

“Cimmerian Steppes: Chasing Shadows”

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Abstract

My creative thesis is an immersive historical fantasy novella. As a novella, my work primarily focuses on character development. Novellas are uncommon to the genre, yet Patrick Rothfuss and Mercedes Lackey have standalone and supplemental novellas. My novella challenges pre-existing genre conventions by introducing the ideas such as the hero's journey, only dash them. My manuscript is set in an alternate world, and features characters exploring liminal spaces where they struggle with the ever-present tension between monstrosity and humanity. My work is influenced by J. R. R. Tolkien, Guy Gavriel Kay, and George R. R. Martin. Kay's harkening to ages past influences my setting, as antiquity offers more charm than a well-traversed setting; as such, I do not use the romanticised medieval setting. I aim for realism in a genre where fate is often the central plot, like in *Harry Potter*, where a final clash is prophesized.

Works by critics and theorists such as Farah Mendlesohn, Brian Attebury, Lucie Armitt, and Edward James have assisted me with interpreting fantasy in its various forms, which has informed my writing and allowed me to see the common links and twists in the genre. These insights allow me to build upon, or diverge from, traditional narratives; for instance, I don't use a destiny-driven plot. Feminist fantasy writing informs my writing, and I explore the idea of gender equality within an ancient patriarchy. My creative thesis adds a new voice to the monstrous body of works that is contemporary fantasy, while also doing things half a step differently than more traditional texts, and I hope this will aid in propelling the genre ever onwards.

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CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

Description of Project

“Cimmerian Steppes: Chasing Shadows” (hereafter “CS:CS”) is a historical fantasy novella with two three chapter sections and a bridge-chapter between, and each has its own point of view character. Section One has Hajari escorting the Rain Bringer to the capital, Section Two has Euanthe plying her trade before and during a plague, and the bridge chapter between them is where Aeson is caught by opportunistic outsiders seeking profit. In “Historical Fantasy”, Schanoes states that historical fantasy “is a hybrid of two seemingly opposed modes, fantasy, with its explicit rejection of consensus reality, and historical fiction, a genre grounded in realism and historically accurate events” (236). Guy Gavriel Kay describes his works of historical fantasy as being “Nearly our known history, but not quite” (*Brightweavings.com*), which means that the drawn upon historical reference is just a framework. Similarly, George R. R. Martin, in an interview, states that “Fantasists enjoy certain freedoms that historical novelists do not... I can surprise my readers by killing kings and other major characters” (*Bernardcornwell.net*) that are untouchable in history. With history as a guide infused with fantasy, both authors can treat that initial framework as a sandbox wherein anything is fair game. I feel the same: history is the foundation, whereas fantasy is freedom. History is familiar to a reader, preventing instant alienation, whereas fantasy offers a sense of wonderment that provides a commentary on the mundane without seemingly doing so. Fantasy possesses a carte blanche quality that allows for the exploration of the what-ifs. To me, fantasy is freedom, and history keeps me grounded. Ursula K LeGuin

notes in her *The Language of the Night: Essays on Fantasy and Science Fiction*, that “the most challenging freedom of all: [is] the freedom to set one’s own boundaries” (12).

Part One of “CS:CS” features Hajari in a desert setting as part of a culture reminiscent of ancient Persia. Hajari’s story is one of increasingly difficult trials, spanning from childhood into late adulthood, culminating in him choosing to devour his nation’s most important person, whom he has been tasked with escorting. The bridge chapter features a young boy, Aeson, in his encounter with a heroic woman during his brief stint as a slave, and it is this meeting where his courage in the face of the monstrous unknown alters his life following loss. Part Two features Euanthe, a woman from a culture akin to ancient Greece, in foreign and familiar landscapes, where threats of mobs, plague, and death reign. In spite of this, she remains unbent, demonstrating acceptance and healing even when events spiral beyond her scope.

As stated in the “Introduction” to *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, James acknowledges John Clute’s affirmation that “In the full fantasy, a text passes through WRONGNESS, THINNING, RECOGNITION, [and] HEALING” (James 2, emphasis his). Both Hajari and Aeson fail to induce restoration within their worlds. It is in Hajari’s second chapter that the wrongness of Myrjah being without a ruler is revealed. The dual wrongness in Aeson’s section is the slavers having invaded inland and the monsters attacking together. Further, Euanthe’s first chapter presents the actions of people as threatening, such as the man that “was to be executed” (Stroh 78) for stealing water during a drought. Further, a wrongness between the different societies is hinted at during Euanthe’s encounter with Hajari, when he admits to having “never had the opportunity to leave [his] country and venture through the Ashar Grasslands” (Stroh

84), which indicates the geographic area of contention between both nations. Though the concept of “wrongness” sounds vague, it implies that there are problems causing the world to be in a decline, problems that need to be corrected for the betterment of the world.

With the recognition of wrongness, comes a push towards a healing—not to imply that a world exists only in one of two states, broken and not-broken, but as a place where one does what they can while things are not ideal. Hajari kills and consumes the destined ruler of his country to survive, and while his section appears to end in his death, Euanthe’s section reveals a changed Hajari has occupied Haldis’ position. However, his presence there further indicates a wrongness: “But if he was the Rain Bringer, and he had chosen to quietly travel to the alley that the Halosian travelers had used to make their escape, then [Euanthe] was sure something foul was afoot in Myrjah” (Stroh 90).

Euanthe sees and worries over the issues of foreign threat and encroaching monsters, and is not a destined hero who can and will rectify all the ills of her world. The plague warns her and readers that many things are beyond a person’s ability to rectify, as the plague kills more than the aforementioned monsters ever do, but her drive towards healing portrays her as doing what she can, and it is this small act that shows a world in healing. She tends to the dead, and her ultimate act of healing is her tending to the last rites of her apprentice, Aeson.

“CS:CS” was conceptualized as a novel, but for the Master’s program, I decided on the novella, as its “effect, unlike that of the short story, is cumulative rather than immediate [...allowing] for a subplot or two, though plot need not be at the heart of the form” (Kolosov 183). The novella enables me to focus on character development rather

than plot, often a pitfall in genre fantasy, and had the piece remained the start of a novel, it may have been plot heavy. Plot is great, but if the characters are flat, then it is difficult for both the reader and writer to empathize with them. Empathy allows readers to identify with characters, allowing for a more immersive experience. In fantasy, novels are common, whereas the novella is atypical, but not as uncommon as one might think. Several examples include: Patrick Rothfuss' *The Slow Regard of Silent Things*, or Mercedes Lackey's *Arcanum 101*, *Drums*, and *Ghost in the Machine*. Though uncommon, there is a growing movement towards using the novella as a fantasy format, and a publisher of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Tor, has recently sought submissions for "novellas of between 20,000 and 40,000 words that fit the epic fantasy, sword and sorcery, high fantasy, or quest fantasy genres" (Tor.com), which is indicative of a growing market. While it is unlikely that the genre will dispose of the novel, novellas are a new vehicle for adding a diverse richness to a colossal genre, for it is much easier to entice new readers when they are faced by a smaller story, rather than presenting them with the behemoths popular to fantasy. Further, the novella can offer readers insight into novels, and thus it can be supplementary to the larger bodies of work.

Monstrosity and marginality are significant to "CS:CS". In his *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Cohen acknowledges that monsters are the other, "an embodiment of difference, a breaker of category" (Cohen x), that which exists beyond the known, outside of our ability to classify them, and it is this inability to fully understand this concept of other that inspires an instinctive, near primordial, fear compelling us to conceptualize that other as monster. It is "a construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically 'that which reveals', 'that which warns'" (Cohen 4), and

thus the presence of the monstrous in history and older texts, appears beyond the current societal or individual control, whose mere presence undermines establishment. For example, Non-Greeks were barbarians, and thus they were marginalized and considered monstrous just by virtue of not being Greek. There was a similar case with the Amazons: “then, as now, to be an ‘Amazon’ was to be an aberration, a kind of monstrosity, like the dragon that the hero, defender of civilization, must destroy” (Harris 312). Monstrosity is a fear-instilling tool to undermine any foothold of the other. Further, that which is monstrous is immortalized, for “the monster always escape[s] to return to its habitation at the margins of the world” (Cohen 6). However much the marginalized monstrous acts as a warning, “the monstrous offers an escape... an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world” (Cohen 7), and it is this power that appeals to me as both a writer and a lover of ancient history.

In “CS:CS”, the marginalized and the monsters appear in three forms. First, I use the monstrous other, akin to the classical hydra, neither human nor animal, which threatens the lives of humans. In Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, Scylla transforms into a monster, where the human “parts of her have been replaced / by gaping mouths, like those of Cerberus” (XIV 91-2), making her a threat: “to show the hatred she bore Circe, / she carried off Ulysses’ men as plunder” (XIV 101-102). I write about several monsters, including a “vargwyrn”, long-necked specters, and the “corpse-lure,” which parallel the hydra model: they are a twisted ‘other’ that threatens one’s immediate well-being. Second, my characters operate from the margins, threatening their individual cultures’ status quo; or, they are those who wear a human mask, but are monstrous within. These

human-monsters lack the kill-count of the plague. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Circe does not fit into classical gendered behavior, and thus her actions are the threat that a marginalized figure, the monster, poses to the civilization structure: "And [Circe] laced this potion with insidious drugs / That would make them forget their own native land" (X 253-254), and while erasing a few people is horrid, her threat cannot compare to a plague's. Third, is the plague which destroys more than any monster; it has the power to undermine structure and order. A plague decimates societal structures: "as the hope of health abandons them, / they realize that their disease will end / only in death and give in to their desires" (*Metamorphoses* VII 804-806). Plague removes the able-bodied, and dispirits the survivors; the plague has the highest kill count and is merciless. These abovementioned monsters complicate heroism, add conflict to the narrative, and explore the power of the margins within my novella.

The first human-monster within "CS:CS", Haldis, skirts monstrosity, as seen when he denies Hajari water: "No water until you get me food" (Stroh 50). He indicates that people can be as dangerous as, or even more dangerous than, the actual monsters. One might expect Haldis to grow worse, but through the build of Hajari's story, there are indications that Hajari (his guardian) is, in fact, the most dangerous, for "a Myrjahn survived" (Stroh 25). The danger of Hajari appears in his heroic acts, but it is only after he is in a desperate situation that he allows his monstrosity out, resulting in him killing and eating another person. In Aeson's chapter, there is another type of monstrosity: slavers. These slavers are murderers who "unseamed [Aeson's] mum" (Stroh 62), kidnappers, and they force captives on dangerous marches. In Euanthe's section, a mob stirs for blood, and, by trying to escape the mob, Euanthe encounters two

dangerous men lying in wait. It is only after extracting herself from these men that she learns that one was the Rain Bringer, the young Haldis, and yet the reader knows that Haldis was killed and consumed, leaving the question of what, or who, took his place. The encountered Rain Bringer is Hajari, who has survived the desert and obtained power through consumption. After Euanthe flees the foreign space and returns home, a plague strikes. My novella is a constant battlefield between the monstrous and the non-monstrous, but there is every indication that identifying who or what belongs to which group is problematic.

The Genre

Contemporary fantasy boasts works such as George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Fire and Ice* and J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter*. Rowling's work is children's literature in spite of the maturation of the series in *The Goblet of Fire*, which propels the piece towards, if not into, the realm of adult fantasy. Contemporary fantasy is a monstrous body of works, one that is impossible to categorize, as not every text belonging to the body has the same hallmarks. In *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn provides five groupings to identify fantasy: *portal-quest fantasy*, *immersive fantasy*, *intrusion fantasy*, *liminal fantasy*, and "the irregulars." Harry Potter stepping through the barricade between Muggle London and Diagon Alley is an example of portal quest, where "a character leaves familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place" (1). Tolkien's setting is immersive fantasy, which "is set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world" (59), and thus familiar to its characters. Intrusion has "an intruder" (114) entering into the character's world, and most of the works by H. P. Lovecraft fall into this category. Liminal fantasy "estranges the reader

from the fantastic as seen and described by the protagonist” (182). The irregulars are those that break category and “do not fit comfortably into [Mendelsohn’s] design” (246), which indicates that the genre cannot neatly fit into classifications.

Contemporary fantasy is often formulaic, and in Attebury’s “Structuralism”, he notes that the genre is “criticized for being too obvious in its oppositions. Light versus dark, good versus evil” (86). However, many of these elements indicate that “here’s the shape of the story you are about to read” (Attebury 82), rendering the text closer to metafiction. Further, “fantastic metafiction tend to open up the text, inviting us to see the degree to which reality itself is structured like a story—or indeed, because much of the reality we live in is of human making, is constructed through the act of storytelling” (Attebury 88). Martin’s *A Game of Thrones* is well-versed in the formulaic aspects of the genre, enabling him to make Eddard Stark appear the hero, thus allowing Martin to dash that expectation with an execution: “her father’s legs... that was what she remembered... the way they’d *jerked* when Ser Ilyn... when the sword...” (Sansa VI 742). Through manipulating expectations of the genre, a writer can lead his or her reader into a new domain by altering the pattern. Contemporary fantasy is sometimes formulaic, and can be predictable, but it also has the ability to innocuously comment on our reality. Though the aforementioned critics make compelling arguments for fantasy being formulaic, I find that the genre is far less definitive. “CS:CS” pushes against the commonalities of the genre, as do the works of countless authors like Lev Grossman or Jay Kristoff, which is why I call the fantasy genre a monstrous body of works.

Contemporary epic fantasy is often based on the idealized concepts of the High Medieval period and it often misrepresents the period. In “Tolkien, Lewis and the

Explosion of Genre Fantasy”, James claims that following *The Lord of the Rings*, “the default cultural model for the fantasy world was the Middle Ages” (70). Since then, “most subsequent writers of fantasy are either imitating [Tolkien] or else desperately trying to escape his influence” (James 62). Tolkien’s work garners great interest. Thus many writers seek to achieve the same, following or dismantling Tolkien’s success. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* utilizes the medieval setting; however, the introduction of *Mastering the Game of Thrones: Essays on George R. R. Martin’s A Song of Ice and Fire* notes that Martin’s work seeks reality as opposed to ideals, as “the Martin-verse takes place in what could be a plausible medieval world, complete with inequalities and prejudices that would have driven overlapping societies within the high middle ages” (Johnston and Battis 3). Furthermore, in “‘Silk Ribbons Tied around a Sword’: Knighthood and the Chivalric Virtues in Westeros,” Charles Hackney elaborates that Martin’s work contains “a clash between high idealism and grim reality” (132). Alternatively, there are texts that reach further back, such as Guy Gavriel Kay’s *The Sarantine Mosaic*, which is set during the reign of an alternate Byzantine Empire rife with political intrigue able to “[ruin] a man by answering a single question honestly without regard for tact or diplomacy” (366). It is noteworthy that non-medieval-set texts are far fewer than medieval-set fantasy texts, perhaps due to Tolkien, or simply due to the more accessible data surviving the medieval ages that makes it a popular choice.

Modern fantasy begins with Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, which revitalizes the genre. According to Armit’s *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction*, Tolkien establishes the “use of the terms *Primary* and *Secondary Worlds*” (21), and his Middle Earth popularized the creation of alternate worlds for fantasy settings. The secondary world

often contains various peoples, cultures, and histories that make it a unique world even if it draws upon aspects of the primary world: “Those days... are now long past, and the shape of all lands has been changed; but the regions in which Hobbits then lived were doubtless the same as those in which they still linger” (*FR* 21). Further, Tolkien utilizes the “old-fashioned, light-and-dark, good-and-evil binary divide” (Armitt 70), as is evident between Frodo’s struggle with the power of the ring: “his terror was swallowed up in a sudden temptation to put on the Ring” (*FR* 262); here, the evil of Sauron’s ring calls to Frodo, who must resist or fail. However, Tolkien offers a challenge to these stringent binaries by not having a character like Frodo viewed as good or evil. Frodo does destroy the ring, but it’s a figure closer to evil who ends the reign of darkness: “Gollum, dancing like a mad thing, held aloft the ring... he stepped too far... he fell... [and] Out of the depths came his last wail *precious*, and he was gone” (*RK* 275-276). Gollum (the villain) destroys the source of Sauron’s power, saving Middle Earth where Frodo has failed.

Where I Fit

“CS:CS” is historical fantasy due to its ancient settings, practices, and beliefs melded into a world filled with fantastic elements. Hajari lives in a climate akin to ancient Persia and, as such, Myrjah is set in a landscape with mountainous rims surrounding a great desert, with few habitable areas. Hajari’s culture draws upon the Zoroastrian mythology where “in the beginning only the essential duality existed: the good Ahura Mazda and the evil Angra Mainyu” (Leeming 412), wherein one is “the creator-god of truth and light... [while the other is] the embodiment of lies, darkness, and evil” (Axworthy 7). In my project, this divine duo exists, the light one and the dark

one; however, a third deity was added to Myrjah as temperance between the two extremes: “Even the Goddess, the temperance between the warring Brothers, wouldn’t take him into Her oasis” (Stroh 54). The history and myths from ancient Persia has allowed for the construction of an old society with a cultural and religious depth that aids in presenting Myrjah as a fully functioning and realized part of my secondary world.

In Euanthe’s section, the ancient Greek mentality of Greek and not-Greek surfaces in her views of a foreign landscape: “The crowd warbled in their foreign tongue around them, bleating away in snippets that were almost too fast and muddled for her mind to translate into proper words” (Stroh 92). Another example is the theatre, where comedy stands in the role of primary world tragedy in terms of classical Athenian theatre, as “From the time of the almost legendary Thespis, a full generation before the earliest tragedy we possess, dramatic performances of some sort had been regularly produced at Athens” (Greene 3). Euanthe notes that “She had missed the newest play about a crackpot Demelzan inventor... The play had been the talk of the city, and she hadn’t the chance to see it” (Stroh 91). Moving from popular secondary world culture to fringe aspects of their society, Aiastes’ funerary traditions are similarly Greek. The numerous rituals surrounding Greek funerals follow three major aspects: “the laying out of the body, its conveyance to the place of interment, and finally the deposition of its cremated or inhumed remains” (Garland 21), and Euanthe follows these for her apprentice. With the aforementioned aspects providing a framework mixed with supernatural monsters, and the magic of the ruling classes, a merger between the historical and fantastical occurs.

The ancient world is my setting, since the further back in time that one ventures, the stranger and more mysterious the place becomes, and it is this allure of the unknown, a siren call from the lost, which infuses my world with an otherness that seems more at home so long ago. The historical setting embodies a fantastical element in and of itself, which is why much of the fantastical aspects of my secondary world operate as peripheral, almost as an aside. The closer one gets to a primordial setting, the likelier one is to find things in a more basic form, such as a magic based upon the very core elements. In his *Tree and Leaf*, Tolkien notes that “Magic produces, or pretends to produce, an alteration in the primary world... its desire is *power* in this world, domination of things and will” (53, emphasis his), and thus power at its purest is formed through the elements controlling the world. Using a setting that is almost magical, due to its many supernatural mysteries, and injecting the construct of magic enables me to alter the very fabric of the ancient primary world to my will. It is a power to transform. In her *Fantasy Fiction: An Introduction*, Lucie Armitt notes that “the relationship between the real and the unreal during the classical period [being] far more fluid than our own prosaic determination to assert reality at all costs” (14). In this way, the fanciful elements of my secondary world seem more plausible for my characters, since the unreal has established power. My magic needs no spells, they simply are shadow or rain, aspects of the natural world to be conquered, for the individual with an affinity for magic, such as shadows, can instinctively use it to hinder the monstrous other encroaching on their world. While this struggle may not be as clear-cut as conquering, the drive towards civilizing the uncivilized is there. I chose historical fantasy set in

ancient times, as the ancient world is not easily defined or categorized, and it is that difficulty to define that I find appealing.

In “Dark Fantasy and Paranormal Romance”, Kaveney claims that dark fantasy, also known as realistic fantasy, is a subgenre of fantasy wherein a pulling away occurs, such as “the ultimate failure of that genre’s usual positive resolutions” (214), which is the subversion of what Tolkien coins as the eucatastrophe: “the joy of the happy ending... [or] the sudden joyous turn” (*Tree and Leaf* 68). Tolkien’s definition does not necessitate a happy ending, but implies a restoration of balance in a world where all things may not heal, as seen when Frodo says that “I have been too deeply hurt... I tried to save the Shire, and it has been saved, but not for me” (*RK* 382). Kaveney acknowledges John Clute’s *Encyclopedia of Fantasy* through noting that dark fantasy is aligned with horror, though should not be mistaken for it, and its ““crosshatches in which the intersections between this world and an upswelling otherworld’ are at least partly drawn from the vocabulary of horror fiction” (Clute, qtd. in Kaveney 214). For this reason, dark fantasy is not driving towards the Tolkienian sense of eucatastrophe, and is instead pushing for the idea in which “the ultimate victory of good is not a coda towards which all else inevitably develops” (Kaveney 216). Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* is considered dark fantasy, and it often presents unvarnished reality, as is seen through the description of a man from the Night’s Watch: “[Gared] had lost both ears and a finger to frostbite... [and] his furs were ragged and greasy” (*GT Bran* 1: 13-14). The description of an oath bound man being just that, a man with flaws, rather than a romanticized flawless hero, is evidence that Martin’s work is dark fantasy. Though Martin’s work is incomplete, the story’s level of loss makes it hard to envision a return wherein many

characters are “one and whole” (Tolkien, *RK* 382), as the Martin-verse is likely to produce far more Frodos at its conclusion. Further, following Kaveney’s concept of dark fantasy possessing an intersection between this world and an otherworld, Martin’s work contains that meeting, as is evident in the clash of the established world and its encroaching Others from the North.

“CS:CS” can similarly be classified as a dark fantasy. Like Martin, I aim for realism over idealism, and one may argue that Martin’s “commitment to realism is likely what makes the series attractive to readers... who would normally eschew the fantasy genre” (Johnston and Battis 3). The strength of realism enables the reader to better empathize with the character who is more like the reader, more so than a flawless hero. In my novella, realism is apparent in the description of putrefying corpses: “the premature not-green of olives, curdled milk, the yellow of a fourscore woman’s teeth, the red-brown of old blood, and a black darker than any shadow” (Stroh 91). Realism is a powerful tool, allowing me to depict the horror of death in such a way as to instill a sense of the abject within my readers. Had I simply glossed over the matter and not given descriptors easily visualized, then I would have undermined the power of the plague, the horror of death, and the fringe-fear that that too shall be each of us. “CS:CS” does not offer the drive towards good having a victory, it is not a world to be renewed that drives my characters, but a sense of what is best at a given moment. Hajari “needed to eat, to drink, to feed the monster that was eating him, and destroy the one who sought his destruction” (Stroh 52) and so he consumes the Rain Bringer. At the end of the novella, all three characters are irreversibly changed: Hajari can never return to being the hero of Farhad, Aeson can never return to being a farm-boy of Riverstown, and Euanthe

can never be the mother-mentor to Aeson. Though my secondary world keeps going, the three protagonists are forever changed. Lastly, in terms of an intersection between worldly and otherworldly, the monsters and the ghosts occupy the space of otherworld, and each encounter within my novella is a clash wherein both cannot endure. It is for these reasons that my historical fantasy novella can likewise be classified as dark fantasy.

Historically, fantasy has had a dearth of well-rounded female characters, though that is not to imply that there were never strong female characters within the genre, simply that the feminine has had less of an opportunity than the masculine. In “‘Radiant and Terrible’: Tolkien’s Heroic Women as Correctives to the Romance and Epic Traditions”, Downs suggests that Tolkien’s work is a prime example of the aforementioned scarcity of female figures, as Tolkien “assigns the bulk of the action to male characters, and women are primarily present in secondary and background roles” (55). Tolkien’s choice to limit the feminine figures may be as simple as him utilizing a medieval mentality, and since war was considered the realm of males, then it would be a historically probable exclusion. It can be argued that Tolkien was well aware of this mentality, and that he chose to craft “empowered female characters whose instinctive, innate heroism created a framework for future iterations of female heroes in fantasy literature” (Downs 56), such as Éowyn, to counter stringent gender roles. In *The Two Towers*, the men of Rohan claim that “There is Éowyn... She is fearless and high-hearted... Let her be as lord while we are gone” (*TT* 163), which places her as a woman that has earned respect in a patriarchal system. At the Battle of the Pelennor Fields, Éowyn faces and defeats the Nazgûl who claims that “No living man may hinder me”

(*RK* 141), to which Éowyn replies: “But no living man am I! You look upon a woman” (*RK* 141). Here, Éowyn stands between a peerless foe and her king-uncle, defeating a great foe, which promotes Éowyn as a powerful feminine figure, even though her role is smaller than those of the fellowship. In this way, Tolkien can be seen as nudging the door wider to stronger female characters, and it is often this movement that is a feminist drive within the fantasy genre. Since Tolkien, authors like Sara Douglas and Ian Irvine who have female characters taking up more prominent roles similar to Éowyn, like Azhure in *The Wayfarer Redemption* or Tiaan in *The Well of Echoes*.

“CS:CS” has few female characters, but the most heroic of my three protagonists is a woman: Euanthe. However, Euanthe is vastly different from Éowyn. Euanthe is lowborn, and instead of being a fighter, she is a figure that brings about a healing. In her first chapter, Euanthe is identified as “other” in several ways: a foreigner, a woman, uncommonly tall, pregnant outside of wedlock, and an undertaker. This makes her different than Éowyn, but does not render her as any less, or any more heroic, than the hero of Rohan. In my novella, death or the threat of dying takes on the role of Euanthe’s greatest foe, and unlike my male protagonists who flee or hide from it, Euanthe has no qualms facing death, whether it be her own or others: “Facing her task, she ducked under the cart’s pull, and approached the nearest ghastly mountain [of corpses]” (Stroh 92). In a city besieged by plague, she is out tending to the dead, unbothered by the threat of contracting the plague, with her only aversion being the “disrespectful cluster of bodies” (Stroh 91). As a character undisturbed by what may be her own death, Euanthe’s final hurdle is the death of her apprentice, whom she considers as a child of her own flesh. It is in this particular instance that she shines through as the true hero of the piece, as she

performs Aeson's final rites through the agony of her loss, pressing past faltering courage: "If their gazes were to meet hers, she would break" (Stroh 104). Further, it is her willpower to carry on and continue to help others following her loss that promotes her as a culture-bearing hero like Prometheus. She sets her pain aside to the best of her ability to care for those who can no longer care for themselves, offering dignity to the dead, and saving others from having to remove the dead, which is the hallmark of a hero.

Literary/Digital Influences

The influences for "CS:CS" stem from a broad scope of inspirations spanning history, literature, art, and popular culture. Starting with less conventional influences, surviving pottery, architecture, mosaics, and sculptures, have all helped to bring my secondary world and its cultures to life. The Greeks often made pottery and painted them with scenes from stories, such as Homer's *Iliad* or *Odyssey*. They illustrated cultural practices, such as funerary processions, and religion, such as actions by the divine pantheon. These depictions denote a culture fascinated by stories. These material texts demonstrate practices, show clothing and items once common, and thus act as an indicator of aspects from an older age of Greece. Architecture, such as surviving buildings like the Parthenon atop Athens, or even the excavated ruins of Mycenae or Knossos, shows the layout of old cities or temples, and hints at how life once was. Mycenae has a graveyard filled with archeological treasures, while Knossos' design hints at a city designed to counter invasion by sea. Furthermore, mosaics and sculptures add further insight into the Greek past, allowing those of us temporally removed to get a small peek into a grand history. It is this little glimpse that has allowed me to build my

secondary world into a whole filled with its own stories, its own histories, and its own beliefs.

Non-literary influences include the cartoon *Avatar: The Last Air Bender*, Eiichiro Oda's anime *One Piece*, and Ubisoft's video game *Prince of Persia*. *Avatar* features various nations wielding elemental powers (earth, water, air, and fire), which they bend through martial arts. "CS:CS" likewise uses elemental magic, but my world contains more abstract elements, such as shadow. *One Piece* follows Luffy setting out to become King of the Pirates, and the unknown of his world is explored, showing how things beyond the edges of the map can be as amazing as they are dangerous. *Prince of Persia* is set in a visually recreated ancient Persia, alongside a character fighting spreading darkness, and this video game propelled me towards using Myrjah as a setting in "CS:CS."

As part of my undergraduate degree, I minored in History, due to my interest in the ancient world and its various cultures. History has helped me craft my secondary world, including the aspects not seen or only mentioned. In Aeson's chapter, he remembers that "His uncle had said that the shadow lands were the most dangerous place next to the ghost lands of Amarante" (Stroh 69), and that is the only reference to Amarante. My honours project is set in the same world; however, that story did feature Amarante, a land akin to ancient Japan. Brendan Nagle's *The Ancient World: A Social and Cultural History* has helped me in my world-building endeavors. For example, Greece and Persia have had a great number of wars, such as the Battle at Marathon (490 B.C.E.), the Invasion of Xerxes (480 B.C.E.), or the Battles at Thermopylae, Artemisium, and Salamis (480 B.C.E.). In "CS:CS," there is tension between Myrjah,

my equivalent to ancient Persia, and Alpeinhalos, my equivalent to ancient Greece:

“That name hadn’t been used since Alpeinhalos won the last war to retake their Cimmerian Steppes from the thieves of Myrjah who had stolen it and called it the Ashar Grasslands” (Stroh 84). The geographic area of contention in my secondary world is the highly fertile land between the two nations that both countries believe to be theirs. This land is a great source for agricultural resources, and it is also the trade route through the mountains. History has helped me create, build, and colour my secondary world using aspects of our world to add flavor.

Literature surviving from ancient Greece and Persia, such as the *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings* and Ovid’s *Metamorphosis*, has influenced my world building and character development. After having read the *Shahnameh*, I decided to incorporate that title into Myrjahn titles, which is how the name Shahanshah became the rank of the Rain Bringer. That is also how I came up with the concept of Ishah, Nishah, and Sanshah. The word ‘shah’ is the title given to Persian emperors and kings, so my Shahanshah implies king of kings, while the other three titles involve me taking numbers one through three from Japanese and applying them to the title to give rank. Further, the *Shahnameh* contains the story of Kavus, a king who has led his country to ruin multiple times in his pursuit of personal gain, and he is the inspiration for the Rain Bringer who turned the old capital to blood ages ago, and the figure Hajari fears Haldis will become: “[Hajari] couldn’t let this boy ruin him. Ruin Kayu’s dream of a grander Myrjah and a greater Farhad” (Stroh 51). Hajari fears that Haldis will be the undoing of everything, just as Gudarz in the *Shahnameh* recognizes Kavus as a king whose “malicious nature is

a tree / That grows new, bitter fruit perpetually” (Ferdowsi 212). Though perhaps minor in its contribution, the *Shahnameh* has helped me craft Myrjah’s history.

Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* has influenced “CS:CS” through its use of transformative elements. In “The Daughters of Minyas”, several changes are listed, such as “how her daughter, / transformed in a dove of purest white” (Ovid 125, 77-78), or “how the mulberry, which once bore white, / bears dark fruit now” (Ovid 125, 83-84). Ovid’s work is filled with all manner of transformations, and I find such alterations fascinating. The aforementioned has inspired me to adapt a flexible approach in my writing, while simultaneously making me choose to write things to appear more or less than they are in actuality, such as the little girl being a ghost attempting to devour Euanthe: “The little girl wasn’t real. She was an imitation of the dead body hidden in the flowers” (Stroh 97). I enjoy using sleight of hands to mislead readers, such as the prisoner being executed in Euanthe’s first chapter, which should make a reader think of Hajari, even though the two men and crimes are different. Kay does this often. In *Sailing to Sarantium* readers are misled into believing an assassination is afoot, the misunderstanding only cleared up when one of the would-be assassins states: ““What? You thought we were here to *harm* them?”” (399). Sleight of hands have the power to create changes or unexpected events that help keep a reader on their toes, something I have enjoyed as a reader, and they are what I recall most, as they impress and surprise me.

The most influential fantasy authors for me are J. K. Rowling, Guy Gavriel Kay, George R. R. Martin, and Lynn Flewelling. J.K Rowling’s *Harry Potter* is the series that made me fall in love with reading when I was a child who hated to read. Neither of my

parents were readers, and by the time I was three I was entered into school programs, such as nursery school and then playschool, before starting kindergarten, which gave me an early start on reading what I was told to read. Whether it was my resentment of being told, or my dislike of the chosen material, I always felt a schism existed between me and books, one that I only managed to bridge thanks to encountering the *Harry Potter* books as a gift on my eleventh birthday. *Harry Potter* taught me that books could be full of wonder and intrigue, and since my journey growing up with Harry, Hermione, and Ron, I have been an avid reader of fantasy. Though Rowling's books are considered children's literature or young adult fantasy, I have never acknowledged a difference between them and fantasy in general, beyond a writing style and vocabulary that someone raised in the French immersion system could easily follow.

I encountered the works of Guy Gavriel Kay during my undergraduate degree, starting with his *Fionavar Tapestry*, which spurred me to go out and purchase all of his other published works. Kay's works reaffirmed my quenchless thirst for the genre, while also showing me the power of melding history with fantasy to create something new, something that seems poetry made prose. His *Sarantine Mosaic* duet and *Under Heaven* are his three books that I am most fond of due to their spellbinding characters, wonderful plots, and shocking twists. In fact, it was his duet which taught me that historical settings do not have to be the middle ages, as the *Sarantine Mosaic* is set during the days of the Byzantine Empire, which is when I truly began to craft my secondary world. *Under Heaven* similarly offered a different setting, ancient China, and a protagonist who has chosen to bury the restless undead as his way of honouring his late father, which told

me that some heroic deeds can be doing something that no one else wants to do. For this reason, Kay's character, Shen Tai, is my inspiration for creating Euanthe.

Kay's works, paired with *A Song of Ice and Fire* by George R. R. Martin, taught me that fantasy can be more than a story of idealized knights and sorcerers working towards a greater good against some greater evil; instead, the heroes can be anyone, there is no need for a greater destiny harkened by prophecy, and magic can be a subtle entity that exists on the periphery instead of flashily on center stage. As a budding writer, that lesson is beyond invaluable to me as I grow and develop as an author. Further, Lynn Flewelling's *Night Runner* has taught me that it is okay to portray things as being different than the norm, that a writer can embrace all things, unconventional or taboo for many people, and weave them into great stories, such as queer relationships, matriarchies, and war where it is simply luck that determines who lives and who dies. Each of the aforementioned authors have opened my eyes to the wonder, breadth, and boundless potential of the fantasy genre. That is not to say that these four authors alone have influenced me and my writing, as all fantasy works that I have encountered have had some impact, as any book read is a book lived: "A reader lives a thousand lives" (*DwD* 35 Bran 3: 452).

SECTION ONE

Chapter 1

He paused atop a dune formed like the edge of a cup, naked except for the metal canister strapped around his neck. He wanted to go home, but that was not allowed.

Below, nestled between orange stones, was a blue pool crowded by lush green brush. The sun rippled across the water, silver over blue. Hajari wanted to jump into that water. It would soothe the sunscald on his flesh, and he could drink his fill.

It was water that had forced him into this trial. But this water was different. The memory left a bitter taste in his mouth. He never wanted to take this warrior test or be more than just Hajari, the fisher's son, but he did not want to be a disappointment, so here he was, trying to survive and show his worth as a future warrior for his village.

He was so thirsty. The last time water had touched his lips had been in the pre-dawn dark prior to the start of the trial, and now the sun sat in judgement at its peak. It was hot, sweltering, leaving his naked skin as taut as camel hide left curing in the sun. And itchy. Yet, he was immobilized by dual feelings, torn between his deep desire to drink, and his want to avoid bodies of water after his not-drowning.

He remembered the river that had led him to this trial and inner war. That day he had finally been old enough to join his father and brothers fishing at the underground river. He had dismissed his father's warning of its dangers. He remembered seeing the bauble on his line, and being enamoured by the golden glass catching the sun in a sea of froth. The water had been playful. Then something grey and swathed in brown-yellow had snatched the bauble, jerking him forwards. Fingers had dragged him down, down, and away into cold darkness.

He shuddered at the memory of the long river-ride to the next town, undrowned.

There, in the unkind murk of the river, he had held his breath until a blow against his bone-cage forced a gasp through his lips. Water that was air had filled him as he was dragged from Farhad.

His return had been slow, but afterwards, everyone in his village would rub his head in the hopes that the Goddess's favour would brush them too. At first, he had been proud of his survival, but now he felt the consequences. He just wanted to go home. He didn't want to be a warrior. The memory slipped aside as the hot press of the desert reasserted itself.

Hajari half ran, half slid down the dune in a wave of sand. At the base, he encountered leaves that were long and thick and smooth to the touch. He pinched one, brushed his fingers along its edge, finding its prickly lining. He did not know this plant that was too green to burn, and too scratchy to use as a blanket or covering.

He batted leaves, branches, and sharp brambles aside as he trekked towards the water. His mouth was too dry to salivate at the thought of the pending drink. Stings, a mixture of spiny greenery and irate insects, caught his legs and sides. A grainy cloud of insects swarmed him, buzzing at his blundering through their home. He slapped at the few daring enough to taste him, crushing their bodies against his skin.

He was almost there.

The promise of sweet, blue water was just beyond the green and orange of plants, sand, and stones. The thick vegetation parted and a low, flat rock stood between him and the water. Hajari stopped.

A brown snake with a yellow diamond pattern sat coiled on the stone. Scales overlapped above its eyes, like armoured horns. The snake was as long as his arm and as wide as two of his fingers. Its tail twitched. A pronged black tongue poked out of its broad flat head, flicking up and down, tasting the air.

Hajari swallowed, his heart quickening. He gripped his dagger and brought it up in front of his chest, with the blade point down. His heart was beating so hard it hurt. His breath was short. A chill grasped his spine, gnawing at the midday desert heat.

Ghilaod wouldn't have fled. Hajari's father always said that the only way a man could go was forward. Hajari wouldn't run, but he also didn't want to end like Ghilaod.

He shifted, hesitation thrumming through him.

The snake lifted its head. Hajari watched, his eyes growing wider and wider. Kill or fail. His throat was so dry.

He had survived being yanked into the river. He had survived his jealous brother Gamal pushing him in a second time. The Ishah had told him to survive the trial. Everyone said that a Myrjahn survived, and he was a Myrjahn.

The snake swayed towards him.

Hajari licked his bleeding lips. He rocked back and forth on his heels. So thirsty. There was no choice. He needed water. "*The desert desires death,*" the Ishah's words echoed in his head with all the solemnity of a funeral procession. "*Deny it and live.*"

He crouched down, his eyes locked with the snake's. His palm fumbled across the ground before it found a rock. He wrapped his fingers around it and stood. The rock was both cool and hot, sun and shade touched. Light and dark. Life and death.

Hajari threw the stone. The snake reared back, and the rock clipped its head. Distracting or dazing it, Hajari didn't know, but he would use this moment.

He leaped forward, and forced the blade through the top of the snake's head, then down, until the blade tip struck the boulder beneath them. His arm jerked to a halt.

The snake twisted and coiled, its tail striking against his arm. He held firm, his teeth bared, until the snake grew still.

He thought about his favourite story, the one about the greatest Myrjahn hero, Ghilaod. The hero had just saved glorious Myrjah from Halosian invaders, and then was bitten by his bride turned serpent. He was cast into death's underbelly, joining with the Dark One, and all that was cold and wrong in the world.

With his heart fluttering like a skittish animal, Hajari stood, winded and shaking. He didn't know when the trembling had started. He hacked the snake's head from its body; the stories claimed that snakes were only dead without their heads, so he didn't want to risk it. He dropped the blade, and then stumbled towards the water. The pool was more green than blue in colour than it had been from his vantage point atop the dune, and he waded into its middle. The water was cool and refreshing. It lapped the dust from his knees before he sat down with a loud splash. The pool's bed was silky. He cupped water in his hands and brought it to his lips.

Water wept through his fingers as he greedily slurped as much as he could into his mouth. It dribbled down his chin, a cool trickle that dripped onto his chest, soothing the scald of too much sun on his skin. Never had it tasted so cool, so clean, so delicious. He drank and drank and drank, until his thirst was sated.

He let his arms flop to his sides with a *splash*, basking in the oasis. He let the water wash away all the fear, all the tension, and all the feelings of injustice that had bloomed in him since dawn when he had been forced to start the desert trial. He did not want a military life. Yet, here he was, left alone to see if he was suited to fight alongside the Ishah of Farhad against all enemies, neighbouring or foreign. He didn't want to fight with monsters. He didn't want to play any part in bloody skirmishes like the recent one in the Ashar Grasslands.

Earlier that day, he had watched as the Sanshah rode towards the rising sun, away from him, her black plait swaying to her camel's gait. He was left to sand, stone, and dust. He wanted to go home. His mother had never allowed him into the desert beyond Farhad's walls. The empty desert whispered his mother's words: "*It is where the dead go, my Hajari.*" He had seen the sun-bleached bones on the orange outcroppings.

He refused to cry.

Hajari looked over his shoulder at the bisected snake. He was hungry. His mother had once grilled a snake that his eldest brother had caught. It had been tender yet flakey, sprinkled with cinnamon and drizzled with peach juice. He doubted he would find anything dry enough in the oasis to make a fire, but he was certain he could eat the snake. It couldn't be that much different from the raw fish that his eldest brother had tricked him into eating. His brother had said that only those who ate a raw fish could fish.

He licked his lips and stood, crawling onto the stone. It was hot against his palms and knees. The canister strapped around his neck scraped against the stone, sounding hollow. He grabbed his blade from near his kill and dragged it down the length of the

snake. Bone and skin parted from meat as he pared it with all the skill of a fisherman's son. He tossed the dark organs and head aside, not sure he could eat them, and lay out the remainder to dry in the sun.

*

The snake meat lasted six days, but he still had three days before he could unleash the green smoke from his canister to complete the trial. The final morsel of dried meat had soothed his belly at dawn, but with the darkening of the oasis, hunger returned.

He wondered how the heroic Rumil had managed his long run to the capital in time to warn the Rain Bringer of Illana invaders without pause for food. It had been an age since then, and long since Illana's decline. They said that Rumil had made the journey so quickly that the Rain Bringer was able to gather his forces, the thirteen Ishah-tribes of Myrjah. Their combined might decimated Nakyat's army moments after landing. No part of the story told how Fleetfooted Rumil survived a quarter lunar cycle in the desert. Hajari wondered if Rumil had felt this hunger too.

The rock was rough and cold as it pressed against his back. He shuddered. The rock spared him the chill of the wind, but could not protect him from the harsh cold of night. Never had cold seeped through him as thoroughly as it did now. It slithered through his veins like a toxin, numbing his fingers and toes. It tried to lull him to sleep, but he refused. It was better to rest in the heat of the day.

Hajari wanted to go home. To go nestle in warm blankets, and listen to stories. He missed those cool nights when he sought refuge between his mother and eldest brother. Perhaps Rumil had missed that too during his desert trek, and that was why he

had moved so fast through the desert. Hajari couldn't run, though. Speed wouldn't bring him closer to home, and he was no longer the same boy from his memories.

The boy that he had been never would have lurked naked in the chill of a desert night, using a rock for windbreak. He would never have had to dig a sand burrow in a fruitless search for warmth. The boy who he had once been was no more. He wasn't sure when it had happened, and Hajari couldn't help but wonder if the desert had changed Rumil too.

Only stubbornness kept the tears from his eyes. Arms coiled around his knees, he pressed his face against his arms, and wished for day to come. His hunger warred with sleepiness. Sunscalded skin did little to keep the warmth inside of him, and only made him colder. He envied the snakes their holes where they could retreat for warmth, sleep, and safety. And Rumil too, for running fast enough to leave this all behind.

"Mâdar," he whispered. He missed home and his mother, and her sweet peach scent. He clutched his knees.

Rustling, too loud for wind, startled him from his sinking thoughts. Hajari lifted his head and stared at the brush of his oasis. He stilled. His mouth cracked open, and he tasted the night. It tasted of damp stones, salt, dust, and a stench like a rug too long unbeaten. And something else that he didn't recognize.

Crunching, the brush shuddered side to side on a path through the greenery. Something was coming. He could taste a lingering sweat in the air.

Hajari tensed and unwound his arms. He had lasted this long in the trial, and he wasn't going to fail now. Not after all his effort. His fingers slithered around the hilt of

the bone-dagger. He slipped it free from the belt that he had fashioned from the skin of the snake he'd slain.

He shifted to his knees. He raised the weapon near his face, like a great fang poised to strike. A pause. He could taste it prowl nearer.

A muzzle pushed through night-blackened stalks before the beast halted.

Hajari recognized its features even in the dimness of the clouded-moon, as he had seen the same amongst the pelts that the sand-traders peddled. It had a long nose with pointed arrowhead ears. Its fur was inky on top and white beneath. A Myrjahn jackal. Its jaw parted, and teeth shone with saliva that caught the light.

The gap between them was as infinite as it was small. The world halted, as though he was faster than the tide of sand. Hajari's fear was strong, coiling inside him and ready to strike, but it was different than when he had faced the snake. This fear was tinged with excitement. A thrill coursed down his spine as he acknowledged this unexpected feeling. Two sensations pulsed through him now, driving away the chill.

His upper torso swayed side to side beneath the thrall of dual emotions. A breath slipped from between his lips. It sounded almost like a hiss. A warning. A goad. He wanted to play with the jackal. He wanted to best it. He wanted to kill it. He wanted it to fill his belly. He wanted to be what no one had ever been, and all of these strange sensations were new to him.

Neither blinked.

The jackal eased down, its limbs poised to pounce. Its clawed paws dug at the earth below, promising the same should flesh yield before them.

Hajari slipped his foot back until his bare sole pressed against the stone. His muscles tensed, mirroring his prey's movement. He understood the stalemate. The victor would be the swiftest. The fleetest. Hajari had only just tasted life. He craved more, and he would take it.

The jackal sprinted forward with a growl.

Hajari lashed out, his blade striking air.

The beast leaped back, missing the slash. It pivoted to the side and launched again.

Hajari propelled himself from the rock, and rolled under a snarling mouth that clacked together where his arm had previously been. Sharp nails snagged his arm, causing him to drop his blade. Heat sang from the scratch, stinging as he twisted over the wound, and sand snaked its way into the graze. He ended his roll and sprang to his hands and feet. He cast himself forward as the jackal turned back to strike anew, and caught the animal.

He coiled himself around the jackal, arms and legs clinging to keep it snared. The fur was softer than he had expected. Its neck twisted back, trying to bite. Spit from the jackal splashed him in thick, hot ropes. He clung to the beast, legs and arms constricting. They rolled. Brambles snagged their skin and fur. Rocks nicked them. Leaves slashed them. Blood met blood as the world tumbled around their locked body. The jackal thrust a paw between its neck and Hajari's arm. Claws scraped the underside of his jaw, and Hajari whipped his limb free. His wrist cracked against something cool and smooth protruding from the ground.

His gaze snapped to the side. The dropped dagger was under his freed arm. In that moment, he was Rumil, and the distance between his hand and the blade was the whole southern half of the desert. He crashed his other palm against the underside of the jackal's chops, snapping its jaw shut with a clack of teeth. His free hand darted forward. He clasped the hilt and plunged the bone-blade into the fleshy part of its neck. A whine-growl echoed.

Hajari dragged the blade out. A wave of heat coated his hand, and he struck again, forcing the blade deep. He squeezed the jackal in his grasp. Its struggles lessened, but did not relent. The sand grew warm and wet, and it clung to his skin like a sun-warmed blanket. Finally, the beast grew still.

Hajari slipped his fang-like blade free, slowly unwound his limbs from his kill, and leaned back. He pressed his palms into the dust as he gazed upwards at the wash of stars above. The dead trophy cooled on his lap. The air tasted of wet metal. His arms shook.

A grin split his face. He had done it. Hajari lived. He had survived what two great heroes could not: the serpent and the desert.

He sucked in deep breaths. The world around him was quiet. Still. No new tastes lingered in the air. The jackal had been alone. Hajari looked to his prize, the proof of his survival. Only the living could be heroes. Hunger gnawed at his belly. His mouth watered as he looked at his slain prey.

He still had three days until his trial was over. He was so hungry that he longed for nothing more than to swallow the beast whole, fur and all.

He lifted his blade, and sliced into the beast, hacking furred-skin from meat. He tossed bones and organs aside in a stinking heap that attracted a storm of buzzing insects that swallowed the previous silence in their frenzy. He brought the bloody meat towards his lips and ate until his belly was full. It was wet and stringy. But so deliciously warm that it sent heat snaking outwards from his belly to his limbs.

“Survive this, Hajari,” the Ishah had said, “and you will become a man that Myrjah will proudly boast. Do this, and you will make Myrjah as great as ever, and Farhad will shine as the greatest star.”

He would survive.

Satisfied with his wild feast, he set the remainder of his meat aside and dug his body into the sopping skin. Bloody flesh stuck to him, and the heat of his fresh kill seeped into his bones. The sensation was mildly irritating, but he didn't care. Warmth swathed him. He curled into a belly-down ball with no human flesh showing.

Full and warm, he rested his head on his forearms, and fell into sleep.

Chapter 2

The heart of the desert was lonelier than he had expected, even after all these years since his trial. Nothing lived. He couldn't even see the customary sun-whitened bones that decorated the rocky outcrops near the villages that skirted the outer edges of the desert. Everything had fallen away to heat-shimmers. It had been days since he and his charge had last seen an oasis while on this journey to deliver the Rain Bringer to his throne. Weeks since he'd seen the oasis that had sustained him throughout his childhood trial. His skin itched with sweat. His face still felt raw from yesterday's sand storm. He still had sand chaffing places that should never chafe, and the sun's relentless press increased his discomfort. Hajari imagined that they were the first to travel into the heart of the Artachsharta, and he wondered what their song would become.

He was certain that they were halfway to the capital, Halispar. Perhaps a month remained, and then his escort duty would be done. That day couldn't come soon enough. Staying with his charge would be the death of him, and he hadn't survived this long to lose it all for Haldis, the unworthy. He tugged at the dark, thin braid hanging by his left ear.

"I'm hungry." As though conjured by Hajari's thoughts, Haldis interrupted his contemplation.

"Then eat." He gazed skyward, wondering why the boy felt the need to announce things.

"I'm out of food."

Hajari started and pulled on his reins. Kaysar made a whine at the command. Hajari, ignoring his affronted camel, turned in his saddle and stared at the young man. “How can you be out of rations?”

“I ate them,” Haldis said as he reined to a stop, a frown on his sun-scalded face. His words had been slow, as though addressing a child who didn’t understand simple instructions.

“I know that your servants packed enough food to last the journey,” Hajari said with equal deliberateness. “I watched them.” His belly sunk, as he thought of the many times he saw the boy chewing.

Hindsight.

Hajari closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, hoping the air would blow away the rage-embers in his belly, but the deep breathing seemed to kindle rather than smother his temper. It wouldn’t do to strangle the boy. Not after a month of his life devoted to escorting the fool. That, and the fact that killing the Rain Bringer was the worst of all crimes.

“You carry the remainder of my food,” Haldis said.

Hajari’s nails dug into his palms. The sting was hotter than the desert air. Hajari couldn’t believe the audacity. “Kaysar carries my supplies, not yours,” Hajari said. “Kaysar was packed with enough food to last *me* for this journey. Aveh had enough for you.”

“I’m your Rain Bringer,” Haldis cut in. “Only the gods are more important than me, and as my servant, I demand that you give me your food.”

“I am no servant to you,” Hajari said. His words were sharp. “I am Nishah.” A snarl furled his lip. “And here, in the heart of the Artachsharta, I am the master of your life. Never forget that.”

He spied the boy’s throat bob. The boy needed to be a leader, not a master of servants. Hajari would show him.

The Rain Bringer may be the mercy of the Goddess granted to Myrjah, but he was meant to serve Myrjah, not injure Her. He would not suffer this fool to give ground to the whisperers of Myrjah’s decline.

Hajari looked heavenward. Clouds drifted by, lazy and shifting. The Rain Bringer was the icon of life and hope in these harsh lands. He was the wise guide, who brought the life-giving rain for the betterment of Myrjah. Hajari would break this boy and make him into the man Myrjah deserved. He’d make him a man worthy of remembrance.

“If he who leads takes everything from those he leads, then his followers will die, and he who leads will have no one left.” Hajari buried his anger. “A leader, no matter his own qualities, is nothing without followers.” He knew it well. The warriors of Farhad had followed him through much over his years as Nishah.

Haldis shifted in his saddle. “I’m sorry,” he said. His voice was quiet. His shoulders were slumped. “I never had to manage my own things before.”

Hajari let out a slow breath. “The Ishah and I have had many an argument over your upbringing,” Hajari said, as he tugged on his beard. In that moment, he knew he should have argued harder. Then again, he hadn’t been invested in the child or matters of the distant future.

“You argued?” Haldis asked. He lifted his head and turned his attention to Hajari. “Over me?”

“Of course,” Hajari said as his eyes returned to the desert, seeking any trace of life. They would need food to survive. “It isn’t every day that a Rain Bringer is born to our village. As Nishah, it is my job to be involved in all matters of importance to Farhad.”

“Then how is it that we’ve only met a few times prior to this? Why weren’t you there more during my child years?”

Hajari saw nothing edible around them. “The Ishah did not wish it.”

His supplies wouldn’t last them both.

“Why?”

“He never gave his reasons, and I did not press him.”

Kaysar stopped, jolting Hajari. Haldis and his camel followed suit.

Even in the unknown heart, Hajari knew the Artachsharta better than most, and in the space of a single breath he knew what Kaysar knew: that they weren’t alone. He imagined that this is how a hare feels, moments before the jackal ripped into its flesh. He tilted his head, left ear downwards, and listened.

Hajari hadn’t returned victorious so many times by abandoning instincts, his or Kaysar’s, in the desert.

“Haldis,” he called. He kept his voice quiet, but the urgency still carried. “We’re not alone.”

“Truly?” Haldis looked around. “Do you suppose they have food? Perhaps they are my escort from the capital.”

“We’re being hunted by a vargwyrn.” Dread coiled in his belly. The malachite shard strung around his neck felt heavier with his words. It felt as though he was bereft of something he hadn’t realized he had until the moment it was gone.

“I don’t see anything,” Haldis said. “Are you certain it’s a vargwyrn?” He was excited, like the child leaning closer to the storyteller.

Hajari clenched his jaw, and drew his blade while twisting in his saddle. The fingers of his other hand struck out and coiled around the Rain Bringer’s wrist, and he yanked the adolescent with all his strength, pulling him from atop Aveh.

Haldis squeaked and flailed a moment before he landed hard on Kaysar’s rump. “What—”

“Stay still,” Hajari ordered. “You attract far more problems than a corpse does flies.”

A cry, shrill and cruel, sliced through the air. Sand burst skywards.

A root-like head emerged atop the risen sand pillar. It was the brown of apples long forgotten in the sun, and smelt worse. Its scales were a fan of overlapping disks that looked akin to the armour that Daelions favoured. Three men with hands linked couldn’t hope to encircle it.

Sand rained down in a shower of hot and cold orange. Hajari used his left inner elbow to shield his eyes and nose as he slipped from Kaysar to the ground, rolled, then rose into a crouching stance. He knew this foe. Or, at least, its ilk.

Kaysar shuffled away, making space between him and the predator. Haldis pulled himself into a seated position, though his focus was on the bane of the desert rather than his own struggle to seat himself comfortably on Kaysar’s back hump.

The vargwyrms wriggled and twisted. It was a ghastly column garbed with fleshy roots, and lacking a head. Thick, twin branches split from the column-throat, and their ends were edged with teeth high as his knees. It pointed its slathering gullet towards Hajari in a boneless turn just as it swallowed. A thick lump travelled its throats before vanishing where the throat met the main body. It shot forward.

Hajari rolled to the side, creating a greater space between him and his frozen charge. It wouldn't do to have come this far only to have his charge crushed in a skirmish. He sprung back to his feet as the vargwyrms burrowed back into the sand, its serpentine tail sealing the hole behind it.

Hajari growled as he crouched low, and turned his ear downward once more.

"Where'd it go?" Haldis asked. His was higher than its normal cracking, and close. Haldis had dismounted and stood in the open sand between Kaysar and Hajari.

Hajari tossed him a glare that he hoped conveyed the order to stay still, and then resumed listening. From experience, he knew that vargwyrms do not pass through the ground like any other burrowing creature. Beneath the sand, they make no holes or tunnels. They seem to pass through it as a spirit, and they only throw sand or dirt to distract, blind, or startle their prey. Yet a soft noise always echoed from beneath the sands wherein they lurked, as though it was their very bloodlust given voice.

He snarled, his teeth bared as his eyes combed the sands. He shifted his foot, disturbing the sand beneath his heel. Calling for it. Taunting it. As he had done with the much greater vargwyrms, Faridoon, years ago.

Sand pelted his back. He spun, drawing his blade forth in an arc. He twisted around. Sand sprayed his side as the beast's maw missed him by a handbreadth. Several

flesh-roots knocked his side, whipping him like cloth loose in a sandstorm. He slipped his sword forward, ignoring the sting, and the tip caught a ridge on the scale, bouncing with a spark.

He struck again, and with a shriek, the tip of his blade broke. The jagged edge of his weapon scored the side of the vargwyrn before it slipped back into the sand.

Hajari stared at his ruined weapon. He was angry. It had been a gift from his Ishah upon Hajari's appointment as Nishah. It was the blade that took down the traitor. It was the blade that took down the great Faridoon.

The sand beneath his heels trembled, and he slipped his feet wide and crouched low, just as the sand sprayed up from below him, blinding him. He felt the solid ridge of the mouth beneath his feet as he rose upwards into the air, fortunate in his avoidance of the teeth. The mouth quivered beneath his feet, trying to dislodge him so it could feed, but its mouth wasn't so wide that it could unbalance him.

He blinked the sand from his eyes just as a rush of air had him raise his blade. He deflected a swipe from the second arm, severing a handful of root-growths that rained down into the maw beneath his spread feet. The growths were the only part of its body not scaled with the too strong armour.

Hajari glanced downwards at the throat swallowing the pieces he had severed. He grinned at the thrill, just as the second arm made another attempt. He deflected that too, in a shower of sparks from metal meeting the armoured section he had shaved in the last attack.

Taking a deep breath, he brought his feet together, and slid down, down, down. The teeth clacked above his head as he was engulfed in the spongy slick of the

vargwyrms' throat. He struggled to aim his damaged blade, but soon he slashed and jabbed, slicing his way down through the compulsively swallowing mass around him. He cut and thrashed, until his lungs burned from the effort, but then it was gone. The spongy slick became hot sand, and he tumbled freely down to the ground. He rolled, rising at the end in a crouch, as the crumbled remains of the slain vargwyrms coated the orange of the desert nearest him.

Hajari stood, glad that the thick sludge of innards had vanished with the beast.

Haldis walked over so that he could peer at the vargwyrms, though he was careful to keep Hajari between the beast and his person. "I thought you died. I thought *I* was going to die." He trembled.

Hajari shook his head at the Rain Bringer. "Not today."

Haldis brought his toes up and nudged the dark sand that had been a great foe.

"I thought they only lived in the bloodied sands surrounding the old capital?" Haldis asked. He spun away from the remains of their assailant, and began walking towards Hajari.

Hajari mounted Kaysar. "Some venture out."

"But this is so far!"

"Humans and beasts all travel, so why shouldn't monsters?"

Haldis stared at him. "You *are* sun-touched," he proclaimed loudly, as he shook his head. He stared at Hajari with pity, and something else that the Nishah could not identify. It made him uneasy.

Haldis stopped mid-motion, his eyes going wide. With a strange sound, Haldis lurched forward, his fingers curling around the sleeve of Hajari's clothes.

Hajari swore as he was pulled forward. He spun, thrusting his blade, and in a swirl of unbroken movement, he lopped a much smaller vargwyrm asunder. It fell to dust the moment his blade was freed.

Hajari froze, his broken blade high in the air. The cracks spidering from the break caught the sun like liquid fire.

He stared at the dark brown sand settling over the orange. He hadn't sensed that one. He felt a chill at the thought of his almost death. He had witnessed many a good warrior killed a heartbeat after recognizing they were yet alive, because that was the nature of battle. Even the best could fall in a moment through an ill-casting of luck. That he would have died there had the boy—Haldis—not chosen to save him. His hand shook enough that it took him a few breaths to sheathe his blade. He swallowed before turning to a pale Haldis.

Hajari lowered his head in a deep nod to show his gratitude. "Thank you," he said. He gifted him a little smile. "Perhaps there is hope yet for you."

Chapter 3

Mercurial droplets scurried over the sand, catching the dying sun and filling the desert floor with stars. Up close, a droplet ran on four of its six long legs. The ant dragged a beetle's body.

Some hunters were lucky. Hajari was less fortunate this day in finding food to sustain both him and his charge for the remainder of their journey to the capital. Chill-bumps ghosted over his sides as a cool wind breathed along his neck where the worn cloth of his desert robes had pulled away from his skin. He turned and marched to the growl of his hunger's war-drum back towards camp.

He'd trade anything to be home and seated at his commander's table. Hajari could almost smell the cinnamon that Kayu favoured. He could almost taste the succulent spread. The thought of meat made his mouth water.

Hajari crested a dune just as the sun slipped below the horizon. His camp sat before a series of sandstone outcroppings smoothed by wind and shaped like hair combed over a balding scalp. The shape made it an ideal spot to lay the dead to feed the scavengers.

Haldis was there, back against the stone, face resting on his knees. A small fire, more smoke than flame, crackled near the youth's feet.

Hajari's hunger paused in its noise, as though it had just sipped a draught of dread. He tore his gaze from his charge and surveyed the area. Kaysar wasn't there. Neither was his pack.

Hajari lurched forwards, straining his ears for the familiar sound of Kaysar, the camel he had tamed when he'd been lost on his second voyage into the desert, but only heard himself, and not his long-time companion.

Not since their first meeting had Hajari been alone in the Artachsharta.

When he reached the bottom, he stalked forward and under the looming outcropping of sandstone, and then paused before his charge.

The boy hadn't moved. He didn't seem to have even noticed Hajari's approach.

Hajari stared down at the boy. "Where is Kaysar?" he asked. His tone was light, hiding his ire. Kaysar was dearer to him than most people.

Haldis started. "Hajari!"

Hajari moved his head to the side, his finger trailing over the worn cloth that bound the hilt of his blade. He didn't blink. He needed an answer.

"I didn't mean to," Haldis blurted. Blue eyes darted to Hajari's hand. "Kaysar's attitude is worse than yours when you are hungry." He grasped a handful of sand and let it spill out from his clenched fist. "Your beast wouldn't let me take anything from your pack."

"I told you that you were only to eat upon my return."

Haldis flinched. "You took forever. I was hungry and had nothing to do." He brushed his palm on his tunic. "What did you gather while hunting?" He eyed Hajari, as though expecting to find food.

"Nothing," Hajari said. "There was no game to be found." He moved his hand from his blade to his beard. It itched. He longed for a razor. Beards didn't suit him. "What did you do to Kaysar?"

“Your brute bit me, so I hit it.”

“He wouldn’t have run for that.”

“He did,” Haldis crossed his arms and met Hajari’s gaze.

Hajari didn’t believe him. “You drove off our supplies and our remaining mount,” he said, as he sat down beside the fire. Kaysar would make it home. Hajari knew this, but his own survival wasn’t so clear. His anger lost to hunger. “Now, we have nothing.” A Myrjahn survived, and if he failed...

“I didn’t mean to,” Haldis said, his voice small.

“Kaysar will return home, and when Kayu sees my pack atop of him, he will know I have failed.” Hajari looked at the smoke. “When you do not arrive in the capital, they will send out riders.” He pulled his water bladder from his side and untied the top. “I wonder if the sands will consume our corpses before they can find you.” He drank deeply to quench his hunger.

Haldis said nothing.

“With your ability to make the sky weep, we’ll last at least three more days.”

Hajari secured his water skin. “If we do not find food within that time, then we’d best hope for a quick death.” He was tired. He wanted to sleep now, his belly quieted by the trick.

Hajari moved onto his back and crossed his arms behind his head. The sky was growing inky, and specks of light lined the darkness, like those ants he had watched. Maybe he should have stolen that beetle and eaten it. Delirium would be preferable to starvation.

He dreamt of cinnamon and warm hands that took him beyond the stars.

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Hajari woke. His hunger was like a jackal with a bone, determined and vicious. Worse than old Ishah Ralikai at his height. The sky was losing its darkness. He sat up and rubbed the sand from his skin. He glanced to the side where his charge slept curled into a ball. Light snores flowed from the youth.

Hajari stood and stretched. His joints cracked, and a breath of delight escaped him as the stiffness fled his flesh. Hunger reasserted itself. He felt as though something was hollowing him out, layer by agonizing layer.

“Haldis,” he called. He used his toe to nudge the youth. “We’d best keep moving.” He looked westward, where night still lingered.

A groan slipped from Haldis. “I’m dying,” the adolescent said. “Tell me you’ve found something to eat.” He uncurled. “There’s nothing I wouldn’t eat at this point.”

“If we move, we may come across food.”

“I’m too hungry to move.” Haldis said as he glowered at the sand. “Can I eat sand?”

“Don’t be daft,” Hajari chided. “If you don’t move, you’ll die here.” Hajari grabbed his water-skin from his side. “We need water.” He tossed it to Haldis, it bounced off his head.

“Ouch!” Haldis rubbed his head. “Just for that I shouldn’t give you any water.” He leaned back and opened his mouth wide, as though to scream. There, above his lips, like a rising mist, grew a cloud. Water fell from the miniature cloud, landing in the Rain Bringer’s mouth at a steady trickle. The boy gulped down water, sating his thirst.

Hajari watched. Though he hated the boy more often than not, he had to admit that the ability was intriguing. Somehow, Haldis could conjure up rain clouds as easily as men breathe. It was a chilling power. It brought to mind a particular tale of one of the earliest known Rain Bringers: Tahmuras, the last ruler of the lost capital.

Little of the Thirteenth Rain Bringer had survived the ages since, but it was said that in a fit of ire he denied his people water. Then, when they were near death, he used his power to form rainclouds in the dying, and from their bodies sprang blood-rain. He doubted the story.

Hajari had never seen the blood-sands of legends, but he had heard sand-traders speak of the dark red sands that surround the ruins of the once capital. They said those sands were haunted, and that none who ventured in returned.

Something heavy thumped and wobbled against his chest. Hajari started and fumbled with his full water-skin. He would have glared at the youth, but secretly Hajari felt that he deserved that for having hit the boy with it initially. "Thank you," Hajari said, glad for a reliable water source. Not that it would do them much good without food.

His mood soured. "Let's move."

"So commanding," Haldis said, quiet enough to be a whisper, but loud enough to carry as he followed. "How can you expect me to march in this heat with no food? It's unnatural."

"If you hate the heat, then make it a cloudy day," Hajari called back, his eyes roving the sky for clouds. There were none.

“If I did that, it would rain,” Haldis lectured. “I, the Rain Bringer, bring rain, not cloud coverage. It’s in the title. If I call up enough clouds to cover the sun, we’d be trudging through sopping wet sand. That’d be worse than marching through the heat.” He drew up beside Hajari. “The desert’s horrid.”

Hajari drew in a breath and held it for five steps. This was going to be one of the brat’s chatty days. Hajari wished the boy were in one of his brooding moods. Those days were so much more peaceful. If wishes were peaches, he’d be a fat man, and gladly so.

“Do you suppose the goddess blessed the Rain Bringer to oppose the desert?” Haldis cut in.

Hajari wished Haldis would stop. There was no point in debating over the purpose of one’s existence. People just are—simple as that.

“It falls to me to know these things. My people will be looking to me for guidance and answers.”

“Indeed, now shut your mouth,” Hajari said, hating conversations such as these. The air was already getting hot, and he was hungry. He could eat anything, and with that thought, he tuned out the boy’s continued noises.

Maybe he should have tried those ants. They were said to create hallucinations in those that ate them, but Hajari was tempted, and consequences seemed too far away with hunger so pressing. It was no surprise that he couldn’t spot a single silver droplet over the orange.

Hajari didn’t see any life, and it was discouraging. If only the boy was the Food-Bringer. Then, they could eat cinnamon crusted fish grilled to perfection. Or perhaps

some chicken with orange juice squeezed over it. Or an armful of succulent peaches with goat cheese. His mouth watered at the thought of what a Food-Bringer could offer him.

“Are you listening to me?” A hand nudged his arm.

Hajari narrowed his eyes at the youth. “I was counting your shortcomings,” Hajari said. “Cease adding to them, and allow me peace. If I’m to die of starvation caused by your stupidity, I’d rather do so without your inane noises.”

“Why are you so prickly?” Haldis asked. His back stiffened. “Everyone in the village said that you were kind and great.” He clenched his fists at his side. “They said you were the stuff that people make legends of: favoured by the Goddess, gifted in warfare, slayer of the rogue vargwyrms, and protector of Farhad. But you are just the opposite.” The boy stalked ahead.

Hajari glared at the boy’s narrow shoulders. “You bring out my worst nature.” He smiled at his victory, but his stomach ate his joy.

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The sun slid downwards. The day had been hotter than the last. He squeezed his water-skin. It wheezed putrid air.

“I need more water,” Hajari said. He pinched the top of his hand. The skin stayed up a moment before it resettled. Too little water. At the corner of his sight, hazy shapes moved. Green and grey. No matter how far he turned his head, he could never focus on them. Spirits. Lost ones, most likely. They said that those nearing death were able to see the dead more clearly than the living could, and he had never felt so close as he was in the moment. Even the surprise vargwyrms attack hadn’t felt this dangerous.

“Haldis,” he called. “Water.”

“No water until you get me food,” Haldis said over his shoulder. His tone was cold. “I shouldn’t be the only one to provide for us. I have water, and so I can drink my fill. You have no water, so you can drink dust. That, or give me food.”

Rage smoldered in his belly as the hope he once felt cracked beneath the ultimatum. He dreaded, in that moment, that Haldis would be no better than Tahmuras. No better than a master of slaves. Myrjah wasn’t meant to be shackled so. His vision narrowed on the thin neck. He stalked forward, determination spurring his steps. The image of the betrayer, Farhad’s last Sanshah, overlapped Haldis—a long braid swaying in the wind that wasn’t.

Unnoticed, he closed the distance between the two. He grabbed bony shoulders and spun his charge around.

Haldis screamed, his arms flying.

“You’d have it so that should game appear, I’d be too weak to catch it?”

Surprised eyes met his. “What are you doing?” His expression was frustration, confusion, and a touch of doubt.

“Give me water,” Hajari commanded. Thirst matched his hunger

“I told you I won’t until you give me food!”

Small hands clawed at his, trying to pry them from too thin shoulders. His fingers pressed deeper.

“That hurts! Release me, now!” Haldis twisted as though to pull free. He stomped his foot on his captor’s, but still Hajari did not release him.

“Water!” He barked, shaking the youth.

“Food!” Haldis screeched back, thrusting his face close to Haldis’.

He struck the boy.

“I’ll have you thrown in the deepest, darkest, dankest hole I can find when we get to the capital,” Haldis seethed. “For that, you’ll never see day again.” He held his injured cheek. “I could have you killed.”

Hajari stopped listening. This boy would go nowhere. His hope shattered like the last jar of oil on the hearthstone during the longest night. It stung, like a blade thrust deep. He couldn’t let this *boy* ruin him. Ruin Kayu’s dream of a grander Myrjah and a greater Farhad. Ruin his own hope of seeing the great Myrjah of old restored.

His hand snaked forward and grabbed the youth’s throat, changing his threats to gurgles. The sun-baked face grew red, then darkened. He wouldn’t. He couldn’t. He refused to die for this fool, not after having come so far. He *always* survived.

Hajari knew what he was doing, even though his mind was far apart from his flesh. He’d commit the one crime forbidden under the Artachsharta rule of survival above all else.

Fingers scrambled against his constricting hand. Nails bit into flesh.

He was so thirsty. So hungry. All that stood between him and relief was this whelp who thought himself the pit at the heart of a peach. The betrayer was the obstacle to his survival, and if the fool were any other Myrjahn, none would question Hajari’s choice.

He swallowed. His throat stuck from the effort. Had Haldis not chosen to deny him water, Hajari would still be willing to take him to the capital. No more. He wouldn’t die for a fool, and he needed to quench the pain.

Blue eyes stared. Terror.

He loosened his hold. A gasp sang through the air, but he kept his hand in place. He was thirsty. Hungry. He brought his face closer, staring into eyes with popped veins that seemed so red against the blue.

Hajari needed to feed the monster that was eating him, and destroy the one who sought his destruction. His teeth sank into flesh. The taste of iron slid over his tongue. His prey cried out and struggled harder.

Teeth ripped. Weakening limbs protested. He fought them back, and ripped, and chewed, and swallowed. His belly warmed. The fluid did little to calm his thirst, but the food was quelling the pain, mouthful by mouthful.

If only the dish had more cinnamon. But the catch was so tasty. He swallowed another mouthful. Kayu's feasts were extraordinary.

He was so full. It felt so good. Sand bit into his knees. He didn't know why he was kneeling. He should have been seated at a table. He blinked. Orange filtered into his eyes. The world was burning.

His face felt hot and sticky. He must have made a mess. He reached up, and rubbed at the stickiness. Hajari pulled his hand away and looked at it. He paused. Blood coated his hand. He looked past splayed fingers and saw blue eyes staring up at him.

Lifeless.

Hajari had eaten his charge. He had killed the Rain Bringer. He had doomed his village. His mother. Kayu.

He had doomed them all, but he had survived. A gurgling laugh, acidic like bile, slipped from bloodied lips.

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Hajari walked through the night. One step in front of the other through dusk, twilight, and then dawn. They would say that he'd done something too terrible for rest or sleep, that murder outside of warfare left a mark that could never be removed, but he wasn't sure that was true.

He knew that murder above the laws of survival was a sentence to be erased, like footprints in blowing sand. Slaying the Rain Bringer was even worse.

Blue eyes sat behind his eyelids. A ghost, staring in horror, as the realization of death struck the specter. Hunger sated, he felt a whisper of guilt, like a breeze through distant cloth. He didn't feel guilty for surviving, nor for glutting himself on fresh meat. The whisper was for a boy ended too soon, but then the pain of Haldis' betrayal, the shattering of hope, reasserted itself.

Hajari recalled how he had ripped the green shard from his neck and placed it in Haldis' cooling hand. Now, at least, the boy's spirit wouldn't be lost to these dunes, unlike his bones. Haldis' spirit would find the holy mountain.

He had walked away from the gore of his feast, as though it had just been another meal at Kayu's table.

The first and last Rain Bringer slayer had lived a hundred years ago. His name stricken from knowledge. His reward was to be bound to two ladders, and hacked apart lengthwise with a blade, before his bisected corpse was paraded about Halispar. He admired the poetry of it.

As a greater punishment, the army had invaded and obliterated the man's town. No names survived. Now the town was a ruin filled with outcasts. A husk for forgotten souls. Those whose corpses had been tossed into the desert without their guide stones. Lost ones denied the very heavens. He did not want that for Farhad. For his mother. For his Ishah.

"You've destroyed us," his Ishah said.

Hajari glanced at the ghost beside him. His commander was a green-brown blob. A hallucination. Yet the man spoke the truth. He always did.

"You should have left me to fishing," Hajari said. "Ignored my inability to drown. Farhad would have been better for it."

"Perhaps." The ghost gained form, and his commander stood there beside him, his dark gaze peering into the depth of the desert. Just like the day Hajari had departed on this ill-starred journey. "Yet, what would Farhad have been without you?"

The ghost paused, as though weighing its words. "You had so much promise. I saw that the moment you were returned to the village, the first time you fell into the river, but I thought you were still a boy yet, too young, and so I sat back and watched. Then you survived a second time. When you returned, I knew the goddess intended much for you. When I sat with your parents to argue for them to permit the trial, I saw something great in you."

Hajari stumbled. He licked his cracked lips. His throat was dry, but his belly felt full of stones. "Leave me to die." He grasped for the shard that was no longer there. Only the Dark One would take him now. Even the Goddess, the temperance between the warring Brothers, wouldn't accept him into Her oasis.

To the side, he saw old Ralikai sitting cross-legged, his severed head upside down on his lap. “I still can’t figure how you managed to beat me, whelp,” he said, as he flung his brain aside to flop in the sand, while his free hand moved wrist deep in his head, seeking that persistent itch. “That feels better.”

“You don’t deserve such an easy death,” the Ishah said, as he drew his blade and levelled it towards the beheaded ghost. “Though, for all your skills and luck, I never thought you’d die so low.” He sounded disappointed. “To think, the Great Hajari, hero of the Qatur uprising, defeater of the rogue Faridoon, and the next in line for Ishah, would have so ruined himself. If only your enemies had known that you were your own undoing.” He glanced at the beheaded ghost, who began to laugh.

In the distance, Hajari saw his much younger self, racing towards the Holy Mountain with the traitorous Sanshah at his back, her dark braid flying behind her, while her curved blade drew ever nearer his back.

“Hajari,” his mother called. She placed her shadowy hand on his shoulder. It felt cool in the heat.

“Have I killed you already?” Hajari asked. His heart ached.

“Not yet,” she said. “But, you did wrong.” Her disappointment cut him. It left him little more than a boy, standing before his mother after breaking their only jar.

“I know,” Hajari whispered. He was too dehydrated to cry. The lack of tears made the sting worse. “I’m sorry.” He wasn’t apologizing for Haldis though, only for upsetting her. At least the naked little boy crouched in the sand nearby could cry the tears that Hajari could not, huddled in his fresh-stolen skins.

“I know, my Hajari,” she said.

Hajari glared up at the sun.

“Go to the capital.”

“I know my fate if I step into that city without Haldis.” He ascended a high dune, the progress slow. “Why should I go? Here is an easier place to die.” The thought sat uneasily in him: he hadn’t survived so long to die here.

A black shadow leapt over his foot and vanished.

His mother’s image cleared at his side. Warm eyes lined by age met his. She smiled. “And when have you ever walked the easy trail, my Hajari? When have you ever let Farhad down?”

“I’ll die before I reach the capital,” he whispered.

“That’s why it appeals to you as a course of action: the challenge.” She walked so easily up the steep sand-hill. The folds of her yellow pants swept the sand, but left no trail behind. “You owe the boy that much, Hajari.”

He disagreed. He owed Haldis nothing. His payment for nourishment had been the shard, a pass into the heavens. “They’ll kill me. Then you.”

A tall stranger stared at him from afar.

“They will. A death fitting your crime. We, your family, will die a death suited to your crimes. All of Myrjah will know the drought of the Goddess’ ire. Farhad will have never been.”

Breathing hard, he crested the sand mound. There, he paused. The capital, Halispar, stood in the distance. Black stone in a sea of orange. It was massive, larger than any dwelling he had even seen, ever imagined. Not even the city in the hollow of

the holy mountain compared to the capital. He could see where the harsh orange sands gave way to brown and burnt-green near the river's edge and before the city.

A hand the colour of old blood sat partly-buried in the sand.

"It will take two days yet to reach," Hajari said. "I cannot last that long without water." Laughter bubbled in his throat, dry and hoarse to his ears. "I'll not die of starvation. I, who killed the Rain-Bringer, will die from lack of water. A fitting end."

A small figure crashed into his leg. Hajari stumbled to a halt as he looked down at the child clutching his garments between pale fingers. Wide blue eyes stared up at him. "I'm afraid," said the child.

After a couple of breaths, Hajari remembered this moment from years ago. It had been his turn to guard the child, the future Rain Bringer, from kidnappers in the night. The boy had been prone to night terrors. "Let me go with you."

Hajari felt a sharp grin split his face. "It's too late for that," he said, as he set his hand upon the child's head. Haldi fell to dust.

"You haven't failed us yet, so go," his Ishah commanded. "You've never shied from danger or pain."

Hajari's dark humour died. He turned to his left to stare at the man. Here, though, he felt no power beneath the command. He felt no desire to admit his crimes. Surviving was not more a crime than living. Farhad and Myrjah deserved better than that boy. He wouldn't see it ruined now.

He remembered the day of his departure. Kayu had not looked at him once that day. Hajari wondered if his Ishah had known what would happen.

“As you command,” Hajari said, though he knew his words were a lie. He would never admit to killing the Rain Bringer. Hajari began his descent. He had obeyed the final command. He had escorted the Rain Bringer, and it was done.

*

His ghosts had fallen silent with the sun’s peak. Hajari supposed that they too felt his lack of water. That, or perhaps they felt the dying needed some measure of peace. The capital didn’t seem any closer than before. If anything, it seemed further.

With the silence of his shades, darkness had begun creeping in at the edges of his vision. The dark ate at his sight, and now with the sun on a downward arc he felt as though he stood at the mouth of a cave, looking outwards.

A jolt of pain lashed up his right leg. The muscles clamped down and he fell to his knees while his leg shuddered with pain. He couldn’t straighten the limb through the intensity of the fit.

It burned. He bit his lip hard and took measured breaths as he rode out the cramp and the seizing agony.

He didn’t know how long he stayed there. When the cramping stopped, only a dull throb remained in its place to remind him. He didn’t move. He didn’t open his eyes. The sudden pain had left him tired, too tired. Hajari didn’t have it in him to pull himself up.

Maybe the cold and dark of death that he had once dreaded would be a welcome reprieve.

He only wished he could have one last sip of water. Hajari imagined water. Cool and blue and soothing. That first oasis during his trial. He could almost smell its fresh, clean scent. He could almost hear water falling like rain. He could almost feel it running over his abused body. The conjuring of a dying man.

Around him, the searing orange became a muted brown as the darkening grey ate the sky. The dips in the sand filled like little cups given too much water. He opened his mouth and drew in a breath, tasting the water in the air.

In the growing puddle, he met a face that wasn't his own. Or it was, just a version he hadn't seen in a score of years. His age lines were smoothed away, the scar he earned half a decade ago no longer crossed his right eyebrow in a jagged line, and his beard had left him without him being any other wiser. There was one thing wrong with his young reflection. Gone were the yellow-orange of his eyes, and in their place were Haldis' blue.

The blue of the Rain Bringer.

Hajari laughed. The sound loud and high amidst the rain. He understood now what he was as the answer that had chased the edges of his mind since his childhood trial has finally allowed itself to be seen. He had eaten a raw fish and survived the river as only a fish could. He had eaten a raw snake and then killed a jackal in the manner of a snake. Then he had eaten a raw jackal and learned to stalk, to hunt, and to kill as only a jackal could. Now, he had eaten Haldis, and the boy's power and youth were his.

He would let Hajari go. He would become who Haldis should have been. No one in the capital knew Haldis' face. He would make Myrjah the place that his Ishah had

spoken of beneath the stars so many years ago. So there he let Hajari slip away to the lull of water and footsteps in the sand.

AESON

Interlude Chapter

The cave reeked worse than the cesspit beside his village-that-no-longer-was. Dea had pushed him in once, almost drowning him in filth, so he knew, and he had hated being unclean since. Here, precious few spaces were left unspoiled, and he was lucky enough to be curled up on one such spot. He just wished that the smell would respect his clean area boundary, and then maybe he could finally sleep like everyone else looked to be.

Through the half-dead light of the campfire that was heat-steeping the stink, he could see the dozen or so figures curled up like him on the floor with hands and feet bound. He didn't know any of them. His rope-raw wrists reminded him with every beat of his heart that he was alone. He couldn't remember a time where he went so long without his mom to comfort him through his pain. He wanted to cry. Everyone had said that he cried too much, too easily, but here he knew crying didn't work. Crying wouldn't undo the knife that had unseamed his mum. And it wouldn't stop them from hurting him.

Aeson wanted to do something, but he knew he couldn't, as a young captive among slavers. For all his mum had claimed he was growing like a weed, he was still too little. Built like a twig, his uncle had teased: short, thin, and knobby-kneed. He didn't stand a chance against even one of his captors, let alone the half-score of men whose arms were thicker than his body.

One of the slavers prowled around the cave, his club-arms swaying side to side with each step, watching them. Aeson had met his gaze a few times throughout the

course of the day, but the man ignored. He took pride in never being the first to look away—he wasn't meek.

A grunt and the scuffing of something being dragged sounded over the light snores of the prisoners.

He looked towards the sagged mouth of the cave, where he recognized the brawny and hairy form of one of his captors dragging a person, who was taller than any person he'd ever seen or imagined, bound hand and foot. The scuffing noise was the newest prisoner's feet dragging across the stone.

The prowling slaver approached the duo, causing Aeson to tense as they drew near his spot.

“Where'd you find this one?”

“Making for the Steppes.”

Aeson started at that. He hadn't realized they were that close yet. His uncle told him that bones from the last war with the Myrjahns could still be found in the Steppes. He wanted to see them.

“I hear that the new ruler is lenient with these Halosians. Lord Haldis, was it?”

“They call them Rain Bringers, not lords.”

“How'd you know?”

“Did work in Halispar a few years back—when that Haldis was found half-dead of thirst after losing his escort to a vargwyr. They wouldn't stop nattering about that and their drought—hear they haven't recovered from it yet.”

The man threw the person to the ground a hand-span from Aeson's space, and then stalked from the cave with the guardsman following. "It's a silly title." Their naked backs were sweaty in the lingering light as they bickered their way out of the cave.

If slavers were free to work around the Steppes, he guessed that meant that they and the Myrjahns had pulled out of the area again. Otherwise they'd have been caught, and he'd be home. He wondered if that meant a new war.

With a groan that was distinctively female, the newest prisoner sat up, drawing Aeson's attention.

Aeson's gaze met hers, and the woman paused, as though surprised by his scrutiny. Her features were local Halosian, distinctive even with her unusually dark tan. Her hair was short and dark, neat despite the rough treatment, unlike his own that always resembled a bird's nest on his better days. Her eyes were either grey or blue—he couldn't tell through the clinging shadows, but he liked to think they were grey like his. Like his mum's.

"Where are we?" Her voice was little more than a whisper as she brought her bound hands up and touched her fingers to a slow-bleeding bump on her temple.

He shrugged a shoulder, feeling terrible for the slight relief he felt at not being the only one in pain. "Don't really know. They moved me here at night, so it's hard to say, but I don't think I've walked enough to be too far east of the Steppes." This was the first prisoner to speak to him, but she was also the newest after him. That's probably why he had answered, he realized—he was lonely.

The woman frowned, her sharp features severe, and for a moment he was reminded of the one hazy memory he had of his father wearing that same expression, but

he couldn't quite place the memory. "East would take us too close to Aiastes. They could never move this many by the shadow capital unnoticed. Especially by night."

Aeson stared. He knew that she wasn't talking to him, and he didn't really understand what she was saying, but it was nice to hear someone respond to something he had said. The last time had been six days ago, when his mum had—he shook that aside, his throat burning.

Footsteps came from the cave-mouth. Aeson looked towards the four men there. He realized he had gotten no sleep that day.

"Up!" the hairiest of the four slavers said. "I said: up!" He kicked a nearby figure, resulting in a yelp, as the captives of the cave stirred.

Aeson pushed himself up while the other prisoners likewise roused and rose around him. He noticed that he barely reached mid-thigh to the newest prisoner, and that realization stunned him for a moment. He wondered if giants really did exist like in his mum's stories.

"Move out, you lot."

Aeson jerked out of his astonishment and shuffled forwards. It was hard moving with bound feet. He could feel the scabs on his elbows and knees, earned from their nighttime drive.

He glanced at the woman. She was eyeing the slavers with the same look his uncle had reserved for naughty children, and Aeson couldn't help but admire her boldness. He ducked his head and smiled, wondering if he could be brave like her someday. Then, maybe, he wouldn't have to lose anyone else he cared about, like his mum and uncle. Or even Dea.

He'd stick by this stranger, he decided. Maybe that way he could meet other giants. Or become strong. His tongue poked out between his lips as he focused on getting his shuffle-steps to match hers.

The woman looked at him, noticing what he was doing, and she slowed her pace a fraction.

He smiled at her, though his face was downturned. She was kind even with that stern face from earlier. He liked to think his dad had been too.

The moon above was scarcely more than a sliver, and very little of that light slipped through the dense foliage of the shadow province. Aeson gave into dark feelings again, his lower lip poking out as he realized how hard this night-march would be. And painful—he ached enough as it was, and he really didn't want more pain.

“Do they honestly expect us to travel like this?” the woman asked him, half bent over, with her mouth close to his ear to avoid notice.

Aeson hummed his confirmation, hoping to impart a good impression on her. “I don't think they want people to notice slavers have come so far in, so they are trying to hide us.” His uncle had said something about people disappearing, but he had claimed it the work of shadows, not of slavers, since they weren't near the sea.

“Where'd they take you from?”

“Riverstown,” Aeson said. “It wasn't very big. I was the only one they took—I don't know why.” His throat ached, and he could still taste the ashes of his home.

The woman tilted her head to the side. Aeson thought that she looked like one of those adults that knew everything.

The cluster of slaves was prodded onwards, and Aeson did his best to stay close to the woman with whom he felt a kinship. The group's slow pace was tough for him, but he was nothing if not stubborn, and his phantom-stinging cheek warned him not to fall behind again.

They scurried on and Aeson lost count of all the times someone fell by the time the moon sat at her highest. He had fallen twice. He could feel the hot stickiness of blood down his right leg, and he guessed he had cut his knee badly on that last fall. Every step since had hurt, but he tried his best to ignore it.

The woman hadn't fallen once, and he was equal parts awed and envious at her grace. His uncle had always said he was all thumbs at things, and Dea would tease him for getting hurt over the silliest things. Like that time with that rabbit.

A sharp crack, like a heavy branch being snapped beneath a bull's hoof, shot through the woods and chased the memories away. He jumped in surprise, nearly falling over.

Everyone stopped.

The woman nudged her leg against him, the hit enough to make him trip with his wobbling balance and his bound feet. He pitched sideways with a heavy breath as he landed in a leafy bush. He was glad, he supposed, that he hadn't landed on his knee again. He just hoped that there were no fire-leaves in the bush; otherwise, he might end up like Kissos on his wedding night.

"What—" He paused mid-outburst. His hurt warred with his earlier admiration.

There, at about where his head had been, was something swaying like a pendulum in the almost dark. It took him a moment to recognize that wriggling red-

black hand that twitched like a half-crushed bug. It dangled and spun on its chunky cord that stretched up into the trees. “Oh.” He remembered one back home reeling Nem up by his crushed skull. He could still see the grey and dripping red through its fingers, while Nem twitched, the rattle still clutched in his pudgy little hand.

Aeson swallowed bile. “Thank you.” This one was much smaller though.

“We’re nearing Aiastes,” the woman said with her face tilted upwards in the moonlight. “The night is more dangerous there than anywhere else in Halos. Watch the trees.”

Aeson nodded as he brought his hands to the ground outside of the bush. He wondered how she had noticed the shadow-hand there, and he wondered if he could learn how to do that too.

He paused at the feel of cold smoothness beneath his fingers. He squinted down. It looked like a polished rock, but it was too dark to make out its colour. He wanted it, so he picked it up before he managed to get to his feet. His old collection was lost now, but he could always start a new one. He would miss that blue one that had been his dad’s.

A scream curdled the night’s stillness.

He jumped, and almost dropped his new treasure.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a person dragged sideways into the darkness, like a toy on strings. There was a shriek. Then other sounds, like a barn roof collapsing, and a fox ripping through live chicken flesh.

Aeson shivered and clutched his stone to his chest. His mum had always said the night was dangerous, but he’d thought it was her attempt to dissuade him from sneaking

out to play with his friends in the dark. Not that he had listened. His uncle had said that the shadow lands were the most dangerous place next to the ghost lands of Amarante.

He believed them both.

A head snaked into view behind the woman. It was pale, like his mum had been when the slavers had dragged him away from her body. Pretty though, until the face split, its mouth the width of its upper throat. Rows of pointed teeth lined the gaping maw. Long dark hair, like tangled shadows, cloaked the too-pale skin, making it even more ominous than before.

Aeson's heart hammered in his chest. He had never felt so afraid before. If his bladder hadn't been empty, he would have watered himself there, as it came for her.

The woman spun and rammed her elbow upwards, smashing the great maw shut with a clack like thunder. "Get out of here," the woman ordered, her eyes meeting his before she jabbed her elbow into the long neck.

He couldn't feel his legs. Only his heart, and the pain of failing to get any air.

The head shifted back, like a snake rearing, before it shot forward faster than he could follow. With a blink of his eyes, it was wrapped around the woman, constricting, as its jaw split open to twice the size of before.

He shook. He didn't want to see her die. She was kind, and wise, and strong, and graceful, and he admired her for that. She had even saved him from that last shadow. He wanted to run, but not without his new friend. His heart paused in its race as the weight of that realization struck him.

With a cry, he threw his new treasure. He was desperate. It struck between the monster's dark eyes in a fluke of a throw he'd have never managed if he'd tried. It

shrieked; a noise escaped it, higher and more chilling than he had ever heard. Bump-flesh coursed down his back. The noise could have shattered pottery. Then, it burst into dust.

Relief and confusion pooled in him. He didn't understand how his little stone had done all that, but he knew better than to question something that worked.

The woman staggered slightly with her sudden release. "By the furies," she said, before spinning back to Aeson.

Faster than he could perceive, the woman had him over her shoulder, as she scurried away from the thrashing group. The bones of her shoulder dug into his belly, and the jostling hurt, as she led them away from the screaming.

The screams and shrieks slipped away faster than he thought possible. Soon, the only sounds were those of their own gasping breaths, and he felt his heart finally slow its race. It was only then that the woman stopped and set him back on his feet with a gentleness that surprised him.

Aeson realized he was shaking. He was cold. And thirsty. "What were those?" He had never seen such monsters.

"That which lives between the worlds of the living and the dead," she said, as she brought her fingers to his bindings and began undoing them. Her gaze strayed to their surroundings. "The nearer to the city, the thinner the veil between the worlds becomes, and the easier it is for things to slip through. Though I've never heard of a group that large acting together."

Aeson rubbed at his raw and tender wrists, chilled at the thought of what else could be out there at that moment. He suddenly felt as though an uncountable number of eyes were on him. He was terrified, but he didn't want to show it.

“Clan Sable patrols the area to keep them away from the city, but we must be farther out than I had thought.” She offered her bound wrists. “They wouldn't let this many live too near the city.”

He blinked a moment, and then quickly set to untying her ropes. The knots were tight, but his uncle tended to knot tighter, so he managed to tease them loose after a few moments. It also gave him time to wonder how she knew so much about the city and its rulers. And how she had escaped the ropes around her feet without him noticing.

“I suggest you make for your village, as heading towards Aiastes in the dark is very dangerous. The graveyard will be the safest area near here.” She turned away. He was so turned around that he didn't even know which way was where, and if it weren't for the ground beneath his feet, he was certain he'd be confused on up and down too.

Aeson felt his stomach sink. “Wait!”

She stopped, and half-turned to him.

His hands shook, and he balled them into fists, as he fought to keep his fear and rising loneliness away. “My village is gone,” he said, a small sob escaping with that last word. “Everyone is gone.” His voice fell as a whisper. His sight blurred with tears that he wouldn't let fall. He had no one. Nothing. He didn't want her to leave him. He ran the back of his hand over his eyes, wiping away the tears before they escaped.

It hurt to lose all of them, but here he liked to think he had made a friend. Sure, he knew nothing about who she was or what she did, but he knew enough about her as a person to know leaving her would hurt too.

She fully faced him then, and he could hear the breath she let out, even though he couldn't make out her features in the dark.

"I am Euanthe," she said after a few moments of silence.

"Aeson," he said. His voice wobbled.

Her shoulders drooped. "Tell me, Aeson, what are your thoughts on becoming a grave keeper? I'm travelling to study undertaking traditions abroad."

He stood there a moment, contemplating her words. He had never considered anything more than caring for crops and animals. He had never wanted more. But now, that wouldn't happen.

"Could we bury my mom?"

SECTION TWO

Chapter 1

The press of bodies was hot, and it churned like the sea of Alpeinhalos just off the beaches of her home, Aiastes. Shoulders bumped against the middle of her back. Heavy feet crunched her toes. Euanthe cradled her belly, guarding it from jabs by wayward elbows.

There, in the arid heat of Halispar, the only moisture to be found was that which was secreted from the reeking, unwashed bodies and sun-baked filth that coupled in the throng like shameless lovers. The stench was nauseating enough without her recent scent-sickness. She could only imagine the chaos that vomit would incite in the volatile cesspit that was a Myrjahn mob. Soon, however, they would be leaving for home, where they could leave all of this behind.

She glanced at her little apprentice who clutched at the corner of her sash as though it were the only thing keeping him bound to the world. His other hand was held in front of his nose. Even after these past few years of apprenticeship in the death trade, Aeson still couldn't handle foul smells or things that were especially filthy. His face was often a source of amusement in her somber profession.

Not that she told him that.

It was unprofessional for a grave keeper to gag over putrefying bodies, and she hoped to wean him from that habit. She knew it would take time for him to grow out of his revulsion to foul-smelling things following his childhood mishap with a cesspit—a story that amused her greatly. But she wouldn't rush it. She hadn't been born immune

to the stench either, but her intrigue overwrote her disgust, and now only the foulest of corpses turned her stomach.

That, and pending motherhood. She smiled at the memory of the sand-trader she had taken as a lover, remembering his warm hands that took away the chill of the desert night, and his easy smile. Their farewell just before she started showing her pregnancy had been bittersweet, she would miss him and his two wives, and what they shared, but it had only been a passing fancy.

The crowd warbled in their foreign tongue around them, bleating away in snippets that were too fast and muddled for her mind to translate into proper words. There were some things, though, that she caught.

“What’re they so excited about?” Aeson asked. His words were muffled by his hand, but she could pick up her native language amid a crowd of foreign words as easily as one spots the lone hearth fire in the night.

“It sounds like an execution.” She felt distaste at that. People died readily enough without others speeding them along under the pretense of justice.

A stranger bumped into Aeson, sending him crashing against her side. She moved one hand from her belly and set it over her apprentice’s head. He had the worst luck. Her lips twitched at the memory of him tripping over his too big feet, causing him to fall into what must have been the only puddle in all of Myrjah. Back when they travelled with the sand-traders, back when she had met her lover, Khar.

“They’re excited over that?” His voice cracked mid question.

Euanthe met his sea-grey eyes. She was pleased by the confusion that mired his voice. He understood the value of life, and it was something she had never had to teach him. There were too few who knew that in the world.

“I don’t think I’ll ever understand Myrjahns. Or why we’ve been here for so long.” Aeson stared at the ground with his lips pressed firmly together.

Euanthe took a slow breath to keep from snapping at him for whining over this portion of their journey again. She could understand his homesickness, and she knew that it was hard for the young to control or conceal their emotions. He tried her patience so easily this far into her pregnancy, but she knew better than to fall to his level and it was her responsibility to guide him to adulthood. Even while he was being a brat.

The title ‘Shahanshah,’ echoed often, but Euanthe doubted that they were going to execute their supposedly divinely appointed prince. “It sounds like someone important may be involved.”

“Why?” Aeson asked. “It’s wrong.” He played with the shiny turquoise rock strung on a rough cord around his neck. He only did that when he was anxious.

She too felt her curiosity piqued. “There’s only one way to answer that.” She let the current of Myrjahns sweep them along.

They washed through the market, pressed like a rapid river between the high and cliff-like black walls of Halispar. Flecks of blue and gold, paint from bygone ages, spattered the lattice-work stone here and there as the last remnants of a past too stubborn to concede defeat to time. She imagined that, long ago, Halispar must have been a city of peerless beauty that her age would never know.

The towering buildings were pocked by narrow windows that had ropes darting over the road and into the windows across. Robes, tunics, and long wraps hung on the ropes, and they showed the vibrant colours that Myrjah was famous for: orange, red, and yellow.

Between the buildings were narrow alleys that twisted and turned out of sight. Their mouths were almost concealed behind tall pots and thick-woven baskets.

Doorways were recessed in the cliff-like walls, leaving just enough room for several people to stand before their tear-drop doors to watch the flood of gawkers.

More bodies, like driftwood, sucked into their mass. She was finally pulled from her momentary observation of the city, and wondered if this was how the great flood felt as it swallowed much of the world and divided her country so long ago, or so the scholars said.

Onwards they pulsed, forcing her to hold tight to her apprentice's shoulder lest she lose him in the tumult. They flowed through wide streets filled with perfume stands, rank with sage and cinnamon. Fortunately, the desert city, didn't have the cloying stink of fish that plagued her own home, but that was expected of a harbor city.

They moved through markets with wooden poles and cloth roofs that looked like woven flames, poor dwellings where the reliefs on the dark walls were time-smoothed into facelessness, and wealthier areas where most things were blindingly gilded or bejeweled. They passed beneath lattice archways wreathed in shriveled vines wrapped in new growths, moving nearer and nearer to the black and gold palace that loomed over the entire city.

They poured into the gardens before the palace walls.

Euanthe had never been to this part of the capital. A grave keeper had no place in such lofty spaces, and she was not impressed by it. Half-withered grass crunched beneath her sandals. Flower husks and sprouting buds sat sagging in their cracked beds, until feet turned them into fine, sweet dust that tickled her nose.

Aeson sneezed at her side.

The trees wore only their sun-whitened bark. It seemed that even the wealthy and powerful of Myrjah were useless against the drought. Perhaps the Rain Bringer of Myrjah wasn't what their stories implied, since he didn't use his powers to keep his city watered.

Had they been wise, they would have hired someone from Clan Irisa, the water clan, just like many of the cities of Alpeinhalos did.

The crowd stilled, like wine poured into a cup. A silence swept over them.

With the advantage of her height, she peered over the heads of everyone and spied a raised area before the hulking gates of the palace.

"I can't see anything," Aeson said. It was more of a whine than a comment.

Euanthe felt her lips twitch. "Shall I describe it to you?" She met his gaze.

Aeson gave her a flat look. "If you would, that'd be nice."

"Very well," she said with a small smile. "There's a platform with two pillars—black and gold veined—and strung between them is a man."

Her humour at her apprentice's predicament vanished as the disappointment of people always flocking together like flies to a corpse asserted itself. She had hoped that she had misheard, or mistranslated the rumblings of the crowd, but now she knew it wasn't so. It was moments such as these that she wished she didn't heed her curiosity.

“So, it really is an execution?” Aeson shifted against her side, and looked down to his toes wiggling in his sandals.

He must have found his answer on her face, but she wasn't certain how. She had always thought her blank expression indecipherable, but somehow her squeaky-voiced apprentice could always find his answers there.

Euanthe was far enough away that she couldn't quite make out the features of the ill-fated individual, but the grey beard was clue enough to know that it was a man, and the stained and faded yellow tunic he wore did not portray him as wealthy. She presumed, from the whispers, that he was to be executed.

“It seems so.” She soothed her fingers through Aeson's wild hair. She knew that seeing people killed brought back memories for her little apprentice. And night-terrors.

Another man, this one dressed in more gold than cloth, circled the first man, and the butt of his golden polearm struck ground with every second step.

Gazing at the people around her, Euanthe realized that they were all watching the man in gold, as though he were performing some astonishing act, like the worm charmers that lined the markets upon their arrival in Halispar half a moon-cycle ago. To her, he looked like a shark scenting for blood amidst a school of prey. Or, she remembered, like the ghost she had seen while studying her trade abroad in Nakyat while in the guise of a man.

Euanthe shook the memory aside before it could consume her and refocused on the golden man who had, at some moment during her inattention, ceased his prowl around the prone man. He had the eyes of everyone.

She wondered if he was a lure—judging by the thrall he evoked, she supposed that he truly was no different than the monster she had encountered deep in a Nakyat tomb.

“Sons and daughters of glorious Halispar, know my voice!” He thumped the butt of his polearm against the ground, and a crack like thunder echoed through the crowd like a wave breaking over stones.

Aeson started at the sound, and Euanthe let her hand still on his head to reassure him. He had been a tad jumpy since that worm—she couldn’t recall the name the caravan had used for it—had jumped the sand-merchants they were travelling with, costing the caravan one of their sand sleds and a whole shipment of olive oil. A dear loss, but no one had died.

“Bear witness, for before you is a most heinous criminal.” The man swept his free hand towards the strung-up man. “You have all borne witness to thieves being parted of their hands; traitors drawn between two horses; rapists dismembered; adulteresses cast upon stakes; and the branded cast out into the sands to become lost spirits. *Justice.*”

Excited shifting rippled through the assembled, as though his words were stones in a still pool. Euanthe did not like what she was hearing. Public displays, such as these, were barbaric. They didn’t happen back home.

“It is not our worst crime that this one has committed, murdering of our most divinely appointed, thank the Goddess. Yet all crimes merit punishment. This *man* stole the Goddess’s mercy for man, her tears—*our* water reserves!”

The mob roared. A furious upwards fist nearly caught her jaw, as the man to her side threw his voice into the fray. She edged aside, pulling her apprentice with her. This mob would tear the man to pieces if let loose.

“What’s happening?” Aeson asked, as he stumbled against her side. He was looking at the people around them with a wary eye.

“A man in gold is riling the mob into a frenzy,” she said. “This could grow quite dangerous for us. If the crowd is not sated by the blood offering, they could very well turn to outsiders in their midst. Particularly us, since relations between our two countries have been strained for decades.”

Aeson stared at her a moment. “I don’t want to stay here.” He looked afraid and embarrassed, as though he didn’t want to admit his fear. He tugged at her sash. “Why aren’t we leaving now?”

Euanthe ran her hand over her belly. They had stayed too long as it was. She was long overdue returning home. She had an apprentice to introduce, and a child to birth. Her mother would be so thrilled. She hid the cringe at that thought as old arguments between her and her mother over her not being married at her age resurfaced. That was a real reason she had decided to travel in the first place.

A foot crunched hers, and she glared at the booing woman that had stepped on her foot without a word of apology. The people in this city were rather ill-mannered.

“We’ve overstayed our welcome,” she said, as she offered her hand.

Aeson took her hand, and she led him through the crowd. She paused a moment as she spied a little girl weaving through the throng, like a rabbit through tall grass.

“Is something wrong?” Aeson asked, his gaze following hers to the girl who slipped from sight behind a man hollering at the golden man.

This mob was not a place for children. She knew, though, that little thieves favoured distracted crowds. “No,” she said, feeling pity in her breast. She never wanted that for a child of her own. Her gaze flickered to her apprentice. She knew that had she not taken Aeson, he could have been stuck in a similar situation as that little girl.

At first, her acceptance of him on her journey had been one of pity. Looking back, she was glad that she had followed her heart. The boy was a diligent student, and a good soul. With some more training, he would make a fine grave-keeper to replace her when the day came for her own rest. It was hard to see a child in such a state, but the thought of Aeson falling through the cracks in their world was a heart-wrenching one.

With effort, they pulled from the clamouring crowd and slipped into the shade of a nearby road, nearly crashing into two men. She stopped, suddenly enough that her apprentice bumped into her.

Aeson stumbled back a step, rubbing his nose, before peering around her.

The broader of the two had arms like a man who did hard labour day in and out, which was likely the reason the sleeves of his robe-length tunic had been ripped away—his arms wouldn't have fit.

Euanthe pitied the undertaker that would have to care for such a heavy body. She wasn't weak by any means, but she knew even she would struggle with a man as large and muscled as that.

What remained of the man's tunic looked expensive. The tunic was a pale blue with a green hatching overlay. A pink flower was stitched on the thick, high collar.

Something about the flower seemed familiar, but she couldn't place it, as it wasn't one she worked with in her trade. In his hand was a loosely gripped black javelin with a golden tip.

Euanthe shivered. Instinct told her not to cross this man, and years around the dead, the dying, and the things that came back had taught her to trust her instincts.

The second man was of slighter build than the first, but his body showed that he too was familiar with hard work. His skin gleamed dark bronze from prolonged sun exposure, like the sand-traders who travelled the desert. His hair was dark and short, save for a pinky-thin braid capped with a green bead. The braid hung in front of the man's ear and brushed the shoulder of his orange tunic-robe. He was clean-shaven, a rarity among Myrjahn men who often preferred thick beards braided with colourful beads. He was dressed similar to the first man, though his tunic was cinched at the waist by a woven gold belt with the pink lotus in milky-pink gemstones at the center.

His eyes gave her pause: they were blue. She supposed, then, that he wasn't a full-blooded Myrjahn. Her hand went to her belly, and she wondered if her child would have her grey eyes, or Khar's orange eyes, or maybe a blend of the two.

"A foreign woman and child," the second man said in her tongue. His voice was calm, almost soothing. His gaze met hers a moment before moving to Aeson's. He paused a moment, as though surprised, when Aeson held the man's gaze. A man unused to being challenged, perhaps. Her charge had his brave moments.

"It was a wise choice to leave the mob." The man absently tugged at his little braid, as a ghost of a smile slipped over his lips, but it didn't reach his eyes. His gaze was too focused, unblinking, like a snake staring down the one foolish enough to stumble

upon it sunbathing. “Though Halispar welcomes foreigners in her palace, the streets are far less accommodating. It is a rarity to see uninvited Halosians here, especially a woman with only a small boy as escort.” He wet his lips.

“We can manage without an escort, and this city has treated us as fairly as any other,” Euanthe said, feeling uncomfortable. He reminded her of something unnatural, like the ill-ghosts that come from those who died too soon.

“Ah,” the man said. “I see.” His gaze slipped to her belly.

Euanthe felt annoyance surge. She understood that glance. The man thought she couldn’t manage, which is why she was with child without any obvious father nearby. She had been a willing lover, not a victim. She met his blue eyes with her coldest expression—the one she reserved for grave-robbers discovered mid-heist. She didn’t fear this man.

The man’s lips twitched, before he tilted his head to the side and dipped his gaze. “I’ve offended you, my apologies.” His stance was insincere, overdone, like a lesser actor on stage. Done like a man new at his role and not quite comfortable in it.

“Do not apologize for courtesy’s sake,” she said.

Aeson gripped her hand hard, and she looked to her apprentice. With his gaze alone, he asked her what she was doing, challenging the wisdom of her retort. She squeezed his hand a moment, to offer assurance. The second man was wily, and the first was dangerous, but she was an undertaker, and she had faced much worse than them. She didn’t fear them, but she would be cautious.

“I am called... Haldis,” he said with a curious pause before his name. Almost as though it were uncomfortable. As though the name wasn’t his, which affirmed

Euanthe's suspicion that he was being deceptive. It made her curious if she alone saw him as a liar. "I find you most curious, Halosian, and would love to have you for dinner."

He had a glint in his eyes that Euanthe distrusted more than his words. And the name... it was familiar, but not in the way of a common name. Perhaps, then, he was pretending to be an important person, and that that was the truth of his deception.

"I have never had the opportunity to leave my country and venture through the Ashar Grasslands into your domain," he said without break enough for her own name.

Euanthe almost scowled. That name hadn't been used since Alpeinhalos won the last war to retake their Cimmerian Steppes from the thieves of Myrjah, who had stolen it and called it the Ashar Grasslands. The man's tone, however, had been light, not bitter, nor possessive. So, perhaps he had meant nothing by the name and the subtle reference, but it never boded well when Myrjah turned greedy eyes towards the Steppes. War was too costly, and there were never enough graves to bury the war-dead. Halos could ill afford a war on this front while the one in Daelaegus was still being waged.

The Steppes were fertile lands that Myrjah had stolen from her people twice, and twice now her people had retaken them in a bloody dance back and forth between the two countries. He appeared too young to be vested in the last war, but his eyes were too old for his face, and they held a ghost she could not fathom.

"I am curious," the man said after letting the silence hang for a moment. "What brought you to this city, Halosian?"

“Cultural studies.” She felt a vague satisfaction in using short answers with a man who was digging for something. She wanted to know what he sought from her. There must be a purpose to the façade.

The man frowned. “Cultural studies?” He asked as though tasting her answer, rolling it over his tongue. It reminded her of the jackals she saw in her desert travels, but she wasn’t sure why, as men could not become animals, ill-choices aside, regardless of the stories. “Culture in general or a particular aspect of Myrjahn culture?”

“Funerary.”

The man’s eyebrows rose. “A curious subject to study. If you weren’t a woman, I would assume that funerary matters were your trade.”

“Your assumption is correct,” Euanthe answered. “I am an undertaker on a journey to study with other undertakers around the civilized world.” The truth, but not the real reason for the journey, just a benefit. Escaping her mother’s demands for marriage, and her society’s judgment for not being wed were the true reasons. For a woman of her build, lovers were easy to find, but they would never marry her. They never wanted to garner the looks she collected from normal people.

“Most curious,” the man said, his head tilting to the side, as though he could hear something she could not. “I thought Halosian women were hidden away?”

Euanthe considered her answer. She couldn’t comprehend his reasoning for the line of questioning, and it irked her. “Some are locked away in pretty rooms, some work beside their husbands, but clan Sable has always been more open in their functions.”

“You are of that shadow clan then?” A strange light filled his gaze, and his eyes roamed over her, as though seeking some hint of shadow power from her. He looked... hungry, but it was not the hunger that men looked upon women with.

“No,” she said. “I am clanless. I merely live within their domain.”

The man’s shoulder seemed to slip, as though his excitement had been torn from beneath his feet. He turned his gaze to Aeson, the action dismissive and smooth as a man used to navigating ever shifting dangers and found her harmless.

“And you, boy?”

Aeson shook his head. “No,” he said, as he scuffed his sandaled toe over the orange stone of the street. “I’ve never seen a Sable before.”

Euanthe felt a small kick inside her womb, and she placed a palm over the area. Unease was growing, and it seemed that her child knew the same. It was as though she was standing eye to eye with a predator hunting its next meal, and the sensation repulsed her, as though the very nature of the man pressed against her being, like two sides of a coin never meant to meet. It no longer felt wise to attempt to humour the man to discover his purpose in questioning her.

“I will admit that I am rather intrigued by Halosians,” the man said, causing her further unease. “There are so many curious stories that one cannot help but be skeptical.”

“Your country boasts a man who can call rain,” Euanthe countered, noticing a slight twitch of his hand at her words. The action was abortive, like wanting to reach for something, but what, she knew not. “That is not so different.”

“I see your point,” the man said with a slight incline of his head. “Yet here, there is only one man, one who was powerless to stop the vargwyrms eating his escort, while there, there are many. I find such a thing fascinating. I’d be most curious to hear and know more.”

“Then you should go and see,” Aeson said, as he shifted his weight back and forth on the balls of his feet.

The man looked at Aeson and gifted him a little smile. “A wise suggestion, but I have too many obligations here to investigate the wonders of the world. I am prepared to offer you meals, lodging, and coin in return for any stories. A first step in changing the standing of our nations.”

“It’s generous, but I must decline,” Euanthe said. Her instincts were urging her to leave. As an undertaker’s daughter and as a woman of that same trade, she knew that instinct kept a person safe.

The man’s face grew guarded. His eyes held a glint she couldn’t decipher, but he retained his smile. A chill coursed down her back. It was the face one expected on predators and monsters, not men. “Come now, I mean you no harm, and am offering much for your trouble. A few stories rarely would garner such wealthy recompense.”

“Apologies,” she said. A bead of sweat trickled down her neck, tickling her. “As you see, I am with child, and I am expected home for the birth.” A lie. Her parents knew nothing of the foreign man’s child growing within her.

Aeson kept his tongue. She would find him the prettiest stone for his collection as reward.

“Ah,” the man said, his suspicions slipping away.

The tension in the air dwindled, and Euanthe realized she could breathe somewhat easier.

“I understand. Tell me, is home far?”

“Aiastes.”

“Ah, the shadow capital,” the man said. “Just on the other side of the Ashar. Is it true that shadows walk as men there?”

“Yes, it is true. It is a common practice for the ruling clan, as it allows them to be in many places at once.”

“Do you command shadows?” The unease renewed its vigour with the question.

“I’m clanless,” she said, annoyed with needing to repeat herself. “I have no such gift.” Never before that moment had she been so glad of that fact. She felt like that answer had saved her from something terrible, even if she didn’t know what it was. Another kick struck her from the inside, making her wince. She pressed her palm over the area, as though to sooth the uneasy child.

“Ah.” The remaining tension slipped away. “Such a pity.” The man glanced at his silent comrade, who Euanthe had nearly forgotten about during the strange exchange.

“Thank you again for your offer,” she said.

The man waved dismissively and turned away. The other man stared at her a moment longer, before he followed the slighter man like a shadow.

Soon, she and her little apprentice were alone.

Euanthe let out a breath. She had never felt so ill-at-ease. He had seemed kind, pleasant even, but something felt wrong, unnatural and deceptive. His motions had been

neutral, his face had been genial—or as genial as a stranger’s face could be in strange circumstances. With the exception of that fleeting expression.

She felt, in that moment, it would be wisest to depart for her country immediately.

“Are we going to your home now?” Aeson asked after the stillness had carried on for some time. “I don’t like it here.”

“Yes,” she said. “The time for that is long overdue.” She led Aeson from the shaded alley and returned to the deserted main street.

“Euanthe,” Aeson spoke up, causing her to slow her pace. “Wasn’t that one man wearing the symbol of the Rain Bringer?”

She looked down at him. “The pink lotus,” she said, as the familiarity of that stitched flower fell into place. “He couldn’t have been the Rain Bringer, as they say he has blue eyes.” She stopped. “The other man did.”

“Did we just meet the Rain Bringer of Myrjah?” Aeson asked, as he swayed back and forth on the balls of his feet. “The sand traders told me he almost died of thirst! That he’s not very good with rain because something happened with him and his escort on their way here.”

Euanthe chewed on that thought. It was inconceivable that the most powerful man in this country was skulking around alleys with only one guard and ill-fitting in his presented act. Had the Rain Bringer wished to attend the execution, he would have had prime seating for the spectacle. A Rain Bringer should not be an act, as it was a gift from birth. But, if he was the Rain Bringer, and he had chosen to quietly travel to the

alley that the Halosian travelers had chosen to make their escape, then she was sure something foul was afoot in Myrjah.

Euanthe did not believe in coincidence. If the Rain Bringer was making shadow-play, then perhaps that earlier slight on the name of the Cimmerian Steppes was a slip of what was to come: another war.

After that encounter, the foreign wonder and draw of the city was gone. The empty street unnerved her, and she wondered if her apprentice felt it too. In that moment, it seemed this city was a hostile place, as though the buildings themselves wanted her gone, as though they had heard the call to arms in the passing of a single name.

She would grant their unvoiced request. She clutched at Aeson's hand, and took a moment to situate herself. Finding her way, she took great strides as she made for the exit nearest their route.

After these long years away, she made her way towards the Cimmerian Steppes, the only land-route between this country and home; the first place she had taken her apprentice nearly three years ago.

Chapter 2

Usually, the river was a vision of smooth grey stones bordering the sun-catching expanse of swift waters to the awe of travelers bound for Aiastes. But this day the river was a horror beyond the capacity of imagination. The deep green and rich purple flowers paled as though pigeon-washed by the mounds of corpses that were piled higher than she was tall along the river's edge.

The macabre sculpture of human frailty was a lure of colours: the premature not-green of olives, curdled milk, the yellow of a fourscore woman's teeth, the red-brown of old blood, and a black darker than any shadow. There was a foot with crooked toes and wild nails whose flesh looked grey-olive. It was pressed against the dirt-smudged face of an old man who looked as though he were only asleep. Brown-grey fluid with yellow-white floaters encircled the mounds as the flies frenzied in delight.

Bile rose in her throat, but it was her job to tend to the dead, and she would do just that. She was the undertaker, and she would not balk beneath a plague.

After finding that first body, a nameless Myrjahn trader, she suspected a plague, but never in her wildest dreams had she expected *this*. She had to look away. This was far, far worse than she had fathomed. She had never seen so many sick-dead. She had never seen such a disrespectful cluster of bodies. The smell bludgeoned her.

She understood why so many had fled the city to escape this horror. She even understood why some had burnt the city's temples until only sooty marble pillars remained—they blamed the gods or stopped believing in them altogether.

Euanthe spun around, fumbling with some spare cloth and a jar of mint and cinnamon infused oil. She doused the cloth and secured it around her mouth and nose,

oil dripping down her front. She was glad that Aeson, who had just mastered his aversion to ill-scents, wasn't present. His hard work may have been spoiled here.

From that curious encounter in Myrjah with Haldis the Rain Bringer, she had feared that war would come from Myrjah. She never would have guessed plague, as a plague was far worse than a war could ever be.

She swallowed a tremor of fear at the thought of what might be drawn to this death-hoard.

Facing her task, she ducked under her cart's arms, and approached the nearest ghastly mountain. With each step, the vision of plague carcasses shifted to people. Some she recognized.

"Keeper," a shadow said as it approached her. Its voice echoed as though spoken from the end of a long hall. "I'm here to guard you." It walked at her side.

She nodded. "Is this all the dead?" she asked as she reached up and gripped a small man under the arms, pulling him from atop the mound.

"No."

She recognized the man she had grabbed, and she swiftly closed his eyes. It felt wrong to see empty grey eyes in a face she knew. She studied the deceased actor. He had played the mad inventor masterfully. She had missed the newest play about a crackpot Demelzan inventor when she was summoned to the first body of the plague. The play had been the talk of the city, and she hadn't the chance to see it. Now, she never would.

The shadow tilted its head, as though listening to a sound she couldn't hear. "I'm needed elsewhere, Keeper. They've broken through the blockade and are pushing into

the forum. I'll return as fast as I am able." The shadow filtered away, like fluid through cloth.

Euanthe tensed. The Shadow Clan was all that stood between them and that which exists beyond the known, the things that are often only found in the corner of one's eyes. The things that only appear when it is too late.

If the city was lost...

Euanthe shook her head. It wouldn't do to dwell. She turned her gaze beyond the mounds. She wasn't certain when the rain had stopped, or when the clouds had parted enough to let the sunlight play atop the river. She stared. The trees were a rich green and heavy with fruits of all colours. Flowers still wet from the rain caught the sun and set the far edge of the river alight.

It was disturbingly beautiful to see such life on one side of the river, and festering death on the other. She took a step to turn and paused, catching a glimpse of something at the edge of her vision.

Euanthe looked back across the river and was surprised to see a young girl standing there, swathed in gauzy white cloth. She was pale, as though her skin rarely met the sun, like the ladies holed up in their pretty rooms. The girl's hair was long and dark, and blew to the side in a wind that Euanthe couldn't feel.

The girl lifted her hand and waved at her.

Euanthe stared at the girl with confusion mingling with sadness at what such a young girl was witness to. After a moment she waved back to the child. She wondered if the girl was here to search for her family. Or, if she knew that her family was within this mound. She must have been watching for some time, hiding.

Warmth and sorrow rose in equal force within her heart, kindred spirits. She with her dead-born son lost in the Steppes, and the girl with plague-dead family. The girl beckoned her.

Euanthe looked at the dead, and at the actor she had admired. She was torn. As Keeper of the dead, she was charged with the care of these plague-taken bodies. She was the only Keeper still working, as she held the civil contract. But, her heart lurched, and she looked at the still beckoning child.

If she followed the girl, then Euanthe could help her. The dead were beyond help. Her delay would not dishonour these dead more than their crude piling after a sad end had. It wouldn't make them any less putrid, and it wouldn't change the fact that they would all be heaped in pits. Unnamed. Unmarked. Erased.

She was the only one willing to tend the dead, especially during this plague. No one was here to judge her—only her own conscience.

With a nod, Euanthe stepped away from her charge, from the actor she admired and the others she would tend to with due time, and approached the river's edge. She paused. With the recent rains, the river was wider than normal, but was still no deeper than her knees.

She drew a breath and navigated between the dead to reach the river's edge. The water was cool, almost refreshing, as it washed over her lower legs. She walked slowly, careful of shifting or slick stones.

Euanthe stepped out of the river and onto the far bank, and looked up from her feet. She started. The girl was gone. "Where?" She drew down her scented rag, wondering if her hidden face had frightened the girl away.

There was no one on this side. She scanned the trees, the flowers, but there was no pale little girl among them.

Shaking her head, she turned to re-cross the river, but a movement to the side caught her eye. She turned. The girl stood, facing her, a little ways further up the river's edge.

Euanthe puzzled over how she had missed the girl. "You don't need to hide," she said, worried that she had scared her. It wouldn't have been the first time someone ran from her due to her terrifying height. Most children did the first time they saw her—except for Aeson, she realized. "I won't harm you."

The girl beckoned her again.

Euanthe began walking towards the girl.

The girl walked backwards, moving further up the river. She was staring at Euanthe.

"Where are you going?" Euanthe asked. Something felt wrong. She picked up her pace, but the girl must have as well, as Euanthe couldn't seem to close the distance.

Euanthe wasn't sure how long they had walked, but a glance backwards proved that she could no longer see the corpse-mounds. She refocused on the girl and stumbled to a halt, realizing that the girl had stopped only a handful of steps ahead.

"Why did you ask me to follow you?" Euanthe asked. A part of her wondered if the child just wanted to get away from all the dead but was too afraid to go alone. She pitied the girl. Plagues were ghastly to everyone, but always worse for children.

The girl tilted her head to the side and blinked slowly. She smiled without showing teeth. She lifted her left hand and pointed it to a bull-sized rock.

Euanthe frowned and looked where the girl was pointing. “What are y—“, she stopped mid-question. There, beside the rock and nestled in the tall flowers, was something white. Curiosity snared her, warring with her sense of wrong. She walked towards the rock and crouched down, brushing the purple flower-heads aside. She paused.

The white she had seen was a pale, small hand. Euanthe reached out, and brushed her finger tip over the hand. It was cold, still, and stiff. Another body. She closed her eyes. This was a child’s body. Perhaps a sibling to the girl. Or a friend.

“Who is this?” She asked.

The girl stayed silent.

Euanthe brushed the flowers and grass aside, uncovering the body of the child. She paused. A small shiver ran down her spine. She looked to the little girl that had led her here. The girl was identical to the dead one. “Your twin?” she asked, but she knew.

Euanthe stood and approached the little girl, moving slowly. “This is your twin sister,” Euanthe tried to assert before glancing back at the body, unease coursing up her spine. “Do you know where your parents are?”

The girl didn’t move. She just smiled her same smile. Her grey eyes never blinked as they stared straight at Euanthe. Almost like...

A shiver tickled her. There was no doubt, but it was always the children that were the hardest for her to let go.

She reached out, her hand moving for the girl’s shoulder. The skin beneath her hand was cold and bony, and the cloth of her garments that hung on the girl’s shoulder felt like a wisp of wet air. She opened her mouth to speak.

A noise, like a whirl of wind, drowned the river's noise.

The girl's smile showed all teeth. Her eyes widened impossibly large.

Euanthe took a step back, as a blur of movement came from the side. She spun, looking towards the rock, as something lunged for her.

Grey, purple, and yellow teeth.

It was always teeth!

She flinched backwards, raising her hands up as a last shield, just as something cold hooked around her middle and pulled her back across the river.

A loud clack of something solid meeting something equally solid thundered around her.

Looking behind her, she recognized the shadow of her earlier guide. Her escort had pulled her away from whatever the thing was. She looked towards the little girl, and froze.

The little girl's face was still contorted with that toothy smile. She was no longer standing on her feet though, for they were several arm-spans above the ground. Her arms hung limply at her sides, and from her back was what looked to be an umbilical cord that was holding her aloft. The cord joined her to a grey-purple head with no eyes, and a massive mouth lined with yellow teeth shaped like blades of grass.

"Careful, Keeper," the shadow said. "They've already made it this far." It released her and stepped in front of her. "Stay back."

She stumbled back.

It took a moment, and then she knew beyond a hope. The little girl wasn't real. She was an imitation of the dead body hidden in the flowers. A lure, like the one she had

seen in Nakyat, which was used to snare prey. The one she had seen there was small, only able to bite off a man's hand. This one would have swallowed her whole. This one was well fed.

Euanthe felt a wry, dark humour at her penchant for attracting the toothier variety of shadows. She almost wished she attracted the shadow-hands like Aeson did—those were mostly easy to manage, like spiders.

She looked away as the shadow lunged against her assailant, hating violence and loathing her weakness. She both did and didn't understand how she hadn't accepted that the girl wasn't actually a girl. How she had felt so connected to a girl who wasn't real. The false image of a dead child. Like the child she had lost in the Steppes, while clutching desperately at her apprentice's hand, and the old stranger who had helped her and vanished without a word. He took her child with him, lips blue in the moonlight.

Perhaps that was just it. Death was her trade as much as it was a part of her. She always grasped the living, seeking to cling to them to affirm her own life, but she was created for the opposite.

She remembered her return voyage home from horrid Myrjah, and the sudden cramping followed swiftly by pain. There, an old man had delivered of her a dead child. She remembered those large eyes in a still little face. Had she not attempted to have that child, that infant son she had asked that strange man for, then that child would never have died before he could even begin living.

Aeson had saved her.

She was too tainted by her trade to embrace life, and yet she had Aeson, though he was on the edge of not being a child anymore.

Euanthe looked up and started. Her attacker was no more, and no trace of it remained as the Sable had returned it to the shadows—they always did. The little girl's body was gone, leaving only a small depression where she once rested. She had been too distraught, she realized, to watch as the clan-shadow ended the monster.

“Come, Keeper,” the shadow said. “It's too dangerous for you to continue.” It approached her. “I will take you home, directly.”

“What about the dead?” she asked, and her gaze flickered to where the little girl had been on the far bank.

“It has been determined that this is too dangerous.” The shadow shook its head. “We cannot guard you, and you cannot fight them.”

“Then what is to be done?” Euanthe asked, worried at the dismissal. “What about all the bodies? They'll just attract more if left to further fester.”

“We've enlisted Lucasta, and they will be here shortly from High Antares. They will burn everything.”

She swallowed thickly. They had called the fire clan. Fire had less honour than mass-burial, but she could say nothing against it.

The shadow took her arm, and night replaced the day for a moment, before she stumbled. Looking around, she noticed that she no longer stood at the river's edge. She was at the doorway to her workshop. She felt dizzy, and braced her hand on the doorframe to steady herself.

“You are to remain here until the situation is resolved. Your duties will resume after this is over.” The shadow slipped away.

Euanthe took a few deep breaths, and once the world stopped swaying, she straightened.

She snorted to herself as she walked into her empty workshop. Just that morning she was thinking of how exhausting mass grave digging and hasty ceremonies over them were. Now, she suddenly had more time than she knew what to do with, and her earlier exhaustion had abandoned her.

She walked over to a wicker basket and unwrapped a loaf of bread within it. She picked it up and stared at the blue-green parts for a moment. This would be the best food she'd get if she was out of work for the foreseeable future.

Particularly if they burned everything.

Euanthe took a bite, chewed, and swallowed. She had eaten so much dry and mouldy bread in her life that she no longer tasted it. It just stopped the ache of hunger before it could start. It was a pity that her pomegranates would not be ready for some months still as that would have been a much better fill than her bread. She took a few more mouthfuls and rewrapped the loaf for another time.

"Euanthe," her mother called from the doorway.

She sighed, recognizing the tone of her mother about to chide her. It was the tone that started all their arguments. It also spurred her choice to travel the world under the pretense of studying her trade.

"Don't start," she said as she turned to face the woman. "I'm having a bad enough day without you getting on your old horse again."

Her mother's lips pressed together into a thin line. "Come inside, now." She turned around and stalked back into the house.

“Cameo grant me patience,” Euanthe muttered as she strode from her workshop and into her home, following on the heels of her mother. “We can’t have this argument in my shop?”

“It’s not an argument,” her mother said. Her shoulders were tense as she stopped and pointed towards the hearth.

Euanthe looked where indicated and paused.

Her apprentice, Aeson, lay on a pallet before the fire, crying. His upper torso was bare, but for a large sore wreathed in black veins. Yellow liquid wept.

Euanthe said nothing. The plague had reached her home.

Chapter 3

She worked with the flickering hearth fire as light to guide her through the rituals as she plied her undertaker trade. The air curled with thick smoke. The scents of the trade, sage and aiastes—the shadow flower that bloomed only in the lands ruled by the Shadow Clan—veiled the room as thickly as the silence.

He used to wrinkle his nose at the smell.

Euanthe reached into a scarred leather satchel and dusted a pinch of salt into the basin of freshly boiled water that still rippled.

She took a sea sponge, new and firm, and dipped the corner into the water. She wrung out the excess, and began. She brushed the sponge over flesh as still as marble. The face that she washed was young, cheeks rounded, no sharp angles. Just a boy, even with that handful of little hairs poking out along the jaw.

“When I’m older, I’m going to be better than you at all this.” His voice teased from her memories.

The water was brown-yellow upon completion. The child’s flesh was now purified of dirt, sweat, and the discharge of diseased flesh. The plague had stolen his life.

“It hurts! Please, make it stop!” Sweaty hands had grasped the linens. Sores wept through bandages. Her own hands shook as she fought and failed to soothe her dying child.

Euanthe cracked the seal on a jar of rose oil infused with mint, and dipped a square of blue silk into it. She massaged the amber liquid over death-chilled skin, until her charge’s flesh seemed bronzed in the fire-light.

She set dried asphodel, white lilies, and an olive into a bowl and crushed them with a rounded stone. She splashed oil and wine into the bowl, and mixed the contents into a thick paste. Using the oiled silk, Euanthe soothed paste into the open sores that the plague had rooted in death-pale flesh. The wounds tended, she covered the paste in soft purple petals, obscuring the once weeping sores.

His face was no longer pinched with pain. But his screams—

Euanthe's hands trembled.

She placed a gold coin beneath the boy's tongue. Payment for the Shadows. Then she added a petal on the top of his tongue and closed his mouth for a final time. She grabbed a pinch of oiled laurel ash and smeared it over his closed eyes. The final touch, a sprig of cypress, was set over his heart, before she veiled the child in a deep blue cloth.

"Blue? Why blue? Why not green? Green's nice." His ghost asked the question, as he pulled out a polished green stone to emphasize his point.

She lifted him. The body was past its initial firmness, and it slumped heavily against her breast. Euanthe carried the child out into the dawn. Gooseflesh rose on her sides as she stepped from the balminess of the shop into the morning air.

Her charge offered no warmth.

She remembered pulling the thrashing body from his bed. *"Shh,"* she said through lips pressed against his crown. *"Just bad dreams."* His arms had wrapped around her middle. Tears had soaked her shoulder. *"I have you, dear one."* She didn't. His short life held too much suffering.

She swallowed the wasp-sting in her throat.

Her household surrounded her, dressed in the blue of mourning. Her mother supporting her father who stared up at the sky with an absent gaze.

Near, but apart from her household, stood the healer from clan Tavaril, Androkles, a fellow tradesman and a friend. The day they'd been tasked to sleuth out the plague source seemed long ago with the lifetimes of suffering she had watched and endured since then.

Since Aeson, her apprentice, her child, had taken ill and died.

Euanthe couldn't meet their eyes. She couldn't bear to see fragments of her pain reflected there. She had just lost another child. Even if this one hadn't been of her flesh. Even if she had failed to cherish him as much as he deserved. She didn't want their pity.

If their gazes were to meet hers, she would break. Just as she broke when the man had taken her stillborn from her arms many years ago with only Aeson to keep her grounded.

Setting her child upon the cart with her supplies, she led the procession from her home towards the graveyard.

They passed the statues of nameless heroes adorned in stone pelts and armed with spears topped with bronze. The faces were half-eaten by time. They wound along the uneven trail around hill-tombs: pregnant mounds that birthed only death. Solemn-faced statues judged their passage from beneath their canopy of little temples. They ascended the winding route higher into the mountain graves where wood pocked the cliff-face, hiding the dead from the eyes of the living. Only once they reached the outer edge of the graves, on an outlook that gazed down upon a wild valley, did they finally stop.

Euanthe's gaze settled on the narrow slot carved into the edge. She froze. Her heart began to crack. She couldn't—

A warm hand landed on her shoulder. Androkles' blue eyes met hers. She read sorrow in that gaze, and understanding. There was no pity there.

Pity would have undone her.

Euanthe dipped her head. She could do this. She had to, for Aeson. For herself. Funerals gave comfort to the living.

Euanthe gathered a smoking bowl from her cart and approached the grave. The tomb was narrow, chisel-hewn stone whose marks scored the pale grey of the cliff in wounds that would never heal. It was dark in the grave.

And damp.

She cast the smoldering contents of the bowl into the tomb. Ashes and embers scattered within, rolling with a reddish glow before extinguishing. Her trade-scent consumed the cold damp in a breath of smoke and dust.

She had expected a war to come, not a plague. She supposed the death count was the same, regardless. Or worse.

Euanthe dropped the bowl to her feet. It shattered. A vessel that could contain life no more. A ritual symbol.

Steps crunched near, and she moved aside to allow Androkles of Tavaril to tuck the shrouded child into his cold bed. His last mortal home.

She watched. Her tongue gave voice to duty absent her mind, as her apprentice was still in his cramped tomb. She could almost hear him reciting the chant beside her, proud in his capacity to remember it all.

He would have been a good Keeper.

She took a sprig of cypress and dipped it in a vessel of oil before setting it ablaze at the tomb's mouth. White smoke billowed upwards as the branch was devoured by flame.

Euanthe took a jug of wine that was decorated with painted black figures. She poured a cup and splashed its contents at the cliff's face. She poured and they all drank, until a single cup-worth remained.

Celandine wine tasted like ashes to her.

Euanthe placed the cup and the jug inside the tomb to rest next to her child's head before she slipped the wooden seal over his grave. "May the earth be sated," she whispered to the wood, and bumped her knuckles against it. The ritual ended.

Euanthe closed her eyes. Tears crept down her cheeks. Her chin trembled. Then she spun around and pressed her lips down against those of the healer, Androkles, who had become a friend in the short few days of Aeson's sickness.

He pressed up into her kiss.

She buried her sorrows in his embrace, and broke.

His hand was hot against her cheek. She felt cold. Cold as the earth. Cold as the dead in their stone houses. Cold as the empty darkness of the afterlife.

She pulled back from the kiss, and turned her back to him and her household. She stalked away. She couldn't stay. She couldn't listen to or watch the post-funerary laments. It was too much. She couldn't do it again. She loved Aeson, and had realized too late that she'd endangered him.

She made her way past her workshop and into her adjoining home, pausing by the dead hearth. The ring of stone had been cleaned out, no trace of ash or fire remained. Its warmth as snatched as hers.

She moved from the hearth and into Aeson's room, and crawled into his bed. It was far too short for her, but it had been more than enough for him. The pillow still held his smell, something soft and warm, but unidentifiable.

Euanthe rolled to her side and looked at the little table by the head of the bed. She ran her index finger along the head of the wooden horse. Aeson had loved the horse. Her father had carved it. Had she allowed it, he would have brought it with him everywhere that he went. Now he didn't have it. She should have placed it in the grave with him. Normally, she would have, but she hadn't been thinking clearly since the moment her mother had pointed out the state of her apprentice.

Behind the horse stood his precious collection of stones, lined up in a tight phalanx. They all had unique colours, and were polished to a shine. Even the malachite that he had found.

She sat up and leaned forward. Euanthe stared at the green stone. Malachite was uncommon in the city; it had to be brought in from afar. She hadn't thought it odd to find a piece of it so close to the diseased foreigner discovered before the outbreak. The day she had met Androkles, they had seen a woman with a golden pin that had a little green stone in it.

The second plague-victim she had been called to had a set of stone beads in his purse. One had been malachite. The sandal-maker's girls had a stone collection, just like Aeson's, and in it was a little green stone.

Euanthe was certain that had she looked closely, she would have found a piece of malachite in the belongings of all those dead to the plague. She took a slow breath.

Malachite came from Myrjah. The nationality of the first victim. She doubted it was a coincidence, even if malachite was believed to drive the shadows away in that orange country.

Her mind flashed back to that blue eyed man she had met in the alleyway, and his fascination with Alpeinhalos and his mentioning of the Ashar. In her gut, she knew that man, Haldis the Rain Bringer, was behind this somehow. He had to be.

The sound of knuckles on mud-bricks echoed from the doorway. She looked to find Androkles standing there.

“Euanthe?”

She moved from the bed. “I know the plague’s source,” she said. She just didn’t know *how* it was the source.

His eyes widened. “How?”

“Aeson had the answer,” she said, the bitterness ripe in her words. “He found the answer long before there was a question.” Her smile tasted sour upon her lips.

“Malachite.” She pointed towards the green stone. “Myrjahns place two such stones over the eyelids of the dead. These stones are unnatural here, and yet, somehow, an unknown quantity of these plague-stones have come to Aiastes. They seem to be inverted in their purpose, corrupted somehow.”

Androkles looked to the floor. “The green stone?”

“Yes.”

He made a sound. “I recall seeing greenstones.” He tilted his head, as though trying to hear a distant memory. “In the homes of my patients. Those I fought to keep from the plague.” He met her gaze. “Let’s end this plague.”

Euanthe eyed the innocuous stone. She would bury them deep. So deep, that they would never see day again.

For Aeson. For herself.

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