make a genetic relationship, but what use is that to anyone? Family is about spirit. I love you, Maya, you raised and nurtured me, you *are* my mother. Pryor is my uncle, and Arun is my father. What else matters?”

Maya smiled. “It is good to hear you have accepted Arun, but we kept secrets from you. I don’t know that I would forgive so quickly.”

“Well, I have. For tonight, forget your problems, and join the party. Dance, sing, and celebrate without a thought for tomorrow. Tomorrow will have enough anxiety with out adding to it.

Ianus shook his head, and ran back toward the gathered. The music took hold of his soul. The whole crowd moved as one.

Ianus was so tired of talking; he was glad to get lost in the dance. No more regrets, no more cares, there was only music and movement. ‘This is how it should be,’ Ianus thought, ‘Decide what is right and act. There’s no reason to agonize over such easy decisions. Peace of mind and clarity of life were rare. They should be relished while they are here. Who knows how long they’ll stay.’

After years of training, and too many sleepless nights wondering if anyone cared what happened to him, now he was home. He had his friends, his family, what else could he ask for?

The familiar prescient fog stole his sight. Thunder and lightning filled the horizon. A shadow was stretching over the land. Something terrible had just happened. Panic ripped the air out of Ianus’ lungs. His muscles were rigid. All he could see was blood. Violence, terror, death. A giant had awakened. Cythraul was pleased.

“Ianus!”

‘Who said that?’ he thought, ‘I know that voice.’

Slowly, he opened his eyes. Eman towered over him.

“Are you all right?” Eman asked.

“No. I have seen something that troubles me,” Ianus caught his breath.

“I know. We have seen it too.”

“Why is Cythraul so excited?”

“Tomorrow, tonight we dance.”

“Do you know? I can understand leaving the past to the past, but this has only just happened.”

“We can not stop our lives every time Cythraul upsets things. If we did that we would never sleep. You will learn soon enough. This is my friend Hinun.” Eman patted his hand on the shoulder of the Enmadra next to him.

“Come now,” said Hinun, “Join the dance. The dance can heal a broken heart, and tie a community together. The dance is the soul of the people. It can even inspire magic.”

Hinun and Eman lead Ianus to the largest bonfire burning in the center of the square.

Hinun released Ianus’ hand and ran toward the fire. He leapt into the air and began to dance across the tops of the flames. Whirling to the beat of the drum, he floated across the fire, the flames kissing his feet and holding him aloft. A boisterous cheer rose out of the crowd.

“Do you see?” Eman asked, “Anything is possible. Only you can hold yourself down.”

Eman flipped on to the wisps of flames and held out his hand to Ianus. “Gravity can not hold down one whose heart is free.”

Ianus took his hand, and he lifted Ianus into the air.

“Do not take your eyes off the heavens and you will not fall,” Eman said, and he joined Hinun in the dance.

The flames tickled Ianus’ feet, but they didn’t burn him, he spun around.

Hinun jumped off the flames and over the heads of the crowd. Rebounding off the far wall, he flipped across to the other side of the square.

Ianus had read about the sky dance of the Enmadra. He never imagined that he would get to take part in it. He took a deep breath, and leapt off the fire. His feet brushed against the outstretched hands of the Enmadra. Never did his weight come down on them.

As he turned at the wall, he saw Aashen and Tuun. The wings of their Ceeri carried them high into the air. They swooped over the ground, and across the crowd in magnificent arcs.

Ianus had never felt so free. He never wanted to come down. Seeing Daru in the dance, he reached down and lifted her into the air, “Trust me,” he whispered, but the look in her eyes told him he didn’t have to say a word.

Hand in hand, they moved through the air. Their feet pumped to the rhythm of the dance; their arms outstretched to welcome the heavens to their eyes. Nothing was real but the moment. Nothing existed but the song and the movement.

Ianus had never known such peace of mind. This was how life should always be: Alive in the moment with no thought of tomorrow.

The Enmadra broke out in song. The words were foreign to Ianus’ mind, but the melody was as familiar as his own heart beat. He and Daru sang along. Soaring over the heads of so many, the power of the dance was so real.

After learning to fly without wings, what could hold him back from his goals. The song taught him freedom. Beyond every word that he had ever read, far past every philosophy, this showed him the face of liberty.

He looked at Daru with tears in his eyes. He loved her more than any word could ever say, but he knew that fate longed to see them separated. By death or war or distance, it would all end the same. He could not let go of her no matter what happened.

She was the blood running through his veins. Without her, his life meant nothing. Together, they could do anything. They could never be parted. Ianus wouldn’t allow that.

Daru looked over at Ianus. He had a smile on his face and tears streamed from his eyes. She circled him. The Enmadra beneath her raised their arms as her feet came down. The timing was perfect and unplanned. It just happened.

She wanted to ask Ianus what was wrong. Why was he crying? Why had the smile stayed on his face? She hated to think that something could be wrong with him.

Her foot slipped, and she slid down into the crowd.

Ianus grabbed her hand, "Don't take your eyes off the heavens," he said, and pulled her back up.

She loved the feel of his skin against hers. She ran her fingers up his arm, and around his back. Electric waves of silence pierced her heart. No words were necessary. She slid her hands across his shoulders. She rubbed her thumbs on the nape of his neck.

Her breath quickened.

Ianus swooped around her, and wrapped his arm around her waist.

She could feel his breath, hot against her back. Her pulse quickened. She pressed her back into his chest. He was so close; she could feel his heart beating on her back.

The song faded from her ears. There was nothing but him and her. She turned around and gazed into his eyes. The whole universe glittered in them. She brushed his cheek with the back of her hand. He closed his eyes.

She wanted to hold him and never let go: To stay in that one perfect moment forever. If only this was a dream that would never end. This was home. This was a place that could never be taken away from her. Love was forever.

Together, they spiraled out of the sky. The ground felt heavy under her feet. Everything had changed. Nothing would ever be the same again. In one brief moment of endless bliss, the whole world had changed. The mountains didn't seem so high, the valley didn't seem as low. Passion burned in her heart like she never knew before.

Ianus wiped a tear out of her eye, "What's the matter?" He asked so tenderly it almost took her breath away.

"I don't want this moment to end. I want to stay here forever."

"Then don't let go. As long as we have each other, nothing can stand in our way. I will never leave your side. Death could not even keep me away from you. You are my faith. You take away all of my fears."

Daru blushed, "I will never leave you. If we are destined not to survive this, then we will have all eternity together."

Arun and Maya danced through the air past them.

"I am so glad they have found each other again," said Ianus.

"I'm glad you made peace with your father."

Ianus shook his head, "Don't you start with me again." He giggled, "I thought we were having a perfect moment. One that would never end."

"We are, but that doesn't mean I can't comment on your mistakes."

"O really, does that mean I can point out a few of yours?" Ianus smirked, "You're too shy. You don't speak up for yourself."

"Really? Do you want me to be more assertive? I can be, you know. That is if you want me too." She pushed Ianus' shoulder.

"Excuse me, miss," someone said behind Daru.

She turned around and gasped, “Rasmus Dyre? You’re the man who sold me that Eidolon!”

“Yes, miss. I’m sorry for the deception, but the order demanded it. I thought it was only right that you know, seeing how you’re here and all. How have they been treating you?”

“Very well. They have all been quite friendly.”

Suddenly, a loud roar shattered the night. Fire on the horizon, a bright light growing closer.

“It’s a ship!” Ianus exclaimed, “Are we under attack?”

“Not likely,” said Valeryn walking away from the dance, “No ship could enter Tai-wer without knowing the clearance code.”

“Could Cythraul know them?”

Valeryn looked up at the approaching ship, “He could, but if it is him, why hasn’t he fired? He could decimate the entire city from the air.”

“Maybe he doesn’t want to destroy the city,” said Daru, “Perhaps he wants to take the city for his own.”

Valeryn sighed, “He has always wanted Usekht Maati for his capital, but something about this is not right.”

Tara sat blindfolded on the bridge of the Sangrida.

“Is this really necessary? I’m going to know where we are going when we get there,” said Tara calmly.

“I’m sorry,” said Kanu, “There are rules that have to be followed. You have to trust me.”

“You know I trust you, or I would have never let you blindfold me and take control of this ship.”

“I know you’ve been through a lot lately, but soon everything will be better. I can’t promise you that Panthera will never bother you again, but I swear I’ll do everything in my power to help you.”

Tara could feel the ship beginning its descent.

“Sangrida can finish the landing. You have to come with me.”

Tara stood up and took Kanu’s hand. He led her through the corridors of the ship. Kanu pulled the blindfold off Tara.

She gasped at the sight of Kanu in the dark crimson robes. “You are A’nath-ari?”

“Yes,” he said as he opened the gate, “I have served for a long time.”

A large crowd had gathered around the ship. Valeryn Kamau approached the gate. “Kanu? Is that you? It has been a very long time. Who is your friend?”

“This is Tara Lael,” Kanu’s eyes widened, “The Enmadra? I have been gone for far too long.”

Valeryn squinted. “Little Tara Lael? I know her, but has been a while since I’ve seen her,” Valeryn smiled, “She serves with Master Barami.”

“Tara?” Ianus said, “What are you doing here?”

“I don’t even know where here is,” said Tara, “I’ve had a very strange trip.”

“Why are you wearing the To’asaa?” Asked Daru.

“It called to me. With it, our people were reborn. It is my salvation as well.”

“You know you must give it up. You stole it. It is not yours to do with as you please.”

“I will make restitution for my crimes, but you are not my judge. I will answer for what I’ve done.”

“But you have to give it up.”

“It is not yet time.”

CHAPTER TWENTY: THE THREE JEWELS

After the bonfires turned to ashes, the assembled revelers wended their way through the labyrinthine streets on their way home. Valeryn shared his house with the crew of the Valkyrie.

Ianus woke up before the sun had managed its way over the horizon and strolled leisurely through the city street. The sunlight glinted off the gilded roofs of various houses and temples on either side of the sandstone streets. The sweet smell of the burned spice woods lingered on the air. Bakers and other chefs had begun cooking for the day.

So many people filled every alley; it hardly looked like the same city. Everywhere Ianus looked groups of Enmadra towered over the crimson robed A'nath-ari who talked or practiced their arts. There was an urgency in the air that Ianus had never felt before. This was the moment these people had been waiting for. They had trained all their life for what was coming. Most had never faced anything like the coming storm. They were both frightened and excited. He could see it in their eyes.

Around a corner, Eman was giving a group of A'nath-ari their marching orders. He bowed and turned around, "Hello. Ianus, I didn't expect to see you up this early. You were one of the last to leave the square."

"Me?" Ianus nodded, "You were still there when I left. How is it that you are already issuing orders?"

"My kind don't have to sleep in quite the same way you do. We have learned to get through the day after only a period of deep meditation. Are you ready for today?"

"Yes. I'm sure I am. I can do whatever you need me to do."

"Don't you start too. Look, the A'nath-ari serve us as penance for their many years of terror after the death of Adir Radd."

"He had been murdered."

"That cannot excuse the bombing, the lynching, and the all out war that they brought to the galaxy. Nothing excuses the nightmare they unleashed. We knew others would rally to their cause, so we brought them under our control. Now they benefit the communities they once harmed. You do not serve us. You are your own. I might ask you to do something but it is always your decision whether to do it or not. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Ianus glumly, "I understand."

Hinun walked up to them and bowed, "Eman, I have good news. The east gate has been repaired. The new idolons have installed themselves."

"Very good, were there any incidences while our defenses were down?"

"No, the reputation of these lands scared away any would be treasure seekers."

"I've been wondering, why do you use idolons for defense?" Ianus asked.

“O, we use them for much more,” said Hinun. “The idolons move apart from their matrix. If they are defeated, they learn the defect in their action or substance, and evolve. They are always improving, which makes them ideal for many tasks.”

“Isn’t it dangerous to have so many evolving life forms roving around you? I mean if they can think for themselves what maintains their loyalty?”

“They are all designed for a particular mission or purpose, and not all of them can think for themselves. The more dangerous ones have no minds or free will as you might say.”

“Do you want to be in the middle of the coming storm with us? If so, I will hold nothing back from you,” said Eman.

“I would like nothing more,” said Ianus, grinning.

“Very good. Cythraul will make his move soon, and we have to be ready. In the past, he amassed an army before he made his move. That gave us time to amass an army of our own. We would strike before he was ready and break his forces.”

“That is why you are here,” said Hinun, “The Vaticinars believe he will strike here first, before we can prepare. We only have one advantage. He doesn’t know we are expecting him. With luck, we can turn his surprise attack into our ambush.”

“How can he attack? You don’t think he already has an army do you?” Ianus asked.

“A large number of Raewyn joined his rebellion, but they haven’t been seen for a long time. He could be using them,” said Hinun.

“No,” Eman shook his head, “He knows the rules, if he attacks openly, he will be inviting the whole Empyrean to intervene. No, he has something up his sleeve. There is something we haven’t foreseen. His joviality last night proves that. We have to be ready for anything. Somehow, he has kept the Vaticinars from seeing his plans. I have to admit, that troubles me.”

“Well, then,” said Ianus, “We have to make a plan of our own, don’t we?”

By the time Tara woke up, the house was empty. She found some bread lying on the table in the dining room, and ate it for breakfast. She was surprised no one was waiting around to interrogate her.

After she had arrived, Kanu and Valeryn lead her away to the festivities. She danced all night, and no one had mentioned the theft of the To’asaa or the Sangrida. Part of her was happy that she didn’t have to answer any more questions. It did make her nervous. They were not reacting at all like she expected.

She left the house and walked down the street to the town square. Numerous A’nath-ari were practicing their art. Tara formed a staff with the To’asaa.

Rounding on her heels, she thrust the staff forward. Then quickly to the back.

“Would you like help?” Kanu asked.

Tara nodded, “Do you have some pointers for me?”

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen you fight. I can spar with you if you like?”

“Kanu?” Tara hesitated, “Why did you help me? I mean, why are you helping me? You know what I’ve done. You know the people I once worked for.”

Kanu turned his back to her, “Eight years ago, I was a foolish teen. I was attracted to the teachings of Adir Radd, but I didn’t stop there. I came upon the writings of some of his disciples, after the madness had blinded them. The A’nath-ari found me

while I was planning a bombing. They showed me the error of my ways. I understand what it's like to make a mistake. That was all I could do. I have to serve life."

"I had no idea. It makes a lot of sense."

"Many of the people here have a similar story. I am living proof that anyone can change. I will help you no matter what happens." Kanu formed a staff with his periapt, "Would you like to spar?"

"Sure, if you really want to, but take it easy on me I haven't taken vows yet."

Kanu turned to face her. They bowed.

Their staves clacked together.

Kanu swept his foot to trip her. She met his leg and wrapped her foot behind his knee.

As he fell, Kanu twisted his body and landed on his hands. He slid underneath her and grabbed her belt, pulling her down with him.

Tara rolled to her left. She slammed the staff flat on the ground. Light rippled from the impact as the staff reformed to throw her into the air. Landing on her feet, she looked up to find Kanu.

He was just getting to his feet, "That was very good," he said, "Would you like to go on to the sword next?"

"What is this?" Barami said sternly, "Do you have a new Master? Why wasn't I informed?"

"O no, Master Barami," Tara bowed, "We were just practicing."

"I am surprised you didn't come to me before you came out here to practice. Your future in the order does rest in my hands, and since I've been appointed to the Camarilla, that is even truer than before."

"I'm sorry, I should have gone looking for you, but I didn't know where you were."

"You betrayed the order! That is not easily forgotten." Barami looked down at the To'asaa. Sweat beaded up on his brow. "What do you think you're doing wearing that. It is not for you!"

"It has chosen me. I don't know why, but it speaks to me. It even sings me to sleep at night."

"What? Am I suppose to believe that? You stole the To'asaa twice, and now I'm suppose to take your word that it has chosen you to own it? I'm not a fool, you know!"

"How can I prove to you that I'm telling the truth? Name your test and I'll take it. I'm not lying to you!"

"*Sure* you're not. You still have to stand trial for your crimes."

"Fine!" Kanu said, "The Enmadra administer courts of law. What are you waiting for? Press your charges. They could even submit her to the trial of the Vaticanars if you so wish. Well? Which will it be?"

Barami sneered at Kanu, "This is an internal matter of the Bahn Se'leen. This has nothing to do with the Enmadra."

"I'm afraid I can't agree," said Kanu. "The Enmadra are a sovereign people, the Jade Moon is not. If you want justice you must submit her case to the lay court."

"And I will take the judgment," said Tara, standing proud, "No matter what it is. I will pay for my crimes."

"Do you think you can undo all that you've done so easily?"

“No,” said Tara, “I can not undo anything that I’ve done, but I can change what I’m doing.”

Daru finished her prayers. She stood up from the kneeler, and bowed toward the altar. The weight of the future lifted from her shoulders. The prayers were said, all that was left was business and planning.

She left the temple, and saw Aashen and Tuun coming toward her. They greeted each other.

“Praying?” Aashen asked, “We spent most of the morning in there. I recited every litany and prayer I know.”

“Me too,” said Daru, “So much has happened lately. I never thought I would ever see this town, much less pray in it’s temples. This is like a dream and a nightmare at the same time.”

Daru looked at the brilliantly painted mural of Adir Radd and Tien Shaa leading their armies against those of Dov Lavan. “This is all happening again isn’t it?” Daru asked.

“That never happened,” said Tuun, “Master Radd was dead before the war broke out, and the A’nath-ari were terrorists.”

“I know all that,” said Daru, “But if Cythraul has formed another champion, that is how Lavan fell from grace.”

“If you listen to the Enmadra, they are expecting a more subtle attack this time,” said Aashen.

“What could be more subtle than a surprise kidnapping and assassination?”

“When we were children, Aashen and I were kidnapped by slavers,” said Tuun, “They would slip into a busy marketplace disguised as traders. When they sensed the time was right they would strike. They would just start shooting indiscriminately into the crowd. In the ensuing chaos, they would snatch as many people as possible. Later, they would claim responsibility for the attack in the name of some terrorist group. While the authorities were hunting down the terrorists, they would get away without anyone knowing they did it.”

“You call that subtle? Didn’t anyone notice the missing people?”

“At the time they were thought to have been taken hostage, or that their bodies had been destroyed by one of the blasts. They got away with it for a long time. That was their secret. No one saw them move. They saw only what the slavers wanted them to see?”

“I see what you’re saying,” said Daru, “I can’t believe there are still slavers. You never hear about them on the news.”

“As long as the power of money is absolute, there will always be slavery. Money buys justice, and a lot of people simply can’t afford it.”

“You don’t really believe that do you?”

“I see it too often. There are some societies that desperately try to hold on to the rule of law, but there will always be judges and politicians that can be bought. It’s sad, but true.”

“Then what are we fighting for? The Enmadra talk about the battle to preserve liberty, if that can be bought and sold then this is all pointless.”

“It can also be scared out of your hands,” said Tara, walking up to them sheepishly. “I’m sorry for everything that I did to all of you. I hope you can forgive me.”

Daru bit her lip. “Just tell me why you did it.”

“I was scared, I could see all of our traditions slipping away. I wanted to do something, and Panthera held to the old ways. By the time I realized what I had gotten myself into, I was too afraid to do anything about it. Panthera always told us that everyone who didn’t hold to the old ways was destined for eternal damnation. With that hanging over me, I didn’t dare speak out. Even after I realized that he was lying, I was afraid of what he would do to me. It wasn’t until I stole the To’asaa that I realized I could choose another way. I just wish I would have come to my senses sooner.”

“And the To’asaa has helped you, how?”

“It talks to me. It whispers advice in my ear, but I couldn’t have done it with out you. You were always there for me, giving me advice whenever I needed it. You talked me into leaving Panthera forever.”

“I had no idea,” said Daru, “Although that would explain all of those questions. I had my suspicions about you, but didn’t think I was helping you.”

“You all did. I only hope you can trust me enough to help with everything that’s coming. Eman said he wanted me to, but I told him I wouldn’t if you didn’t approve. Your opinion means a lot to me.”

“I will not stand in the way of the Enmadra,” said Daru. “If they want you on the team that’s fine with me.”

Aashen and Tuun agreed.

“Anyway, we’re going to need all the help we can get,” said Daru, smiling. “And if there is anything I can do to help you, let me know. We got to make sure you stay on the straight and narrow, don’t we.”

Tara blushed, “That is more kindness than I deserve. If you want to help, all I really need is support, and hope.”

Night fell over the city. The time was right. Faroh wound his way up the hill toward Usekht Maati. His mind was still clouded. The thoughts and memories of Dov Lavan haunted him. He fought back the foreign personality, but at a great cost. He was weakened. Lavan taunted him from the corner of his mind: A faint whisper with a venomous tongue.

Tonight was for reconnaissance. Cythraul had made that point painfully clear. He had to know if the Enmadra had returned, and what the cities defenses were like. They had to plan carefully if they were going to succeed. He had searched all day, and could only find one clear and easy approach up the mountain. It would be difficult to bring an army to bear on the city. Even if they survived the ascent of the mountain, they would surely break on the walls.

The walls raised fifty feet out of the solid rock. Not a problem for a well-trained maker, Faroh simply leaped onto the battlement landing in the embrasure, but an army would have a much harder time. He was surprised to see that there were no guards on patrol.

Faroh smiled malevolently at the lightless towers. They must have no idea what Cythraul was up to. He thought that they would be on alert after having lost one of their gatekeepers, but they didn't even have Eidolons standing guard.

'This will be too easy,' he thought to himself as he jumped off the wall onto the town square. 'They do not understand the danger they are facing.'

He crept along the wall. There was no sign of the Enmadra. A few A'nath-ari walked through the town square and down the city streets. They were walking slowly, calmly.

One of them sat near a fountain, reading under the light of a street lamp. The voice of Lavan cackled with laughter. "I know that one," it hissed, "He is Valeryn Kamau, a Raewyn. He has been hunting your precious Cythraul since his pitiful rebellion. While he might be useful to rid yourself of that parasite, he is too dangerous. Take him out, and the city will be yours."

Faroh resisted the voice. He knew if he gave in, it would only become more powerful. He had to fight it off. He had to win.

A dark cloud writhing with lightning flew from Faroh's periapt striking Valeryn to the ground.

He was obviously trying to scream, but without air he couldn't make a sound.

"He is already down," the voice said, "Kill him! Now, before it's too late."

Faroh stood over him, and watched him gasp for air. Raising his hand, Faroh began to draw Valeryn's life force from him.

"Stop that!" He heard a woman shout.

He turned around, "Little Tara Lael?" He said laughing at the sword in her hand, "What do you think you can possibly do to me? Go to bed. I have work to do."

Tara ran toward him, swinging the blade before her.

Faroh formed a blade, and quickly deflected her sword. She dropped to her knees, and swept him off his feet with a swipe of her arm across the back of his legs.

Distressed, Faroh rolled off his back into the air. He threw his weight toward her, grabbing her arm. He lifted her off the ground and tossed her at the fountain.

She kicked off the sculpture, and twisted around the stone Enmadra's waist.

"You have learned quite a bit since the last time I met you," said Faroh, "You should be dead by now."

"Too bad you haven't learned anything."

"Little girl, you have no idea what you're talking about. You once served Panthera, come now, serve me. I will succeed where he failed! Do you see this!" Faroh held out his hand so she could see the periapt, "This is no mere replica! It belonged to the Ara'lu himself. Join me, and you can serve at my side."

"Never!" Tara cried out, "I left Panthera, and I will not be enslaved again."

"Who said anything about slavery?" Faroh heard footsteps behind him. He turned quickly. Ianus Akeru and some woman were entering the square.

Ianus' eyes were different. A blood colored haze covered them. "What are you doing here, Lavan?" Ianus shouted, "Your kind are not permitted in this city."

Faroh was disoriented. He staggered around helplessly. He looked over at Ianus, but saw only a man with long black hair and crimson robes. "Adir Radd," he muttered. Looking over at Tara, he could only see the figure of Tien Shaa. "What are you doing to me?"

“Flee, you fool,” the voice of Lavan sneered.

He turned and ran as fast as he could to escape the city, but the vision wouldn't leave his eyes. Adir Radd had somehow returned.

Tara watched as Ianus fell on the cold city street. She sprinted across the square. Daru dropped to her knees and cradled Ianus in her arms.

“Ianus, speak to me,” said Daru brushing his hair out of his face, “Talk to me. What's happening? What's wrong?”

“He slit my throat,” Ianus cried out, “I'm bleeding. Please help me, I'm bleeding.”

Daru ran her fingers across his throat, “No one slit your throat. You're not bleeding. Everything's all right. Just breathe.”

“Listen to me,” the voice of Tien Shaa whispered in Tara's ear, “I have seen this before. Adir Radd is sharing with him. I can help. Lay your hand on his forehead.”

Tara did as she was told, and a soft, green light issued from the To'asaa.

Ianus exhaled. His body relaxed. He grinned and opened his eyes, “I remember everything.” He looked into Tara's eyes, “You understand too don't you.”

Tara nodded.

“Well, I don't,” said Daru.

“My periapt once belonged to Adir Radd, he just shared his memories with me. Has the To'asaa shared with you yet?”

“No,” said Tara, “It says I'm not yet ready.”

“I'm okay,” said Valeryn hobbling over, “Don't worry about me.”

“I'm sorry.” Daru and Tara said together.

“Don't worry about it, I'm okay. Please be more observant in the future, would you?”

They all nodded.

“That was the man who killed Ihy Khem, wasn't it?” Daru asked, looking at Tara intently.

“Yes, I know him. His name is Faroh Raanan. He too was a servant of Panthera, but it looks like he has found a new master.”

“I met him at Shiloh,” said Ianus, “He said he was in the Jade Moon. He said he served the Camarilla under Master Theron. I showed him around the campus. I helped him.”

“You didn't know,” said Valeryn, “No one did or he would have been caught. Now he is something else. Something much more dangerous. He has all of Dov Lavan's memories, and has begun to master the old techniques.”

“The three gems have found their masters again,” said Daru. “I suspect there is more going on than we have seen.”

“This has happened before?” Tara asked.

“Yes, this has happened nine times before. The last time was six hundred and forty-eight years ago. Atarah Lien was chosen to bear the To'asaa. The rebellion was crushed, but not before a great deal of bloodshed. It was rumored that Lavan's periapt had been used by the Ual-leen, but it was never proven.”

“There’s no way I am worthy to bear the To’asaa,” said Tara, “It must have me confused with this Atarah Lien. I mean Atarah Lien, Tara Lael. Our names are very similar.”

“Why would you say something like that?” Valeryn asked.

“I am a former Ual-leen agent. I was on the other side.”

“I thought you were reading the old stories?” Daru said. “If you had been you would know that Kahlil Vamu Shaa was not always Vamu Shaa. He was born Kahlil Mehtar. He was one of the original twelve A’nath-ari. In the early days of the war, before Tien Shaa had realized that Dov Lavan had betrayed his vows, Kahlil had killed Tien Shaa’s only son. He, then, snuck into Tien Shaa’s room to kill him.

“Something overcame him that night. He couldn’t kill him. Instead, he fell to his knees and confessed to the murder of Tien Shaa’s son. Tien Shaa was so distraught, he collapsed on his bed and cried. His first thought was vengeance, but he realized that the ending of one life could not repay the loss of his son. That day, he gave Kahlil the vows of the Jade Moon, and told him his penance would be to fill the void he had created.

“Tien Shaa adopted Kahlil Mehtar, and renamed him Vamu Shaa, which means of the family Shaa, in the old tongue. In time, he even came to love Kahlil as a son. He was known as the beloved disciple.

“If he could choose Kahlil, he could choose you.”

Tara nodded, “I guess you’re right. So, what are we going to do?”

“Tonight, we have to rest,” said Ianus, “In the morning, you and Daru should go to the Enmadra. Tell them what we have learned. Valeryn, out of the nine times this has happened before, can I presume you were there?”

“You can,” said Valeryn.

“Then you should be ready to help the other members of the Jade Moon prepare for the battle ahead.”

“You should go straight to bed,” said Tara, “The To’asaa says that you will need the rest. Wear the periapt. It will teach you while you sleep.”

Ianus’ dreams were filled with memories and training sessions. He remembered the first time Adir Radd ever used the periapt and the ways he learned to communicate more efficiently with it. He remembered the first time Adir met a young Kahlil Mehtar, and he remembered his good friendship with both Tien Shaa and Dov Lavan.

Tien Shaa had such a good sense of humor. He had never thought about what the founder of his religion would do in his spare time. The idea that he would joke around with his friends had never entered his mind.

His memories of Dov Lavan were more disturbing. He had been Adir’s best friend since childhood. They would tell each other everything. Lavan was such a nice and kind man. Then one day, they were discussing the ancient legends of the Enmadra. The suggestion that different people could read them and find alternate meaning in the text trouble him. He relied on the ancient commentaries.

One day, he announced that he had made a new friend, a Raewyn named Hlachar Cythraul. He seemed to calm down after that. Even Tien Shaa commented on how much Lavan had improved under Cythraul’s tutelage.

The attack was unforeseen. After being kidnapped, he was taken to the grotto where Lavan held court. So many people were there bowing, and worshipping at the

bloody altar. Lavan offered to take Adir on as a disciple to share with him what he had learned from Cythraul. Then he formed a knife with his periapt and slit Adir's throat. He didn't even wait for an answer. As his friend laid on the altar bleeding to death, Cythraul said, "So it ends for all heretics. Destroy the infection and cure the disease."

When Ianus woke up, he was in a somber mood. The traumas of another man's life were fresh in his mind. He decided to skip breakfast, and go see Arun. He had unfinished business with him.

Valeryn was reclining in the lounge. "Did you sleep well?" He asked, lifting his head slightly to look at Ianus.

"I had vivid memories for dreams, but other than that yes."

"I gave your friends some exercises to prepare them like you asked. Most of them went down to the square to practice. I still need to rest. Last night took a lot out of me."

"Do you need anything?"

"No, I will be better soon. Thanks for asking."

Ianus left the house and headed toward the gardens. They were on the opposite side of town from the square. He, now, knew this place as well as he knew Shiloh. It hadn't changed since Adir Radd walked these streets.

He was surprised to find Maya and Pryor in the garden.

"I thought you would be practicing with the others," Ianus said.

"No, we have our own work to do," said Pryor.

"In the gardens?"

"We're taking a break, if that's all right with you."

"Do you know where Arun is?"

"He's in the Labyrinth," said Maya, "Why?"

"I have a gift for him."

"He said he needed a quiet place to meditate and with all of the A'nath-ari running through the streets preparing the city for battle, he thought the labyrinth would be a safe bet."

"They feel that something major is coming," said Pryor.

"A dark hand has stretched over this land," said Ianus, "And with the intruder last night, it's no wonder they're concerned."

"Are you all right?" Maya asked, "I heard what happened."

"I will be, soon enough," said Ianus, "Don't worry about me."

"It's no use saying that," Maya smiled. "I love you. I'm your mother. I'm always worried about you."

Ianus shook his head and walked into the labyrinth. The number of Eidolons walking around between the hedges amazed him.

One of them, a white lion, walked up to Ianus and stared at him.

"Can I help you?" Ianus asked.

"You are Ianus Akeru, aren't you?"

Ianus nodded.

"Nahimanna has told us a lot about you. My name is Paytah. Here, I'll walk with you."

"Thank you. I have to say. I'm surprised there are so many eidolons in here."

"We are guides to the labyrinth." Paytah said, "We help the wayfarers, giving them advice along the way."

“You mean if they get lost?”

“In a manner of speaking. You for instance. You need to know that when your time comes, nothing can keep you from your destiny. You can accept it or reject it, but should you reject it, it will only make you bitter. You will not listen to me, of course, you will have to see for yourself, but you still needed to hear it.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: THE STAR DANCER

Faroh slowly walked back to Dov Lavan's tomb. Nothing had ever scared him as bad as seeing Adir Radd walking the streets of Usekht Maati. It was a primal fear, an instinct buried deep in his unconscious mind. Where there is fear, there is weakness. Weakness can always be exploited.

He had spent his entire life honing his skills as a warrior. He had faced so many savage creatures that saw him only as food. He was steady as a rock. Why did the image of Adir Radd trouble him so much.

"Could it be guilt?" The voice of Lavan asked.

"Why would I be guilty? You killed him not me. I'm sure you had a good reason."

"I could see in his eyes that he would stand in the way of our mission. The truth must be served, no matter the cost."

It would never happen again. Faroh was sure of that. He had known fear, and nothing happened. It was unfounded. Remove the foundation, and the tower must fall. Obedience was all that should fill his mind. From now on he would be on guard.

Stooping to enter the Ara'lu's tomb, he found Cythraul talking to a frail, female Raewyn.

"Welcome back, Faroh," said Cythraul as he beckoned him into the antechamber, "Was your night productive?"

"Not as such," said Faroh, "Who is this?"

"This is Lawh-ren Gunda, she is one of the few who joined in my rebellion against the throne that is still with us."

"Where are the others?"

"They are dead. War is costly after all. That won't matter soon, will it? She has been my envoy to several governments that are sympathetic to our cause. She was just reporting her progress."

"Well, how goes the effort? And why haven't I heard anything about this?"

"Because they are a safe guard to keep you in line!" The voice of Lavan laughed.

"First things first," said Cythraul. "We have our work to do here before we can go down that road."

"What were you able to find out?" Gunda asked, "Are they ripe for the picking?"

"Not exactly. There is no sign of the Enmadra. It appears they have yet to return. I saw no patrols on the walls and the towers were empty."

"So what's the problem?" Gunda asked.

"I ran into Tara Lael. She was a fellow servant of Panthera. She recognized me."

"That's minor," said Cythraul, "That can't be what's troubling you."

Faroh sighed, "I saw Tien Shaa and Adir Radd. I don't know where they came from, but the sight of Radd filled me with a terror that I've never known before."

Cythraul shuffled around on the stone bench. "There is no way they could have found them so quickly. You said this Tara was there, did you see anyone else?"

"Ianus Akeru, and some woman that I didn't recognize."

"Ianus Akeru? By all rights he should be mine."

"What's going on?" Faroh asked, "Has this happened before?"

"Tien Shaa, Adir Radd, and Dov Lavan are each reborn in every generation. If they are reunited with their former periapts they can resume the work they had left unfinished."

"You're talking about reincarnation?"

"Not exactly. As every generation passes away, a new one rises to take its place. All souls come from the same source. They are all related. Those that come have a certain similarity to the ones that came before them. It is possible for the spirit of strong souls to come upon one of the living. Did you see Valeryn Kamau?"

"Yes, I did. Lavan tried to kill him."

"And the others stopped you," Cythraul shook his head, "He is the luckiest person in the universe. He has been a thorn in my side for a long time."

"Our plans must change," said Gunda. "This is unforeseen."

"The Parcae said Faroh is the key to opening Usekht Maati. If we can take the holy city they will be at a disadvantage. This is the advantage we have never had. We have to take the city."

"Should I call in our allies," Gunda smiled.

"No, they are still our secret. We should not tip our hand too soon. This battle belongs to Faroh. Without him, we can do nothing. He bears the spirit of Dov Lavan. He is the key. Perhaps he will need that army after all."

"What army?" Faroh asked.

"This will be like the old days. An army of Eidolons marching across the face of Tai-wer."

"Eidolons? Substantial holograms are going to be an army? Have you forgotten how easily I dispatched the gate keepers of Tai-wer?"

"Only because you destroyed the hardware. We can leave the crystals here, then the Eidolons themselves must be defeated. Gunda can be their mind."

"Are you sure you want to rest our fate in the hands of crystallized light?"

"No, we are resting our fate in you. You shouldn't think so lowly of Eidolons. They are a convergence of energy and force, blind to everything but their mission—their purpose. They do not feel pain and they evolve with every failure making a stronger army for the next offensive. Surely you can see their advantage."

"Very well, let us raise an army the likes of which this world has never seen. Tai-wer will be ours."

Ianus walked the labyrinth with the white lion, Paytah.

"What makes you so sure I won't listen to you?" Ianus asked.

"It is your personality," said Paytah, "It doesn't really matter. This is your life, you have to live it as you see is best for you. No one can tell you what is best for you to do. You already know that, but you still long for the approval of others."

“Is there anything wrong with that?”

“Not if you understood that it is not necessary. Every one wants to make their parents proud, but if they are not proud of you when you are the best you can be, then there is nothing you can do to bring them around. Your problem is that you crave validation. You need someone to tell you, ‘You’re doing a good job.’ That is your weakness. What will you do when no one is watching you?”

“I never thought about it like that. I don’t know what I’d do. I didn’t realize how often I look to see who’s watching me. I have to do something about that.”

“There may still be hope for you yet,” Paytah bowed his head and walked away.

Ianus continued to wind around the twists and turns of the labyrinth. The hedges opened up. A simple marble fountain was in the center. Arun sat on the edge of the fountain, rubbing his thumb over his right palm.

“Hello, Ianus,” he said without looking up. “It’s a strange thing isn’t it?”

“What is? Do you have something in your hand?”

“It was Ihy’s periapt. When Selwyn put us together, he embedded it in my palm. Sometimes, I almost feel like I’m myself. It is strange. Can you imagine not being yourself?”

Ianus sat down next to him, “Yes, I can. I’ve felt like that a lot lately. This is not the life I wanted, but it is the life I was born to live. Once I realized that, it got easier.”

“Easier, but not easy.”

“You once told me that nothing easy is ever worth doing.”

“You mean, Ihy told you. I’m *not* Ihy.”

“Yes, you are. You are Ihy, and you are Arun. Together, you are a match for the world.”

“I can almost remember the last time I was here. It is elusive. I wish I could remember.”

“Do you really want to remember?”

“More than anything.”

Ianus laid his right hand on Arun’s forehead. A soft, green light flashed from the periapt.

Arun closed his eyes. “I remember. I remember everything. How did you do that?”

“Tara healed me last night when the memories of Adir Radd flooded my mind. For a while I forgot who I was. I thought if it worked for me, it might work for you.”

“Thank you, son,” Arun smiled broadly. “I cannot imagine a better gift.” He wrapped his arms around Ianus and held him tight.

“I thought I’d lost you forever,” Ianus whispered, a tear ran down his cheek. “It is you isn’t it? You are back aren’t you?”

“Yes, my boy. I’m back,” Arun took a deep breath, “I remember everything. Did you say you have Adir Radd’s periapt? I thought you were destined for the To’asaa. That’s why I had Pryor bring it to Shiloh.”

“No, that was for Tara. You said you were here before. Why?”

“They—the A’nath-ari believed I was destined to replace Dov Lavan. They wanted to get to me first. That’s when I started working with them. It was a good relationship. Helping both our orders. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t risk anyone else finding out.”

“There was a lot you didn’t tell me. You knew about all of this and you kept it a secret.”

“About that, you have to understand, I was afraid the truth would weaken you. If you knew you had a destiny, you might not work hard enough to prepare for it. A destiny is nothing but an opportunity and a choice. What ever happens is always up to you. So many don’t understand that.”

“You could have explained it to me! I’m not stupid. I am trainable.”

“Would you have listened? Honestly think about it. What age would have been appropriate to tell you? What would it have done to your ego? You were hard enough to handle with out the knowledge that the Vaticinars had prophesied over your birth. It was the right choice. It may not be what you would have liked to have happen, but it was the only coarse of action open to us.”

“I know. I know you had your reasons, but it felt like such a betrayal. It felt like you didn’t trust me. That hurt me.”

“You have to know that I’m sorry. I never meant to hurt you. I’ve only ever wanted what was best for you.”

Eman and Hinun left the temple and headed for the town square.

“Are you sure it’s wise being out on the streets. What if Cythraul sends someone else in to see if we’ve returned?” Hinun asked, glancing around nervously.

“This won’t take long,” said Eman. “We have to prepare, we have to know.”

“I do think we are taking too great a risk. No guards, no patrols, he could attack at any time.”

“The Vaticinars have been consulted. The council has spoken. For better or worse, this is our strategy.”

Hinun was not satisfied, but he knew there was nothing to gain from an argument.

They entered the town square, and walked straight over to Tara.

“I hear you’ve been practicing with the To’asaa,” said Eman, “Has it spoken to you?”

“Yes,” said Tara, “It has been advising me, and teaching me, why? Is something wrong? You are here to take it from me, aren’t you?”

“No,” said Hinun, “Why would you even ask something like that?”

“Master Barami says I don’t have a right to use it. He says I have to face trial for all that I’ve done.”

“O really,” said Eman, “Doesn’t he know you already have?”

“I didn’t know. When?”

“Yesterday, the governing council met to hear your case.”

“Don’t I get a chance to defend myself?”

“Hinun defended you, and quite well I must say. You were found guilty of two counts of theft and one count of hijacking.”

“So you are here to take me away to jail?”

“No, the council felt you would benefit most by doing your penance here. We feel that you must help the people you have harmed,” Eman smiled and winked at her, “Consider it a form of community service.”

“But he said he would take it to the Camarilla itself.”

“We have already informed them of our decision. We made our position quite clear. I can assure you that they won’t bring up the subject again.”

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank us yet,” said Hinun, “There is still a lot more to go through. You might prefer jail to what is coming.”

“It is more than I deserve. Why are you doing this for me?”

“The To’asaa chose you. You can not steal what is yours to protect,” said Eman. “You really shouldn’t take the things people say to you so personally. You have to be surer of yourself. Stand up for what’s yours.”

“I’ll try. It’s hard sometimes. I’ve never really done anything to be proud of.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” said Hinun. “You underestimate yourself. Humility is a virtue, but any virtue taken to extremes is a vice.”

“He’s right,” said Eman, “The To’asaa would not have chosen you if you weren’t special. It knows what it’s doing. You do trust it, don’t you?”

“Yes. It has not lead me astray.”

“Has it shared its memories with you yet?”

“No. It says I’m not ready.”

“Follow us,” said Eman, and he turned and walked back toward the city.

They made their way through the streets to Valeryn’s house. They led her into the lounge and encouraged her to have a seat.

“This could overwhelm you, so remember no matter what happens, just breathe naturally,” said Hinun.

“In the dark time to come, you will be instrumental, but only if you are open to the mysteries set before you.”

Valeryn walked into the room, tapped Hinun on the shoulder, and they walked out of the room.

“I have to warn you,” said Valeryn, “A ship entered our air space and landed within the walls.”

“Did they know the codes?”

“Of course they did or they never would have survived the flight. Are you sure it wasn’t one of ours?”

“We checked the registration. We are sure it wasn’t one of ours. It must be reinforcements for Cythraul.”

“How big a ship was it?”

“Not to big. It could hold five to ten people at most. We have to get ready.”

“Eman is preparing Tara now. Something about this doesn’t feel right. He must be very confident, or he wouldn’t be moving so openly. The attack on the guardian. Allowing a ship to fly through the defenses. He’s letting us see too much.”

“He’s always been overconfident. He’s just making another mistake.”

“I hope so. We’ve had a problem gathering intelligence about this Faroh Raanan. He’s good. Everything we’ve found out about him is an obvious forgery. He may be more of a threat than we had originally presumed.”

Ianus and Arun emerged from the labyrinth and ran over to Maya and Pryor.

“I’m back,” Arun shouted, throwing his arms open. “All my memories, my personality, everything!”

“What do you mean back?” Maya’s eyes widened.

“Ianus healed me. He made me whole.”

Arun and Maya embraced.

“Is this real?” Maya whispered, “Please tell me this isn’t just some wonderful dream.”

“It’s real,” Arun kissed her on the cheek. “It’s all real.”

“I thought I lost you forever.”

“You could never lose me. I will always be with you. Even if it’s only in spirit, I will always be by your side. Forever and Always.”

“Always and forever.”

“It’s a beautiful thing.” Pryor nudged Ianus with his elbow, “They belong together. You did good work.”

“Thank you, but I only did what I had to do,” said Ianus. “It is good to see them together again.”

Ianus looked around the garden. He watched a beautiful silver and gold butterfly going from flower to flower. It flew toward him, and landed in the palm of his hand.

Pain shot up his arm; he couldn’t breathe. Falling to his knees, he felt his chest tighten.

“Hello Ianus,” Cythraul’s familiar voice echoed in his ears, “It has been a long time. You have not called on me. Is everything all right?”

“I don’t need you. Leave me alone.”

“O, but *we* need you. A great warrior like you would make a wonderful asset for the side of truth. Come join us, and we will give you more power than you’ve ever dreamed.”

“I was born with all that I need. There is nothing you have that I need.”

“What about glory? If you would leave the A’nath-ari and join us, your name will be remembered forever.”

“That isn’t true. The greatest flaw of all societies is they forget the tyrant, and do not learn from their mistakes. If I joined you, my name would be forgotten; and even if it was remembered, it would be nothing more than a curse.”

“When we have finished, our empire will stretch from one corner of the galaxy to the other. You could have your own kingdom. All you have to do is accept the truth, and turn from your errors.”

“What errors would that be? Believing that everyone should be allowed to have the freedom to believe as they wish? That is not an error. It is the central pillar of all liberty.”

“You do not understand,” said Cythraul, “We serve the same Master, you and I. I have learned that debate is nothing but anarchy. One voice must rule them all. There is but one truth.”

“Who is to define that truth, you? We do not serve the same master. I serve life, limitless and free to evolve into higher forms. You only serve death— death of conscience, death of hope, death of freedom. You serve to the death of all who would oppose you. It is always the same with your kind. You speak with a golden tongue, but there will be blood on the streets before it is over.”

“I can not control what my followers do. I merely teach the truth. They govern their own lives.”

“When your version of the truth includes litanies of people that don’t deserve to live, what do you think the end result will be? You may not encourage the slaughter, but you encourage and condone the beliefs that cause them.”

“Are you blind? To deny me is to deny yourself. Without me, who will tell you what is right and what is wrong. I give your life meaning, you must see that. Come now. Serve the truth.”

“History teaches us what is wrong, and guides us ever closer to what is right. We learn and grow over time. You have not. You do not give our lives meaning, you rob it of meaning through your blind acceptance of the song. You say that all our lives have a particular meaning and purpose. You do not see that sheer life is without meaning. It is the individual that brings meaning to it. You rob them of that opportunity.”

“You can’t really believe that, can you? You know the song as well as I do.”

“How are you doing this? You have to be close. Release me! I don’t need your chains.”

“I will never leave you. I am the first thought you have in the morning and the last you have at night. I am a part of you.”

“You may be, but I don’t have to listen to you. You’re using the butterfly aren’t you. It’s an eidolon. I have made my decision. I will never join you. Leave me alone. You are less than nothing to me.” Ianus crushed the silver and gold butterfly in his hand.

Tara sat on the soft chair, and breathed slowly. The full force of the To’asaa’s memories had abated. She felt drained and exhilarated. A new strength welled up in her heart. The voice that had once whispered softly in her ear had taught her in the space of a few minutes everything that it knew. The wisdom seeped through her mind and melted seamlessly into what she had already known.

She opened her eyes. Eman and Hinun stood on the other side of the room talking to each other.

“You’re awake,” said Hinun. He walked over to her and handed her a mug of toffee colored liquid. “Here, drink this, it will help you feel better.”

Tara took a sip. The spicy, rich flavor warmed her very soul. It tasted like a warm winter morning around the fireplace.

Valeryn walked in with Kanu.

“Are you ready?” Eman asked.

“No!” Kanu said, “I don’t think this is a good idea. You know quite well that a Raewyn can see the unseen. It is too risky.”

“We have no choice.” Eman’s breath quickened, “We have to know what he’s planning this is the only chance we have.”

“Ask the Vaticinars!”

“You know that they can only see the big picture. We need details.”

“And you think Cythraul is just sitting around reciting his plan over and over again? At best, we can only be there a short time. We might hear a word here or there, but we are not going to be able to get the amount of detail you want.”

“We’ll take what ever we can get— a time, a place, anything. Cythraul has demonstrated more bravado than is justified, even for someone like him. He is planning something big. We have to be ready for it.”

“What about the risk? Forget for a moment the chance that we’ll be discovered. Do you understand what they could do to her if we’re caught. They could tear her apart, and what would that do to our cause then?”

“I am in the room,” said Tara, “Why don’t you ask me? From the sound of it, you are arguing over my fate. I have a say in it, don’t I?”

Eman sighed, “There is a technique that we can use to eavesdrop on Faroh and Cythraul. You have a connection with Faroh, and we can use that to allow you to see through his eyes. But if Cythraul catches you, he could shatter your mind. You would never be whole again. The chance of that happening is slim. The choice is yours.”

“I’ll do it,” said Tara, “I’ll take the risk.”

Eman pulled a chair in front of Tara, Kanu sat down facing her.

“I will allow you to see,” said Kanu, “All you have to do is concentrate on Faroh. I will take you to him. Now be careful. While we are linked, I will be able to see everything you see. If you get into trouble, just think of me and you will return here. Do you understand?”

“I think so. Will it hurt?”

“You may feel a little disoriented, but other than that you will be fine. I won’t allow anything to hurt you.”

Kanu held out his right hand. Tara did the same. Their periapts almost touched.

Tara felt like she was falling asleep. Her eyes were heavy, she slipped away. All of her muscles relaxed. They were like stone, solid and unmovable. She fell through a long tunnel. The wind rushed past her.

A dark room came into view. Torches hung on the wall. In the distance, someone screamed, and the sound of a lashing whip echoed. She could feel the walls of someone else’s mind holding her in.

“This will only be a minor set back. Everything else is happening as we had planned,” a metallic voice said.

“You are sure this won’t be a problem?” Another man said just out of view.

“To the contrary, this could be to our advantage. You cannot find what you’re not looking for. Don’t worry. We have gotten the people to rally to our cause, bless their short attention span. They will give us all the power we have longed for. In the end, they will turn on themselves like wolves. The order of the Jade Moon is ours.”

“Pull back!” Kanu said, “This is not where we need to be. An eye is looking for you. Focus on Faroh. Hurry!”

Tara felt the floor fall out from under her. The hollowness of the winds pulled on her. She focused on Faroh. Sorrow stormed her.

Cobwebs and carved granite met her eyes. She had found her target. He was frantic, pacing back and forth.

“We should attack now!” He roared, “We are ready, they are not. The longer we wait, the more we invite defeat.”

“You need to learn patience,” said an elderly Raewyn, “We have a few details to work out. Besides, only a fool would attack under day light.”

“Cythraul, this is the time for action. I can feel it deep down in my bones.”

“You are right. We attack tonight. Any further delay would be foolish.”

Cythraul closed his eyes and rolled his head. “I can feel something.”

“Pull back,” said Kanu, “He senses you, focus on me. Come back to me.”

Tara felt her muscles twitch; she fled from Faroh's mind. She hit her own body hard, and gasped as she opened her eyes.

"Is she back?" Hinun asked.

"Did you hear anything?" Eman asked.

Tara caught her breath, and stared at Eman. Her lips quivered. "They are attacking tonight, but there's something else. Someone is plotting against the Jade Moon."

"What else is new?" Eman said.

"Tonight?" Hinun said. "That doesn't give us a lot of time. We have to hurry."

Daru ran up to Ianus, and grabbed him by the arm.

"Are you all right?" She said, "I just heard what happened to you."

"I'm a little shaken, but otherwise I'm fine. I can't believe that Cythraul got an eidolon into the city. How are we going to stop Faroh from sneaking back in, if we can't stop an eidolon from getting in."

"It was only a butterfly."

"You don't know what it's like having that man rummaging through your mind. It is a violation no one should ever experience. Can you imagine having someone in your mind, pressuring you to bow to their will. Can you imagine having your free choice threatened?"

"No, I can't, and I hope I never do. You can't let it effect you like this. For all you know, this is exactly what Cythraul wanted to happen."

Ianus huffed, and squared his jaw, "You're right. Peace of mind brings clarity. Clarity yields power. Power serves life. I cannot forget my lessons. That is what we are fighting for, isn't it. The preservation of our way of life."

"I'm not sure we are ready for this. Eman and Hinun have been helping Tara, but the rest of us are completely unprepared. What am I saying? Nothing could prepare us for this."

"Don't say that. We have to be ready. If we loose this city, we will loose the war. Eman has made that clear."

"But why?"

"He didn't say, but there has to be a reason. Why else would Cythraul keep attacking here?"

"You really trust them don't you."

"Yes, I have too. They saved our people so many times over the last four thousand years. All of our cities would be in ruins if it wasn't for them."

"That's not exactly true," said Daru, "I suspect they do it out of guilt. They taught us the Maker's art. The first war was between their disciples. They brought this nightmare to us."

"No, it was our fault. When they taught the Sen, the Inarus, or the Djati, they didn't fracture and begin millennia of strife. We started these wars, and we have to finish them. Don't blame our inadequacies on the Enmadra."

"Are you ready to die for them?"

"If they kill me in the service of life, so be it. We have to draw a line here. We have to find a way to stop this from ever happening again."

"How? There is always a period of calm, but Cythraul always returns."

“Then we have to stop him from coming back.”

“How do you kill a Raewyn?”

“Valeryn must know. There has to be a way.”

“You shouldn’t dream so big. Make a manageable goal. Focus on stopping him this time, we can work on the rest later.”

“No. Dreams are what move us forward. Dreams are what matter. I’m going to stop all this. I have to.”

“Why?”

“Because I can’t let someone else go through what I have. This ends now. No more. Never again! Do you hear me. Never again.”

“I hear you, but I don’t think there’s anything we can do to stop it. A pebble is not a dam.”

“It may not be a dam, but it is a start.”

Sakkara thundered down the street, “Ianus! Ianus, Sakkara has to speak with Ianus.” She stopped, bent over, resting her hands on her knees.

“What is it?” Ianus asked.

Sakkara gulped to catch her breath. “Faroh attacks tonight! Master Fallon wishes to speak with Ianus at the east guard tower.”

“Which Master Fallon?”

Her eyes darted around, “Sakkara is not sure. The one who smiles. That Master Fallon wishes to see Ianus.”

“Tuun.” Ianus chuckled, “Or do you mean Aashen. I’ve seen both smile.”

Sakkara bit her lip. “The nice one.”

Ianus nodded, “Aashen. We will go to the east gate.”

“No, no, Mistress Isann wishes to see Daru at the North gate.”

“All right. Do you know what to do?”

“Sakkara is a warrior from a long line of warriors. She can take care of herself. She will be with Master Kamau.”

“Very well then,” Ianus turned and grabbed Daru’s shoulders. “You take care of yourself. Don’t do anything I would do.”

“I guess this is it,” Daru said glancing off toward the gate, “See you on the other side.”

“Just remember. Nothing can hold down a person who can fly without wings. Watch out for Maya. Tomorrow, we will raise our glasses in victory.”

The city came alive with Enmadra and A’nath-ari preparing for battle. Every inch of the wall was covered. They took turns napping so that everyone would be rested when the time came. No one knew what to expect. Rumors circulated that the Vaticinars could not foresee the battle to come. Whether it would be one man or a thousand, no one knew. Whispers of armies approaching from every direction ran up and down the walls.

After the sunset, Ianus woke Aashen up. They were stationed in the east watchtower. Silence followed the coming of night. The attack could start at any moment.

“This reminds me of the night you first came to the Monastery at Shiloh,” said Aashen, as he joined Ianus at the window. “Word had come that the transport had been attacked. We didn’t know who was alive and who was dead. We waited for the hospital

ship to arrive, until late in the night. They brought you out first. We were all so excited to see you alive and doing well. When we found out about your mother, it was like all the joy had been taken out of the world. But you didn't understand. You were too young, I guess. You ran up to Ihy and jumped into his arms, and said, 'Mom says I'll be staying with you for a while. Do you have any games?' We all laughed. We really needed to laugh right then."

"What brought that up?"

"You have always been there to help when the world seemed dark. Here you are again, making everything better."

"I hope you're right. I don't feel ready for this. Have you ever faced battle before? I'm not talking about a duel, I'm talking about war, where more than just your honor is at stake."

"Yes, I commanded an army during the slave revolt on Sinon. We fought many battles. None of them were easy. It is easy to fight when you feel slighted, but when you're facing another army, you suddenly realize your mortality."

"What do you do about it?"

"Remember what you're fighting for, and pray. If the cause is just, you will gain more strength than you need. It's not easy, but if it has to be done, it has to be done."

"Do you think we will be facing another army?" Ianus asked.

"I don't know. Cythraul has something up his sleeve. That much is certain. We have to be ready for anything. He won't pull his punches."

"Do you smell that? There is incense in the air. Are the A'nath-ari performing a service?"

"Not that I know of. I think they would have told me." Aashen sniffed the air. "It's coming from the mountains."

"What do you think it means?"

"Someone is praying for us."

"Do you know why this city is so important? Why does Cythraul focus his aggression here?"

"Because it is a symbol of everything that the people believe in. If you can destroy the faith of the people, they will never recover," Aashen said.

"I understand. This is where it all started, this is where it must end."

"Something like that. Cythraul believes that submission and obedience are the highest virtues. People are more willing to conform when their spirit's broken."

"Do you know how to kill a Raewyn?" Ianus asked.

"No. They are practically immortal. As long as a part of them survives, they will return. I'm not even sure they can die. Why are you asking?"

"I thought if we killed Cythraul this would never happen again."

"It's a good idea, but I don't know how realistic it is. Maybe Valeryn would know I'm sure a Raewyn would know. I don't know how easily they would give up that information though."

"You are probably right."

"Let me give you a little advice. Don't let them frighten you. The first task of a good general is to put fear in the hearts of their enemies. If they put fear in you, they win."

“How am I suppose to stop that from happening. Fear is an instinct after all, isn’t it?”

“Fear that makes you run or fight is natural. I’m talking about the kind of fear that won’t let go of you. The terror that freezes your heart. That kind of fear saps your courage and steals your strength.”

Ianus leaned out the window and stared at Adrakaya’s three moons. They loomed over the horizon, casting an eerie glow over the land.

The sky was remarkably free of clouds. Tonight, they would face their fate under the stars. Nothing could be hidden. If Cythraul had an army, they would be easy to see. If Faroh came by himself, the A’nath-ari would catch him on the walls.

There was no way to surprise them, so that would not be the objective. Cythraul chose tonight for a reason, there had to be some advantage. Maybe he just wanted to catch them off guard.

“What is he hoping to accomplish by attacking tonight?” Ianus asked.

“He thinks we’re unprepared. The Enmadra made sure of that. The first target will be the temple. If they defile the temple, and destroy it’s meaning they will win.”

“What’s the advantage of destroying the temple?”

“Do you know what is in the temple?”

“The only thing I saw was a small gold box.”

“Exactly. In there is all of the wrath of the A’nath-ari. You know they waged a terrorist war for over twenty years. In that time, they developed Eidolons of such unimaginable destructive force with only one thing on their minds— vengeance.”

“Why weren’t they destroyed?” Ianus asked.

“If even one of the Nanites survived it would replicate the Eidolon. Each one possessed all of the knowledge necessary. They were the perfect weapons of terror. They were easy to conceal and would cause massive casualties. If that can be shattered or stolen, not only will Cythraul score a symbolic victory to demoralize the people but they will be a major step closer to achieving their goals.”

Ianus lowered his head, “If they were shattered, they would multiply, wouldn’t they? They would rebuild thousands in their place. That’s why the newer warrior eidolons do not have minds of their own.”

“Exactly, this way that war could not happen again. We have to stop them, no matter the cost.”

“Why would Cythraul want to release them?”

“They would be an indestructible army raging across the galaxy, diverting our resources from fighting him.”

“He’s insane. He would be at risk of attack too.”

“More martyrs for the cause,” Aashen lowered his eyes. “He doesn’t value life like we do. You see, by winning here they score a double victory. Only one thing is certain. After tomorrow nothing will ever be the same again, but you have to realize that the stakes are high.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: CITY ON A HILL

Daru was stationed with Maya in the north watchtower overlooking the gate. They scanned the horizon for any sign of movement.

“When this is over, Arun and I are going to take a long vacation. We’re just going to get away, somewhere quiet, where we can just relax,” said Maya, wistfully.

“Do you really, think this is the best time to talk about this?”

“As long as we have our eyes on tomorrow, there is hope there will be a tomorrow. Do you think Ianus will ask you to marry him?”

“*Maya?*” Daru blushed, “I really don’t know. I thought about asking him, but with everything that’s been going on. This just isn’t the best time.”

“When is a better time? When it’s quiet?” Maya laughed, “Listen honey, it’s never quiet. You have to grab anything good that comes your way. Life is only simple when you’re too young to see everything going on around you.”

“I know. We did tell each other how we feel, and we shared a dance that I will never forget.”

“So much rests on Ianus, the weight must be unbearable. Don’t neglect your work. In the battle to come every warrior must stand strong. Find what you’re fighting for, and hold onto it.”

“How will I know what that is?”

“It will be the same thing that urges you to get out of bed in the morning. It is easy to find something to die for, but it is truly special when you find something to live for. That will be the same thing that you would fight for.”

“I live for Ianus, no, I take that back. I live for love.”

“Then fight for love. That is a powerful reason to live. When I thought I lost my love, it was like the breath had been stolen from my lungs. Hold on to it, and don’t ever let it go. That is your greatest strength.”

Daru smiled, and looked away.

“All of your training,” said Maya, “Your whole life has conspired to bring you here. You are ready for it. You are more than a match for whatever comes your way.”

“Thank you. That means a lot coming from you. I have always seen you as something of a role model for my life. I can’t thank you enough for being here with me.”

Daru stared off into the distance. A great sea of trees waved in the breeze. The smell of incense wafted up to the tower.

“The Parcae are praying for our safety,” said Maya, “Eman told me they would.”

“Is that a good sign?” Daru asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve never heard of them doing this before. I like the idea of someone praying for us.”

Something caught Daru's eye. A faint twinkle between the branches of the trees. Flickering lights, like a swarm of golden fireflies, streamed out of the forest.

"What is that?" Daru asked.

"I see it too."

A faint sound, a distant drumming slipped through the trees. The creaking of leaves under many feet. Flashing lights moved to the rhythm of the drumming.

"It's an army," Maya gasped.

Daru stared intently at the serpentine lines of light slithering toward the hill.

"He's using Eidolons!" Daru shouted, "I recognize the glow."

Maya leapt onto the rope hanging down from the ceiling, the large bell in the tower tolled overhead.

Daru ran and lunged from the tower into the city square, "Eidolons!" She shouted, "Make ready. He's using Eidolons!"

Tuun swept down and landed in front of her. "You saw them?"

"With my own eyes."

"How many?"

"I don't know."

"May I see what you saw?"

Daru nodded, the images flashed before her eyes.

"Hundreds," Tuun said. He closed his eyes. "Thank you. Now everyone who is sensitive has seen what you saw. They are informing the others. Did you notice if any of them had wings?"

"No, but I would assume they would already be in the air."

Tuun closed his eyes, "They need us on the walls. Come with me."

He grabbed her under her arms; his Ceeri fanned its large wings. Tuun carried her high into the air and swooped down on to the battlement.

Daru steadied herself and looked out at the encircling band of light.

Ianus and Aashen leapt from their watchtower and ran out to the center of the wall over the gate. The crimson robed A'nath-ari lined the entire wall surrounding the city.

Faroh's luminous army marched into sight. A whole menagerie of creatures armed for battle.

"Call forth the Palladium!" Eman shouted from his command post.

Ianus turned around to face the city. He remembered what he had been told to do. He stretched out his right arm with the rest of the A'nath-ari, and pointed his periapt toward the temple.

He concentrated on the image of Uma Nari, and repeated, "Come forth, protect our city, come forth."

Struggling to keep focused, he watched the twelve winged celestials fly out of the temple and form a circle over it. They drew their swords, kissed the blades and pointed them to the center of the circle. A bolt of lightning shot from the tips of the swords, striking the temple. A luminous fog poured from its doors. It filled the streets and rose into the air. As it ascended, the mist turned into the creamy azure mantle and robes of the titanic Eidolon that was forming. Gargantuan silver wings stretched out behind the translucent woman. She knelt over the city, covering even the walls with her massive wings.

“Focus on the wings!” Eman shouted.

Ianus swiveled around with the others. Through the silver wings he could see the Eidolons of the celestials swoop down on the approaching army.

Swords tore through the luminous skins of the approaching Eidolons. The wounded fell and dissipated into mist.

One of the celestials charged a large mud colored monstrosity. The celestial sheered off one of its horns; it lashed out tearing a deep gash in the celestial’s side. Flapping its wings, it rose up away from the monster. Ianus watched the wound in its side weave itself closed.

The celestials fought well, but they were hopelessly out numbered. Faroh’s army flooded the wall and began to attack the palladium’s wings. They hacked, slashed, clawed, and bit the shield.

Ianus could feel the vibrations in his periapt. Each strike sent ripples of force back at the Makers who were struggling to buttress the wings.

He watched in horror as the clear distortions that out lined the Makers’ links to the Palladium began to shimmer and turn colors. Their defense was weakening. Brilliant violet lines of force flickered between them and the wings.

Pressure filled Ianus’ palm. More of Faroh’s Eidolons were reaching the wall. The periapt became warm. He felt like the attacks were directed at him. His arm began to shake.

“Be strong!” He shouted, “Hold on, don’t give in. I know it’s hard, I know you want to let go. Hold on as long as you can.”

He watched as a bull headed warrior punched the shield so hard it’s arm snapped. Many of Faroh’s eidolons were injuring themselves on the wings. A thick fog of dissipated Eidolons flowed into the valleys and surrounded the hill.

“Hold on!” Ianus shouted, “They are breaking at the wall.”

Three winged lions landed on the wings, and clawed at them. Sparks showered down on Ianus. He could see the wings beginning to twitch.

“She’s not going to last long,” said Aashen.

A’nath-ari shrieked as their tie to the wings broke. Deep fissures tore through the wings. The rancid smell of burnt flesh filled the air. Moaning from the wounded blended with the creaking of the battered wings.

“Give her all you can!” Ianus shouted.

A wave coursed back through the periapt, striking Ianus like a nail through his hand. He held his place. He must not fall. The wings shimmered and became opalescent; the Palladium groaned and slumped over.

Ianus tried to hold his place. The force that he sent out to the shield recoiled on him and threw him off the wall. Landing on his back, the air was knocked out of him. He gasped.

The Palladium’s wings shattered, raining sparks and glowing fog down on the city. The Palladium reeled backward and lost its form.

Ianus stood up. Fear lashed his heart, “What will we do now?”

A loud bang startled him. He turned toward the gate and watched it shake. Along the walls, many of the A’nath-ari had formed bows, and were firing at the enemy. The others were filing off the walls to fill the square.

Aashen swooped down on his Ceeri’s wings.

“We have to defend the gate, round up as many as you can and meet me there,” Ianus said.

He ran as fast as he could toward the solid metal door. Bulging punch-marks and cracks covered the gate from top to bottom. It would not hold long.

Valeryn and Kanu rallied a group of A’nath-ari and eidolon celestials.

“Soon, they will breach the gate,” said Valeryn, “Ianus and his troop will try to hold them there. We need to make a retaining wall to keep them from entering the city. Form up from wall to wall, and hold them back, and get ready to charge them, don’t let any through.”

Kanu grabbed the sleeve of an A’nath-ari running past him, “Take word to Tara and Pryor. Let them know we will hold this position. She has to protect the Temple and the Basilica. Be sure to tell her to hold back until the time is right.”

The woman nodded, and ran toward the back positions.

Metal clashed at the gate. The battle had begun. Light flashed, a telltale sign that Eidolons were shattering.

“Their line won’t hold,” said Kanu.

Valeryn shook his head, “The line doesn’t have to hold. It just has to buy us enough time to set our people up.”

The A’nath-ari at the gate broke ranks and ran. Ianus and Aashen lead the withdrawal.

Valeryn let out a loud battle cry and charged the oncoming Eidolons. The line of A’nath-ari behind him joined in.

Hundreds of bull-headed and lion-like Eidolons poured through the gate. They roared and snarled. The two armies met.

One of Faroh’s eidolons fired metal bolts at Kanu. They hit the field around him and crumbled to dust before they could hit him.

“What are you, defective?” Kanu said, twirling his sword. He ran at the thing and swung his sword at it.

The beast grabbed the blade with his hand, and head butted Kanu. The creature slashed at him with its four-inch claws.

Kanu jumped into the air. Landing on the beast’s back, he formed two daggers and stabbed it on either side of its neck. Light flashed from the open wounds. The Eidolon collapsed on the ground.

Wind rushed over his back; the sound of wings filled his ears. Rolling onto his back, Kanu threw his daggers into the throat of a winged lion descending on him. Light gushed from the hole.

Kanu leapt into the air and grabbed its head. Pulling it down, he flipped onto its back. Thrusting his hands through the eidolon’s dissipating flesh, he ripped his daggers out of its back. Out of the corner of his eyes he saw a bull-headed Eidolon about to stab one of the A’nath-ari in the back.

He melted the two daggers into a bladed whip and lashed the Eidolon around the neck. He pulled back hard decapitating it.

Quickly, he formed the whip into a spear, and thrust it through the chest of a winged lion. He tossed it over his left shoulder. Changing the spear into twin blades, he deflected another bull-headed eidolon’s claws with the blade in his right hand and

stabbed it in the abdomen with the sword in his left hand. Pulling up, he tore the beast open.

“This is almost too easy,” he said, then he looked up.

Hundreds of Faroh’s idolons swarmed the city square. They were falling quickly, but more followed. A thick haze covered the ground from all of the dead and dying. The celestials fought well. Fewer of them had fallen.

The tide was turning, without reinforcements, they would surely fall.

Kanu fought his way over to Valeryn, “This is not going our way!” He said.

“I know, we have to regroup,” said Valeryn.

“We need reinforcements. If this line breaks they will have a free run of the entire city.”

“We have to fall back. There’s something I could do, but I’ll need you to help me get out. It will drain all my strength, but it should give us enough time.”

Kanu nodded.

“Pull back!” Valeryn shouted.

He clashed the flats of his blades together. Light as bright as the rising sun flashed from the blades. Flames poured from the electric arcs between the swords. All of the Eidolons in the path of the blast shattered.

“Fall back,” Valeryn shouted, “Pull back, I can’t hold them back much longer.”

The light from the blades dimmed.

Valeryn closed his eyes. The rays of light expanded destroying more of Faroh’s Eidolons.

The A’nath-ari did as they were told.

Kanu was getting nervous, “You have to stop.”

Valeryn’s arms collapsed to his sides.

Kanu grabbed Valeryn’s arm, and pulled him toward the back position. A group of A’nath-ari fanned out around them to cover their retreat.

Ianus ran over, “Is he all right?”

“He just over did it. We need to get the reinforcements deployed. He cut down a lot of them, it’s time to finish this.”

Tara paced nervously in one of the back command posts. Tuun and Pryor stood guard. At any moment they would call on her to take action. She watched the battle, and knew that they would need her. Why couldn’t they have given her sometime to practice?

She knew what she was suppose to do. The To’asaa knew as well, but it would not be able to help. It could advise, that’s all. She would have to do this on her own. That scared her more than anything else. They had based their battle strategy on her and Ianus being able to do what they had to do. Her stomach churned. Her moment was coming, and sooner then she had hoped.

She watched Kanu running toward her. She knew what he would say. The A’nath-ari lines were falling back. Now was her time.

“This will be more than a battle for you,” the To’asaa said to her, “You will not see the battle before you. You must fight the battle within. It will mirror the outside. You must be the mind of so many. You will not see things as you should. You will see them as you see life, shrouded by your own perceptions.”

“Reinforcements!” Kanu shouted, “We need them now!”

“We will cover you,” said Pryor, “No harm will come to you as long as we have breath.”

Tara closed her eyes, and concentrated on the Eidolons buried under the city square. She could feel her mind stretching out to each of them.

“Awake,” she whispered, and saw the stone begin to glow. As the first one awakened, she could see through its eyes. “Attack the line,” she thought, “Take out one in the middle.”

The next one awoke. Suddenly she felt herself leave her body. With each newly awakened Eidolon, she issued orders and went on to the next one. As each one stirred she could see more of the battlefield.

“Soon your mind will not be able to sort through all that you see and hear,” said the To’asaa. “Your mind will begin to project over the battle field. Don’t forget to fight.”

She could see so much, all one hundred and twenty were awake now, she could see and hear everything that they did. Her mind tried to composite the images and sounds into a virtual tapestry.

“Their right flank is weak,” she thought, “Push through.”

She was the mind of one hundred and twenty warriors. Soon it became as easy as breathing, or moving her arm. She didn’t have to think about it, she just willed it to happen and it happened.

They could fight on their own, but they lacked organization. She moved them around like the fingers of her own hand, taking advantage of any weakness she could perceive.

It was surreal. The battle was turning again. Faroh’s army was falling back, regrouping, and mending its lines.

A nagging concern weighed on her mind. So many were depending on her, friends and strangers alike. She had never succeeded at anything she ever tried to do before. She was a follower, not a leader. How could this turn out any different.

‘I was a fool to agree to this,’ she thought, ‘I should have told them to find someone else.’

She had to pull her forces into the air to avoid a devastating charge. In doing so, she lost her ground advantage. Her troops would have to fight from the air until they could reclaim a firm position.

This was what she feared most, she was losing control of the battlefield. Calling twenty celestials back to the basilica, where the fighting had not reached. On foot, they charged the enemy front. Hopefully, they could hold long enough for their companions to land behind them and join in a new offensive.

She had to succeed. Others were depending on her. She couldn’t let them down. She couldn’t let herself down. She couldn’t loose this time. Failure would harm more than just her. Countless numbers would die if she could not hold her ground.

She remembered something Arun had told her, “Life survives on life. If we are not truly alive, we are stealing from the world that nurtures us.”

Never before had she considered whether she was truly alive. She had been living in the past, robbing from the moment. She lived in her failures. She was not even looking for success.

All her life she had been a slave: First to the predicant that lied to her for his own advantage, then to Panthera. She thought that blind obedience to authority would free her. She left Panthera to be a slave of her own past mistakes. No more! Never again would she be a slave.

This was her life. No one else could live for her. No one else could answer for her.

Ianus watched with amazement as the celestial Eidolon's Tara summoned cut their way through Faroh's army. The battle was finally in their favor. He lifted his axe and waited for an opportunity to rejoin the line.

Tara was a master. She would open a hole in the line, luring the enemy to advance. Then she would cut off the escape and destroy the stragglers. It was like a dance.

She had contained the majority of Faroh's army.

The once vast army had been decimated. They still outnumber the forces of Usekht Maati, but they had stopped filing through the gate.

The line bulged, they were making a push toward the temple.

Ianus ran over to a hole in the line. He swung his battle-axe, and cleaved an eidolon in half. He spun around and slashed the arm off another.

He could see Eman towering over the crowd, a sword in each hand, hacking a path toward him.

"Ianus," Eman said as he pierced an eidolon and tossed it aside, "Faroh is heading for the Sanctum. He broke through the line! You must stop him!"

Eman grabbed Ianus' hand and pulled him into the air.

Hopping from head to head over the battle, Ianus and Eman soared over the chaos.

Hands reached up for them, but they did not stop. In the distance, beyond the crowd, he could see two figures running through the streets. It was Faroh and Cythraul.

They landed just behind the A'nath-ari lines. Ianus kicked off and bounded from wall to wall. It was faster than running.

He past the bodies of several A'nath-ari and Enmadra. They had been killed efficiently: The clean strokes of a professional killer.

"Be careful," said Eman. "Cythraul can not intervene. The moment he does, his people and mine have the right to move against him— but don't for a minute think that he can remain neutral. He has found a way to circumvent the rules or he wouldn't have come. Just remember, I cannot intervene unless he lays a hand on you."

"Who makes up these rules?"

"They are treaties that ended a most terrible war. They have come to mean less and less over the centuries, but the pretence of neutrality is better than the horrors of open war. In the last Raewyn/Enmadra war, dozens of worlds were rendered inhabitable."

"So you hold to the letter of the truce and not the spirit."

"If we didn't, none of you would be here. If any Enmadra were connected to the death of a Raewyn, it would open the old wounds. Now, go!"

Ianus leapt from wall to wall.

Two winged lions swooped down in front of them. Ianus raised his axe and swung at the lion. He buried the blade deep in its back. The other lion lashed out.

Pain seared his side, as the lion's claws tore through him. Ianus fell to his knees. He heard a Bennu's screeching cry.

Nahimanna swept out of the air and sank her claws into the remaining lion's head. She wrapped her wings around it. It bucked and struggled. The Bennu shoved its sharp beak through the lion's back and breathed in its energy. The beast roared as its skin began to shrivel and its eyes bulged in their sockets. Pulling her head from the frail remains, Nahimanna let out a cry and leapt into the air.

She circled around Ianus and landed on his wounded side. "I will hold you up." She said and melted into Ianus' side.

A flame burned over the claw marks; the pain went away. Ianus stood up. He could see the temple at the end of the road.

Off he ran. He had to catch them. He had to stop them. He could feel his heart racing. The voice of Adir Radd was so close.

Reaching the steps of the temple. Two of the bull-headed Eidolons were watching for him.

The door to the temple had not yet closed. They had just walked in. He still had time.

"Run Ianus!" Sakkara yelled as she ran up beside him.

"We will clear a path for you," said Khensu on his other side.

"Don't look back!" Sakkara said, "Whatever Ianus does he must not look back."

"We will see you when you come out," said Khen.

Sakkara and Khensu attacked the two eidolons.

Ianus ran past them up the stairs. He could hear their weapons clashing, he could hear their breath. He had to go forward. No looking back. There was no time to wonder. Faroh and Cythraul had to be stopped. He heard two bodies hit the ground. No time to look back.

Faroh and Cythraul entered the temple. Faroh strode toward the sanctum. The battle could not have gone better. He had reached his goal, soon he would have victory. "This is it," Faroh said in triumph, "Let's capture the flag, and finish this."

"First things first," said Cythraul, "That Akeru is right behind us. I want his head on a pike over the gate."

"Why don't we just destroy the Sanctum now?"

"Because it is guarded by a simulacrum and several Eidolons. It will be ours, remember the words of the Parcae. You are the key to Usekht Maati. We will have our reward."

"What are we doing here if we can't take what we desire?"

"We have drawn the young Akeru away from his friends where he is vulnerable. He will not be a problem for you."

"You want me to kill him?"

"It won't be that easy. We need him. Don't get me wrong, we will crush this Akeru. His periapt is the key to the Sanctum. Without it we will be lost in the Simulacrum. I say we fight fire with fire. I will construct a simulacrum of our own. Within it, we will have the advantage. We will crush him there."

"Why not let me kill him with my bare hands?"

“I told you. We need him to open the sanctum. If he died in the simulacrum, he will become a mere shell of his former self. He will be weak willed and docile. We can have him do whatever we ask him to do.”

Faroh laughed, “He will become another prize. We should let him live, at least for a little while. He would make an amusing pet.”

“If it would make you happy, you may have him,” said Cythraul. “You will have to stall him until I am ready. Distract him, but don’t provoke him. I need to take you both into the simulacrum at the same time. A moving target will make that hard.”

“Don’t worry, Master Cythraul,” Faroh bowed and grinned, “I can keep him occupied. He is an emotional man. He lacks the cool heart that makes a man strong. I have dealt with many of his kind before. I know what to do.”

“He’s coming,” said Cythraul staring at the door, “Follow me, he has to catch us on the way to the Sanctum or he will become suspicious. Let him think he has the advantage until the time is right.”

Cythraul and Faroh turned and began to walk toward the altar.

The door slammed open.

“Stop!” Ianus shouted, “Yield, and I will show you mercy.”

“Yield?” Faroh said as he turned around to face Ianus, “Why should I yield to someone like you? There is nothing you can do to me.”

Ianus laughed, “This from the man who fled at the very sight of me the last time we met. You’re all talk. Face me now. I challenge you to a duel.”

“*You challenge me* to a duel, how melodramatic. How many Akeru have to die before your family chooses a simpler life? You’re not good at all this.”

“My birth father dethroned your former master!”

“And where is he? Dead. Where is your mother? Dead. O, and before I forget. Thank you for the tour of Shiloh. I never could have killed Ihy Khem without your help. You made it so easy for me to get in and out. Tell me, did he die in agony or did he go out quietly? He struck me as a whiner. I bet he begged for pain killers and when they failed, he begged for a quick and merciful death.”

Light flashed. Faroh was momentarily disoriented. He looked around. They were still in the temple, but Cythraul was missing.

“You fool!” Faroh said, “Welcome to my world. You are finished.”

He formed a sword with his periapt, and was surprised to see Ianus do the same. They were both makers, even the simulacrum could not take that away.

Faroh ran at Ianus. Sparks flew as their blades met. Ianus slid backwards from the force of the strike.

Cythraul had made Faroh stronger here.

Ianus punched at Faroh with his left hand, Faroh dodged the fist and hit Ianus on the back of the head with his elbow.

Swinging his sword at Faroh’s waist, Ianus moved forward.

Faroh leapt into the air and kicked off Ianus’ shoulder. He landed behind his adversary and punched him in the kidneys.

Ianus fell to his knees and struggled to breathe.

“You disappoint me,” Faroh sneered, “This was all too easy. I only hope you make a good pet.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: BETWEEN EARTH AND SKY

Kanu and Valeryn met up with Tuun, Pryor, and Tara in the command area of the square. Tara's mastery of the Eidolons had freed the living combatants from the front lines.

Kanu stared at Tara. She looked like a statue, motionless, but her muscles were relaxed. Her eyes moved rapidly behind her eyelids. Her breathing was slow and steady. She had given herself over to the battle. Nothing could move her.

Glancing over the battlefield, the luminous fog of banished Eidolons floated over the broken bodies of dead and dying Enmadra and A'nath-ari. Blood covered the stones of the square. So much death and suffering. Crimson robed A'nath-ari rushed through the mist marking the dead with golden stones, and carrying the wounded away to be cared for by healers and physicians.

Sorrow, loss, and pain; the realization of the battle and her monstrous cost swept over Kanu's mind. The numbing glory of the fight had faded to the isolating reality of pain, blood, and death.

"Are you all right?" Valeryn asked, from somewhere behind him.

"Is this worth it? The loss of so many lives to protect just one city," Kanu could not take his eyes off the violence of the battlefield.

"If we did not stand here, where would we stand?" Valeryn asked, "Is it better to fight off the aggressors or to languish under their Tyranny? This battle would come sooner or later. Today, we fight off the enemy. Tomorrow, we would have to overthrow our masters, but that war would not begin until so many were murdered and brutalized that the populous had no choice but to rise up. Which is better?"

"Neither is good. Many would die either way."

"Yes, but if we end this now, fewer will suffer. He brought the war to us. Silence in the face of totalitarianism is the tyrant's greatest weapon. The first obligation of every warrior is to preserve the peace. We know the horror of war— we are the best advocates for peace. We are the ones who fight and die for the people, not the politicians. Take in the ghastly sight before you— this is the cost of war. It will never leave you, haunting all your nightmares until the day you die."

Kanu closed his eyes, but the horrors did not go away. The sight etched itself into his eyes. "You're right. I will never forget these brave souls. As long as we continue to work for peace and justice, they did not die in vain. I just didn't realize how many had fallen."

The preservation of life was something Kanu understood. This willing destruction of life was something else entirely.

He cast his attention back to the line. Only the oldest and most powerful Eidolons were left standing. One of them, a grotesque shaggy haired beast, with a long muzzle and prominent fangs caught his eye. It used its claws and curled horns to break through the line.

It ran straight for Tara.

Tuun rose into the air on his Ceeri's wings and swooped down on the beast. His blade bounced off its fur and slid off its body.

The beast grabbed Tuun's robes and slammed him to the ground. Kicking him in the face, the beast turned back toward Tara.

Pryor leapt in front of it, he threw two daggers at it, but they became tangled in its shaggy coat.

Intercepting one of the beasts mammoth hands, Pryor pulled it's arm down and around to it's back. He twisted the beast's arm, but it did not snap.

It rolled forward and kicked Pryor in the shins. Falling on to its stomach, it pulled Pryor down with it. The beast thrust its elbow into his abdomen. As it stood up, Pryor fell unconscious to the ground.

Kanu formed a quarterstaff with his periapt, and stood confidently.

The beast lunged at Kanu; he rapped it hard on the crown of its head with the staff. It stumbled over its feet. Regaining its balance, it swung its razor-sharp claws at Kanu, who deflected them with ease.

Kanu slammed the end of the staff on the paving stones and swung his feet into the air, striking the beast hard across the face.

The Eidolon howled. The sound sent chills down Kanu's spine: the instinctual fear of prey when it hears its predator call.

Kanu swung the staff, and hit the beast hard on each arm. Sparks flashed from the wounds.

"So, you're not invincible," Kanu smiled.

He beat the beast on either side of its face. Quickly, with all his strength, he disoriented it. Transforming the end of the staff into a spear, he thrust it through the beast's chest.

Luminous fog gushed from the wound as the beast fell backward.

Sure that it had dissolved, Kanu turned around, and knelt before Tara.

"I swore my life and my honor to protect you," said Kanu, out of breath, "I will never leave your side. Finish this. The time has come for you to rest."

Daru surveyed the battlefield. Very few of Faroh's Eidolons remained. She was tired, and her muscles ached. She could not find Ianus. Terror filled her.

She began walking out among the A'nath-ari, "Have you seen Ianus?" She asked each one. None of them had seen him.

'I should have stayed by his side,' she thought, 'I never should have let him out of my sight.'

Catching sight of Valeryn, she hurried over to him, "Have you seen Ianus?" She asked him as soon as she was sure he could hear her.

"The last time I saw him, Eman was taking him off toward the Temple."

"In the middle of the battle? Why would he..." her voice trailed off and her face fell flat. "Faroh broke the line, didn't he?"

Without another word, she turned and ran toward the Temple. Every step made her fear grow. Blood lined the streets. Was any of it his? Faster, she had to find him. She had to help. ‘I will not loose him like I did Ihy,’ she thought, remembering the last time she faced Faroh. Reaching the Temple, she found Khensu and Sakkara sitting on the steps.

Tears streamed down their faces.

“What happened?” Daru exclaimed.

“Eman told us to sit out here and wait for him,” Khensu wiped the tears from his eyes.

Daru charged up the steps, and flung the doors open.

“Ianus!” She shouted.

Ianus and Faroh were suspended from the ceiling, hanging limp as if they had been strung up by hooks through their chest. Cythraul floated between them, his eyes closed and arms stretched out to the bodies on either side of him.

Daru ran toward Ianus.

“Don’t!” Eman snapped, standing up from the back pew.

Stopping, Daru looked over at him, “Why?”

“If you disrupt the simulacrum, he will die.”

“Cythraul did this, didn’t he? Why don’t we just kill him?” A knife formed in her hand.

“That would have the same effect. To kill him would be to kill all three. Besides, he would be more dangerous in death than he ever was in life. Just sit down and pray or watch. If you can’t do that, then get out!”

“We can’t just sit here. We have to do something to help him.”

“What would you do?” Eman asked, “This is his fight. He has to do this for himself. The battle has always been in his mind. Now, that is where this will be won or lost.”

“What do you mean?” Daru twirled the knife in her hand.

“Ianus and Faroh are more alike than either one would ever admit,” Eman chuckled, “This is their last chance. A battle of wits. All we can do is wait and see who wants it more. Who has more faith?”

Daru sat down next to Eman, “What do we do if Faroh wins?”

“We stop him.”

“You told me that Cythraul could not take direct action or the Raewyn could become involved.”

“I told you there were rules. The Raewyn are a tired people. They don’t want another war. They read the treaties by the letter, and technically Cythraul is a passive conduit for this conflict. That’s the real problem, today. The emotion has left the fight. One side fights for revenge and greed. The other side has become complacent. Now the galaxy is in this sad state. Wars and rumors of wars, vengeance and vendettas, all of the principles that should guide them have been lost. Everyone has their own agenda, and a small minority is left to fight for what’s right. That is the way it has always been. That is how it will always be.”

“That’s a pessimistic note,” said Daru, dissolving the knife back into her periapt.

“Not really,” said Eman, “The poor and the disenfranchised are always willing to fight for their rights, but once they are empowered, they do to others exactly what was done to them. We have seen it so many times.”

“There has to be something we can do about it.”

“You are special, Daru. You actually care. Your kind is a rare and precious thing. If you want, you can talk to him, encourage him. You two have a special connection to each other. He might be able to hear you. Remember, be calm and helpful. If he senses your anxiety, it could work against him.”

“Are you sure it’s wise? What if I distract him?”

“You are the one who kept asking me if there was anything you could do. He needs you. You are one with him, your hearts have touched. Share your strength with him and he will be able to do anything. Don’t hold anything back. Tell him how you feel.”

Daru stood up and walked over to Ianus. She could hardly bear to look at him like this. He looked so fragile.

“Ianus,” she said cheerily, “You have to make it. I can’t lose you.”

Ianus ran across the pew toward the wall. Pivoting, he raised his sword. Faroh stood on the other side of the nave smiling.

“You are a good warrior,” said Faroh, “It’s a shame I have to kill you. I don’t have to kill you, you know. You could always join us. I could make you a general in my army. In time, you could have a planet of your own.”

“For what? What would I do with a planet? As long as I have music and the dance, what more do I need?”

“You are incredibly short sighted for an augur,” Faroh cackled, “Has your prescience failed you? You know in your heart that Cythraul and I are doing the right thing. How often do you look out on the world and wished more people knew the world as you do. They will not find the truth for themselves. Most of them are too lazy to even try. The truth must be taken to them.”

“By force? You can threaten them with violence or with damnation, but that won’t help them know the truth. They will recite after you out of fear not love. They will not love the truth—they will fear the consequences of disbelief. What good is that to anyone?”

“Fear is the beginning of wisdom. They will learn. Will you join us?”

“Never!” Ianus ran at Faroh.

Faroh rushed Ianus. They met in the center aisle of the temple. Their blades clashed, Faroh slipped backward from the force.

Ianus dropped and swept Faroh off his feet with a kick.

Rolling, Faroh bounced off his hands, and kicked Ianus in the face, and then he flipped into the air. Grabbing the chandelier, he swung away.

Ianus formed two daggers and threw them at Faroh one after another and ran at him.

Faroh cut them out of the air, and dodged as Ianus punched at him.

Bringing his arm back, Ianus knocked Faroh to the ground.

Anger distorted Ianus’ face, “You killed my father!” He began to kick Faroh, harder and harder.

Faroh wailed and curled up into a ball, as Ianus mercilessly attacked him. Fists and feet pummeled him.

“You deserve nothing but death!” Ianus sneered, raising his sword over his head.

Faroh looked up at Ianus.

Ianus dropped his sword, and gasped, “No...” He could not see Faroh, only the broken and bloody body of his father, Ihy. Ianus staggered backwards. “This is not real!” Ianus shouted, “What have you done?”

“What is not real?” Faroh struggled to speak, “You are me. We are cut from the same cloth. We ride the leopard blissfully, knowing it could destroy us,” his voice strengthened, “You are me. Join us!”

“No,” Ianus shook his head, hoping the image would leave his eyes, “This is not real. You’re lying. I could never do the things you have.”

“You seem so sure of that,” Faroh struggled to his feet, “If you kill me, you are doing exactly what I would do to you. You have to see that, join us. Don’t fight what you are. Together, we would be a match even for Cythraul. Together, there is nothing we can’t do.”

“Ianus,” Daru’s voice broke through the simulacrum. “You have to come back to me. I love you! Do justice, and return to me.”

“How sweet,” Faroh clapped his hands, “You have a girlfriend. She is right, you know. You should do the right thing. It is better to serve in heaven than reign in hell.”

Ianus looked up at the image of Ihy that cloaked Faroh. “You’re right. You’re both right. If I killed you out of anger, hatred, or revenge, I would be you. I cannot do that. You have broken the laws of nature in your desire to enslave your fellows. You have made me what I am. I am the hand of justice. If I don’t stop you, you will spread your plague-ridden filth throughout the galaxy. This is war!”

Running at Faroh, Ianus watched his emotions. The image of Ihy faded. Ianus smiled.

Faroh swung his blade at Ianus, who formed a blade and parried. Ianus moved quickly. Faroh could barely duck, dodge, and parry fast enough.

“Don’t you see?” Ianus said, continuing the onslaught, pushing Faroh back toward the altar, “Justice gives you power. Where is your claim to truth now that you need it? Death comes to all of us sooner or later, but it stalks after tyrants, as close on their heels as their own shadow.”

Kicking Faroh in the gut, Ianus changed his sword into an axe, and raised it over his head. Faroh fell to his knees. Ianus brought the axe down toward Faroh’s neck.

Suddenly, Ianus found himself on the North Terrace of Usekht Maati.

Faroh stood a good distance away, “This is my world, Ianus, my boy,” laughing madly, “I make the rules here.” Faroh twirled around. “Here is my power!”

“This is an illusion,” said Ianus, “What does that say about your powers?”

“You *are* blind, aren’t you? This is where I will place my throne after I have taken the city.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if your army hadn’t already been crushed by now.”

“What do I need an army for? This is at worse a hit and run. Cythraul wants to conquer this city first. Personally, I like the irony of beginning my campaign where the Ara’lu began his, but I do not care about this place. I do care about removing you though. You have been a thorn in my flesh for too long.”

“Why don’t you just have me fall off a cliff?”

“One thing at a time,” Faroh smiled, “I just don’t understand why you are being so obstinate. Are you so self-righteous that you cannot see the opportunity that I’m offering you? The galaxy belongs to those who know truth. You preserve chaos. We bring order!”

“All you bring is terror and death!”

“We bring prosperity. No civilization that has rejected our ways has ever survived.”

“Because your kind destroy them from the inside!”

“You don’t know your history. The Jade Moon may be popular today, but traditionally, we have held power in every major government!”

“Lies and propaganda,” Ianus calmed himself, “Cythraul has been a corrosive force against every democracy there has ever been. He’s never done one good thing for anyone.”

“He brought me here to finish you off.”

“How? Are you going to talk me to death?”

“I’m trying to give you a chance to reconsider your wicked ways. Ask forgiveness for your sins,” Faroh looked genuinely concerned, “You would make a valuable asset to me, but if you will not join forces with me, I want to give you every chance to recant your heresy.”

“Heresy?” Ianus scoffed, “You condemn people for disagreeing with you, even when they can prove you’re wrong. You devalue life with every word you speak, and you call me a heretic.”

“You don’t understand!” Faroh said, angrily, “I have read the Holy Writ. I listen to the Song. I know the names and the law. Whosoever knows the names has the power! I know the truth, there can be no other!”

“You have closed your mind. How can you seek out wisdom when you believe you have it. Blind arrogance! You lecture me on right and wrong? How much blood is on your hands? You are not clean in anyone’s eyes. Even your beloved Cythraul condemns you with his every word. ‘All souls are impure and incapable of doing good.’ Isn’t that what you preach? How can you dare to believe you can share your saintliness with me. You are nothing but a preacher of death.”

“And what do you have to offer? If it feels good, do it? What kind of world would that make?”

“You don’t understand us at all, do you? You offer totalitarianism, we offer a search for truth. We know that the truth *evolves*. We learn from our mistakes, your kind never does. There is such a thing as truth, but it is not written in stone. We once thought the world was flat, and that we were the only intelligent life in the universe. All of that was considered truth before we learned better. We used to condone slavery. We used to burn our heretics too. We learned. Why can’t you?”

Faroh leapt at Ianus. Forming a whip, he lashed Ianus’ arm. The whip wrapped around his right wrist, and pulled Ianus off balance. He formed a single edged sword, but Ianus punched him in the jaw.

Twirling through the air, Ianus kicked Faroh with each foot. Faroh cartwheeled away, and kicked off the retaining wall and caught Ianus with both fists. He hurtled through the air with Ianus until Ianus crashed onto his back.

He stood over Ianus and thrust his sword down at Ianus' throat.

Quickly, Ianus slid out from between Faroh's legs. Getting to his feet, he turned around and struck Faroh hard on the arm. Blood poured down Faroh's arm.

"You forget, Ianus Akeru this is my world!" Faroh raised his arm high over his head, and dropped it sharply down.

Ianus looked up and saw a wall of water falling from the sky. It hit Ianus with so much force it threw him to the ground. Surrounded by water, Ianus held his breath.

"He who builds the simulacrum makes the rules," Faroh took a deep breath.

Ianus lay on the ground. He forced himself not to breathe. Pressure built in his lungs. He wanted to exhale. He focused all of his strength to keep his mouth shut.

"I bet you wish you were still at Shiloh, playing with your toys!" Faroh laughed, "What's the matter? Can't breathe," Faroh inhaled deeply, and began to pace around Ianus.

"Did you think you had a chance?" Faroh asked. "I'm sorry you have such a sad fate. To die in your prime," he shook his head, "You could have been great. You could have had temples named in your honor. I warned you. You knew the game was fixed, but you came to the table anyway. What were you thinking? You're probably really mad at the Enmadra right now. They lied to you. They made you into a hero, but they forgot to tell you that all heroes die. But your death will not have been in vain. You can do what we can not."

Faroh knelt down in front of Ianus, "It's not too late for you. I could end this. All you have to do is bow to me. Join us and I will spare you."

Ianus sat up and scowled at Faroh.

"It's a good offer," said Faroh, "You won't get any better. It's hopeless. If you don't give up your foolish pride, you *will* die. All that you believed in, all that you fought for will be lost. What a sad day, you could have been so much more than you are."

Ianus looked around. The liquid sky stretched to the horizon and beyond. None of this was real. He knew that, but its consequences would be quite real. That is why the Vaticanars tested life and death in the simulacrum. Every thought had weight here.

The pressure in his lungs was unbearable. He felt like a fire had been lit in his throat. There was no way to escape the illusion without being set free. Somehow, he had to break out. His vision blurred. He would have to breathe soon, or he would pass out, and drown.

He covered his mouth and tried desperately not to breathe.

"What's that boy?" Faroh asked, "Do you want me to put you out of your misery? I have had my fun with you."

Faroh picked up Ianus' head and placed his blade to Ianus' throat.

"This is an illusion!" The words bubbled out of Ianus' mouth.

Faroh laughed. "No my boy. You are quite mistaken. This is very real," Faroh smiled, "For you."

Ianus closed his eyes. None of this was real. He had to have strength. A way to win. His periapt worked here. They should have been able to turn it off. Why did it work?

"This is an illusion!" Ianus screamed and sprang away from Faroh.

Ianus floated in the liquid sky. Nothing here was solid. Cythraul could change the rules on a whim. There was nothing but thought. His periapt worked because he was a maker.

The makers gave form and purpose to the world. Their songs, their words were the backbone of society. That essential quality could not be denied. It was true beyond what anyone thought or said. The dance would save him.

He twirled around, the rhythm of the dance guiding his steps. He opened his eyes. Faroh was lunging at him. He was moving too slow.

Ianus dove toward the edge of the terrace.

“This is not real!” He screeched as he landed.

Bending down, he curled his fingers under the illusory horizon. His skin began to glow, and then burst into flames. “Your lies have no power over me!” He lifted the curtain of the sky and threw the veil of water up into the air.

“This is *not* your world!” Ianus said as he turned to see Faroh flying through the air. “You have *no* power over me.”

Faroh crashed into the retaining wall and collapsed to the ground.

“What have you done?” Faroh exclaimed.

“I have heard your kind all my life telling me I wasn’t good enough. No more! You can deny the Life Giver all you want, but I know who I serve. You and your kind will never control me again. Illusions! That is all you have. You listen to the dreams of the ancients and pretend they’re history. You have lost your way.”

“Cythraul!” Faroh shouted, “Help me!”

“What can he do? He is powerless before me. His lies and hollow promises cannot help you now. Yield, and I will show you mercy.”

“Cythraul! Help me, *please* help me.” Silence, “Then I will have to kill you myself!”

Faroh got to his feet, and lifted his sword.

Ianus formed a sword, and walked slowly toward Faroh. Ianus pointing the sword at Faroh, “Behold your god!”

The sky filled with airships and spaceships warring with each other. The ground became flat and dead bodies covered the terrain. Tanks and armies clashed in the distance.

“See what you have become.”

Faroh’s hands were covered in blood; around his feet were the bodies of all the men, women, and children whose deaths were connected to him.

Faroh slashed at Ianus, his blade went clean through without leaving a mark.

“What’s the matter Faroh? Is your faith wavering! Look at them. All these have died because of you and your kind. Do you not hear the song of the machine? Their screams are mixed within it. You rejoiced in their death. Another sacrifice for the truth.”

Faroh swung his sword wildly, it passed through Ianus like he wasn’t really there.

“You can’t do this. I have read the tales. You can not do this,” said Faroh.

Ianus thrust his sword through Faroh’s heart. “May your soul find rest, someday.”

Cythraul’s screams filled the simulacrum.

Ianus vision blurred. He gasped for air and found himself floating above the ground in the temple. Screams filled the hallowed place. Faroh and Cythraul wailed. Ianus fell to the ground and watched Faroh collapse in a heap on the floor.

Cythraul twitched, and faded away.

Ianus looked down at Daru. She was smiling with a tear in her eye. She threw her arms around his neck. He pulled her closer. They kissed. Ianus laid his head on Daru's shoulder.

"Thank you," he whispered, "I wouldn't have made it without you. I love you," he kissed her again and held her tight.

"I love you too," she nuzzled into Ianus neck.

Ianus looked over at Eman, "Where is Cythraul?"

"He's gone." Eman said, seriously.

"Is he dead?"

"No, not dead."

Letting go of Daru, Ianus slumped forward, "Is it over?"

"For now," Eman's eyes filled with tears.

The sound of revelry leaked into the temple.

"It sounds like the battle is over," said Daru, holding Ianus tight with her right arm.

"He left Faroh behind," said Ianus, looking at the shivering man on the floor.

"Cythraul always rewarded loyalty, but rarely showed it himself," said Eman.

"Poor Faroh, he is worse than dead. You destroyed the part of him that knew what he was. It is his ideology turned against him. Now, he can only obey."

Eman walked over to Faroh and slipped the black periapt of Dov Lavan off of his hand.

The doors to the temple opened. Arun, Tara, and Pryor walked in.

Arun ran over to Ianus and embraced him, "You did good, son."

Eman handed Lavan's Periapt to Pryor, "You kept the To'asaa safe all these years. Now do the same with this."

"Why not destroy it?" Pryor asked.

"The knowledge that it contains is too valuable. Once we have extracted it, it will be safe to destroy."

"I'm proud of you," said Arun. "You did what you had to do. Thank you for not abandoning me. You did good."

Ianus looked back at Faroh. The once proud warrior glanced around the temple like a confused child. Anger flooded over Ianus, as he remembered all the evil Faroh had brought to him. Shaking his head, he watched the pitiful man fidget with his hands.

"What is to happen to him?" Ianus asked.

Eman sighed, "That is hard to say. The part of him that committed his crimes is dead. The personality gone, he remembers nothing of his former life. The Hand of Providence has punished him for his crimes."

Slowly, Ianus walked toward Faroh. He felt a deep compassion for the man. "Faroh," he said gently.

Faroh scurried away like a frightened animal. Curling his knees into his chest, he pressed his back against the wall.

"Do not be afraid," said Ianus softly, "I won't hurt you."

“Who is Faroh?” The shell asked.

“You are,” an empty chill filled Ianus, “I would like to help you.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Ianus Akeru,” reaching out his hand to Faroh, “I would like to help you.”

“Why?”

Ianus looked back at his friends. “Because you are lost and afraid, and no one deserves to live like that. We all need a place to call home.”

“Home?” Faroh asked, blankly, “Are you my friend?”

Taking a deep breath, Ianus helped Faroh to his feet, “I hope to be.”

“You can’t do this!” Tuun protested.

“Why not?” Ianus asked, “Because of his past? Because of what had been done?”

“What have I done?” Faroh asked, “Am I in trouble?”

“No, Faroh,” Ianus put his arm around him, “It is a new day, and there is much to rebuild.”

GLOSSARY

Pronunciation Key

ä	father	ǎ	hit
ǎ	cat	ǒ	hot
ā	say	ō	go
ə	away	oi	boy, join
ě	bed	ou	out
ē	see	ū	blue
ī	eye	ǔ	cup
		ũ	put

A'nath-ari [ä'näth'är'ē'] Noble order of Blood, founded by Adair Radd and reformed by Kalil Mehtar after the death of Radd.

Aashen Fallon Ken-Azi [ǎsh'ĕn fə'län kĕn ä'zē] Sen, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon, brother of Tuun Fallon.

Achates [ə'kā'tēz] a small town on Adrakaya, home of the retreat monastery of Rohan in Achates on Adrakaya.

Adir Radd [ə'dēr' räd] One of the three first Shedü Makers, founder of the A'nath-ari-leen, later the A'nath-ari. Murdered by Dov Lavan. Student of Jeriah Kamil.

Adrakaya [ä'drək'ä] the holy world when the all of the major houses of the Chian'niu originated. The homeworld of the Enmadra.

Al-Benu [äl'bĕ'nū] The homeworld of the Shedü/Lamassu

Allostheoi [ä'lös'thē'oi] the “other gods,” powerful entities of possibly of benign persuasion.

Ammaau [ə'mə'ou'] The Holy City on Al-Benu when the Enmadra first came.

Ara'lu [ä'rä'lū] title of Dov Lavan

Ari-leen [ä'rĕ'lĕn'] “Blood Moon,” one of the moons of Adrakaya.

Arun Namid [ə'rün'nä'mĕd] one of the three Kishanu on the Valkyrie

Ashiyr [ǎ'shĕr'] The freighter owned by Maslin Talbot.

Atarah Lien [ə'tä'rə lĕ'ĕn] Raewyn, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon. One of the Holy Ennead. Chosen to bear the To'asaa 648 years ago.

Augur [ä'gür] a person who naturally infers future events through the observation of patterns.

Auset [ä'sĕt] Lady of Ammaau, mother of Ihy Khem.

Azi Mandas Ki-A'shen [ä'zĕ män'däs kĕ ə'shĕn'] Ceeri joined with Aashen Fallon.

Bahn Se'leen [bän'sĕ'lĕn] Shedü words for Jade Moon. Short for Cynath Bahn Se'leen.

Balder [bäl'där] a Jade Moon base on Garm.

Barami [bərä'mĕ'] Lamassu, maker Predicant in the Jade Moon, Master of Tara Lael.

Benben–Stone [bĕn'bĕn stōn] Small carved obelisk containing a Bennu.

Bennu [bĕn'nū'] or Bennu–Bird, an eidolon that takes the form of a Pheonix or Firebird.

Betzalel [bĕt'zä'lĕl] Tey'jadon, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon.

Camarilla [käm'ər'il'lä] Governing council of the Jade Moon.

- Camenae** [kə'mā'nī] Order in the Chian'niu, a bardic guild dedicated to healing and nonviolence.
- Cathal** [kǎ'thāl'] one of the Vaticanars, who wears blood red robes and red hair. He has one eye, and embodies the element of fire.
- Ceeri** [sē'rē] small dragons about the size of a backpack with extremely oversized wings capable of carrying themselves and the Sen to which they are psychically linked aloft.
- Cenobite** [sēn'ō'bīt] Makers who have elected to live communally in monasteries often for the purpose of teaching.
- Chian'niu** [chē'än'nyū] “The Place of Tides” the underworld filled with mystics, smugglers and all manner of person wanting to remain unseen.
- Cynath Bahn Se'leen** [kī'nāth' bän' sē'lēn] “House of the Jade Moon,” more often called the Bahn Sa'leen or Jade Moon.
- Cythraul** [sīth'räl] **Hlachar (or Llachar) Cythraul** [hlǎ'kär' sīth'räl] an ancient Raewyn who helped Dov Lavan found the Ual-leen.
- Daru Shaheen** [dä'rū shə'hēn] Shedu, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon.
- Deryn Moore** [dē'rīn mōr'] Shedu, Sister of Maslin Talbot.
- Djati** [djä'tē'] a species of cobra – like humanoids renown for their bureaucracy.
- Dov Lavan** [dūv lə'vä] One of the first three Shedu makers, student of Jeriah Kamil, founded the Ual-leen under the instruction of Hlachar Cythraul, murdered Adir Radd. Called Ara'lu.
- Eidolon** [ē'dō'lōn] Independent holograms capable of interacting with the world around them.
- Elkan Akeru** [ēl'kən ə'kē'rū] Shedu, Maker Presager in the Jade Moon, Husband of Hannah father of Ianus.
- Eman Sarad** [ē'män sə'räd'] Enmadra, maker, and leader among the Enmadra.
- Empyrean** [ēm'pēr'ē'ēn] The common name of the Raewyn Empire.
- Enmadra** [ēn'mä'drə] Short for Enmadrakaya [ēn'mä'drə'kī'ə], the giant natives of Adrakaya, powerful ancient race, Allostheoi.
- Faroh Raanan** [fē'rō' rä'nän] Shedu, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon, in the service of Master Theron.
- Ganedan** [gän'ē'dän] a planet left in ruins after the battle of the same name between the Enmadra and the Raewyn.
- Garm** [gärm] a small Shedu colony
- Gihon** [gē'hän] one of the four rivers flowing South out of the Forbidden Lands on Adrakaya.
- Greer** [grēr] one of the Vaticanars, who wears white robes and white hair. She is tall and embodies the element of Air.
- Hahu** [hä'hū] the name of Ihy Khem's Sukallin.
- Hannah Akeru** [hä'nə ə'kē'rū] Shedu, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon, Wife of Elkan, mother of Ianus.
- Haven** [hä'ven] one of the Vaticanars, who wears brown robes and has long gray hair. He embodies the element of earth.
- Helmsmen**, one of the technoguilds, a Helmsman pilots a ship by merging with it through the use of cybernetics.
- Heru Osanna Dhouti** [hē'rū' ō'sā'nä ʔbu'tē] Shedu, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon former head of the Camarilla, student of Ihy Khem, murdered by Panthera.

Hike [hĩ·kā'] a mythic figure that stands forever between the transcendent and the mundane.

Hildred Nadir [hĩl'·drəd nə·dēr'] A Ymiri sales woman.

Hinun Dabir [hĩ·nūn' də·bēr] Enmadra, maker guide of the A'nath-ari.

Holy Ennead [ě·nē'·əd] The Holy Group of Nine: Kahlil Vamu Shaa, Phaedra, Atarah, Omer Yul, Tien Shaa, Seraphin, Rohan, Makarios.

Ianus Osanna Akeru [yā'·nūs ə·kě'·rū] Shedú, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon

Idunn Beach [ĩ·dūn' bēch] a popular vacation resort on Adrakaya.

Ihy Hahu Khem [ĩ·hē hā'·hū kēm'] Shedú, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon, adoptive father of Ianus Akeru.

Inarus [ĩn·ār'·ūs] A species of humanoids with a conkshell- like horn covering the back of their head to their crown and temples, and possessing four arms.

IRV, Independent Republic Vessel

Jago Modcearu [jā'·gō mōd'·kē·ār·ū] Shedú, Maker in the Ual-leen, masquerading as a Shedú security officer.

Jenn Elsu [jěnn ěl'·sū] Shedú, Maker Cenobite in the Jade Moon, wife of Roman, victim of the Ual-leen.

Jeriah Kamil [jě·rĩ·ä kā'·mĩl] Enmadra, maker, teacher of Tien Shaa, Adir Radd, and Dov Lavan. He brought the maker arts to the Shedú.

Kahlil Vamu Shaa [kā'·lěl vā'·mū shā'] Shedú, formerly Kahlil Mehtar, a member of the A'nath-ari who converted to the Jade Moon after he tried to assassinate Tien Shaa, who in turn adopted him as his own son. One of the Holy Ennead.

Kahraman [kā'·rā·mən] Large, gray skinned species with a reputation for violence.

Kanthanka, SRV [kǎn·thān'·kə] a monastic vessel in service of the Jade Moon.

Kanu Vasin [kā'·nū vā'·sĩn] Shedú, Maker Cenobite in the Jade Moon.

Kesin [kě'·sĩn] Shipmaster of a Tengu pirate ship.

Khensu Min [kěn'·sū mĩn] Shedú security officer on Al-Benu. An Oblate in the Jade Moon.

Kishanu [kě'·shān·ū] singular Ekishan, an android built out of a colony of cooperative nanites.

Kur-gal [kər·gāl'] Homeworld of the Ubasti.

Lachesis [lə·kě'·sĩs] a river running past the ruined place of the Ara'lu on Adrakaya.

Lachesis, battle of. Decisive battle when Ihy Khem lead the Jade Moon to victory over Panthera and the Ual-leen.

Lamassu [lā'·mə·sū] A Shedú that has not been joined with a Sukallin.

Lasse [lās] Shedú, Maker Cenobite, Prior of the monastery of Rohan in Achates on Adrakaya.

Lawh-Ren Gunda [lā'·rěn gūn'·də] Raewyn cohort of Cythraul.

Leor Tali Ki-Tuun [lā'·ōr tā'·lē kē'·tūn] Ceeri joined with Tuun Fallon.

Makarios [mə·kā'·rē·ōs] Shedú Maker Predicant, Twin brother of Rohan, one of the Holy ennead.

Marnin Akeru [mār'·nĩn ə·kě'·rū] Shedú, maker Predicant in the A'nath-ari, Prclate and titular head of the order of blood. Cousin of Ianus Akeru.

Maslin Talbot [mās'·lĩn tǎl'·bōt] Lamassu captain of the independent freighter Ashiyr.

Maya Isann [mĩ'·ə ĩs·ān'] Shedú, Maker Cenobite in the Jade Moon. Adoptive Mother of Ianus Akeru and sister of Pryor Isann.

Mista Namid [mĩ'·stə nə'·mēd] one of the three Kishanu on the Valkyrie.

- Mne Seraphin** [mī'nā' sēr'ăph'ēn] Order in the Chian'niu founded by Seraphin, a disciple of Tien Shaa's and one of the Holy Ennead. They practice arcane magics.
- Nahimanna** [nā'hē'mā'nə] an ancient Bennu in the possession of Ianus Akeru.
- Namid** [nā'mēd] "Star Dances," a family of Kishanu that has produced many great Kishanu.
- Nar'han Inn** [nār'hän] a maker friendly in South Beach on Adrakaya.
- Nexus**, a devise used for mater to energy transportation between to materialization gates.
- Nusair Akeru** [nū'sār ə'kē'rū] Shedū, former Presager Predicant in the Jade Moon. Grandfather of Ianus Akeru.
- Oblate** [ō'blāt] a lay person obligated to a house in the Chian'niu rather than ordained / initiated member.
- Omer Yul** [ō'mər yūl] Shedū, maker, uncle of Tien Shaa, one of the Holy Ennead.
- Osanna** [ō'sā'nā] The Sukallin entrusted to Ianus Akeru.
- Osten Moore** [ō'stēn' mōr'] Lamassu, security officer, Jago Modcearu's "Project."
- Palladium** [pə'lā'dē'ūm] a colossal eidolon designed to protect a city.
- Panthera** [pän'thēr'ā], **Karu Panthera** [kā'rū pän'thēr'ā], Chimera Shedū Maker Predicant formerly in the Jade Moon, who left to reform the Ual-leen, former student of Ihy Khem.
- Parables of Vamu Shaa**, a holy book written by Kahlil Vamu Shaa about the life of integrity, compassion and duty.
- Parcae** [pār'kī'] Three sisters who interpret fate for the A'nath-ari and the Enmadra.
- Parr** [pār] Lamassu, maker Cenobite in the Jade Moon. In the monastery of Rohan on Adrakaya.
- Paytah** [pā'tə] Eidolon in the shape of a white lion.
- Peregrine** [pēr'ə'grīn] legendary white stag, considered an omen. Silver fur with white down neck and belly, gold horns.
- Periapt** [pē-rē'ăpt] a semi-technological talisman stone embedded into a leather glove.
- Phedra** [fā'drə] Shedū, Maker, student of Tien Shaa's, one of the Holy Ennead.
- Predicant** [prē'dī'kănt] Makers who are not attached to a particular monastery or temple who are able to travel, teach, and perform any necessary duties required of them.
- Presager** [prē'sā'jər] Makers who are augurs and who have taken an oath and vows to lend their talent to their order as necessary.
- Presager, Oath of**, an oath taken by augurs who a lesser oath so he can take on the order of the Cenobite or the Predicant.
- Pryor Isann** [prī'ōr is'än'] Shedū, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon. Brother of Maya Isann
- Psalter of the Mne Seraphin**, Part grimoire, part devotional, used by the Mne Seraphin for instruction.
- Quinn** [kwīn] One of the Vaticinars who wears blue robes and has short brown hair. She embodies the element of water.
- Raewyn** [rā'wīn] an enigmatic species that is rumored to originate in hyperspace. Little is known about them. They are counted as one of the Allostheoi.
- Rasmus Dyre** [räs'mūs dīr] a traveling merchant who sells Eidolons. Called Ras [räs] and Rasi [räs'ē]
- Rohan** [rō'hän] Shedū, Maker Predicant, Twin brother of Makarios, one of the Holy Ennead.

- Roman Elsu** [rō'·mǎn ɛl'·sū] Shedu, Maker Cenobite in the Jade Moon, husband of Jenn, victim of the Ual-leen
- Sakkara Corazon** [sə'kär'·ə kō'rə'zōn] Kahraman, Maker Novice in the Jade Moon.
- Samara the Rogue** [sə'mär'·ə] Chronicler of the last Ual-leen War.
- Sangrida Namid** [sǎn'·gē·də nǎ'·mēd] one of the three Kishanu on the Valkyrie.
- Selwyn Avrum** [səl'wīn' ǎv'·rūm] Ubasti, Maker Healer in the Camenae, helps Ihy Khem when he was an infant.
- Seraphin** [sɛ'·rā·fīn] Lamassu, Maker, student of Tien Shaa's, founder of the Mne Seraphin. One of the Holy Ennead.
- Shedu** [shɛ'·dū] a muscular humanoid species that hosts the Sukallin.
- Shiloh** [shī'·lō] The city on Al-Benu where Ihy was stationed.
- Simulacrum** [sīm'·ū'lāk'·rūm] a field of illusion in which psychological forms can manifest as people, places, and things.
- Sinon** [sī'·nōn] the planet where Aashen and Tuun Fallon were enslaved.
- SRV**, “Sovereign Republic Vessel”
- Sukallin** [sū'·kə'·līn] Small, gelatinous, long lived, sentient creatures that require a host to survive. Once part of a colony of symbiotic sea creatures driven to extinction centuries ago. Now hosted by the Shedu to their mutual benefit. One Sukallin will survive around a dozen hosts, sharing their memories and experiences with each.
- Tai-wer** [tī'·wɛr] the empire of the Enmadra in the Forbidden Lands of Adrakaya.
- Tara Lael** [tā'·rā lǎ'·ɛl] Shedu, Maker Apprentice in the Jade Moon. Student of Barami.
- Te'nath Ual-leen** [tā'·nǎth ū'·ǎl·lēn] “Order of the Black Moon,” more often called the Ual-leen.
- Tengu** [tɛn'·gū] Raven headed humanoids that are renown for their mischievous ways.
- Theron** [thɛ'·rōn] Shedu, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon, head of the Camarilla, student of Ihy Khem.
- Tides and Seasons**, a holy book written by Tien Shaa about the politics of the Chian'niu.
- Tien Shaa** [tɛ'·ɛn shǎ'] Shedu, member of the Holy Ennead, founder of the Jade Moon, Cousin of Adir Radd, student of Jeriah Kamil.
- To'asaa** [tō'·ǎs·ā] “Water Bowl” the legendary periapt owned by Tien Shaa.
- Tuun Fallon Ken-Leor** [tūn' fə'·lǎn kɛn lǎ'·ōr] Sen, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon and a Helmsman. Brother of Aashen Fallon.
- Ual-leen** [ū'·ǎl lēn] Order in the Chian'niu which has given itself over to the “Great Machine.” Founded by Dov Lavan they are only concerned with tyrannical order. Short for Te'nath Ual-leen.
- Ubasti** [ū'·bǎst·ē] Feline species that were once renown for their violent ways until they converted to the ways of the Camenae. Their home world is Kur-gal.
- Uma Nari** [ū'·mə nǎ'·rē] Shedu Member of the Holy Ennead, Mother of Tien Shaa.
- Uridimmu** [ū'·rīd·ē'·mū] a violent remnant of the warrior Ubasti, dedicated to the Return of their ancient glory.
- Usekht Maati** [ū'·sɛkt mə'·ǎt'·ē] The capital of the Enmadra of Adrakaya.
- Valeryn Kamau** [vǎl'·ər'·īn kǎ'·mou] Raewyn, Maker Predicant in the Jade Moon Intelligence Service. Studied with Pryor Isann.
- Valkyrie**, The name of Ihy's divisible frigate, made of three parts the Arun, the Mista, and the Sangrida.
- Vaticinars** [vǎt'·īk·īn·ǎrs] The Four Prophets of the A'nath-ari. The Seven Eyes of Fate.

Voice in the Darkness, a holy book written by Omer Yul about the voice of the Machine.

Ymiri [ĩ·mēr'ē], **Ymirin** [ĩ·mēr'ĩn] A squat species with large noses and oversized pointed ears, renown as shipwrights.

Zacari Sea [zə·kār'ē] inland sea on Al-Benu.