

*The Sados
Winds of Change*



D. Scott Tumlinson

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By D. Scott Tumlinson

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Preface

Although this book is Sci-Fi/Fantasy, it is also Christian in nature. Some will say that you cannot mix the two. But though all Sci-Fi/Fantasy books are based in fiction, it is still possible to apply the principles of a Godly life (i.e. what would you do in this situation or what would the Lord have you do?). Speculation based upon a foundation of morals, ethics and guidelines provided by the Word of God are of a never-ending value to us in this ever-changing world. Young readers need the platform from which they can base their decisions in life that will ultimately honor the Lord. Finding these values in the secular marketplace is highly unlikely. It is therefore, with great pleasure, I present to you book 1 of “The Sados”.

- *D. Scott Tumlinson*

Introduction

Alarmed by the rapidly decaying sociological environment, an elite crew of scientists and astronauts take advantage of the newest technological breakthroughs and boldly set out to escape in an experimental spacecraft from planet Earth. The craft crashes on an alien planet and only one man and one woman survive. They begin a new race in the only environment hospitable, the Sados, a forest of immense trees, teeming with life.

Over time, in spite of the inherent dangers of this planet, both from new life forms and the deserts surrounding the forest, the human population explodes. The Earth has become no more than ancient folklore with the indigenous faerie folk forming a new reality. But the faeries' powers to drain life and the population explosion drive most humans from the forest into the harsh deserts to forge new towns, villages, kingdoms and political alliances extending far from the roots of the forest and the moral standards of their ancestors.

Sre, an outcast from the human populace, seeks to understand the faeries in the only world he knows and thus, bridge the communication gap in order to bring in a new and lasting peace between the two races. But, he must first overcome the barriers of his longstanding social status. Help comes, but from the most unlikely sources and Sre discovers that sometimes, the best ways are the old ways.

Prologue

Screaming alarms and claxons blared all around them. Indicator lights flickered off and on sporadically. Emergency lighting, power and artificial gravity were still functional, though. Years of intricate corroboration and hardcore research had gone into today with top scientists and technical experts from around the world working feverishly. Every possible contingency and precaution had been forecast and planned for. This was not supposed to happen.

“Talk to me commander, what are we doing?” Michael asked. Michael Stoarke, famous, eccentric, or just plain crazy billionaire had funded this scheme to reach out to the stars. Stoarke was one of those Type A personalities, now in his mid fifties. He knew a good idea when he saw one. And, he knew enough to keep it a secret until it was patented or ready to stun the world. This wasn’t just top secret. Not even the U.S. government knew of the research and development he had amassed to make his newest of dreams possible. By now, the launch site had been overrun with every available bloodsucking agent. By now, they would be combing through every shred of paperwork and every electronic file they could retrieve in efforts to discover how a spacecraft that could rocket out past the solar system within minutes had been designed, manufactured and launched without the knowledge of the U.S. government. America needed to know who was on this

ship and what their intentions were. By now, heads were rolling in the C.I.A. By now, it was too late.

“Somebody please shut those sirens off and get Laurie and Chris out of their cryo-beds,” Alan said, squinting his eyes and rubbing the bridge of his nose. Alan Washington and Michael Stoarke had known each other since elementary school. Mike was a white boy and Alan was black. But, that didn’t stop them; they were the best of buddies, each one looking out for the best interests of the other. But for the sake of the crew, they kept their public appearances on a professional level. “Sir, we’re doing our best to find out what’s wrong, but as you can see, every time we start to get somewhere, the system crashes and reboots. We can’t take corrective actions until we find out what’s wrong”.

Mike closed his eyes and breathed a sigh of relief as the control station alarms abruptly cut off. “Alan look, we’ve been friends for how long, all our lives? I’m not trying to implicate anyone. I just want to get a bead on the situation. How far off course are we? What’s our heading? What will it take to recover? Shoot, shut... shut it all down if you have to. We can start from scratch; we’ve got time”.

“Houston,” Melissa Anderson shouted, “we have a problem. Y’all better have a look at this... Now!”

Mike and Alan unstrapped their chairs and wheeled them across the room to tether them again near Melissa’s station. The right section of her monitor was flashing red while the left side showed a slowly spinning

globe and streaming, real-time data. Commander Alan Washington immediately assessed the situation and a hard lump began to form in his throat. He was beginning to feel weak.

The moral fiber of every nation on earth had deteriorated to the point of disaster. They had seized the moment when a young prodigy had shown up on the doorstep of Stoarke Enterprises with revolutionary thinking on the ability to achieve light-speed, enabling mankind for the first time to maneuver outside the paradigms of conventional space travel.

The breakthrough had come when a Canadian scientist, Michelle Gastinou had been playing around with Einstein's theory of relativity $E=MC^2$. Since the constant – the speed of light – was unchangeable and the amount of energy required for light-speed was unmanageably high and dangerous, the only other alternative was to change the mass of the object. Unfortunately, that was also impossible. But, the ability to hide an object's true mass was not. This led to the invention of the world's first and only M3, the mass masking module. This technology also eliminated the pesky problem of having to include inertial dampeners. Since for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction, the minimal amount of energy required to achieve light-speed produced a kinetic energy of almost nil.

As a perk, she had been richly rewarded and she had even been offered a seat on the first flight in exchange for her ideas. They were careful to keep the

discovery hushed. If the government had known, all would have been confiscated and threats would have been made to squelch any potential media leaks.

They interviewed top scientists with flawless DNA and off-the-chart I.Q.'s, not telling anyone but key personnel until the last possible moment of their plans to shed themselves of earth's debauchery and start afresh on a pristine world. Destination: Gliese667Cc, a superterran exoplanet in the Scorpius sytem. It lay in the habitable zone, albeit a little on the warm side. Except for Stoarke and Washington, everyone aboard was a clone, even their wives. The bio-engineers could cull out the genetic imperfections, but not those pesky morals. Now, it would all be for nothing.

“We've stopped too close to a large planet and our atmosphere is decaying... rapidly,” Melissa said, staring Stoarke in the eyes “and our only working engine is on the port side.” Her voice started to falter and she began to shake uncontrollably. “If we start that up, it will only bring us about to make matters worse. As if it could get any worse”.

“What do you mean?” Mike asked.

Melissa's voice became solemn. “Sir,” she swallowed hard, “we're at the point of no return. All we can do now is look for a soft spot and place the rest in the Lord's hands”.

As if to affirm her analysis, gravity suddenly increased and then retreated, hurtling crew members through the cabin, against the ceiling, the walls and each

other. People with dreams, people with hopes. The ship lurched forward suddenly, skipping off the planet's atmosphere. Soft tissue collided with metal, glass and arcing electric cables.

Alan Washington lay cataleptic against the control panel, bleeding profusely. Michael Stoarke became pinned between the proverbial rock and the hard spot: an instrument panel which had come loose and slid across the room, breaking connections and power cables, and the nearest desk. He heard the sickening cracks as his ribs began to splinter one by one, crushing the air out of his lungs and filling them instead with his own blood.

Copilot Peter Williams glanced briefly at Alan, then pulled himself into the captain's seat and began to struggle furiously with the control stick. The nose cone began to glow a bright orange and the entire ship jumped brutally. It was every man and woman for themselves now. He scanned the horizon. There was a solitary emerald green spot he could just make out. With high hopes, he aimed for that.

A blast shield slapped shut across the view port. He jabbed at the little red manual override button without results. Peter held the stick as firmly as he could. It was all guesswork from here on. "Lord Jesus, help me".

The bouncing subsided. For what seemed like perpetuity, they began the freefall. An inky blackness abruptly enveloped the interior of Stoarke's Stork. All systems were down. The ship began a slow roll. All he

could manage was, “Oh God, no”. But heavy debris began sliding across deck plating, raining a shower of demise on all who might be in the path. The only good Peter knew now was that he didn’t have to watch as his friends and colleagues lives came to a screeching halt.

* * *

Consciousness slowly ebbed from Lieutenant Peter J. Williams. His breathing was slow and labored now. Pete, who had always tried to do the right thing, even when it meant being ostracized by all the other kids and his own family. Peter, who had sought out the homeless and fed them, who sat and talked with them for hours to give them good news of forgiveness and an anticipation of real life after death.

In the blackness, he could hear a faint hiss from leaking hoses. Everything was still now. He couldn’t tell how long it had been since the crash. It really didn’t matter anymore. *Maybe Chris and Laurie would still be alive.* A ruby glow from the digital clock in his peripheral vision began a countdown. “Cryogenic Failure – Beginning Emergency Thawing” a computerized voice intoned. A small winged man sat perched on the console beside him, eyeing him curiously. An angel... or was it a hallucination? *Maybe...*

Sound, pain and time ceased.

A bright white light up ahead.

Peace.

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1 Exile

Centuries later...

A troubled feeling crept over Sre and settled in his gut. Scores of onlookers didn't make things any easier. They were seated in the chairs to the left and right of the courtroom. Years of training, of apprenticeship, years of hard work and passion on his part were about to become all-for-naught. There was no room for leniency or reprieve. Judgments in these matters were always swift, final and binding. The survival of the human race was dependant on hearings like these. Whispers and hushed tones crept into the crowded hall as the rear door opened and the bailiff entered the chamber.

"All rise," the bailiff boomed, "these hearings are now in session, the honorable judge Ky-nan presiding." *Honorable?* Sre thought. Ky-nan was anything but honorable. Sre knew it, as did everyone in Tameh. Ky-nan's puppet strings extended all the way up to Fatsah, a power-mongering, money-grubbing, would-be politician whose sole obsession was to eliminate Sre so he could move in on Sre's wife, Peshiwah. Fatsah didn't care how it was done, so long as it *was* done. Sre knew that it was not mere chance that Ky-nan was presiding. He wasn't stupid. Ky-nan wasn't stupid either. He recognized that the system was corrupt and the only way to the top of the system was through the top man. Get there, and then you could make some real changes. Only

problem was, by cooperating with the system, you only made it harder on yourself to change it later. But, if you gave Fatsah what he wanted, he'd ensure a troublefree life for you. Fatsah didn't have to be a politician, he just had to control the politicians, and he did that well.

Matt curled his lip and spoke to Sre from the corner of his mouth in a terse whisper. "Sre, get up." Sre reluctantly stood. He had trimmed his brunette beard and he had on his new green tunic. In fact, everything he wore was new, from his hunting hat right on down to his black riding boots. Matt wanted to make sure that he made a good impression on the judge. Maybe, just maybe, it would help. Mattowee, or Matt as most called him, had acted as Sre's foster father since he had been found wandering the Sados near Kereg's pass. It was a miracle that he had been seen. Unattended for more than an hour at the base of the Sados was a death sentence for anyone, let alone a little boy. He had only been about thirty nine cycles old. The lone remnant of the parents was an abandoned pirogue that had already been carried several miles inland. Sre couldn't remember; the only father he ever knew was Matt. He had been the one to find him and after consent from the collective, he had raised Sre as his own.

A lanky, pale figure of a man draped in a pitch black robe cautiously entered the room and surveyed his surroundings. *Hmmph, probably wants to know if someone's here to kill him.* Ky-nan stepped forward after a pause and climbed the steps to the high judge's bench and seated himself. Today's gathering didn't look

to be the normal crowd, just an assortment of peasants and scallywags with nothing but contempt for the law.

“Please be seated,” Ky-nan slowly drew his words out as if it pained him to humble himself even to the level of the decorum mandated by his office. With pretense, he hunched over and slowly perused the documents handed to him by the court bailiff. Sre laughed to himself, seeing the top of his balding head.

The best that Sre could hope for was a temporary banishment to the outskirts of the Sados. This whole thing was rigged, so there was no deferring the case. The worst case scenario, he would be bound and hung out in a cage to face some gruesome death at the cold will of the various creatures of the wild. Unless something drastic happened, and soon, Sre feared the worst.

Chairs shuffled, scooted and groaned as the crowd began murmuring again. The properties of the carefully crafted hall amplified the sounds. Judge Ky-nan’s eyes rolled up from the papers as he scorched holes in the masses beneath his furrowed brow. A hush crept back in. Sre could feel the blood flushing into his face as Ky-nan’s gaze refocused and settled on him.

“Let the accused step forward.”

Mattowee and Sre stepped up onto the the raised platform before the bench. Ky-nan pointed at Sre with the documents. “Young sir,” he said scowling, “you are accused of negligence in your trade as huntsman. According to these documents that I hold before me, you

have *not* contributed to the dwindling surplus that we must maintain for the coming winter cycles for some...” Ky-nan paused as he quickly scanned the documents again, “for some three cycles, now. Is this truth or is there something that I’m missing here?”

“Sir,” Matt began, “there is...”

“Truth or no, advocate,” Ky-nan barked.

“Truth, Your Honor. There are extenuating circumstances though sir,” Matt forced the issue. Sre let a slight smile start to creep onto his face. He had been right to ask Matt to advocate for him. Ky-nan frowned as if to stare Matt down. Matt continued on undaunted. “It seems that the local faerie folk have taken somewhat of a liking to Mr. Sre’s arrows.”

Occasionally, the faeries of the Sados would tag alongside an arrow much like a dolphin would alongside the bow of a ship. To anyone whose livelihood was dependant on predation, it was devastating. Any would-be prey did the same as any human would do seeing a rapidly approaching glowing light... it moved. Unfortunately, the faeries were of late, taking an increasing interest in Sre’s arrows above those of his fellow hunters. The result was complete and utter ruin.

“Has the accused become gainfully employed in another trade?” Ky-nan asked with a slight smirk, knowing full well he would not be fit for other employment for at least another three cycles.

Checkmate. The other trades demanded too much skill and preparatory training.

The crowd of onlookers began to stir. Ky-nan sensed their swiftly growing distaste toward him and the hearing. Mattowee sensed it too. He recognized his opening and launched himself into the floodwaters of their malcontent.

“No man or woman here seated,” Matt bellowed, stretching his hands toward those within the court, “can ready himself to take an alternate form of *gainful* employment within the time that you are advocating... sir.” Mattowee fixed his gaze steadfastly on Ky-nan and refused to budge.

“Advocate,” Ky-nan snapped through gritted teeth, “control your tongue or I will have the bailiff remove you.”

Matt stemmed the tide a little. “Excuse me Your Honor, it only occurs to me that such a demand is beyond reason. If you would allow...”

“Duly noted, sir. However, the law is clear in this case and it is itself unreasonable. It was instituted to preserve our race and to motivate slackers to action. Seeing as it has had no measurable effect on young master Sre here, it is therefore the duty of this court to move to the next stage of deciding and implementing punitive action.”

Fear swallowed Sre, gulping him into its abyss. His knees involuntarily gave way as he stumbled back

and thudded into his chair. The crowd stirred anxiously as they argued vehemently amongst themselves. With finality, Ky-nan now stood, brought the gavel down and stepped away from the bench, walking out the door, his back firmly set against clemency. Matt stood stunned. There had been no room for absolution, no quarter for mercy. There would be no appeal. Just like that, it was over. Death was a given. Ky-nan simply had to give the word.

An idea began to take form within his mind. Mattowee stooped to whisper into Sre's ear, but he was waved off. Tears welled up in Sre's eyes and began to stream down his cheeks and into his beard. Sre hung his head in shame and covered his face. He was a failure. He had failed the village. He had failed his wife and children. Ky-nan was right; he wasn't fit for anything. Mattowee walked to the sidebar and began a conversation with Ghellatahn, the village's local drunk. A hard worker to be sure, six foot two with large hands and a heart to match, but a drunk nevertheless. Ghellatahn nodded his head and made his way through the crowd and out the front door.

* * *

Ky-nan rubbed his temple; he could feel a headache coming on. He'd been directed to eliminate Fatsah's problem. If he sentenced Sre to outright death, the villagers would riot. Even now, the volume was escalating in the hearing hall. If he failed to make an end of him, then Fatsah would want an explanation – not just any explanation, a watertight explanation. *Why are they*

making so much noise? I can't think. On top of that, he would also have to order the euthanasia of Sre's gutah. The thought of putting down such a fine creature like Ekoomuh turned his stomach as it was no doubt about to do with most of the community.

A domesticated gutah was one of the greatest assets a man could own in the Sados. The giant multicolored lizard could be saddled and ridden through the trees at amazing speeds. Its hind legs were superior, its jaws were crushing, its claws were ominous and it was a friend for life. It would defend its master to the death. No greater friend, no worse enemy. But, it was of no use to anyone once its original master was gone. A feral gutah would wander aimlessly and oftentimes turn vicious toward humans, though no one understood why. The gutah would have to be surrounded and assailed by numerous huntsmen, piercing its thick hide with arrows until it finally lost enough blood to pass out. All the while, it would thrash and wail. It was a pitiful sight and the process was heartbreaking.

This is ridiculous. I can't think with all this noise. What is that bailiff's problem? Ky-nan stood and walked to the heavy wooden door. He turned the brass handle and gave it a push. It didn't open. He pushed harder. Nothing. Abrupt recognition struck Ky-nan. He reached for the third coat hook on the back wall and pushed up. Then he slid aside the rug and pushed in on an innocent looking plank. As it gave way, a small trap door dropped into an unlit and cramped, hidden stairwell. When they would finally get around to him, the room would be empty. Even if they *could* find the

trap door, the chances that they would find the lock also, were slim to none. Ky-nan disappeared down the hole and the door clicked up behind him.

Outside in the hearing hall, the bailiff lie helplessly gagged and bound. The defendant's seat was vacant and a full-blown riot was underway. The bonds of heavy, restrictive laws were snapping one by one. Love usurped the authority of man.

* * *

Sre dodged and ducked his way through the crowds outside the courts, speeding to the platform where he had left Ekoomuh tied. The only thing he had left now was his life and they weren't about to take that. *Perhaps in time... no time to think about that now.* Ekoomuh turned his massive head, detecting the familiar sound of the master's boots. Sre slid to a stop on the platform beside Ekoomuh. Ghellatahn handed him the reins.

"Thanks, Gell," Sre said gasping for a breath. There was always time for courtesy and a little thankfulness would make the ride easier.

"No problem, Sre," Ghellatahn said smiling a sheepish grin that would make most men grimace. He had only half of his teeth, and what he had didn't look that great. "Matt's got a gallon o' ale with my name on it." Sure, he would get that. Matt was a man of his word. But, he also knew Gell hadn't helped just for the ale. In spite of his weaknesses, or maybe just to spite them, Ghellatahn gave his whole heart where it counted

the most. He invested in people. Because he did, he had no shortage of friends.

Sre threw his left foot into the stirrup and speedily mounted Ekoomuh. Next, he pulled his riding gloves from his belt and quickly shoved his hands in. The massive back legs of the gutah tensed and they were off like a shot. They flew between branches and foliage. Whole trees shuddered as Ekoomuh would deftly land and then bound off again toward the next giant. *Where to? Home?* No, that would only endanger Peshiwah and the kids. He was now an outlaw. *There's no way that I can stay here; I'll go to Moh.* Sre knew that he could reach the village of Moh in only a few days. He would have to be careful; soldiers would be out looking for him. Even an innocent bystander could be forced to give up information on his position and course if he were seen. He couldn't have that on his conscience. Sre would have to take the scenic route. That would add days, but it was still safer.

2 The Beast

The sounds of the forest, natural sounds, which should have been increasing now that nightfall was drawing near, were instead, waning. Sre had been taught by a master huntsman. Heck, he had been the best. He was the trainer for the Shadows, an elite group of fighters that operated below the canopy, in the thick roiling fog where men feared to go. Mattowee had told him on more than one occasion to be ever mindful of his surroundings, to think like the forest. He crouched silently, contemplating, waiting for what, he didn't know. It wasn't just in one direction. Silence was creeping into his entire surroundings. The only thing readily noticeable was the sound of Ekoomuh's breath.

Winds were picking up; clouds were mounting far overhead. Then he heard it; the faint blare of horns sounding in the distance, followed soon thereafter by more horns at a closer proximity. The word was out.

Sre stood, took the reins in his left hand and softly remounted Ekoomuh. "It looks like they've got us surrounded," Sre grumbled. His mind raced frantically for an amenable solution. He had time to consider his options, but not much time. *I could give up. Not! I could stand and fight... and lose. Hopelessly outnumbered. Or...*

“Okay, boy,” Sre huffed with resignation, “I don’t like this any more than you do. But, we go down.” Sre pulled the reins to the left and leaned back. Ekoomuh felt the weight shift and instinctively knew what he was indicating. But still he hesitated, eyeing the thick vapor swirling below. “Come on, boy,” Sre urged. Then they began a slow decline, one leg over the other, into the hazy fog. He could hear the bark of the Sado tree crunch as Ekoomuh gripped the trunk and began the plunge. Ekoomuh’s head disappeared into the mist ahead of him. Sre would have to trust in Ekoomuh’s instincts from here on out. His vision, hearing and tactile sensations were far superior, and he could taste the air.

* * *

Tam gradually turned his head, scanning his surroundings. The council of masters had recently conferred upon him the title of huntsman. It had been a hard assessment of his abilities, but it was worth the effort. Now, he could put his skills to good use. Small splinters that usually fell off the bark with time, clearly showed that a very large gutah had just passed through this area. But then the claw marks vanished. *Which way would I go?* Movement! Tam snapped his head to the left and downward just in time to see a large gold and ruby red tail slither down into the rolling mists. His heart skipped a beat. He could feel the blood drain from his face as a sudden chill coursed through his veins. *Oh no he didn’t.*

His pulse quickened as he reached for his horn. Placing it to his lips, he sounded the alert. Within moments, Marok and Hassah arrived on their gutahs. Ellintin, Marok's gutah, was sleek and slender with scarlet and russet colored splotches while Bee-toh, Hassah's gutah was shorter and obviously packing on extra pounds. Bee-toh had beautiful multi-shaded hues of green. In the springtime, she was masked almost entirely from her environment. Now, in the fall, she stood out.

Marok took a quick assessment of his surroundings. "What did you call us here for? Did you see something?" he barked.

"I saw a gutah," Tam announced. "It was Sre's."

"Well, spit it out man; where'd he go?"

Tam crooked his neck to the left and pointed down into the ethereal fog. Marok pursed his lips, hesitating for a moment. Then he turned to Hassah. "Okay," he grumbled, "Hassah, watch my back; let's go." Hassah nodded. Turning to Tam, he charged him to stay behind and wait for the others who would be arriving soon. He wanted the glory for this one. No freshling, redheaded huntsman was going to outshine him. Tam watched dumbfounded as Marok and then Hassah slipped into the swirling haze.

Minutes passed and Marok and Hassah began to lose track of time. It was difficult at times to even determine which way was up. Images floated in and out of their field of view as the fog thinned and thickened

with the cool breezes. Hassah trailed close behind Marok so as not to lose him. He didn't want to be the one to tell Marok, but this had to be one of the most hare-brained ideas he'd had in a long time. *This is stupid, following some suicidal idiot into the fog. What was he thinking?*

A flock of ghostly white Tepin birds, frightened by Ellintin, suddenly took flight. Hassah could feel Bee-toh's muscles tense beneath his legs. The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. A wind carrying a thick, billowing breath of fog obscured Hassah's vision. The Sado tree rocked. As the mist thinned, he glimpsed Ellintin leaping through the void toward another unseen tree only to be enveloped within a cloud.

Hassah's heart sank. He pulled back on Bee-toh's reins. She looked up and shuffled back and forth as she calculated her jump trajectory. Every muscle in her body tightened in preparation for flight. Bee-toh's hind legs pulsed with power as she stretched herself out and launched them both into the air. Just before the moss covered branch struck him across the abdomen, ripping him from his saddle, Hassah realized that they had taken off from a point higher than Marok and Ellintin.

He clung to the branch, gasping for air and watching the fog clear enough to see Marok, Ellintin and Bee-toh on the sado just in front of him. Marok stared up at Bee-toh, straining to try and make out Hassah. When he saw the empty saddle, he whipped his head around and caught Hassah's eye, just as a pterosaur

swooped in and pulled him screaming from his saddle into the rolling vapors.

* * *

Ellintin and Bee-toh had come back, each without a rider, hours ago. They were becoming restless. Their nostrils flared and they were shifting constantly. Bee-toh turned and snapped at Ellintin who jerked his head just in time to avert a nasty gash.

Nalor put his hand on Tam's shoulder and turned him to the side so that no one could hear their conversation. "If you're going to be a real huntsman Tam, then you and your wife need to learn to live with the possibility that one day, you may not be coming home. Nobody goes to work planning on dying that day; sometimes it just happens. It's the nature of the beast. You need to buck up or none of the other guys here will respect you." Tam understood, but it didn't make it any easier.

Nalor turned and waved into the trees. One by one, shadowy, hooded figures, twenty in all, stepped into the light, bows in hand. Tam took a deep breath, straightening himself and raised his bow. Each man nocked an arrow and they formed a circle around the two gutahs.

3 Revolution

Peshiwah was growing anxious. She stuck her head out the door of the sadosta. Matt and Sre had left several hours ago and there had been no news. Something was wrong; she could feel it in her bones. The sky was embroiled with dark thunderclouds. The winds were beginning to blow now and leaves that were turning red, gold and brown turned loose of their branches and began tumbling into the misty darkness of the jungle fog below.

It seemed that the only place that rain fell regularly was in the Sados. But in the last twenty or so cycles, even that had changed. The woods, although enormous, were showing signs of shrinking. With the growing population, that was a real problem. There were few habitable places outside of the Sados. The fragile northern and eastern kingdoms had trouble enough supplying livable lands and provisions for their own escalating populaces. The southern region had long ago succumbed to warring tribes in search of sufficient food and water sources. In spite of the hostile outside environments, few people braved the Sados. A plethora of lethal and vicious creatures inhabited the forest floor, invalidating attempts to live beneath the canopy.

Along an enormous branch of a neighboring tree, Peshiwah saw a mob gathering. She recognized Billy,

Matt, Dellis, Chetz, and a number of other nameless faces she had seen in Tameh. This *definitely* did not look good. The group stopped for a moment and appeared to be discussing something. Soon, they dispersed to the various sadostas in the area. Matt was headed in her direction. He didn't look her in the eyes. It was apparent that he was preoccupied and contemplating something.

Peshiwah stepped out of her doorway and walked down the staircase onto her balcony. She began to shake. "Matt," she asked, "where... where's Sre? What's going on? Why are all of those people here? What are they doing?"

Matt looked up and gazed into her eyes. He looked troubled and yet excited at the same time. "They're friends, Peshiwah," Mattowee began. "Things... that is, Sre... can I come in?" Matt finally managed.

"I'm sorry," Peshiwah said, "where are my manners? Of course." Peshiwah swung the gate open and Matt stepped up and walked into the warmth of the cozy sadosta. The wealthy built their homes inside the trees with the broadest girths. They had plenty of room to spread out without having to give up room for things like interior stairways. Sre and Peshiwah's sadosta was smaller. Much smaller. It didn't take an observant eye to know that they had sacrificed a great deal of room for their children, Pekko and Chasha. Of course they had to build around the arteries of the trees that carried water to the treetops, leaving pillars in the centers of rooms.

Then there were the communication tubes. Hollow veins that families living in the same tree used to communicate. They had done a great job of incorporating them into the design, though. Diminutive windows and a miniature lamp provided the necessary light for the family room.

“Would you like something to drink?” Peshiwah asked softly after she had regained her composure.

“No,” Matt whispered, “thank you.” He took a seat facing her. “Peshiwah, I’ve got some hard news for you.” Matt paused for a moment to let it sink in. Peshiwah fumbled for a chair and sat down. “This isn’t easy for me,” Matt said. She turned her head as the tears began to fill her eyes. “and it’s not going to be easy for you, either. Things are... different in Tameh.” She turned to face him again, tears spilling over onto her cheeks. She could feel her face burn as her anger began to rise. “There’s a revolution going on in town and it’s spreading. No one is willing to endure the system anymore.”

“Where’s Sre?”

“That’s what I was getting at. You see, Sre’s the reason for the revolution. Well, not just Sre. There have been a long line of injustices. Justin, Annator, Ryallie..”

“Where is Sre?” Peshiwah said again, slowly and forcefully.

Mattowee paused and drew a breath. “He’s gone, Pesh. I don’t know where. We helped him escape. He’s

not safe here and neither are you and the kids. Not now. Maybe later, but certainly not now.” Matt could tell from the look in her eyes that she needed time to think. So, he just sat and waited.

“You’ve come to take us, haven’t you?” Peshiwah asked.

“Yes... that is, if you’re ready. If not, well, you’ve got friends. We’ll keep guard here until you’re ready.” Matt stood and looked out the door. It was starting to get dark. “Dellis and Rubun have gone to fetch the kids. They should be back soon.” Peshiwah knew better than to show disrespect toward this man. He might be stubborn, but it could easily cut off her only connection to Sre’s whereabouts. She scooted her chair back and walked off to the bedroom, softly clicking the door closed behind her. Thunder reverberated in the distance and Mattowee watched as large drops of rain slowly began to spatter on the balcony, gathering themselves from tiny rivulets into small pools.

* * *

“One need not be rich to be powerful,” Mattowee argued his case to Peshiwah. “There are more sparrows than eagles. There’s strength in numbers. We have that. Even most of the soldiers are disgruntled and side with us.”

Pekko was curled up on a cot, blanketed by thick furs. Dellis cuddled Chasha in her arms, rocking her gently back and forth. Her little eyes were so heavy. It was late and she too would soon be sound asleep.

“Don’t get me wrong,” Peshiwah countered, “I’m glad Sre’s alive, only I’m not sure that *we* have the strength to hold out. These, *eagles* as you call them, have powerful beaks and sharp talons.”

Matt was getting flustered. “Don’t you see? Their beaks and talons are the laws that they impose on everyone. They’re nothing without them. These same unyielding laws *along* with their authors are being thrown out. Once you begin writing laws, there’s no end to the twists and turns they can take *or* to the number of corrupt leaders willing to bend them to their own lusts. We have to be guided by something else. That something else is love. The law knows no love and so it has no place.”

She couldn’t argue his wisdom. But she knew the law still had a rightful place. “Perhaps so,” Peshiwah said. “But complete lawlessness is a breeding ground for every kind of evil. We need laws, new laws.”

“Who would write them? Who would see them carried out? Laws are an end unto themselves. Once you buy into the system, you’re obligated to nurture it until it becomes some ravenous behemoth that you can’t control.” Mattowee thrust his hands toward Pekko and Chasha. “When it starts eating up your friends and your relatives, it’s too late.”

Peshiwah stared helplessly at her two innocent children, now fatherless. She knew in her heart what he meant now. The innocent shouldn’t be made to suffer for the blatant mishandling of delegated authority and

there was no real way to ensure that only those with the best interests of the people came into that authority. Or, maybe there was. There had to be. Without leadership of some sort, it would all be pandemonium – every man and woman for themselves. Someone would eventually rise to power anyway and bring everyone else under his rule. They just had to make sure it was the right person and that there was always a right person ruling.

That evening, discussions trailed off into the night. The need for sleep took a back saddle. Neighbors and friends dropped in to offer support, condolences and political opinions. Everyone agreed that it was time for a change but, it was going to be a long, hard-fought battle.

4 Into the Night

Darkness climbed the tree trunks and crawled up from beneath the leaves and branches; it snuck out of the tangled moss and vines, silently creeping through the woods. It pulled itself free of its hiding places and stretched itself out, covering everything with a thick, velvety blanket. Creatures of the shadows stirred from their slumber with their appetites whetted. Daylight had other business to attend to, other places to be. A line of thunderclouds strayed in and began to soak down everything.

After a hard day's work, it was time to turn in to the safety, warmth and comfort of a soft bed and warm pelts. But not for some. Safety was on the move and the only way for someone on the run to keep alive was to move with it.

A lone weary figure riding an equally weary gutah, emerged guardedly from the fog. Even the faeries, those pesky little creatures that looked so innocent and friendly, that could take a miniature spear with a razor-sharp edge and cut you to ribbons in seconds flat, even they turned in with the darkness. But here he was, dripping wet, trudging on into the night. His adversary wasn't going to slow down for him, so why should *he* rest? Sheer determination and destiny

had brought him this far when every other huntsman, guard and soldier had abandoned the hunt.

He didn't need to see the signs of the trail anymore. He had been secretly trained by the Shadows. They were an enigmatic bunch, but their existence was no secret. Everyone knew of them. Most Shadows were officially trained, but when they needed a job done where anonymity was important, individuals known only to a select few were hand-picked and trained for a minimum of twenty cycles by the masters on a secluded tract of land.

Shadow Land. Every Shadow knew of it, but only an elite few ever experienced it. Training was extreme and very few of those that applied ever made the final cut. One had to be able to think outside the conventional lines and improvise in adverse and varied conditions. The instructors seemed to gain sadistic pleasure from inventing new ways to cause pain and confusion. There was no grade; there was only pass or fail. Failure was not an option. It was all for the good, though. In the end, it culled out the weak and made for a superior huntsman and warrior all rolled into one.

Later, when a graduate was needed, a flag, specific to the individual, would be flown notifying him to go to a predetermined location, depending on the day of the week, where he would find a packet containing further instructions. He had his orders. He would carry them out. No questions asked.

The easiest trail, the scent trail left by the gold and red gutah, was washing away with the rains. There was only one logical place of sanctuary in the direction they had been moving for the last three hours. Everything pointed to Moh. Sure, it was the long way around, but there was no doubt about it. If he could outride this runner now, and there was no reason he couldn't, he would be in Moh waiting for him, even if he missed him along the way. The cold rains and fatigue would force him to stop before too long and build a fire. But for now, gaining ground was most important.

* * *

Sometime just before dawn, the rain clouds started to clear and the faeries began to flutter about. *Stupid faeries*. It was their fault he was here. He didn't understand them. Why his arrows; why any arrows for that matter? They just didn't make sense. Would anyone ever understand them? They didn't speak. Whenever someone encountered one on a personal basis, they would just stare at you like you had taken leave of your senses. Oh well, time to get back to life. Time marches on with or without you. It was best to move right along with it. Daylight was imminent and it was beginning to be the right time for hunting. Sre walked to the trunk, slid on his grappling gloves, picked up his bow and arrows and the container that had been collecting rainwater overnight. He walked back and doused the fire. There was a pain in his heart that he wished he could put out just as easily.

Ekoomuh's thick, gold and red hide twitched over the back of his neck as the tiny chippets dashed about eating the other insects that crawled on him. *Cannibalistic little pests.* Sre stopped for a moment to admire Ekoomuh. Such strength, such grace and agility. These wonderful creatures were so docile when domesticated and yet so vicious when wild. Did anyone ever really domesticate a gutah? Why did they tolerate humans? Yet, they never complained no matter what you heaped on them. What a life he must have. Nobody trying to stab you in the back or play political games with your life, no natural enemies. Food was readily available. Just reach out and pull in a leaf covered branch. Sado leaves were huge, about four and a half feet wide. And there were plenty of them. That's the way life should be – simple.

Things were strangely quiet. Sre froze. He slowly and cautiously scanned his surroundings, moving only his eyes. Left, right, up, down. The hairs on the back of his neck stood up. All of his senses were on high alert. Whatever it was, Ekoomuh was oblivious to it. Sre calmed his mind and stared straight ahead, not blinking, until everything in his vision began to blur into a common gray. Anything that moved would stand out.

Out of the corner of his eye, off to the left and up on a smaller branch, a brightly colored bird fluttered off into the semi-dark woods. Then he saw it, a straw spider. Not technically a spider; it only had six legs. But, it was still just as deadly. It was a big one, about waist high, with long spindly legs and chameleon-like camouflage. The darkness didn't help. Apparently, it

had been stalking the bird. Now that the bird had flown off, it would be actively scanning for another prey.

Sre tried to mimic the sway of the branches and leaves around him and at the same time, slowly move his right hand toward an arrow in the quiver he had strapped on. Too much out of place and he would be noticed. This was going to be painstakingly slow. Eye movements, breathing, hand movements, all had to be just...

The spider turned. Had it noticed him or something behind him? It crouched low as if trying to hide. But it wasn't trying to hide. The spider sprang into the air toward him. With one fluid movement, Sre's hand darted into the quiver, pulled an arrow out, nocked it into the bowstring and "Zing, you're dead." And so it was. But the spider's body kept coming. The shaft had gone straight through, not slowing the momentum. The limp cadaver slammed into his left shoulder. Sre looked over his shoulder as he hung precariously for a moment over the vertiginous void, then lost his footing on the damp branch.

With cat-like agility, Sre spun around and reached out, letting his bow fall. He managed a small spring from the branch, just enough, along with the extended hooks from the grappling gloves to catch a limb five feet down. The spider disappeared into the misty darkness below.

Sre swung under the branch for a moment, allowing him a respite to catch his breath and

composure. No other branches below him that he could see. He would have to climb up onto the limb and make his way back. Sre drew himself up with his left arm and replanted his right glove. The bark tore back like paper, spilling a mass of black carpenter ants onto his face and body. Sre involuntarily shook as many ants from his face and head as he could but the toxins began their work.

Pain wracked his body and he could feel his consciousness ebbing away. He couldn't think. She would never know how he had died. His grip loosened and he dropped out of his left glove. He wasn't sure, but he thought he could just make out the howl of a gutah drifting off into nothingness.

* * *

A robed figure inspected the arrow lodged in the trunk. It was slimy and it stunk horribly. *Only one thing stinks that badly.* Tam surveyed the surroundings. No gutah, a doused fire, scratch marks on the limb near the smoldering coals. One glove hanging on a separate branch crawling with ants. Any idiot could see what had happened. Fate, it seemed, had stolen his glory.

5 Good and Evil

All eyes turned as Miss Whhhop set down. Although technically her name was unpronounceable, it sounded more like a drop of water than anything else. Her wings were beautifully colored, a rainbow of iridescent shades, and her body was long and lean. Every boy in the class had eyes for her. She was sweet, but she could be strict when she had to be. For now, her glow was calm and subtle. You didn't want to make her brighten up. Every student was on their best manners. They sat cross-legged in the grass in a little sunny spot beneath the trees.

“Good morning, class”, she started.

“Good morning Miss Whhhop”, the class all chimed in.

“Today we're going to talk about the tall people. Who can tell me something about the tall people?” She scanned the little group of children. “Yes, Fhhhhhhh...?”

The little girl in the back who had her arm raised, stood up. “They're funny,” she giggled. The whole class snickered and giggled too. Even Miss Whhhop allowed a slight smile. Oh well, children will be children.

“Yes, they *are* funny at times”, she consented, “What else? Siiirp!”

A little boy with unkempt reddish brown hair had his hand up. Normally, he was the class clown. But today, he had a serious look on his face. “My mom and dad says they’re dumb.”

“Do you mean dumb as in stupid, or dumb as in unable to speak?” Miss Whhhop asked guardedly.

“They don’t talk”, Siiirp stated, matter-of-factly.

That was a relief; she had half expected an unintelligent melee to ensue because of parents that just didn’t know any better. It was a pretty common misconception amongst the faerie folk that the tall people couldn’t speak. It was why she loved to teach. The more someone knew about something, the more they personalized it and the less likely they were to ridicule it; they would be more likely to treat it with respect and care. After all, everything and everyone was made for a reason. When you had a purpose and you understood it, you would usually understand that there was a purpose for everything else. She put on a slight pretense, just enough that the children would know that she *was* only pretending. “I wonder why that would be. Could it be because they have no wings?”

“How does one speak if they have no wings?” Fluhfluh looked befuddled and it resounded in the flicker of her wings and on the expression of her face.

* * *

Evil wasn't supposed to look pretty. It was supposed to be dark and lifeless; it was supposed to be obvious to everyone like the smell of dung was obviously repulsive. At least, that's what he'd been taught.

Somewhere in the back of his mind though, Ky-nan knew better. The sadosta's ornate workmanship, along with the abundance of blooms that thought it their duty to fill the brightly lit room with their warm fragrant odors, belied the maleficent nature of the man waiting for him in the next room. Fatsah was still young, born of impeccable breeding, well-to-do and he had an ego to match his bank account. Underneath his charismatic, whitewashed veneer however, Fatsah was strictly business. Others within his dwindling circle of admirers would say that he was just highly focused. Of course, most of them were trying to justify their own association with him. Devil's advocates, so to speak.

The room was uncomfortably silent. Was he trying to break him down by making him wait, giving him time to contemplate his dilemma? It was a universal strategy amongst those in the judicial system. It was also common amongst parents with disobedient children. Ky-nan determined within himself to not be swayed by these little intimidating mind games. But still, it was difficult to not let your thoughts wander in that direction. Given enough time, everyone eventually broke.

Ky-nan's head started to nod. As if on cue, the doorknob on the polished, heavy door turned and the door swung open. Katowee, Fatsah's secretary and

odalisque peered over the edge of her glasses as Ky-nan started with a slight snort.

“Mr. Fatsah will see you now”, she said flatly, “and if I were you, I’d try not to fall asleep.” She looked at him with slightly raised eyebrows and stepped aside to let him pass. She was a good foot shorter than Ky-nan, but her entire demeanor was nonetheless menacing. Whip the servant and the master is in pain. Best to let the disrespect slide.

Ky-nan stepped into the oversized room and Katowee slipped out. Apparently, the room wasn’t large enough for Fatsah, because the sadosta’s back wall was knocked out and the room had been extended another eight feet. Very few people had the luxury of even living in a sadosta capable of handling the added weight that would leave the average Sado tree leaning. They were all very sturdy, to be sure, but if the center of gravity was off by too much, expensive supporting bridgework to nearby Sados would have to be added to compensate for the lean. Fatsah’s sadosta was very large even by the finest standards.

Fatsah stepped forward with an outstretched hand and a toothy smile from ear to ear. “Ky-nan, I understand you had a bit of a close call yesterday; bring me up to date, what are we doing to regain our composure?”

Taken aback for a moment by Fatsah’s casual approach to the situation, Ky-nan stared blankly ahead, his mind reeling, searching for an answer. Fatsah didn’t

pay for excuses nor did he want to hear them; he paid for and expected solutions.

“You do have a solution, don’t you?” Fatsah said, probing his eyes for signs that his trust had not been mislaid, all the while, his smile slowly dissolving.

“Yes, yes of course”, Ky-nan lied, “with your permission of course, I would like to send a detachment of loyal guards with the intent of *detaining* the family members of this Sre fellow in case he should return.”

If he *had* thought of it earlier, Ky-nan would have already implemented the strategy. He knew that he didn’t need approval from Fatsah. Fatsah knew it too, had emphasized it repeatedly to him. His eyes narrowed momentarily, before he countered with his own strategy.

“No, not the entire family. That would only serve to stir the locals against our cause more. Instead, bring in the old man. He was the advocate, and as such is responsible for the disappearance of the accused. Should our little runner escape entirely, he should make an adequate example for the masses.”

Ky-nan nodded his agreement.

“Also, I expect that you’ve already initiated a sadosta to sadosta roundup of those responsible for this rebellion. If you haven’t, do so now. Use whatever means necessary to ensure that this goes as smoothly and as rapidly as possible. Every moment we lose means lost forces. Lost forces don’t just become neutral; they’re forces that have become poisoned against the laws that

have kept us on the road to success and these malcontents spread their poison to everyone else.”

Ky-nan caught the implications, and he had no qualms about the use of torture as long as he wasn't the one performing the deed. Fatsah would torture anyone given the opportunity. He was twisted like that. Only to him, it seemed normal and those who wouldn't appear weak-willed. He understood that few had the stomach for it. So, he was always careful to hide the bodies and cover his tracks. There were always plenty of places in the Sados to hide a body.

“One last thing,” Fatsah added, “make a thorough examination of our guards. I detest those that are *disloyal* bleeding the payroll.”

6 Anonymous

He woke first to the throbbing headache, then to the sudden realization that nothing looked familiar. Not his surroundings, not the gold and red gutah that sat curled up close by, not even the clothes he wore. He was on the ground. That couldn't be good. But how had he gotten there? Where was here? How long had he been here? *What the...? Who am I?* He whipped his head around, only to be reprimanded by the excruciating nausea that instantly filled his skull. He rolled over and prepared to wretch. It never came.

Okay, note to self, no sudden moves. Tertiary pain, face and arms. His arms and hands were caked in blood and hot and swollen. *That's going to scar.* His face was bound to be a mess too. He could barely see through the puffiness around his eyes.

Miniature explosions of bushes dotted the ground. A small brook leisurely gurgled not five feet away. He raised himself cautiously to his hands and knees and began a slow crawl. He needed a reflection to properly assess his condition. A drink would be nice too and his face was hot; he was parched. Every bone and joint ached.

A thick web of vines dipped themselves from high above into the waters, drawing life-giving nourishment. Small valves in their arteries allowed them

to transport water over vast lengths. Myriads of insects took advantage of the vines, crawling up and down them like some sort of highway, carrying food, building materials, droplets of water. An emerald green snake, trying to look inconspicuous, watched him. It was the harmless sort. How did he know that? Oh, it hurt to think.

He knelt over a pool in exhaustion and stared down at the man looking back at him. Did he know him? He certainly didn't look familiar. He might not ever. There were cuts, bruises and abrasions that could easily leave him scarred and disfigured for life. He reached up and gingerly touched his face. He flinched in pain. The nose had been bleeding. It was probably broken. Dried blood was on his mustache and beard. Did it get any better?

He dipped his shaking hands into the brook of cool water, and poured it on his face to ameliorate the pain. He ran his moistened fingers through his matted hair. It was a wonder he was even alive. In spite of the intense pain, there didn't seem to be any broken bones. He scooped up more water and took a long drink.

He could feel his skin on the nape of his neck and shoulders scrunch up. The gold and red gutah had moved up alongside him to get a drink too. Somehow, its presence had triggered some primal warning senses. It belonged to someone; it was still saddled. Maybe they had been waiting for him to recover and had gone off in search of something to eat or to find some pandal leaves to put on his wounds.

No, that couldn't be right. It wasn't safe here on the ground. Everyone knew that. They wouldn't just leave him.

The gutah seemed calmed by his presence. He eyed it curiously. Could it be his? He reached over and took hold of the saddle straps and pulled himself up. There wasn't much in the way of provisions or anything else for that matter attached. Best to look in the saddlebag. If it was someone else's, they would just have to understand. He unbuckled the strap and threw back the top flap. The gutah didn't seem to mind.

He peered inside. Rummaging around, he could see a flint, a cape, two bowstrings, three arrow tips... His skin began to crawl again. The gutah stood high on his front legs and began a deep throated hiss. But, it wasn't looking at him.

Crawling out from the thick foliage, were two, no five... the numbers kept increasing. Large black and yellow striped kris beetles. Each one was about ten inches long and each could easily sever a finger with its powerful jaws. They began clicking to each other. Twelve, fourteen... too many to count. They seemed to be coming from everywhere.

Fifteen feet away – no time to waste. He pulled himself into the saddle. The stinging from his tightly swollen skin made him clench his teeth. No sooner had he slipped his second foot into the right stirrup than the gutah scrambled for the nearest Sado tree. He had to hold tightly onto the saddle horn to keep from falling off.

Oh, the pain. As the gutah leapt for the trunk, a small twig slapped him across the face bringing tears to his eyes. That persistent headache didn't want to go away either.

The kris beetles swarmed in on the ground below, scouring everything. From this new vantage point, he could see hundreds, possibly thousands of them. They advanced mercilessly across the land, like an army, taking no prisoners. Small rodents, caught unawares, would squeal momentarily before being devoured. Branches were stripped clean of their leaves. No blade of grass was left standing, no hole was left unsearched. Large cats, which moments before had been camouflaged, sprang from their hiding and took to the trees. The entire forest seemed to come alive. It was every creature for itself.

As they ascended through the fog, he glimpsed a dark green hat hanging from one of the many vines. Then a little further up, a bow. Draped over another vine, was a single grappling glove. He stared down at the strap across his chest. Curious, he reached back and felt an empty quiver. He was a huntsman. He was sure of it. And he had fallen. The thick web of vines must have acted partially as a net to break his fall. The gutah was probably his own.

For the next half hour, he slowly picked his way through the vines until he had gathered all of the items. There was one slight problem, though – no arrows. He would have to make more.

* * *

How could he have been so stupid? It was so obvious. The more he thought of it, the more he felt like kicking himself. A domesticated gutah without an owner, ninety-nine times out of a hundred, would hang around the area where it's owner had perished. There had been no gutah. Now he had hours worth of backtracking to go through just to arrive back where he should have been hours ago.

He was utterly exhausted. Sre was probably well-rested by now and well on his way to Moh. If... *if* he could beat him to Moh, the odds of him finding him were slim now. He could replenish his provisions and be off to who knows where. He would have to keep this slip up quiet. Nobody else needed to know anyway. But he would know, and it would undermine his confidence unless he remedied the situation soon.

Moh was not the answer. The rain clouds had moved on and there would most likely be a good scent trail. He couldn't afford to be wrong; he had to go back to where he had lost the trail. If necessary, he would circle the entirety of Moh several times to regain the scent. His reputation depended on it. Honor demanded it. Not just his, but the honor of every Shadow before him. When you were given an assignment, you carried it out, no matter what the personal cost.

7 Running

Mattowee pulled the comb slowly across his hairs, laying each strand flawlessly in place. He paused for a moment, gazing into the mirror. Peshiwah sat patiently beside him. His preening rivaled any woman's. But it was time to go. Provisions were packed and everyone else was saddled and waiting.

“Oh well, oh well. I guess you just can't get any better than perfect,” Matt said with a chuckle. Then he froze.

“Pesh,” he whispered. “Don't make any sudden moves. Come here.”

She rose slowly and walked the few steps across the balcony to where he stood.

Matt stood as if transfixed by some ominous force. “Look over my shoulder into the mirror and tell me if you see what I see.” Matt stooped a little to allow her to look into the glass. Peshiwah stared into the reflection, looking past them. Was someone trying to sneak up on them? Had he seen some creature?

Matt pointed toward the mirror. “Who is that good looking sucker in there?” He put his hands on his hips, turned his head to the side and slowly turned it

back toward Peshiwah. “Huh... What?” He couldn’t help but let the grin across his face grow.

Peshiwah gradually hung her head into her hands and tried to keep from laughing. “Oh Matt, stop it! I swear, you are incurable.”

Matt and Peshiwah mounted their gutahs. Matt’s gutah, Razonni, was white with grey splotches. Peshiwah’s gutah, Natzoim, was just the opposite. They looked like they had been cut from the same mold.

They probably had been from the same clutch. Nobody seemed to know for sure, or if they did, they weren’t talking. Gutah breeders – called herps – mainly kept to themselves. If they told you that the hatchling you were buying was worth a cycle’s pay, it was because *they* knew the breeding. The trade required a great deal of trust and integrity. Once a herp had a bad reputation, they needed a different trade. There was just no other way around it. Even then, a bad rep followed you no matter where you went.

When it came time for retirement, Mattowee’s last class of Shadows had gifted him with Razonni. He had owned him since he was only three foot long. Shortly after his retirement, Matt gave Natzoim to Peshiwah. She was a real blessing to her indeed. Razonni was now twelve foot long with an eight foot long tail. His white and gray scales glistened in the red sun and you could spot him a long way off. The Sado leaves would turn red and gold, but there was never any snow. Not around these parts, anyway. They would

have to take extra precautions to not be spotted with so unique a gutah.

Matt surveyed the crowd that had assembled. There was barely any room for another person in the surrounding area. There were probably eighty families represented. More were gathering in isolated spots. They would join up later. He was used to leading people, only not so many at one time, and the responsibility was staggering. It reminded him of the legends he had heard long ago of a man named Moses. He wondered how many malcontents *he* would have. How many would revert to the established and familiar traditions of men and long for Egypt?

Stumbling through the foliage, snapping branches as he came was Ghellatahn on an enormous gutah. He made no efforts when it came to subtlety. It didn't matter that there were already pathways established that would have suited his needs. Ghellatahn made his own ways. His hair was tousled and his clothes rumpled. Just seeing him lent Matt a little relief. He may not have been the prettiest sight, but he could certainly bear some of the load of responsibility. The corner of Matt's mouth came up in a slight grin.

Gell dismounted and ambled his way through the crowd up toward Matt. Heads turned and eyes followed him. He looked tired. His clothes were disheveled. And still he commanded a respect that few equaled and no one denied. Nobody would suppose that he had overslept. The situation was far too grave and Gell had a huge heart for people. The truth was, Ghellatahn had

been out all night, organizing separatist cells into cohesive forces capable of defending themselves and preparing for the trek that led to where only the group leaders now knew.

“Bad news,” he started in a low hush, “I just left Willig’s group; word is, Fatsah’s got forces conducting sadosta to sadosta searches. They’re nabbing up everyone they even suspect of cooperating with us. He’s busy with damage control, but people in his group are scattering and coming this way. They should be here inside fifteen minutes.”

Matt paused for a moment to reflect on this news. *More mouths to feed. More arguments to settle. More and more responsibilities. Good thing my hair’s already white.*

“The really bad news,” Ghellatahn continued, “Fatsah’s got another group. They should be here inside ten.”

* * *

Sre, after climbing above the fog canopy, had gone over the camp site and retrieved every item he could spot. Every item that is, except one arrow, which stunk so badly not even a dwin would want it. The one grappling glove hanging from a remote branch had been somewhat of a test of skill to reel in. There were carpenter ants swarming along the branch, crawling in and out of tunnels. He fashioned a crude lasso and snagged the glove. This took a minimum of twenty tries. Each miss, although coming up empty of a glove,

gathered a few ants. They had to be shaken loose before he could try again. Working the hooks free of the bark took very little effort – just a simple snap of the wrist. The gutah, his gutah, just watched with a detached gaze.

The heavy items, which normally would have been on the back of the gutah except at a campsite, were folded away in a blanket. There was a javelin which was in two parts and screwed together, a small, but sturdy folding trap, a tin of eight steel balls for a slingshot, an assortment of tanning tools and of course, his food provisions and cooking utensils.

After a careful survey of the surrounding area, Sre located two sets of tracks into the camp. One set was from his gutah. He could tell from the spacing of the toes and the depth of gouges. The other set was from a slightly smaller gutah. The scent was not strong, and so it had to be a male. The trouble was these tracks that led into the camp, also led out. Someone had either gone for help, which was unlikely given the situation, or they had abandoned him. When it came down to self preservation, few men could put aside their personal safety. Since the tracks were fresher than those of his gutah, they most likely came in after the fact and had no idea of how long it had been since he had disappeared. With no time reference, they probably filed away the camp somewhere in the back of their mind and went on about their business.

None of this was much of an issue to him. The truly irritating thing was, he couldn't remember anything and he felt like death warmed over. The only real choice

was to continue in the direction he had been traveling when fate had taken a turn for the worst. Not much of a choice. But, where was that and why was he going wherever it was he was going? Was he going somewhere or returning? Would there be someone there waiting for him when he arrived, or had he missed his appointment? If they *were* there, would they even recognize him? Would he recognize them?

It was all too confusing. No sense in panicking. Fear and overanalyzing things were two sure ways to kill a purpose. There was only one way to find out. He had to do what his body told him not to do. He had to climb back in the saddle and just go.

It didn't take too long to find a pandal vine and strip off a length. He would boil them later and lay them on... well, just about everywhere. They would bring down the swelling and provide some relief from the pain. He could reuse the broth for a nice cup of soup. Wonderful stuff. You didn't want to get it confused with the rybexii vine, though. That was an easy way to bring yourself a very unpleasant few hours. When it soaked into your bloodstream, it was a laxative. Your time would be unavoidably occupied for awhile.

Once he'd gotten his bearings, Sre grudgingly pulled himself back into the gutah's saddle. This was going to hurt; but, there was no other way to do it. One last thing – just in case he were to pass out from the pain, he didn't want to fall out of the saddle. Sre reached back into the saddlebag and pulled out a length of rope. He formed a loop which he secured firmly around his waist

and cinched the other around the saddle horn. That wouldn't be good enough. He had to have three points or he could be swinging off to one side. He cut off two short lengths and tied each ankle to the stirrups. That would have to do.

He gritted his teeth, pulled on the reins to point the gutah in the right direction, give them a slight snap and yell out the obligatory command, "Hyah." They were off. The gutah lurched forward and sailed a good forty feet to the next Sado. It hurt, but not as bad as he'd expected. The best thing for him to do was to get his mind off his pain and onto something else. What was waiting for him?

8 Transitions

Every tree, every leaf, every vine, every shadow began to look alike. Sre had followed the path as far as he could but frustration was beginning to set in. And now, at the edge of a river, which one, he didn't know, the way was no longer clearly marked. Apparently, the only option left was to cross the river. Surely, the trail would pick up again on the other side. But there was one major hurdle; the distance was too great to cross, even for a gutah the size of his. It was just over two hundred feet. Perhaps everyone else had eyed the task with equal confusion and dispersed their separate ways, leaving scores of scant and fading pathways. But, there had to be something these travelers were all trying to get to on the other side.

Sre pulled back the dark green hood of his cloak and searched the treetops. An idea slowly began to take form in the back of his mind. No one he could think of had ever attempted such a feat. Of course, thinking of anyone was pretty amazing right now. If it could be done, he would be over the river in a matter of minutes instead of having to travel downriver to cross and then backtrack.

Pulling back on the reins, Sre and Ekoomah began a climb. Going over the process in his mind, he was sure it could be done. But the timing had to be just

right. The wind wasn't going to be a negative factor. Height would be the important thing. There was plenty of that for the Pagons nearest the river banks.

Nahda birds nested nearest the top of the Pagons. One on a nearby branch seemed to be highly interested in his every move. It ruffled its feathers from the top of its long slender neck to the bottom of its bushy tail, and in doing so, it changed from a snowy white to a mottled jade and olive green. It continued to inspect him and his gutah with its new ability to go virtually undetected. Neat camouflage trick, but Sre wasn't interested in hunting right now anyway. Besides, the bird was about to be in for a rude awakening.

Sre looked to his right at the river and back to his left at a towering Pagon. They prepared for the jump. Ekoomah crouched with burgeoning muscles and with a, "Hyah," from Sre, he leapt toward the opposing Pagon. The Nahda was a little rattled and frantically flapped its wings to keep pace with the now swaying tree.

Here was when it was going to get tricky. They were rapidly closing on the massive tree. He glanced over his left shoulder at the Pagon behind them. It was swaying toward them and was approaching its apex. Sre snapped his head back around, yanked back on the reins and screamed out, "Hyah." No sooner had they landed, riding the sway of the tree, than they were crouched and ready to be launched back to where they came from. It was all instincts from here on out. Ekoomah rode the tree as much as he could before being slung back through the air.

Their target tree was finishing another cycle of its swaying motion toward them when they landed. The extra weight brought the tree down farther than was normal. The tree began to groan and the Nahda squawked and flapped furiously, its feathers mixing from white to green and back again.

* * *

The accident site had shown no signs of a gutah's madness: no ripped branches, no deep, bloody gouges in the bark, no other animal corpses strewn about. The site he had visited earlier in the morning was now scoured clean. The signs were everywhere that Sre was still amongst the living. Although, he couldn't see how anyone could have survived such an ordeal. Perhaps it was a ruse to throw him off the trail. Most of the missing items were too large for faeries to have carried off. Nor had they any practical use for them.

Tam was hot on the trail now. Having eliminated all other possibilities, the impossible remained the only logical solution. Somehow, he was alive and Tam's task remained intact. This could make things more difficult. He was a huntsman after all. Tam had made no attempts to conceal his arrival at the deserted campsite. One more mistake to add to the many he could kick himself for. His quarry was sure to be alerted to the fact that he was still being followed.

He reined Kentoh to a stop. Kentoh's breathing was labored and her black and orange striped hide was dripping with sweat. This required a new strategy. He

had to work smarter, not harder. The trail had veered off slightly to the north onto a pathway which had long since been abandoned. *I need a shortcut and I need it now. If I cut a straight path, ignoring the rest areas and risking some long jumps, I could shave as much as two hours off.* It was worth a long shot. Tam got his bearings and they made a bee-line toward the end of the trail, cutting through the densest jungle growth and jumping great distances at a time in order to meet his new goal.

He emerged into the clearing near the river much sooner than he had expected, just in time to see the unattainable. He was worn to a frazzle; he was excruciatingly tired. Perhaps his mind was playing tricks on him. There, gracefully sailing the vast distance over the raging river below was the red and gold gutah. And on its back was the elusive rider he had been tracking for so long. It was incredibly impossible. How could anyone, or any creature for that matter, do such a thing? Tam sat dumbfounded as his prey slipped away once more.

* * *

Lights in the dark, for Him to mark,
The way of wind that brings an end.
Winding and rolling, the path of danger strolling,
'til all is made new.
Shallost 4:19 - Book of Answers

Dank, dark, dingy, decaying and dangerous.
That's what they had been assigned to transform. Now,
they stood staring at the rainbow of glowing lichen that

lit up the tunnel's passageways. It was reminiscent of the glory of the former monarchy. The faeries had been working for nearly forty long cycles in this forsaken territory to create a fresh biosphere inside the maze of Sado roots that interweaved to form the ancient tunnels.

It had been the perfect environment for every creature of the dark to hide and prey on the unsuspecting. When some of the children disappeared into its void, the decision was finally made to remodel. It wasn't enough to blockade the entrance. That had been done, but the kids had found a way in. Probably a scare dare. Six of them in all had gone in; only one came out. Eight more adults were lost on the renovation project. It was sad that reality was so cruel. But for now, they had purpose; they would show Mother Nature who was boss.

Besides, the old prophet Mynost said that the One would need it when he would come to fulfill the prophecies. The Creator had shown him it was so. He would be pleased, whoever he was. Would he be strong and forceful? Would it be the wisdom of a child showing the way? The lights reflected off the pools of water and gave a soft billowing glow to the walls and ceiling. When they fully opened the entrance, the winds would begin to blow again. And then everything would change.

Mynost was one of the last survivors of the old ways. Even his name was different. Every other faerie had names that reflected the sounds of nature. Nature was wonderful in many aspects, but nature wasn't all it was cracked up to be. Sometimes it was deadly. It took

no account of love or righteousness. It was wild. And it needed taming. That's why faeries were created. It was their purpose in life.

There was an excited exchange of buzzing wings. Every faerie had their ideas of which faerie was going to be the One. The old prophet sat calmly amidst the flurry with a smile of satisfaction creasing his aged face. It was ready. And just in time. He could feel it in his spirit. It was so real, he could almost touch it. The moment was upon them. He didn't have the heart to tell them that the One wouldn't be faerie at all, but one of the tall people. They would know soon enough. Sure, they would blame him. But being a prophet didn't mean that they had to like you or understand you. Even if it did, he couldn't change anything. It was written. You had only to know where to look.

“Good friends,” Mynost began, “we've labored for cycles to rid ourselves of the wrong that has plagued us in these tunnels for so long. We were insistent and persistent. They have been driven back by the wars. We have reclaimed what once was ours.”

Age had taken its toll and Mynost was feeling the effects. It was the way of things. He had no regrets. He drew in a slow painful breath and tried to straighten himself. “Soon, the One will come and my time will be done; my time draws near, give no place to fear. We must now complete this wondrous feat. Make the doorway wide, the way, no longer hide.”

The faeries listening drew conclusions about what the old prophet meant; Whhhop drew her own. She saw Mynost give her the slightest nod. But how could she? She needed to understand the humans more than she already did. A trip to the archives was in order.

With his final words, Mynost took a step back. His pupils rushed to his side to help prop him up. There was so much left to do, but it would have to be done by others. Mynost took in a breath and let it out slowly. The light inside faded and winked out. The empty husk shriveled and blew away in the soft, cool, autumn breeze.

9 Chased

There was no method ever contrived to conceal the evidence that nearly two hundred people had recently passed through this section of woods. They were untrained in the art of stealth. One had only to draw out the lines from the various groups to see where they would converge. But Matt was cleverer than that. He had ensured that Gell would have each group start off in dissimilar directions in order to throw the pursuers off the path to the intended destination.

Only one group was to go directly to Law-ree peak to set up camp and make preparations. That group was Willig's and they were being detained. It was now up to Mattowee to swing hard left and come around to an easterly heading to get there first. This complicated matters because it shortened the distance between them and Fatsah's soldiers.

Mattowee was pushing the families hard. So hard in fact, that soon they would realize that they were being pursued. It was only a short matter of time before panic would set in. Once that happened, it would be impossible to maintain order amongst undisciplined followers. The families would begin to scatter without a shepherd to the four winds.

He listened intently as they moved along for signs of closing troops. The wildlife was calm and no

horns were sounding. Quickly throwing up his hand and reining to a halt, Matt began scanning the environment. Peshiwah and the children craned their necks to hear what Matt must surely be hearing.

Ghellatahn brought his gutah alongside. A troubled expression washed across his face. “What’s wrong?”

“They’re on to us. Willig’s been... captured and interrogated.” Matt nodded his head and pointed to the claw marks above, below and to the sides. “They’ve spread out their forces in order to make their trail lighter and so as not to disturb the creatures. But, they’ve already been here. They’ll make it to the river crossing ahead of us and set up a trap.”

Ghellatahn deliberated for a moment. “Okay then, Rubun and I, along with a small group, will remain behind here in case they’ve split up into two forces; you swing to the south of the river’s bend and come back up and cross at Kereg’s pass. I’ll meet you there when I’m sure you’re not being followed. If we’re not there within three hours of your arrival, go on without us.”

Kereg’s pass was meant for travelers navigating the Tivy river by boat. At the deepest and widest area of the Tivy river, the currents slowed greatly. From there, the river turned from its southerly flow to the west and then south again before cascading down the rocky cliffs in a tumultuous waterfall. The pass had been created many cycles ago as a means to avoid the waterfalls. The river swept to the southeast and then eastward again.

The pass exited the woods at one of the narrowest places on the river, right where the speed of the river again picked up. It was here they needed to cross before continuing east again to Law-ree peak. It would put them off schedule by half a day.

“We’ll take a short break here,” Matt replied, “and I do mean short. As discretely as you can, round up the men you need and backtrack just enough to be out of sight of the main group. We’ll continue on without you.”

“One last thing, Gell,” Mattowee added.

“Yes?”

Matt looked him straight in the eye. “God be with you.”

Ghellatahn slowly nodded. “That means more to me than you know.”

* * *

Tall, slender Sados banked the Aston River that branched westward off the Tivy River. Here on the northern shore, the canopy was open and the thin wisps of fog that rose off the river into the chilly air gave way to an unimpeded view for hundreds of feet.

Ekoomuh’s eyes were half closed. Fall was here and soon, he would need to find a warm spot to curl up and hibernate for the winter cycles. His appetite had grown threefold. Even now, he snagged branches and

dragged them into his waiting maw. The Sado leaves were intoxicating as the chlorosis affected them differently this time of year. It encouraged the gutahs to eat more, all the while slowing their bodies' metabolisms. Although it made them lethargic, there was nothing deleterious about it.

Gliese's orbit took them around the sun in only 28 days, but its gradual wobble still provided the seasons necessary for winter and summer. The pleasant eighty six degrees of summer was giving way to the low sixties, and eventually, the upper thirties where it would hover for about a cycle before rising again.

The gutah wouldn't go far. Sre left him to his meal and worked on inspecting the clearing near the small stand of trees where they had arrived. There were no signs of trails. In fact, there seemed to be nothing special about this side of the river at all. He paced the grounds, pounding the sides of his aching head. It made no sense.

Where was I going? Why didn't I just backtrack to where the trail veered off? It's too late now. It worked coming this way, but there aren't enough trees on this side to go back. Oh, that was stupid. If I was going to meet someone, surely, they'll leave after this long of a delay. Sre hung his head and kicked at a small stone.

The fletching on Tam's arrow sang as it guided the sailing shaft across the river toward its target. Sre started as it thudded into the bole of the Sado next to him

and he instinctively rolled to the ground and quickly skirted behind a rotting stump. His body instantly rebuked him, wracking him with pain. He clenched his teeth and sucked in a slow breath.

He needed to know which direction the projectile had come from. Sre poked his head out and stole a quick glance at the arrow to determine its trajectory. The arrow didn't seem to be normal. Something was tied to it. He would chance another look.

Sre warily slid around the side of the old stump to see it again. There it was; with a short piece of ribbon encircling a tiny bit of parchment around the shaft so as not to restrict its flight. That was a relief. It had been so close that he thought it had been intended to strike him. If the person shooting the arrow had intended to hit him, it wouldn't have taken much effort to do so. Perhaps the owner had intended to get it close in order to intimidate as well as deliver a message. Either way, Sre was not impressed.

As he stood, he could easily spot a black and orange gutah with its rider astride it, high on the limb of a Sado across the river. He wore a dark brown hooded cloak with his bow in hand. There was no arrow at the ready. All were neatly tucked away in the quiver which was strung across his back.

With his focus fixed on the rider, Sre reached across to the shaft and wrenched it from the tree. He slipped the ribbon off the parchment and uncurled the

note. Peering down at the slip of paper, he could easily read the simple message, “Can we meet to talk?”

* * *

After moving downstream for several hours, the rider had managed to locate a point where he could cross. Until Sre knew more about him, it was best not to give away his little secret about how he had crossed so easily. Now, he could get a better look at this man.

Tam and Kentoh descended the trunk of a Sado that was towering close to, and leaning over, the water’s edge. Sre made quick note of each detail. Perhaps this was his contact. He was clean-shaven except for the accumulated stubble of a day or two. He was probably somewhere in his early twenties, massively muscular and had a firm broad jaw. He tied his straight red hair back in a ponytail. There were no visible scars and his clothing was, for the most part, clean.

The man dismounted, removed his right glove and extended his hand. “Hi there, my name’s Tam.”

Sre ignored his friendly gesture. “Well Tam, can I help you with something?”

Tam looked him over for a short moment and let his arm drop. The man’s clothing was a mess; scratches, bruises and swelling were his dominant traits. Along with the caked patches of blood and disheveled hair, Tam couldn’t be sure if this was in actuality the man he had been sent to retrieve, but his appearance certainly

matched that of someone who had taken a nasty spill. He decided that a covert approach was best.

“Well,” he began, “I’m not from around these parts and I was hoping that you might give me some directions.”

Sre scratched the back of his neck. “I’d like to help you, really I would; but I’m in somewhat of a dilemma myself at the moment. You see, I’ve taken a fall and I don’t remember much of anything right now, let alone where we are.”

It made sense now. No wonder he had allowed him to get so close. Tam decided to try something. “I’m sorry; I didn’t get your name.”

“I’m afraid I’m not going to be of much help to you today. I can’t recall that either.”

10 Traitor

The air could be stiflingly thick in the summertime. But now, a light mist began to fall as the air cooled and a nice breeze wafted in the scent of decaying leaves. Fall was beautiful. The reddish glow of the moon, when visible, mingled with the variegated autumn show of colors, created a spectacle of brilliance. The forest pulled a patchwork blanket across herself and the fog began to dissipate with the gentle zephyr, only to be replaced with the overcast skies and a light drizzle. Even now, at dusk, all sorts of animals could be seen at the lower levels of the woods. It was a huntsman's dream come true.

Ekoomuh and Kentoh were currently occupying themselves with absently turning over small boulders, exploring cubby holes to stash themselves in for the winter. Tiny bugs and furry little creatures scurried from their hiding places in search of new homes. The gutahs weren't serious yet, but before long, it would absorb all of their time. Tam needed to get Sre back soon before the gutahs lost all sense of obedience. And, he needed to do it unseen.

There was something that was nagging at the back of Tam's mind: an old saying, "He shall cross where none can follow." Where had he heard it? It wouldn't go away.

He was sure that he had never seen him before. And yet, as he looked across the small fire at him and sipped his tea, somehow, he knew that all was not as he had been led to believe. It couldn't be the physical features; he was too much a mess for that. There was nothing special about his voice either. His training told him to kill the runner and be done with it, but his orders made no such provisions. The man's mentor would probably be killed by the powers that be, leaving only this one, with now doubtful memories, to pass on a legacy of secrets known throughout the cycles only to a select few huntsmen.

The certainty of these secrets existed. How else could he have traversed such an expanse on the back of a mere gutah? What great mysteries had been entrusted to him? It boggled the imagination. That wasn't Tam's problem. His masters would be responsible for that; and once they had extracted the information, the Shadows would be great once again.

Elbakhar! That was it. Could he really be the Chosen One, the one that all of the prophecies spoke of, the one that would destroy his enemies and bring about a new peace? If he were, wow! It would make sense. Using the secrets known only to himself, he could overthrow many powers, even if he didn't realize that he was the only one that knew those secrets.

Only, the Shadows would use him to mine their precious information and then dispose of him by turning him over to the authorities. It would perpetuate their legendary tracking abilities, place them in good standing

with the government and they would have the information that they wanted. It was all win-win for the Shadows. But, this man would lose everything unless he did something about it. What a fool he'd been for trusting the Shadows leadership without question, all for the sake of belonging to something greater than himself. But that greatness was greatly wrong. It wouldn't happen again.

Sre looked up from his tea into the eyes of Tam, whose eyes were wide and mouth agape.

“What?”

Tam snapped his mouth shut. *Hold on Tam, old buddy; one incident does not a messiah make. We need more proof.* “I'm sorry, I was just thinking. I may know who you are.”

“Who?”

“Sorry, but there's no sense in worrying you over that now if I'm wrong. But, I'd like you to come with me to meet someone and we can test my idea out together, if it's okay with you, sir.” *If my theory proves out on the way, then it's all for the best, and if not... well, I'll be doing the right thing anyway because he wouldn't be the one.*

“Where are we going?”

He's hooked. “It's about a half day's journey from here.” *Oops! He'll likely catch on to that one.* “Once we get our bearings, I'm pretty confident that we

can get you there soon. In the meantime, you look pretty banged up. You could probably use some rest; I know I could. We can start out fresh first thing in the morning.”

“What about your duties; aren’t you supposed to be going somewhere else?”

“Nothing’s so important that I can’t stop to help someone else in need.”

Sre lowered his head, mulling it over in his mind. A small puddle of water poured down off his hood. He was humbled with this show of compassion, but he still had reservations about this man. He didn’t see much of a choice in the matter. Besides, if Tam knew the right people, he could be on the road to recovering his identity.

“Sounds good. First thing in the morning, then.”

* * *

They had come to bank of the river across from Kereg’s pass and set up a temporary camp. If there was going to be dissention, it would be now. And now would be the time to put it down. He could see some of the leaders by the light of the campfires, quietly going from one person to another, speaking in hushed tones and then walking away to spread their fear to others. He needed to get control of this before it got out of hand.

Matt threw a weighted rope over a high branch and hoisted a green and white striped flag with a single

tree in the middle. It was a call for all the leaders to meet. It was a call for unity and strength.

One by one, they trickled in to Matt's camp. The forest was dense here and tree branches were so interwoven that they provided easy access from one Sado to another. Each of the nine *leaders* took a seat in a circle. Matt stood in the middle, hands on his hips, with a downcast look painted across his face.

"I'm hurt," Matt started. "I'm hurt that instead of consulting me, you've taken it upon yourselves to do what, turn yourselves in and go back to being slaves?"

Perrinol, a large burly man stood up, dwarfing Mattowee. "We've decided that you are not the only one with the ability to make capable plans. Who made you our master anyway? Did I, did Anton, did Rubun? I don't recall a vote being taken."

Mattowee stared unashamedly into his eyes. "I took this position because no one else would, because that's where my training lies. Now, if you think that you can take it from me, or if any one of you thinks you can, then you're welcome to try. Don't assume that because I've seen fifty-seven winters, I can't take you on."

Perri leaned forward to intimidate Matt with his size and stared back. "I'll not be ruled by any man."

"I'm not looking to rule any man either, only to provide leadership."

Mattowee and Perrinon both stood their ground. Perrinon wanted to make his point and Mattowee was just waiting for an opportunity to show everyone who was best qualified to lead.

Rubun stood and raised his voice, “Speak for yourself Perri; I’ll side with wisdom.”

Perri turned his massive head in Rubun’s direction and glared at him.

“Excuse me.”

“You heard me. Matt is the only one here that knows how to deal with the military. Do you? Look Perri, we’ve started out right, we can’t stop now. There’s no turning back.”

“Who says it was right? I say we turn ourselves in along with this man. It’ll give us bargaining power. Maybe, they’ll overlook all of this foolishness.”

Perrinon turned looking for support and found none. His face grew red hot and a storm cloud of rage overtook him.

“Fine, stew in your own juices.”

With that, Perri whipped around and swung a boulder-sized fist at Matt.

With blinding speed, Matt redirected the swing, caught him with the other hand behind his elbow and pulled down hard. Perri hit the branch beneath them

solidly, face first. Unwilling to humiliate him further, Matt released his hold and stepped back.

Perrinon scrambled to his feet, his face and ego now bruised and scraped, and blasted away from the meeting, almost running into Ghellatahn who was coming in.

The group was in an uproar. Ghellatahn's eyes followed Perri out. "Seems I'm a little late. What was that all about?"

"I'll explain later, what's the news."

"They're not following us as far as we've been able to tell. Good thing, we now have eleven more families added to our band of *merry men*."

Mattowee smiled a little. "It won't be long before they realize that they've been outsmarted. When they do, they'll be headed this way. We can't wait until morning; we need to cross over the Tivy tonight. We can allow the people maybe four hours sleep. After that, we need to be moving. The soldiers and guards will need to sleep also. But this will give us a head start if the gutahs can hold out."

Just then, screams erupted throughout the camp. Everyone available bolted in the direction of the sounds. Arriving at the scene, Matt saw Peshiwah kneeling and rocking in their midst, face knotted in anguish and howling uncontrollably with tears streaming down her face.

Dellis grabbed Matt by the arm, stopping him in his tracks. “He took Chasha.”

“Who,” demanded Matt.

“Perri.”

11 Unrest

Neither Tam nor Sre slept with any real comfort or peace. The light drizzle became an unremitting downpour, dampening everything with a penetrating chill. The pelting rains put out the campfire and made it impossible to relight. The makeshift shelter that Tam had erected leaked badly, requiring constant repositioning of their bodies to avoid their humble sleeping bags from soaking up the accumulating puddles. Both gutahs, being cold-blooded by nature, shuffled about seeking for warmer conditions. Eventually, unable to locate a suitable hole in which to stash their selves, they settled for the warmth of each other.

When Sre did sleep, his dreams haunted him with visions, leaving him unsure of whether they were surfacing memories of his lost past or concoctions of his own tormented imagination. A towering, muscular man came drifting in through the mists of his dreams toward him. The man frowned menacingly at him, and drifted off again after folding his arms turning to him his disapproving back.

When Sre couldn't sleep, endless questions once again taunted him. Should he trust this fellow Tam? Why was he being so secretive? Where were they headed? Was he heading into a trap; how should he prepare himself if he were? He forced himself back to sleep, emptying his mind of every thought, even the

thoughts of emptying his thoughts. His mind struggled against it at first, like a prisoner caught in an ever collapsing box, until sleep finally came again.

Tam fought his own demons. Did this man truly lose his memory, or was he playing him so that he could slay his only hunter while he lay sleeping? Was he the Elbakhar, the chosen one of God? Would his friend Barikor even be at home? The man loved solitude, but even hermits had to have company occasionally to keep from going mad. Speaking of company, if Sre were the Elbakhar, it would behoove himself to make friends with him right away. But that could work against him if he had to turn him over to the Shadow Council. Would Barikor have the answers he sought? Maybe he should just end the man and be done with it. Tam decided in the end that it was best to sleep with one eye open, just in case.

* * *

Gell was getting a well-deserved four hour rest, but Rubun and Matt had tracked Perrinon's gutah through the night. It wasn't difficult; Perri's strength was spent and he had no idea of how to erase his tracks or how to throw off the hunters. Chasha was being a real trooper with hardly a whimper.

"Perri, nothing will get settled this way; you'll only make matters worse for yourself and enemies of all your friends," Rubun pled.

Perrinon yelled back, "All my friends are going to get themselves and me killed."

Matt whispered to Rubun, “Let him go if that’s what he wants to do, but we’ve got to have Chasha back.”

“Why do I have to do all of the negotiating,” Rubun asked, “you seem to know how to do this better than me.”

“Perri won’t listen to me, I’ve humiliated him.”

“Perri,” Rubun yelled back, “you can go, but Chasha needs her mother. You’re no mother, Perri. And Perri?”

“What?” he yelled back angrily.

“We know you’re not a bad person either. Just let her come back to us.”

“How do I know you won’t shoot me in the back if I let her go?”

“You have our word on it, besides, we’re not Fatsah’s soldiers, and we don’t operate that way.”

There was a hesitation, a good sign that they had broken through. Then, out of the blue, Chasha, with tear-filled eyes, stepped out from around the trunk with a thumb in her mouth and a blanket clutched tightly in the other arm. She calmly walked out to Rubun who had come out and was holding his arms out to her. He scooped her up.

There was no other movement from behind the trunk; something was wrong. Chasha's blanket was spattered with blood.

"Perri?" Rubun, questioned. No answer.

Matt's eyes grew wide as Rubun walked toward the trunk from which Chasha had emerged. Rubun glanced around the tree and pulled back immediately, almost stumbling. He turned rapidly and began running. Arrows began burying themselves into the branch behind his footsteps. There weren't many arrows, possibly very few soldiers.

"Soldiers," Rubun called out with alarm.

Matt leapt onto Razonni and they sprang into action, positioning himself in the direct Path of Rubun and Chasha. An arrow whizzed over Rubun's shoulder and thudded into the branch. Their aim was getting better now. Rubun hurdled the embedded arrow and handed the girl off to Matt. He was the best hope for getting the girl out safely since he was already mounted.

Matt stared with horror as an arrow penetrated Rubun's throat. Rubun slid down the side of Razonni and fell off the branch into the deep black of the forest. Penno, Rubun's gutah, screeched with rage and rushed off headlong into the hailstorm of arrows toward the attackers. Perrinon's gutah caught a glimpse of the soldiers and also gave chase. With so few soldiers, they wouldn't be able to string arrows fast enough. At least one soldier would die, probably two, leaving more outraged gutahs. It was sad that so many good men were

lured into doing evil deeds with the promises of power and wealth. Men needed something greater to drive them on. They had their hands full now. Matt took advantage of the situation and bolted for the thick woods. Rubun sadly was lost, but Matt had to get back before he and Chasha became casualties. They wouldn't be so easy to follow as Perri was.

12 The End of the Trail

After a beautiful sunrise and a hurried breakfast consisting of pelot milk and a few strips of dried and seasoned tamisk, Tam and Sre spent the first few hours of the day wandering aimlessly in pretend circles. Tam knew exactly where they were, but it was a necessary evil in order to maintain the illusion of being lost. The seemingly endless rain clouds had finally blown through, giving way to a brisk, yet sunny day. Many of the Sado trees were beginning to lose much of their foliage, showing clear pathways.

Now, they could make good time, and Tam pushed them along steadily with an ever watchful eye to make sure that nobody spotted them. The paths that they were using were not well traveled, but it couldn't hurt to take some extra precautions. Sre didn't seem to take notice of any of the well known routes that they used only sparingly. He never offered Tam a quicker course.

By late afternoon, they turned into a dense portion of the Sados. This was the wild game reserve. It lay in the center of the Sados and was clearly marked. Huntsmen were not allowed to hunt inside the reserves because it was the sole means by which the herds of wild animals were replenished. Hunting inside the reserves carried the stiff penalty of death upon capture. Only a few poachers dared to draw from the reserves. Those

who did so only hunted at night when the potential for being caught by the officials was greatly diminished.

This was also the home of Tam's childhood buddy, Barikor. Back then, his name was Mooki. As with all kids, when Mooki came of age, he was tested for competency as an adult and was then allowed to pick a name of his own choosing. He despised his birth name, but everyone that knew him still called him Mooki. Unable to escape the jeers of his childhood peers, Barikor moved into the reserves where he found that he enjoyed the solitude. He could load his pipe with the deliciously wonderful tobaccos that grew wild and not have to worry about someone telling him how unhealthy it was or enjoy a single glass of fermented topus wine without another person to tell him that he was in deep, dark sin. However, he still had occasional visitors and made the long trip into town every cycle to restock supplies. Sometimes, he would disappear for weeks at a time. Everyone knew that he was odd, so they accepted that he would of course do odd things. Tam was one of the few that respected Barikor's wishes to leave the old name behind and thus won Barikor's friendship.

Tam brought Kentoh to a halt and turned to Sre.

“That over there, sir, is my friend Barikor's sadosta. I do ask that you let me do the talking. Barikor is a strange sort of fellow, a hermit of sorts, and doesn't take to guests well.” Sre nodded.

Having said thus, Tam dismounted from Kentoh and walked along the thick branch leading toward the

main trunk of a nearby tree. The path was worn from much pacing but had many vines covering the trellises attached to the sides of the branch. There were a wide variety of fruits and flora intermingled amongst the vines. Sre could see, but not hear, Tam knocking on the doorway that leaned over the branch. Doors to sadostas were built from the lesser branches which had been cut off at an inward angle to keep the frequent rains from gaining an entrance. After a short while, a hand reached out and heartily shook Tam's. Tam stood with his hands on his hip and nonchalantly gestured in the direction of Sre and the two gutahs.

A cautious spectacled head poked out from around the doorway and there appeared to be an awkward moment where Tam wasn't sure if Barikor was going to admit them. More nodding of heads and then Tam turned away and began walking back. No wave, no shaking of hands, nothing that resembled a goodbye. That could be a good sign.

Tam walked up to Sre and began unstrapping his own knife and sheath. "Well, we're in, but you'll need to leave your knife, along with your bow and arrows here with the two gutahs. Barikor doesn't allow weapons in his house. They should be fine here."

"What did you tell him?"

"The truth," Tam said with a grin, "that I had found this poor lost soul wandering aimlessly in the woods and he needed a quiet place to recover."

* * *

The Old Man stood, as ever, watchful over his assigned territory. No one could remember how long he had been there and no one knew just how long he could hold out. He had outlasted many generations now and everyone that passed by stared in wonder at his massive towers and his impenetrable walls, nowadays covered in a thick mantle of vines. His gates were as sound as ever. They could hold back an army. Not that they really needed to. The narrow pathway that approached the bulky doors jogged to the left and then back to the right just before them, discouraging the would-be attacker from using any battering ram. Long abandoned by men, he had become the habitation of all sorts of creatures. Faeries and trolls alike, along with a myriad of birds and insects wandered the dusty stairwells and moldy banqueting halls. Snakes slithered along chasing mice amidst the hundreds of books that lined the shelves of the library. He didn't care, so long as someone was there to keep him company. He was just biding his time until the rightful heir came to whom he could render his loyal services. One day, he would come. The Old Man was sure of it.

Mattowee, Peshiwah, Ghellatahn and the hundreds of onlookers gawked while their bodies shook with fatigue. They had been running on adrenaline up to this point and that was wearing thin. The castle was decidedly impressive; seated high on the edge of the cliffs and silhouetted against the glow of the early morning light, it towered above the closest Sados. Matt had been so rushed that he had completely forgotten about the aged fortress. Everyone else would be headed

to Law-ree peak. From its canyons, crevices, caves and boulders, they could hold out fairly long. But, they would be picked off one by one as they ventured out to forage for sustenance. The Old Man, as it had come to be known, harbored within its gates a small grove of fruit trees grown to withstand the onslaught of invaders, not to mention several creatures that, although unsavory to the pallet, were yet edible.

“It’s incredible,” Peshiwah finally managed. “Is that where we’re headed?”

Matt pondered the angles on this new development momentarily while all of the tribal leaders watched anxiously.

“We’ll make it so. Gell,” Matt called.

Ghellatahn rode forward.

“I’ll need a team of men to start stripping the vines from the walls. We’ll need guards for them and for the women who will be gathering as much food as possible from the surrounding woods. When we lock the gates down, I don’t want what’s inside to be the only source of provisions we have. I’ll need a brave couple of men, preferably single, to ride out to Law-ree peak and reroute any stragglers this way. If they’re the last ones, there’s a possibility that they won’t be coming back. And, I’ll need a scout to ride ahead and raise my flag once he’s sure the fortress is safe.”

* * *

“Ky-nan,” Fatsah slowly began, “we’ve known each other for how long?”

The judge fidgeted, raised a finger and started to say something.

“Allow me... all my life. So you know how incompetence irritates me. And yet you come to me with these lame excuses. They got away not because they were any better, but because you’ve got a soft spot, whether it’s in your head or in your measly little heart I don’t know for sure. But it’s weak, very weak.”

Fatsah clasped his hands behind his back and turned away from Ky-nan.

“The fact that this Sre fellow is dead means nothing. The others have deserted the civilized world. They have cast the die and rolled anarchy. Oh, it looks grand from the onset, but it will eventually crumble. The sad thing is the other townships, villages and whole provinces will follow their lead because of the mass appeal.”

Ky-nan hung his head. How had he lost control? Subtly of course, one lost moment piled on top of another. Fatsah was right; he had a soft spot in his heart that wouldn’t allow him to crush others as this monster could. He just wasn’t built that way. When he finally saw the inevitability of the situation, it was too late. Covering Fatsah’s filthy tracks was a difficult and thankless task. He had been doing it for so long now that the task seemed pointless. Love was given, but never

returned. Every generation, it seemed, was one step further into the darkness than the last.

“The thing that hurts me most,” Fatsah added, “is that you just can’t count on family anymore.” He reached over slowly and placed his hand on an ornately carved sculpture of a man. The man’s right hand reached out to become limbs with the fingers becoming branches that had been cruelly snapped off one by one. Originally, on each branch was carved the name of one of Fatsah’s siblings. They were all gone now. The man was Maltonin, one of the most powerful men that ever inhabited the Sados. He was Fatsah’s grandfather, and the arm that stretched out had engraved upon it the name of Ky-nan.

“Goodbye, father.”

Fatsah pulled down on the wooden man’s arm as the floor disappeared out from under Ky-nan. Ky-nan was getting old and so the struggle didn’t last for long. Soon, he dropped and vanished into the early morning mists of the forest with a pathetic pleading look on his face, all the while still clutching a portion of the colorful rug that had ripped off in his hands.

“Katowee,” Fatsah called.

The door clicked and slowly creaked open to reveal the short woman.

“Get Bassapo ready for me will you,” Fatsah smiled at her. “And see if you can round up another rug

for me while I'm gone. This one seems to have developed a tear."

13 Settling In

Sre sat uncomfortably at the table amongst the two longtime friends while they guffawed over past memories and new jokes. He couldn't help himself; even though he felt a little embarrassed about it, he had to laugh at the one about the madok gizzards. Barikor was quite the host, with a lavish meal and a variety of hot ciders. He was however a vegetarian and so there were no signs of pelts or trophies mounted on the walls and especially no meat. It was quite an odd thing that a vegetarian would be best of friends with a huntsman. But when you're a hermit, beggars can't be too choosy. The foods that had been presented were both inventive and delicious. There was a raging fire stoked in the furnace and a comfy bed already set aside for him with mounds of fluffy warm blankets. Barikor had seen to Sre's wounds, skillfully applying fresh, clean bandages. They would scar, and even quite badly. In spite of the hospitality heaped upon him, Sre couldn't help but feel out of place.

What there were plenty of, were shelves laden with old books and parchments with ink and quills. Apparently, Barikor was a scribe of sorts, meticulously copying moldy manuscripts to be sold off to the highest bidder or some private party. The more rare the book, the higher price tag it could bring. These weren't just books; these were his new friends and his livelihood.

Sitting off in a corner by itself was a bellows flute. The musician would pump the bellows with his right foot, keep pressure on the bag with his left foot, simultaneously cover or uncover the holes bored into the two conjoined flutes attached by way of the long tubing, usually made from jango intestines. This was evidently Barkior's only exception to the rule where animals were involved. Sre couldn't blame him, though. Jangos were nasty little beasties. They were ugly feeders of carrion, smelled exceptionally foul and were explicitly off limits as far as food was concerned.

Sre was growing impatient. He decided to make a bold move.

“Barikor, Tam tells me that you may know who I am.”

Barikor stared blankly at Sre and then back at Tam who began to fidget. Sre could feel his face beginning to flush; Tam's face was doing the same. He had broken decorum and put Tam in an awkward position. Barikor stood up and smiled at Sre.

“Could you excuse us, we need to talk privately for a moment,” Barikor said after clearing his throat.

Tam joined Barikor in donning a cloak and hat. Then the two men stepped outside into the fresh air.

“I *knew* something was up; you just drop in out of the blue. You've been scheming again Tam, haven't you? Haven't you learned, the only thing that you get

from scheming is trouble? What is it this time? I want the truth.”

“He cleared the Aston River with a two hundred foot jump on that gutah of his.”

“So,” Barikor led.

“So, no man on has ever been able to do such a thing.”

“And this leads you to think that I might know who he is, why?”

“Don’t your prophets have something to say about it like, ‘He shall go where none can follow’,” Tam quoted.

Barikor held up a hand. The red slowly began to drain from his face as his mind began filling in the blanks.

“Hold on, you think, after all these cycles, God’s Chosen is showing up and this guy is him?”

“I’m not saying that he is, only that he might be,” Tam countered.

“Have you taken leave of your senses?” Barikor asked in excited whispers, leaning in toward Tam. “Look at him; he’s a mess, mentally as well as physically. He couldn’t lead a napor out of a wet paper bag, let alone an army against a corrupt government.”

“Don’t count him out yet,” Tam pled. “All I’m asking is that you apply what you know of the scriptures to test him, to see if he *is* the Chosen one of this God of yours. If he’s not, I’ll take him off your hands and you’ll never hear of it again.”

“Alright,” Barikor conceded, stepping back out of Tam’s face, “but you owe me. And it was only one prophet, Shallost, and he wasn’t that well respected as a prophet either.”

* * *

“Tell them I want a tribal council meeting in these chambers in ten minutes,” Mattowee demanded. “Don’t take no for an answer.”

Leona, although only one hundred fifty six cycles old, was taking on more responsibilities than many adults twice her age. She took her duties as a page seriously and hurried off to deliver her message to the tribal council members. Families were unpacking now and arguing over who got the choicest of rooms. Some decided that since they were more important, their status demanded larger quarters than those of lesser import with families.

“Julion,” Matt addressed a slightly older page, “I need you to round up a map for me of this castle. This is important. Search the library and the war room. The more maps the better. Oh, and I’ll need one of the surrounding countryside too.”

“Will that be all, sir?” Julion asked.

“Yes, thank you. Now get going and don’t come back empty-handed.”

The young teen had no idea where either the library or the war room were but left undeterred.

All alone, Matt sank into a chair and began to sob. His friend Rubun was dead now at the hands of misguided soldiers. Dellis would mourn her husband the most when she got a chance. They had never had children of their own. Now they never would. Matt would see to it that he got the memorial service he deserved. Perrinon was also gone, most likely dead too. Time had never permitted him to verify it though. It would be more difficult to convince everyone that he should have a proper service considering recent events. He wondered just how many of his friends’ memorial services he would need to preside over.

Chetz, a rotund man, strode into the room and took a seat. He took note of the older man, but said nothing to interfere. Matt looked up, wiped the tears from his eyes and decided that it was best to get about the business of being alive and staying alive. One by one, the tribal council members silently filed into the crowded chambers where Mattowee had taken up residence and took a seat. When they all had arrived Matt rolled up his sleeves and began.

“First things first: Billy, what arrangements have been made for the gutahs?”

A solid man in his late forties spoke up, “All have been stabled in the caves beneath the castle with

plenty of food, Matt. Some have already begun to hibernate.”

“I like it,” Matt stated.

“Dyman, how are the men coming at clearing the vines from the walls?”

Dyman, the matriarch of her tribe, stood. “We’re presently at twenty percent.”

“What’s the hold up?” Matt questioned.

“We lack the proper instruments to cut the vines. In our hurry to leave Tameh, we took only those things we deemed essential.”

“Understood,” Matt said. “Have a search made of the smithy to see what you can come up with. The vines on the walls provide an avenue for our enemy to invade. It is mandatory that those things come down. Burn them off if you have to.”

“Chetz, how are we situated for our culinary requirements?”

The large man stood. “It’s not my kitchen back home, but we can manage. We’ve got enough in the way of fruits, vegetation and ingredients for breads to hold out for a few weeks, no small task for a crowd this size I might add, *and* we’ve managed to round up a small herd of tamisks.”

“Excellent,” Matt said.

“We do have one problem, Matt,” Chetz continued. “The water level of the creek that runs under the walls and through the compound is slowly getting lower. We need that water for cooking and for sanitation.”

Matt looked concerned, now.

“That is a problem, not just for those reasons, but because it provides a route for someone to infiltrate if it gets low enough. I want a constant watch put on it, both ends. Speaking of which, Jarok, do we have a roster for the guard watches yet?”

“Aye, we do,” Jarok spoke up. “There should be a fresh crew switching out with the current watch as we speak.”

“Good. Well done. Now,” Matt hesitated. This could potentially be an issue with the tribal leaders in particular. He placed his hands on his hips and began. “It has come to my attention that dissention has arisen over housing arrangements. Now, I can’t tell any of you how to handle this, but if it were me, you know how I’d do it. My children have always taken priority. Those that need the most get the most. You see the quarters that I’ve taken. All I’m asking is that every one of you do the noble thing here while it remains necessary, until you can go back to a normal life.” Matt’s voice began to rise. “Then you can go back to being selfish or greedy or whatever you think is right. These people hate corrupt government. They need someone who cares about *their* needs.” Matt leaned forward and raised an eyebrow.

“And who knows, if you do what’s right, maybe they’ll respect you after this.”

There it was: the crux of it. The people neither respected nor trusted them to do what they had been elected to do. If they were going to save face with the masses, they needed to make deep sacrifices and to enforce their own sub-leaders’ sacrifices.

“One last thing,” Matt said. “There will be a memorial service for Rubun this evening in the center courtyard. Everyone is encouraged to attend.”

* * *

Trolls were scarce these days. The faeries had all but eliminated every one of Graigun’s brothers. They had been starved out, driven out into the sunlight, slashed into small pieces by the warrior faeries and one had had his life force drained by the queen herself. But Graigun was smarter than they had been. Deep inside the tunnels, he had constructed a camouflaged door of rocks and small boulders that allowed him to hunt from the safety of a small, hidden burrow. That worked for a season. Still, the food supply was dwindling down to the meager scraps he could manage. These days, his diet consisted of a few spiders, roaches and snakes that ventured in through the cracks to investigate the mephitic odor. And while these were the mainstay of a troll’s dietary requirements, Graigun longed for something more. He dreamed of the sweet taste of man-flesh or the greatest delicacy of all, faeries. The problem was, the tunnels had an unnatural glow about them. To

venture out of his burrow would be inviting death to his doorsteps. His stomach grumbled at him, reminding him of his cowardice. But it was his sharp instincts to live that kept him alive while his brothers had died.

If there were a clear path, he could get out and to the other tunnels to warn everyone. Trolls were mostly loners and they probably hadn't noticed the dwindling numbers in the population.

I'll have to make my escape at night. It's been so long since I've been outside that I don't know what time it is anymore. But if I could do it, then I could gather an army. I would be famous. They would make me the troll king. Yes, and then all of my hunting would be done for me. I'll have the largest cave and the pick of the women. No one would dare challenge the king.

Graigun slipped quietly to his makeshift doorway and listened. When half an hour had past and the only sound he had heard was from dripping water, Graigun began the task of silently removing the rubble that sealed him in. When it was large enough to barely squeeze through, he listened for another half hour. One couldn't be too careful these days, not with so much on the line. Slowly, he peeked out the hole he had opened. There was that ghastly glow in the pools and on the walls. It wasn't everywhere as he had thought.

If I keep to the shadows and take my time this could work. He smiled a crooked grin with his rotten teeth and foul breath. Slowly, he lifted himself from the

hole. He was free once more, not as free as before, but soon he would be.

14 What's in a Title?

While Tam sat close at hand with a proleptic look upon his face, Barikor eyed Sre with a degree of apathy intermingled with no small amount of annoyance. He had been asking lengthy inquiries and frustrating questions in an effort to test his candidacy as “Elbakhar”, God’s Chosen, all the while hiding the true intent from him. Sre had not failed any of the tests, but he had not passed either. The results were too ambiguous. Tam was going to pay, and he was going to pay big time. How had he let himself get talked into this one? Probably because, like Tam, there was a part of him that wanted to believe that there really was an Elbakhar, that he was going to come in his lifetime and that *he*, the one shunned and scoffed by his peers, would be vindicated with this life-changing discovery. The clock on the wall was ticking away at his patience.

“It’s no use,” Barikor huffed with resignation, “there’s not enough information for me to go on.”

“Just like that,” Tam asked, “you’re giving up?”

“Yep, just like that. Besides, I’ve got to get dinner ready. It’s third-week and I’ve got company coming tonight.”

Barikor stood from the table, scooped up a hat and cloak, and walked outside into the fading light to

gather fresh fruits and vegetables. Tam, disappointed, also stood up and held out a finger in Sre's direction.

"I'll be right back, just one minute, sir," he said and walked out the door.

"Barikor," Tam called.

"Tam," said Barikor who was busy digging up sabrons, "don't start with me; I've thrown everything I know at him. Do I need to apologize for everyone who doesn't meet the requirements?"

"But he doesn't not meet the requirements either, does he?" Tam asked.

Barikor was getting annoyed, and it showed on his face. "Look Tam, there are probably half a dozen guys in Tameh alone that could meet the same criteria as he has," Barikor slowed down for a moment, "with of course the exception of the river crossing. But that doesn't prove anything by itself. He may or may not be Elbakhar. If he is, then the other prophecies still haven't come to pass. Only time will be the proof. So, I'm not writing him off, I'm just not as convinced as you are. And by the way, what's the deal with you suddenly becoming interested in religion? I've never known you to have the slightest interest in it."

Tam scratched his head. "Well, thanks for trying anyway. I guess I was just paying more attention than either you or I thought I was back in school. We'll be gone first thing in the morning."

“Nonsense, you’re welcome to stay as long as you both like,” Barikor added. “Besides, your friend needs the recovery time.”

Barikor, by now had gathered an armload of victuals. He and Tam turned to make their return to the sadosta. Standing in the doorway with folded arms, was Sre.

“Who is Elbakhar?”

* * *

Barikor had peeled and diced some of the sabrons he had collected, dropped them into the pot of boiling water along with a scoop of eeker nuts and minced jaiper leaves for flavoring.

“We’ll just let that stew for awhile,” Barikor said. “Now, every so often a deliverer, a savior of sorts, is raised up by God himself to free the people from tyranny and oppression. Elbakhar is to be one such deliverer. No one knows when he will come or even if the prophecies concerning him are true or false. Given the track record of the prophet Shallost, who wrote of him, well, let’s just say that we could have had a better source.”

Sre looked confused.

“What do you mean a better source?”

“Shallost seemed to be a bit on the... crazy side,” Barikor explained. “Now, all the prophets usually are

considered eccentric at first, but Shallost was even more so. You see, he actually claimed to be able to communicate with the faerie folk. And while most prophets get their information from God himself, Shallost said that he got his from another prophet, one of the faeries, a faerie *prophet* by the name of Mynost.”

Sre was taking this all in with some difficulty. “So, if he claimed to be able to speak with the faeries, how did he do it?”

“Not speak, communicate. And having lived a condensed life, he never said, but it makes for a wonderful story and of course can’t be disproved.”

Sre was baffled again. “What do you mean by ‘a condensed life?’”

“Shallost did something to greatly anger the faeries; he never said what it was. Faeries are normally very docile, but one shouldn’t anger them. They didn’t kill him like they normally would do with an enemy. Instead, a measure of his life force was drained by them. When he showed up in town, he had aged nearly three hundred ninety cycles. It left him weak, heartbroken and discouraged. He discontinued his ‘communications’ with the faeries, left off prophesying and died within a couple cycles.”

Sre seemed to be contemplating something now.

“What?” Barikor asked.

“If he left off prophesying, wouldn’t that lend credence to his claims of getting his prophecies from the faeries and thus validate his ability to ‘communicate’ with them?”

“I’m surprised; very few people ever catch on to that one,” Barikor said, “That is a subject of great debate amongst scholars. And while no one else has ever claimed to be able to communicate with the faeries, for the most part, Shallost’s prophecies are still considered... reliable.”

Sre decided to delve more into the subject. “And so that’s what all of this questioning is really all about; Tam here believes that I could be *the* Elbakhar that Shallost spoke of?”

“That’s right, but to confer such a title upon anyone is to take some very big risks. There are those in power that would squash anyone who gave even the slightest appearance to be this deliverer and all those associated with him. They have a system of power set up that they must protect. I suggest that you leave off this idea and pursue finding your true identity. For instance, you could research that family crest you’re wearing. You’ve probably got loved ones looking for you right now. Some questioning in the local villages would most likely yield great rewards.”

Sre pressed Barikor more. “One identity is as good as another. I would like to know more about the prophecies of this Elbakhar.”

Tam leaned back in his chair with his hands cupped behind his head. He smiled at Sre's curiosity and persistence. *The man knows no fear. A great attribute for a would-be deliverer.*

Barikor's eyes grew large. "Haven't you been listening?" he asked excitedly.

"Well, you haven't turned me in and Tam is the one who brought me here. It seems to be pretty safe company to me," Sre said.

Barikor looked to Tam who continued to smile. Barikor threw his hands into the air. "You're a glutton for punishment is my guess. I guess I am too. Okay, but you didn't hear it from me." He began to whisper. "There is a scripture that says, 'Because I am the husband to the widow and the father to the orphan, I shall raise up my Chosen,' telling us that Elbakhar is an orphan. No father or mother, no family to speak of. Another says, 'He shall arise with the sentence of death upon him.' This is what I'm talking about. If you were to take on this title, you would be a marked man. Your life would be shorter than Shallost's life."

Sre met those credentials for other reasons and Tam knew it. But to give up that information would require him to reveal Sre's identity and that he already had a death sentence placed on him. Barikor would undoubtedly extricate the two of them, by force if necessary from his sadosta if given that information.

"What else," Sre asked.

“Senseless remarks,” Barikor continued. “Lights in the dark, for Him to mark, the way of wind that brings an end. Winding and rolling, the path of danger strolling, ‘til all is made new.’ and others like that.”

Boom, boom, boom! There was a pounding on the door. Barikor was obviously startled but relaxed quickly. He looked up at the clock on the wall.

“That would be our company.”

* * *

“Heroes, the both of them,” Matt pronounced. “And while one did resort to less than honorable means, it is clear that his intentions were to provide what he believed in his heart to be the best course of action for those whom he had been chosen to serve. Perrinon leaves behind a wife and three children of his own and so it is my sincere belief that no harm would ever have become the child. Rubun leaves behind a loving wife. I trust that we will unite to offer these two women our assistance and love to go along with our condolences.”

A very large crowd, now holding candles and torches, had gathered in the early twilight for the memorial services of Rubun and Perrinon. The atmosphere was somber and yet conveyed a portentous omen.

“Our foe will give us neither quarter nor mercy. This has become abundantly clear through the capture and detainment of our friends back home as well as in

the deaths of the two men we are gathered here tonight to honor. I myself was at one time a servant of darkness, as were many of you all. But now we must unite and overcome or be destroyed. Rubun and Perrinon understood this. It's why they abandoned the system of evil and opted for love. But old habits are hard to break as are the hold of old masters. There will be more struggles, there will be more sacrifices, and there will be more heroes. In the end, we will know our neighbors better and we will be proud to stand alongside each other and to call each other friend.”

In the midst of the crowd, one person began to hum. It was a tune that everyone was familiar with, but the words had long since been lost to the ravages of time. It's slow meter and long mournful notes brought tears to the eyes. Those who stood close by joined in. Soon, everyone who could hum was humming or weeping. Musicians joined in with bellows flutes and the sound filled the air and the consciences of everyone present. No one remembered the wrongs committed. There was just the lonely pain of separation from someone dearly loved and the feeling that some day, this too would pass. Matt stepped back from the balcony. He could offer no more. This was the territory of the heart where words were meaningless.

* * *

Fatsah had decided that it was time to abandon the conventional methods of control. It was time to meet in secret with one he believed would have no qualms about carrying out his less desirable means of control.

“I need a general, someone that understands that life is war and that in war there will be casualties. I need someone who is not afraid to bring retribution to the rebellious in whatever fashion is most expedient for the preservation of order. Do I make myself clear?”

“Allow me to make something clear,” the grey hooded figure said, “if my men and I decide to take on the responsibilities which you are suggesting, we will require of you, not only five hundred draigors apiece, but also a place of authority above that of your pathetic soldiers. They can become your police for all I care. My men take orders from me alone. It would be unbecoming to their dignity to have them know who is paying for their loyalty. You do understand, I hope.”

Fatsah calculated quickly. One hundred, maybe one hundred fifty of the most elite fighting men in the world at five hundred draigors apiece would not set him back too much. With time, he could make that up in new taxes.

“I do understand,” Fatsah said with a slight smile, “and the terms are agreeable. There is one man, a certain Mattowee, I believe you know of him; he needs to be made an example of. I trust you can work out something special for him.”

The hooded man contemplated momentarily, “If this Mattowee has abandoned reason, as you suggest, then I’m sure we can work something out.”

“Excellent,” Fatsah said, pulling out a map, “here is a map of their location. If you will...”

“I need no map; I’m familiar with it, and I’m familiar with its weaknesses. Now, as soon as we have half the payment, we can begin.”

Fatsah pulled a coin sack from his side, counted out twenty draigors and pocketed them. He could easily have paid more. The remainder of the sack, he handed over to his new general.

15 Company

Tam, although currently enjoying the company of Barikor's two guests, was growing anxious. Tam's wife, Genkotah was probably under the impression that he was dead. By now his superiors also suspected him having died in his duties; but if he hadn't and he was spotted by a fellow Shadow while not on his mission or if word even got back to them, there would be questions. Why had he not reported? Was he shirking his responsibilities, hanging out with these civilians? If he wasn't, then why had he not brought the rebel in? Things could get a little precarious. Either way, he was sure to be labeled a traitor and put on trial by his peers. If he was found guilty, the range of his punishment could fluctuate anywhere from banishment to death. It was a struggle to not allow his emotions to give him away.

Viktor, the squat and stout man with long stringy hair and a long mustache had finished off his sabron stew and was sitting on a short stool, tuning an instrument which Tam had never seen before. There were four thick, long strings emanating from the large, round base and extending out along a neck with markings on it. Viktor would press the fingers of one hand on the strings along the neck and pluck them with the fingers of the other hand. The vibrations resonated in the base and produced low mellow tones for a wonderful sound.

There was a similar instrument lying close at hand, but this one had six strings and the neck was shorter. This one evidently belonged to Viktor's brother, Karl, who was taking his time with his meal because he was more of a talker. Karl was of an average build and, like his brother Viktor, wore his hair long and sported a similar mustache. But that's where the similarities ended. Viktor liked to wear flashy colors, but Karl adorned himself with more subdued colors. While Viktor obviously had a passion for music, he worked at it. For Karl, music came naturally and was most likely one of many distractions.

Viktor set aside his instrument and curiously picked through some old papers sitting on a stand.

"Barikor," Viktor asked waving the papers in the air, "is this the score you were telling us about?"

Barikor looked over the shoulder of Karl, who was in mid sentence, to investigate Viktor's inquiry.

"Yes it is," Barikor announced, "please be careful with it; that is the original. I've made some copies for us there to your right. You can use one of those."

While Sre was hanging on every word, Tam had not been paying much attention to Karl, who now seemed to be greatly excited.

"The whole town is in an uproar. Soldiers pulling people out of their sadostas and imprisoning them, with many having fled into the countryside. It was a mess trying to get out of town to come for practice.

The soldiers seemed to think that we were going to run off with the others. I tell you, there's something bad going on."

"What do you mean?" Barikor asked.

Karl continued, "Well, after the disappearance of this one fellow, Sre I believe his name was, the town went haywire. But now the word is that he's dead and even more people are upset. Everyone is concerned that they could be next. You can barely make a move without someone accusing you of conspiring with the rebels. The level of panic is so great that it's turned children against their parents and put a division between wives and their own husbands."

Even Tam hadn't realized that the situation back home had gotten so bad. Every sentence this man let out his mouth was bringing Barikor closer to discovering the truth, if he hadn't already. Tam could feel his blood pressure rising. He needed to change the subject as quickly and as smoothly as possible.

"Karl," Tam said, "I'm in the mood for some music. What is that instrument that you've got over there?"

Both Sre and Barikor eyed Tam suspiciously. Normally, politics was Tam's forte. Now, he gave every appearance of avoiding it.

Karl, thankfully, stopped his line of conversation. "That, sir, is a guitar. Viktor, Barikor and I are in the process of restoring a lost heritage of musical

instruments and musical pieces to pass on to future generations. Barikor has found a stash of old manuscripts that we can draw from. He found the one that Viktor is going over right now. It's called 'Amazing Grace'. You've probably heard the tune but didn't know the words. Some of the words have become unreadable and they're not in the modern tongue as we know it today. I especially like the verse that says...

And when this heart and flesh shall fail,

And mortal life shall cease,

I shall possess beyond the veil,

A life of joy and peace.

Sre perked up. "You mean to tell me that after a person dies, there's another life?"

"Absolutely," Barikor added. "We're not descended from the geppipillions as most scientists today believe. What people consider as dying is simply this outward shell that we inhabit falling off. The inward man of the spirit keeps right on going."

"So nobody should really fear death then," Sre said with a smile.

"Hold on," Karl said, "only those who are pure need not fear death."

Sre looked upset now. “But nobody is pure.”

“Right again,” Barikor chimed in. “That’s why it’s not what we do that’s so important; it’s who we know that’s important. Everyone lives forever. It’s not the quantity of life that we’re concerned with but the quality of life afterward. Those who know their God will have their blunders and bad deeds erased, from the smallest to the greatest, and live forever with God, who loves them. Those who don’t will go into eternal punishment.”

“That’s rather harsh, don’t you think? If I had died in my fall, you’re telling me that I would have been punished for not knowing God?”

“Not really,” Barikor said, “God’s judgments are better than man’s. He knows if we’re ignorant of the requirements. If you had perished without any knowledge, then you would simply be judged on what you did know. Did you follow your heart and do what you *knew* was right or did you follow the desires of your fleshly cravings?”

“But,” Sre continued slowly, clearly thinking it through as he went, “if I knew God and still could not find it within my ability to do what I knew was right, even though I was trying, you’re telling me that my mistakes would be erased?”

“That’s right,” Karl stated. “Everyone has a natural tendency to do what’s wrong. It’s called a sin nature or iniquity. Nobody can change that within themselves. It doesn’t matter how hard we want to or

how much someone is pressuring us to change, we can't do it. It's not within us. And, it's not our responsibility."

Now Sre was really interested.

Karl continued, "Only by staying focused on the *Savior of mankind* and relying totally on him, which is our responsibility, can lasting change come about. Change is God's responsibility. Anyone trying to change themselves or someone else is playing God."

Sre was dumbfounded.

"Well then, who *is* this Savior of mankind?"

* * *

Julion was pillaging the library, which he had finally discovered with a great deal of difficulty, when he heard a soft shuffling outside the door. After hours of frustration and feelings of ineptness, he finally decided to find a quiet place to sit and ponder his dilemma. No one could know that he was not actively searching, so he needed a secluded spot away from condescending stares. Those were exactly the requirements the architects had used for positioning the library in a high room adjoining the southeast watchtower.

He placed his lamp on the stand next to the shelves he was perusing and blew out the flame. He could always relight the wick. But he didn't want anyone else plundering his treasure trove. Quietly, he

slipped behind a shelf so that he could remain hidden while he watched the door.

A soft bluish-white glow from the moon outside filtered through the windows in the library. Julion could see that the doorknob was turning, but the movement was slow, almost unnoticeable. A thin sliver of light from a torch mounted upon a sconce somewhere in the tower stairwell pierced the darkness of the room. It suddenly occurred to Julion that whoever was outside the door might smell the smoke from the extinguished flame. He leaned over the lantern and took in a deep breath, inhaling as much of the smoke as he could in order to remove it from the air and placed his hand over the lantern to capture the rest of the smoke inside the glass column.

His lungs immediately reacted with displeasure and he almost coughed out what he had just sucked in. His hand was burning on the glass column from the lantern. He gritted his teeth, reminding himself that it would all be over soon and he could go back to his duties.

As the door swung quietly open, Julion stared with amazement. Outside the doorway, was a bush. That was strange. He hadn't remembered seeing a bush outside the door when he came in; he was sure of it. A person would remember something like a bush in a stairwell. But then something really odd happened; the bush moved. Even in the moonlight, he could see that it had eyes. And what's more, it carried a knife in addition to a bow and arrows.

Julion pulled himself back into the shadows, holding his breath. The bush leaned in and hurriedly scanned the room. When it was sure that no one was present, it shuffled on down the stairwell to the left. His lungs spewed out the smoke with great relief and he shook his hand madly to remove the burning sensation.

He needed to alert the guard up in the watchtower. As silently as he could, Julion moved to the doorway and looked out into the stairwell. The bush was gone. This was his chance. He scurried up the stairwell and broke out onto the precipice only to discover the guard was slumped against the guardrail. He was dead. If he didn't do something soon, more people would die. He couldn't go down the stairwell; that's where the bush was.

Julion searched the guard. No good; his horn had probably fallen over the wall. He removed the sling from the guard's side and pulled a steel ball from his pouch. In the center courtyard was a large, metal, convex plate. Chetz had called it a gong and he used it to announce the meal time. Julion loaded the sling and swung it around his head, taking aim at the gong. When he released the ball, it fell short. Gravity had a greater effect over the distance than he had imagined. Something in the courtyard moved. It was the bush. It had noticed the ball hitting in the dirt nearby. Julion ducked out of sight and fumbled through the guard's pouch. The steel balls rolled out of the pouch and over the side, clicking on the stone wall as they fell. Julion managed to capture one before it was lost. There was only one steel ball and one opportunity left. If he missed

this time, the bush would not only see him, but Julion would be unable to alert anyone of the infiltrator who would surely return to kill him. But he had to try.

* * *

Jarok, captain of the guard and leader of the mastonite tribe, had just unbuckled the sword from his side and was laying it on the table in his room. He had had a long day and was ready for a good night's sleep. Then he heard it: a metallic *tang* like someone throwing stones at an empty barrel. It came from the courtyard. Jarok took the few steps to his window and pulled aside the curtains to peer out. Others had heard it too. Lights from windows began to fill the courtyard as the curious looked out their windows. From one of the nearby towers came the sounding of a horn's blast. In the shadows, Jarok could make out a blur slipping into the doorway of another tower.

Jarok snatched up his sword and scrambled out the door. More off-duty guards joined him quickly in the moonlight. The sounding of the horn again. Nawgli, the guard in the northeast tower, had sounded the alarm when he had been alerted by a steel ball striking the meal gong. He was pointing to the southeast tower now, the tower that the blur had moved into. Jarok scanned up the tower to search for the guard who should have been up there. All he could make out was a figure the size of a young boy, silhouetted against the moon and waving frantically. The courtyard was beginning to fill with people holding torches.

“Get these people inside before one of them gets killed,” Jarok barked to a guard and then began maneuvers toward the tower, occasionally ducking behind whatever he could find. When he made it to the doorway, he let his sword lead him in. If anyone were waiting for him, they would meet a steel blade first. He stopped just before an open doorway halfway up the stairs. There was a faint hint of smoke in the air. Four guards had followed him in with more beginning to file into the narrow staircase. Jarok looked over his shoulder and motioned for one guard to cross the doorway to draw fire. The guard nodded and sprinted the short distance. No arrows.

More guards crossed without incident. Jarok left six guards to watch over the doorway and continued up the stairs. When he got to the top, Julion was standing next to the dead guard, unarmed just outside the door on the balcony and waiting for his own imminent demise.

“Which way did he go, boy?” Jarok asked.

Julion shook his head nervously. He hadn’t seen the bush.

“Back to the room,” Jarok ordered, “he didn’t come out here.”

Jarok and the other guards quickly moved down the stairwell and bravely entered the library, each expecting to die, but too hyped up on adrenaline to contemplate much of anything except how to locate the enemy.

* * *

“We searched the room and questioned the boy, Matt,” Jarok reported. “We found nothing. The boy says that it was a bush with eyes and a knife. The moon must have been playing tricks on his eyes.”

Matt was seriously troubled. “Julion has no problem with his eyes, Jarok. It was a Shadow dressed in a gilly suit, a suit made to look like leaves and moss. It camouflages the wearer; it allows him to blend in with the forest surroundings.”

“I see,” Jarok said. “But Shadow or not, it can’t make him blend in with books and shelving.”

“Go over the entire tower with a fine tooth comb,” Matt demanded. “I guarantee you, there’s a hidden entrance there somewhere. That’s why I had Julion searching the library to find a map. In the meantime, put another guard in the stairwell as well. You’re dismissed.”

Jarok looked over at Julion who was standing in the corner, tears streaming from his eyes and waiting for his rebuke. “Come on, boy; let’s go.”

“Julion can stay; he’s my page,” Matt said.

“I’m sorry, sir,” Julion managed after Jarok had left the room.

“For what?”

Julion wiped the tears from his eyes. “I tried to be strong. I just wasn’t ready for it yet. I didn’t mean to let you down.”

Matt looked with compassion on Julion. “The tears mean nothing, Julion. Strength lies not in the body as the young would think, nor in the mind as the intellectuals would suppose. Strength lies in the heart. Train that, and it will lead the rest. Tears are the sign of a strong heart.”

16 Captive

A chill was in the air as the first sun crept over the horizon. This was that wonderful time of year, Sre loved so much, when the pervasive fog of the Sados faded into a faint mist that clung only to the lowest valleys. Karl and Viktor were headed back to Tameh with a satchel full of Barikor's copied books to sell off. Tam was helping with the morning dishes and other chores.

Sre stood leaning on the railing just outside Barikor's sadosta, enjoying the morning. Barikor had loaned him a pipe and given him a bowl full of his private blend of tobaccos. He had to admit, the lack of stress associated with this lifestyle suited him. There were birds singing and insects slowly warming up in the sunlight for the day's activities. There was so much to take in. This Savior of mankind must be very special indeed if he could create so much and at the same time give his creation the right to reject, persecute and murder him. But the story hadn't ended there. His power was so great that he had won out in the wrestling match with death and was at this very moment, seated on a throne somewhere in the heavens, welcoming all who desired his company.

He could see Ekoomuh and Kentoh moving lethargically across the ground far below, in search of a

place to hibernate. It was amazing how much weight they could pack on in so short a time. He realized that he had better get to them speedily or lose them and the equipment they carried. Spring was still a ways off. Of course, he could just track them down. But, why should he wait until they were discovered missing. He might as well make himself useful.

Laying aside the pipe, Sre crossed to the winding staircase built onto the side of Barikor's sadosta. Although the fog had relinquished its mighty hold in preparation for a winter's nap, the forest could still be a dangerous place. The predatory creatures could not only be seen better, they could also spot *their* prey better. He would have to keep a watchful eye on his surroundings.

The staircase had webs strewn across the path, all the way down, from the inactivity of summer. He swept these aside as he descended to the halfway point. From here he could take a small lift to the forest floor. He had felt eyes following him down the staircase. He decided that the best course of action was to step into the lift as swiftly as possible. Just because he couldn't see his watcher, didn't mean it wasn't present, ready to claim a breakfast prize of its own.

The rope was securely fastened to a hitch and wound through a set of pulleys to alleviate the struggle of lowering and lifting a person's weight. Everything, by all appearances, was in working condition and in good repair. Stepping into the protection of the lift's cage, Sre closed the door behind him. There, on the bole of the tree, now shrinking back out of sight was a large,

jade green, king scorpion. Measuring two feet long, it could paralyze a large man in less than a minute with only one hit from its venomous tail. Death would come quickly afterward. It had evidently come out from under the flight of stairs and was following him down. And where there was one, more were sure to follow.

He was safe for now. If the others showed up, he would have a tough go at it. He could ride Ekoomuh back up to elude them and retrieve the lift later. Sre unlashed the rope from its hitch inside the cage and initiated his descent. A small group of the faerie folk sat on branches nearby inspecting his every move. He waved to them. They eyed his waving hand but made no move to return his greeting. Upon reaching the bottom, he began searching for the two gutahs. As luck would have it, they hadn't gone far. They had found a hole in which to spend the winter. All it needed was a little padding and it would be perfect.

“Nice hollow you two have got here, buddy,” Sre said, patting Ekoomuh’s neck. “Unfortunately, I’m going to need you for a little while longer.” He glanced over Ekoomuh’s back at Kentoh, who was grunting as if she understood every word he said.

There was something more. In the darkness of the hole, Sre could see a faint green light in the distant background. This wasn’t just a burrow; it was a large cave. The roots of the Sados were intertwined, forming a cavern. He could feel a cool breeze on the back of his neck as the moist forest air was sucked into the void. As

Kentoh shuffled about, the breeze increased. The cave had to be quite extensive to create such suction.

The light in the cave negated the need for a torch. Sre reached into the pack Ekoomuh was carrying and pulled out his knife. There could be creatures other than gutahs beyond the entrance. If there were, they could come out while the gutahs slept and potentially be a threat to them. If they were to be left here for the winter, it was his responsibility to ensure their safety.

* * *

Stupid beasts. They were blocking the way out. Still, it was morning outside and Graigun wouldn't be able to leave for some time now. By night, these monsters would be sound asleep and he might be able to squeeze by. It was too late to take the other way out. It would take at least four days travel and food he didn't have. And what if he met faeries along the way? He hadn't covered up his hiding place after he had left. They would have found it by now. No, it was this way or not at all.

What was this? A voice? Graigun listened intently. His hearing had become sharp. One of the beasts moved and he could see *and smell* a man. His mouth began to water. Graigun's dreams were coming true. He could taste the barbequed flesh already.

Come on; come on into the darkness. He could feel his pulse quickening and his breathing becoming harder. *Must calm down. So close.* Graigun shook with delight, moving back into the shadows. The man

creature was coming in. Graigun could see that it had a knife. *Oh how thoughtful of it to bring a carving knife with it.*

Graigun felt around and picked out a rock to throw. As the man moved into the cave, one of the beasts stuck its head in behind him. It was very large, too large to come in. That was a relief. Humans didn't know how to fight in the dark. This would be short and easy. Graigun waited until the man's knife hand was close to a wall. Then, he took the small rock and bounced it off the wall, striking the man on his right cheek. Startled, the man turned and smacked his hand against the wall, shooting pain through his hand and causing him to lose his grip on the knife. Graigun sprang from his hiding place and placed a massive hand around the man's neck, lifting him off the ground. Nice catch.

* * *

Morning found Matt, Jarok and his men assembled in the large courtyard.

“With the exception of those on watch, everyone's here, Matt,” Jarok informed him.

Matt carefully looked over the crowd of guards, gathered in a loose formation. He placed his hands on his hips and hung his head. They may not have been the cream of the crop but, he knew from experience, they could be.

“As I look over this assembly,” Matt began, “I see only one or two that presently have what it takes to be the best. Now, no matter what you have heard or what you have believed, being a Shadow isn’t about an abundance of natural talents. There’s nothing supernatural about it. It’s about the sincere, heartfelt craving to uphold the standards and morals that make us great as a people.”

Their curiosity was now aroused.

“For now, the Shadows are under the guidance of a misinformed and misguided *man*. In spite of your not being able to point them out, currently there are probably close to a hundred Shadows outside these walls with the mandate to penetrate our defenses and take us all back to lives of captivity. They *will* kill as many as they deem necessary to accomplish their goals. Last night was just a recon mission. And thanks to a team of watchful men and one very lucky lad, we sent them a message that taking us back will not be as easy as they had first imagined.”

Julion watched from the balcony along with other onlookers. He could feel a sense of dignity rising up in him.

Matt continued, “It is not, and should never be, our intention to injure or kill any of them. If you want to win out against them, you will need to pay special attention. I will teach you to spot them, to anticipate their actions and to frustrate their purposes. With further training, you will be able to outmaneuver them, operate

covertly outside the confines of this fortress and to take captives. Do I have any takers?"

The crowd enthusiastically responded with cheers and raised hands. Julion found himself raising his hand. He quickly put it down, hoping no one had noticed. But someone had. Someone who, although beginning to outwardly show his age, was inwardly as young and whose eyesight was as sharp as ever. Matt looked up at Julion and smiled at his youthful passion. Julion was part of Willig's tribe and had escaped when the rest of his family had not. He had plenty of reason to join the struggle, and Matt was not one to deny him.

Matt noticed that Julion's gaze was suddenly diverted toward the sky. Other eyes began lifting. Seasoned training told Matt that something was wrong. He spun around in time to see a lone arrow soaring over the walls. The guards began stepping back to make room. Matt estimated the arrow's trajectory and walked toward the point he felt the arrow would make landfall. As the arrow fell, Matt snatched it from the air before it could hit the ground.

There was a note attached to the shaft. Matt removed the scrap of paper and read its contents:

To whomever reads this note:
Sre is no longer alive.
Give up Mattowee and
you may all go home free.

Matt crumpled it with a tight fist. Propaganda.
Simple, yet effective. There was no other alternative.
They would not win.

17 Resigned

Graigun's small mind was crammed with thoughts he never thought he'd think. This was all too difficult. There was a large beast slowly widening the hole to get to its master, a man too raw to eat – humans were great when cooked, but not so great raw – and with no way to get to dry wood for a fire. His only exit was blocked by the beast. If he killed the man, he would only anger the beast, but he was too hungry to let him go with nothing to replace him with. If he let him escape, the man would alert other men or possibly even the faeries.

This was a dilemma reminiscent and worthy of the troll kings of long ago. Putor, the last of the great troll kings, had said upon his death bed that the glory days of the trolls were past. Now was the time of men. But if Graigun could pass this test, he would be deserving of the title of troll king and he would prove Putor wrong.

After an hour or so of contemplating his situation, Graigun had finally come to an answer. He would take the man back into the dark tunnels, out of sight from the beast, kill him, and then wait near the entrance until the beast finally broke through and went to look for the master. Then he could slip out. He would have to hide the man really good or the beast would find

him before it became dark outside and then it would come looking for Graigun. Once outside, he would be able to hunt freely for another meal with plenty of wood for fire.

“Get up,” Graigun huffed. “We’re going for a little walk.”

The man glared at him and slowly stood. He was probably scheming. Humans were always scheming something. Graigun kept a better grip on the knife than the man did. If it tried anything, he would just have to kill him there and run away back into the tunnels before the beast could break through.

“Don’t try anything,” he warned. “If you do, I’ll slit your throat. Juga?” The human just continued to frown. “Do you understand?” Graigun snarled. The man slowly nodded its head.

“Good,” Graigun snarled, nodding toward the small doorway, “let’s get going.”

* * *

Peshiwah was devastated; the reports of Sre’s death, whether real or feigned, tore at her heart like a massive claw, shredding every hope. The many trials of the past days weighed heavy now. They threatened to throw heavy shackles on her and drag her away to their cruel master, despair. The only key to survival was to busy her mind with more important matters, although at the moment, she had a difficult time distinguishing what

those might be. One didn't just sweep issues like these under the rug.

Chasha was quick to remind her just what those issues were. She pulled on Peshiwah's skirt, wanting to be held. Peshiwah gladly raised her up and nestled her closely. Even though she knew in her mind that no one would take her child from her again, she couldn't help trying to assuage those fears by keeping her close at hand.

Mattowee shared in Peshiwah's pain, having raised Sre from childhood, but he refused to believe the reports. To relent was to give in to despair, and despair clouded the mind like a drug. Even if it was true, which it probably wasn't, he needed clarity to lead this great people. They believed with their hearts in freedom; they committed to it with their entire being. They deserved a leader that was just as committed: one who had weighed the cost against the possible gains and was willing to gamble every last cent against the seemingly bottomless reserves of his opponent.

"Julion," Matt called.

Julion stepped through the arched doorway into the room where Matt and Peshiwah sat. Matt looked up with a look of anger turned determination. "Julion, I seem to recall seeing some terrador bushes growing inside the walled garden. Tell Jarok that I want him to take some of the berries from them every evening and drop them over the outer walls."

A questioning look crossed Julion's face; nevertheless he turned and departed to deliver the order. Peshiwah also eyed Matt with curiosity. Matt decided to enlighten her.

“Until our men are properly trained, we need to have the forest animals working for us. We're creating an artificial feeding plot. The terrador berries are fragrant enough to draw borits which only feed at night. The borits, which are in no short supply, have excellent night vision and will alert each other and our guards if anyone comes too close to the wall. Borits are the favorite dish of sippons, also night-feeders, which will settle for humans as an easier prey.”

Peshiwah frowned. “Wouldn't that be unethical; I mean if the Shadows are being misled by a deluded leader, then why should we plan harm for them?”

“Sippons are one of the easiest creatures for a Shadow to detect,” Matt explained. “Their voice range is not audible for borits, although humans hear them quite well. And their calls are very distinctive. They'll be prepared to deal with the sippons but it'll occupy their time. The more Shadows devoted to other tasks, the better. It will also free up some of our guards from mundane duties so that they can find time for badly needed training.”

Peshiwah was still pensive. “Matt, is there anyone that is skilled enough to go into their camp and spy to find out if Sre is really alive?”

“Good question,” Matt said. “If I can find someone that can and will do this, they might be able to find out what else the Shadows might be planning. It’s worth looking into. In the meantime, we need to focus our resources on digging in; it appears we’re going to be here for some time to come.”

* * *

Tam had called Kentoh several times with no reply. It was a fact of life; when it came to the fall season, gutahs just weren’t that quick to react. However, with this level of unresponsiveness, he might have to write her off as being out of the picture until springtime. Now, he would have to either wait for a ride out, or go it on foot. To make matters worse, his prisoner had disappeared. As a Shadow, waiting around was simply not an option. A successful person always took a proactive approach.

The small lift attached to Barikor’s sadosta was sitting on the forest floor. So, after borrowing a considerable length of rope from Barikor, Tam quickly rappelled the perilous heights to the forest floor and went in search of Kentoh. Where she was, Sre’s gutah was sure to be. And where his gutah was, Sre would likely be. Well, it was worth a try anyway.

Upon locating the two gutah’s tracks, Tam followed the trail into the small cave where they had evidently decided to hole up for the winter. Kentoh was already in hibernation and Sre’s gutah appeared to be in hibernation also with one small difference. His head and

right front leg were extended into another hole with claw marks surrounding its entrance. He had obviously been very determined to get through the opening when nature took over.

Sre was surely on the other side of that cave wall and in some kind of trouble. But the thought of moving a hibernating gutah, small or large, was not a task which Tam savored. It was going to be back-breaking work. In the end, it was necessary to route some ropes through the rings on the saddle to haul him away from the hole.

Wearied from the labor, Tam pushed onward to investigate where the access might lead. A beautiful, yet ghostly green light filled the cavernous hollow. All of Tam's senses were on high alert. Whatever had befallen Sre could potentially be a snare to him if he didn't take care.

Two hours of constant search only turned up two sets of footprints in a struggle, one belonging obviously to Sre and the other to a large barefooted creature, most likely a troll, and some drag marks for a short distance. The drag marks ended at a pool of water. Beyond that were all rocks and a multitude of tunnels in which they could have vanished into. If Sre made it out of that one alive on his own, he would face a maze of darkness from which man rarely ever returned.

This was not the sort of trail that one man alone could ever hope to track. If Sre were to come out of this one alive, he would have to do it on his own. After coming to grips with the cruelty of the forest, Tam

returned to Kentoh and retrieved the items that he needed to go on alone. He would return in the spring for his gutah. The time had come to put aside dreams of saviors and move on with reality.

18 Winds of Change

Humans were so misunderstood. Miss Whhhop knew that it would be a battle against the winds to prove it to the other faeries. Instead, she would have to let them prove it for themselves. That called for a drastic plan; a plan that was as secretive as it was innovative.

That's why she had come to the archives. She had to know as much about the humans as she could dig up. She had pored over every possible document that she could find, but there were references to books that were nowhere to be found. The only human that was known well by the faeries was Shallost, and the reports concerning him were all but blotted out.

School was out for the winter cycles. She would have to make a trip. Not to another archive, but to the home of Shallost. It would be a long trip, taking nearly a week to complete. She would have to locate the old remote outposts for a safe place to bed down for the night. She pulled the maps with the outpost locations, sought the best locations for fresh food along the way and planned her route. Next, she needed a plausible reason for leaving the safety of the faerie village. She was a teacher; so she could easily offer as an excuse, if questioned, that she was doing field research for her spring classes.

All preparations made, Miss Whhhop reassured herself that this was the right thing to do, said her goodbye's with promises to return by spring, got her bearings and flew off into the early morning sunrise. This was going to be a huge risk. But so what, a life without risk, was it a life worth living?

* * *

Sre was a walking dead man and he knew it. This was not the sort of creature that one could bargain with. Push their intellect too much and they would rebel with deadly consequences. This one already had the look of murder in his eyes. Also, their stubbornness was legendary; once they had decided on a course of action, a swift death was usually the better alternative. They could be merciless in their cruelty when death was taken off the menu. Nearly nothing was off limits.

This troll held the blade to the back of Sre's neck as he walked forward. There was no chance in trying to outrun this brute. His arms hung nearly to the cave floor. He would certainly have no trouble reaching him if he broke out running. Sre could feel the damp winds in the tunnels picking up every time they came to a new junction. It was as if all of the tunnels were funneling their energies in one direction.

"In here," the troll huffed.

Sre paused for a moment at the entrance of a small chamber only to be shoved headlong into the room. It was like being struck by the force of a gutah's tail. He banged his left shoulder as he stumbled into the

dark room. Glancing back, he saw the gruesome grin plastered across the creature's face. This was it. This was where his life would end. He could feel his adrenaline surging through his body and mind.

The troll's entire body blocked the doorway, yet Sre could feel the moist winds surging into the room. If the winds were coming in, surely there was a way out. The troll had made a mistake by shoving him out of arm's length. It was now or never. He had to run with the direction of the winds.

Sprinting off into the darkness, Sre crouched low and held his arms out before him in case he came across any obstacles. The troll began roaring in rage and took up the pursuit. He would be on him in only a short while. Over time, his eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness. It could see him better than he could in this darkened room.

It wasn't long before Sre ran smack dab into a wall. But he could still feel the strong winds sucking at his legs. Quickly, he ducked and began to crawl for safety. The troll was now on him, scraping at his right ankle with those long fingernails. It must have abandoned the knife in order to gain a better hold. He could smell its rancid breath being carried past him.

The troll began to spew forth hatred. "Raga mawl," he screamed. No idea what that meant, but it couldn't be good.

Sre kicked furiously with his free foot and clawed for a handhold. The cleats on the bottom of his

boot tore at the troll's hands and he released his grip. Sre scrambled out of the troll's reach, but the winds were whipping past him furiously now. His hat flew off and tumbled down the corridor out of sight.

There was room to stand now, but the winds were strong enough that they threatened to topple him. He could no longer hear or smell the troll. It wouldn't give up, though. They were too stubborn for that. He had to find his way out quickly or the troll would find him. Using the rough walls of the tunnels, Sre began feeling his way back against the suction. That was the way out.

Too late. There it was again, that awful rotten breath being carried along by the gusts of air. He thought he would puke. The accompanying cruel laughter only confirmed that it had seen him. Sre could barely make out its silhouette in the tunnel ahead. He had to go further down the tunnels. More darkness, more wind.

Sre turned and sprinted, arms flailing wildly. A fleeting thought crossed his mind of how this day had so quickly turned sour.

The tunnels must have converged because the wind speed doubled suddenly. With nothing to hold onto, Sre stumbled head over heels, being carried along by the winds until he tumbled out of control.

Without notice, the cave floor dropped out from under him and Sre began a freefall. After he had fallen for a full four seconds, Sre relaxed, knowing that his fate was sealed.

But the winds continued stronger than before, pushing and pulling. After a minute, Sre wondered when the end would come. After vomiting from the constant turbulence and disorientation, he stopped counting. His mind was playing tricks on him. Any moment now and he would be dead.

Still the winds continued howling, buffeting his body relentlessly. He couldn't fight it. He was confused. An hour went by, two hours, and still the sensation of falling. He slowly stretched himself out as far as he could in an effort to touch something. His hand struck water. Sre strained to tuck himself into a ball.

He fell upward, or was it downward. Anyway, he plunged into the water and it was moving fast, almost as fast as the wind. Sre gasped for air as he broke to the surface.

There it was again, that same foul odor. The troll was nearby. He wondered if it could see him. He was in an underground river and was being drawn rapidly to an unknown destination.

Time passed slowly. Sre was beginning to feel invincible. He should have been dead many times over today and somehow he had survived. It must be God. There was no other explanation. The odds were too great. More minutes passed without reprieve. His body grew weary. Then, the river dumped him thirty feet into an underground lake with the weight of the waterfall thundering down on top of him.

Sre could hear the winds howling overhead while condensation rained down from the ceiling. There was a huge “Sploosh” close at hand and the odor returned. Could anything wash away that smell? He turned his back to the sound and quickly submerged, swimming under the surface as far as his lungs could hold out. There was a small light ahead. Was it real or was he imagining it? He resurfaced and drew in a quick breath.

There were more lights, only they were above him. The winds were escaping through holes in the cave walls. That wasn't all. A single faerie fluttered about in the vast room. It seemed to be watching him very intently.

Sre turned his head in time to see the troll and duck. It swung a powerful, glancing fist. Even at less than full impact, it was stunning. Sre had to escape and there was no immediate exit. The troll grinned and swam closer.

Once more, the unexpected happened. The troll's face began showing concern. He was struggling to stay above the water. Small whirlpools started forming around him. The water was draining below the troll through the hole that Sre had seen and the troll's extra height was working against him. He was being sucked down. Sre took advantage of the situation and swam to the nearest wall.

Graigun was beginning to panic. Some unseen force had his leg and was dragging him down. The human was swimming away and there was nothing he

could do to stop his descent. There was a light ahead in the water. He was being sucked toward it. Then the light grabbed hold of his foot. He struggled against it, but it was stronger than he was. Graigun lashed out against the light, striking blow after blow. The light grew brighter and he could feel its grip extending up his body. The more he punched, the brighter the light grew.

Water rushed past him into the light. Graigun landed more blows and the light continued to suck him in. He was up to his waist now. He grew frantic, a virtual maniac, struggling in vain to free himself of his attacker. Without further ado, the hole broke open and Graigun plummeted into the rocky canyon below followed by a giant, steady stream.

Sre had made it to the wall in time to see a very large whirlpool form where he and the troll had just been. The underground lake was draining through the hole. The troll never came back up. Good riddance. The faerie, apparently satisfied, flew up and out one of the holes above.

After a rest, Sre climbed the walls and climbed out through one of the exits. There were small wispy clouds beginning to form above him. He gazed out at his new horizon, one he had never seen before. The forest was gone; it had been replaced with a barren desert.

* * *

Matt was showing signs of fatigue and stress. He couldn't pass up the very real possibility that Sre was dead after all. He would never allow such a thing to

happen again to anyone. These people depended on him far too much for him to let down his guard. His sleeplessness was beginning to affect his judgment and his tolerance for other's mistakes. He would apologize for his short temper, but he was finding it increasingly difficult to reign in his emotions.

When Jarok had suggested that they install tripwires along the tops of the walls, Matt blew up, asking why he hadn't just taken the initiative to do it. He involved himself in the everyday, trivial affairs of the people, carefully watching over them to make sure that they didn't make any costly mistakes. Any wrong decision could cost them their freedom. When asked if someone could help him with the leadership tasks, He was quick to throw it back in their faces that they weren't trained as Shadows and therefore weren't fit to share in the responsibilities.

In the training of the guards, Matt was ruthless. He often pushed them beyond their current limits and gave little time for recovery. The guards were feeling deprived of sleep. Only their fear of the consequences, kept them awake. Once, a guard had noticed a lone Shadow creeping up the wall. After the intruder had been repelled, the guard was grilled as to how he had crossed an open field and climbed halfway up the wall before being noticed. As a reprimand, the guard stood upon a stool in the center courtyard for a full day without food or water, followed immediately by an eight hour watch.

Peshiwah was growing concerned for him, but his schedule was so tight that she couldn't get a spare moment with him. When Mattowee slept, it was only in short spurts. The people were just too needy and there was just no one else that could fill the bill. If things didn't change, the people would be forced into rebelling.

Matt was no fool. He could read in their faces the growing contempt and the mistrust. But it was for the good. The masses rarely ever knew what was best. They needed a strong leader to explain to them why things had to be the way that they were. And if they didn't understand, it was still for the best. They would see in the end.

19 Return

Light was slowly approaching. He had to be on the opposite side of the southern mountains. Funny, he had seen them before in the distance, but he had never imagined them being this tall. Somehow, in a few short hours, he had traveled what would normally take days to traverse. And that was just the horizontal distance. The vertical crossing was considered to be no easy task. That was one incredibly, impossible trip. But somehow, it had happened.

The cliffs were too steep and too high for a return trip. Without provisions, finding his way back would be unthinkable. The mountains acted as a barrier. They stopped the southbound clouds, forcing them to dump their rains in the forest to feed the mighty Aston and Tivy Rivers. They also kept the marauding tribes of the southern wastelands from entering the forest unawares. But now the mountains were letting the clouds come through. And if the clouds could come through, then anyone determined enough could return.

There were lights in the near distance beginning to flicker. Sre decided to follow the newly formed river down and make his way toward the lights. About two thirds of the distance down the mountainside, he discovered the broken and mangled body of the troll that had haunted his morning. *Not so bad now, huh?*

The river filled in small ponds and dry lakebeds. Making a slow headway, the river kept pace with him. Whenever he was thirsty or tired, he would stop for a short breather and a drink. By evening, the clouds behind him had grown into mammoth thunderheads, threatening to rain down on the desert. Lightning strikes riddled the dark billows. The tops were catching the winds that blew over the mountains.

He could clearly see the village now. It was unlike anything he had ever seen before, having grown up in the forest. The houses were made of clay. Most had probably been there for many cycles. The river steadily advanced alongside him toward the village. The town must have purposely been built along this ancient riverbed.

Marauders weren't settlers, so the villagers probably weren't the sort that would leave him half-dead and destitute of all earthly belongings. If anything, they could probably offer shelter. He was sure that he wasn't dressed like any desert bandit.

He could see a few of the people who stopped to watch as he entered the town. They were certainly different. The style of their clothing was more suited to their desert environment and they behaved as if they had never seen a stranger. They eyed him with curiosity, their gazes bouncing between him, the slowly advancing river and the looming clouds.

A group of men clustered together and began making their way in his direction. One man, a short

fellow with muscular arms and legs, smiled broadly, holding out a hand of welcome. Grasping Sre's hand, he shook it vigorously.

“Can we get anything for you?” he said, “You look tired. You need a place to bed down for the night, two nights, three?” My family's finished our meal for this evening, but we'd be happy to warm something up for you.”

As it happened, all were very eager to introduce themselves and a crowd began to form. There was Kallop – the dwarf –, Brindol, Ferrots, Palidon, Effer, Nistor, Allibrae, Thegor and a whole slew of others he was sure he would never remember. It was like a hero's welcome. Word spread quickly and soon, an argument about who would house him for the night commenced. Too embarrassed to ask why the big welcome, Sre just accepted it and decided to go with the flow.

“I've got an idea,” Ohnammon suggested, “he can spend the night at Ellory's. He takes in the widows and orphans and he's always got plenty of extra food and a spare bed. We can hold a drawing tomorrow to see where he can stay after that.”

To this, everyone agreed. Ellory was called for and arrived shortly. He was slightly taller than Sre, about six foot with a thin body, with long wavy brown hair streaked with grey and deep brown, caring eyes. He kept a neatly trimmed beard and mustache that showed more grey than his hair.

“Pleased to make your acquaintance...,” Ellory started, leaning toward Sre.

Sre, uneasy of the silence, responded with the only name he could give himself. “Bakhar, my name’s Bakhar.”

“I see,” Ellory said, smiling. “Well Bakhar, we’d like to welcome you to our humble village, Komai. I’ve been assigned as your guide and host for the night. As you can tell, we’ve been looking forward to this for a long time.”

“I’m sorry,” Sre began, “this is all a little awkward for me; looking forward to what?”

“Well, you’ve got to understand,” Ellory said, “there’s a story, one which a lot of folk in these parts take seriously. It tells of a stranger who walks in unannounced and returns the waters of ages past. When you walked in ‘unannounced’, with clouds and the riverbed filling up, well... let’s just say, you made quite an impression.”

“That seems to be happening a lot these days,” Sre mumbled.

“What’s that?”

“You see, I know I’ve told you that my name is Bakhar, but the truth of the matter is, I have no idea who I am. Amnesia, I guess. Another man, whom I spoke with just yesterday, seemed to take me for some sort of deliverer, a deliverer of sorts, a guy he called *Elbakhar*.

It's supposed to mean 'God's chosen'. And with the things that have been happening lately, I'm starting to believe him."

Ellory stared at him in amazement. "Amnesia, huh? Haven't you tried to seek out any family?"

"How am I supposed to do that?" Sre asked.

"Everyone I know has a family crest. Haven't you got one?"

Sre paused to think for a moment. "I had one embroidered on my cap which I've lost."

"Well, I can't guarantee anything, seeing that you're not from around here, but what does it look like?"

Sre stooped to the ground and began to draw in the sands with his finger the image of a man lying on his side with a bow and three arrows strung upon it.

Ellory, visibly struggling inside, grew silent. The anger was growing on his face.

"I don't know what kind of cruel joke you're trying to play, sir, but you've got a place to stay tonight. After that, you need to move along," he said, turning to leave.

Sre reached up and grabbed his lapel. "You know the crest, don't you?"

And there it was, tattooed on Ellory's chest, the same crest he'd seen on his own cap.

* * *

Explaining to Barikor his sudden departure was the least of Tam's worries. He had raced along at breakneck speed through the winding paths of the Sados. He was breaking standard Shadow training and taking big risks in order to make up time. Explaining his absence for so long would be difficult. Showing up empty-handed after four days and retaining his credibility with the Shadows would be a strain. He knew the trails that were watched; he avoided those until the last minute, at which point, he slowed to give himself time for his breathing to calm down. He didn't want to appear as if he'd been pushing himself. That would be a dead giveaway.

Pulling himself up to his full height, he held his arms straight out to his sides and began beating his chest, the sign to anyone watching that a fellow Shadow had returned victorious. The only one that appeared to be watching was a beautiful female pleantor, a great black cat with white spots, who watched the show with ambivalence from the safety of her cave.

An inconspicuous puff of white smoke rose above the canopy, giving him clearance to proceed unhindered. Tam knew all of the snares to avoid by heart. There would also be the mental hoops and snares he would have to avoid in order to not be trapped in his deception. It was sad that things had to be this way; it was just easier to avoid the questioning and the punishment for the blatant disregard of orders.

Soon, Tam was joined by two men – escorts – who appeared seamlessly from out of the woodwork. No words were necessary. The procedure was standard; first, you were taken to a neutral room where you could get a chance to clean up and check in your weapons and then, without rest, food or a chance to make up a story, it was off to the gambits for a game of mental chess. Depending on how that went, you were either allowed a warm meal and rest or you would be passed up the line for further examination. Right now, Tam held no hopes for the former.

The room was small with only the barest of necessities. Fortunately, a Shadow was trained to use almost anything convenient as a weapon. As a result, his necessary arsenal was minimal. He laid out his knife, bow and arrows, cleated boots, hooks and began to undress. A shower would be nice, even if it was cold. Upon exiting the shower, a fresh set of clothes would be waiting for him. All of his possessions would be scooped up and waiting in a guarded locker, to be returned only after a successful session with the gambits. Tam gave his property one last look. It was going to be a long night.

20 Secrets

“I’m sorry,” Ellory confessed. “I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt... about the amnesia that is. We here in Komai have an enemy that loves nothing more than play with our heads. Although, why he would single me out is beyond my reasoning.”

While Sre and Ellory walked along the dusty roads through the village of Komai, the locals were busy digging furrows to direct the newly revived river’s water into their fields and homes. Children splashed along the banks. Sre and Ellory were headed to “The Apple of His Eye”, Ellory’s home and ministry center.

“I don’t follow,” Sre interrupted.

Ellory eyed him cautiously for a moment and decided to continue.

“Okay, let me back up and start from the beginning. Many cycles ago, I too lived in the Sados. It was my home; I had a family and a job just like so many others. Temi was beautiful; I loved her from the first time I ever saw her. There was another man named Maltonin, a very ambitious man, who wanted an unreasonable amount of authority. Take my word for it, that’s just a polite word for power. Anyway, when I saw the writing on the wall – so to speak – I was given the option of a complimentary position of ‘authority’ or

disappearing permanently. I played along for awhile, looking for a chance to expose him. Everyone I knew saw me as a traitor. It hurt. He was ahead of me all the way. He outmaneuvered me like a pro and I was set up as a seditious and evil man. The whole town turned against me. Temi and I fled into the forest. But it was too late; Maltonin's lies had worked against our marriage. She ran off on her own, into the forest, carrying our only son. I never found her. So I came here, no questions asked; I have a new life now, free from the contention and all the striving that comes with a lust for power. Over the cycles, I've financed many expeditions in search of news concerning them. Nothing. I am the last of my family."

Sre considered the implications. Ellory was certainly convinced that he had no relatives – none living that was. Maybe he *had* been hired as a spy by Maltonin. But if he had been, he wasn't aware of it now. No amount of coercion would convince Ellory otherwise.

"So you believe this Maltonin guy," Sre started.

"No, no. I see where you're going, but Maltonin is long dead. His grandson now rules in his stead. There is another man, Arimon, a warmongering bandit who cares nothing for politics but instead loves raiding and starting quarrels so that he can cash in on the pain and suffering. He was once a great protégé of Maltonin. He ended up murdering him in his sleep. Maltonin's grandson never sought revenge because Arimon had abandoned to him the power that he had always desired.

I put nothing past Arimon. It would be very like him to send spies into our town in search of weaknesses. Perhaps I have unwittingly even hired one to search for Temi and my son.”

“What was the name of your son?” Sre asked.

“That sir,” Ellory stated flatly, “is a name that I will take with me to the grave.”

An aged tree, void of any leaves, stood in the center of the town. It had been converted by a skilled craftsman into a magnificent bronzed sculpture. Sre paused and stared up at it. The carved man stood, waist high in water, hands uplifted to the evening clouds. The legend had permeated every part of their lives.

“I will see to it that your bandages are changed and that you are properly fed,” Ellory said. “If you seek refuge, we will provide it. In return, we ask that you make yourself a profitable citizen of this town.”

“I appreciate the offer, sir, but I’m seeking no refuge,” Sre replied. “I need to get back. Perhaps I can still find my rightful place.”

“By the way, Bakhar, how *did* you get here? You don’t seem to have suffered any lack in your journey and your bandages are still pretty fresh.”

Sre smiled at Ellory. “That, sir, is a secret that I’ll probably take with me to my grave.”

“Touché,” Ellory returned with a smile.

The Apple of His Eye was only a short walk further. Inside its humble walls were jammed over fifty individuals, each one more desperate and hurting than the last. Still, they all appeared content.

Thegoí, a large, robust man, had been cruelly tormented as a younger lad. As a result, he had become extremely withdrawn and defensive. He was satisfied with his meals and maintaining a daily existence. Only recently, had he made the move to interact with society on a more personal level.

Janniphar was a frail, young woman whose home had been destroyed when Arimon's marauders came to pillage her small town. She had fled while her family chose to remain. Brothers, mother and father were all slain trying to defend their possessions. It would take time to rebuild her trust in mankind.

Lemmay and his entire family were crowded into a small corner of the shelter, having lost their home to the wiles of greedy bankers. Even homeless, they hounded him, trying to extract their pound of flesh. But Lemmay now felt freer than he ever had been. Not because he had no responsibilities, but because he knew freedom's name.

Even the legendary Shallost had at one time taken shelter within the walls of the "Apple of His Eye". When he became self-sufficient, he moved out and started his own vineyard. But that was a long time ago. All the fields were barren wasteland now.

Sre gladly accepted a bowl of crifton soup with its long, stalks hanging over the edge. He smiled and took a seat. The stalks themselves were hard shells with a soft core that melted out into the heated broth.

“You’ll need to scarf that down,” Ellory pointed out. “We’ve got group worship in ten minutes.”

“Worship?” Sre returned, “I’m sorry; I don’t follow. What’s worship?”

Ellory’s raised an eyebrow and a wry look crept across his face. Explaining worship to someone who was unfamiliar with the concept would take too much effort for the short time remaining.

“Come and see.”

* * *

Stillness lay over the woods surrounding the castle called the “Old Man”. It had been days since the warning had arrived via arrow. Matt expected the worst. It was the calm before the storm and they all knew it. The Shadows were out there making their plans. Somewhere, they had found a chink in their armor and they were working hard to exploit it. They could have days or perhaps just hours remaining before the Shadows’ plans were unleashed. Peshiwah sat quietly contemplating their dilemma. Every moment wasted in the wringing of hands was time lost. As much as she hated to admit it, Matt was losing his touch, maybe even losing touch with reality. Something had to be done soon.

She stood slowly and scanned the courtyard. She located Jarok managing a group of men in the gathering of large stones. Iron bars were being constructed to keep intruders from entering through the waterways, but if the water level dropped low enough, they could heave a large supply of stones from the walls in a pinch to fill in the gaping holes. She had crossed nearly a quarter of the courtyard when the thought of Matt crossed her mind. Stopping in her tracks, she turned her gaze toward the balcony outside his room.

Mattowee looked haggard. His usual impeccable appearance was replaced with three days worth of stubble, unkempt hair and wrinkled clothes. He took a moment from his pacing and looked down in her direction.

“Hey Matt,” Peshiwah joked, “hair number 5,867,231 is out of place.”

For a moment, a slight smile broke on his face and then just as quickly vanished. Matt went back to grinding the stones beneath his feet to dust.

A slight twinge of guilt plucked at her heart. But you didn't just sit idly by and hope the best for those you loved. Someone had to act, and if Matt wouldn't do it, then she would go behind his back to get it done. Passing Jarok without a break in step, Peshiwah barely let her small voice rise above a whisper. Jarok continued unabated in his ever-increasing chores. Perhaps he hadn't heard. She would have to let it stand for now. Attempting to speak with him again this early could

draw unnecessary attention. Without warning, he laid aside his tool belt, called for an early break, picked up his dinner and walked away.

Peshiwah was leaning against the wall in the shade outside the window of Jarok's quarters. She could hear him just inside. The next closest person was well out of earshot. As far as she could tell, it was safe to speak. Before she could even form a word on her lips, Jarok spoke from behind the shutters of his window.

"I know what you're thinking, Pesh and I'm with you. I knew you wouldn't want to be left out, so I'm working you into the plan. Meet me in the library this evening, say about eight?"

"I'll be there," Peshiwah whispered.

21 Steps of Faith

Sleep didn't come, but Sre didn't care either. It wasn't that his bed was uncomfortable, or that his wounds were too painful. Tonight, his so-called knowledge had taken a back seat while he searched with his heart and finally found what he had been longing for. Sleep was the last thing on his mind, now. He knew, without the slightest hint of doubt, that his ways were pathetically insufficient. No amount of self-effort could fill the gap between himself and his Creator.

But one perfect being had undertaken that task in his behalf. He knew it. There was no explaining it, he just did. And when he gave into it, oh, the peace and joy that came flooding in. It was like nothing he had ever experienced before. There was nothing in all of creation that had greater power than the blood that had been spilled for him.

And this thing called worship, oh the worship. It was pure and precious; it humbled him and at the same time, it lifted his soul to the gates of heaven. Why on Gliese had all this escaped him before? How could he have been so blind?

Sre's feet would not rest tonight; they were now imbued with resurrection life. While his mind raced with new-found revelation, his feet paced. They paced right out the door and onto the empty streets. Everyone

else was too caught up in the love and excitement of the moment to notice. If the truth be told, Sre hardly even noticed, himself. Before long, he found himself wandering out close to the edge of town, his mind miles away.

Night had fallen without warning. Except for the soft gurgling of the new brook, silence permeated the thick air. Billowing thunderheads were edging their way south from the mountains, pushing swirling clouds of dust toward town and yet bringing something the villagers hadn't felt in many cycles... humidity.

Coming across a small crumbling shack, curiosity crept into Sre's mind. It sat alone and yet, this humble, ramshackle abode called out to him. It was unlike the other clay houses. It must have been ancient. When wood in these parts had become scarce, the other houses had been built and repaired with clay. This one had been wooden from the onset. It had fallen to time and neglect and still it stood without a single hand to help it regain its dignity. No one had even bothered to drag off the wood for kindling.

The revelation hit him like a bolt of lightning. Shallost! This must have been his house. He'd heard that the famed prophet had lived in this town once. He had a vineyard; Sre could just make out the silhouettes of old support sticks in the yard. When the faeries had supposedly drained some of Shallost's life, it must have put the fear of God into all but the bravest of treasure hunters. That would explain the warning signs set up at the street. Fear kept guard over this address.

According to Barikor, Shallost's lost book had never been found. What secrets did it hold? Could it still be here after all these cycles? If it were, would it hold up to the rains now threatening to pummel the small village? Should he pass up this opportunity and possibly lose it to the storm's ravages?

Sre found his way into the small shack by moonlight. He couldn't keep the phrase from his mind, "where angels fear to tread". But, there were no signs of faeries. The place had long been deserted by man and creature alike. A dead silence infiltrated the entire place. Shadows from the window played on the wall, casting haunting images into his mind.

Sre pulled a half broken candle from a shelf. It was a short stub, but it would work for now. As he lit the wick, the light pushed the demons back into the darkness.

He could now see the dusty remains of the old man's living quarters. The place was in shambles. He was not the first treasure hunter to enter these sacred chambers. Walls had been torn apart; there were holes in the floors and ceiling. The normal accoutrements of societal living had been spirited away in hopes of gaining some hidden secret. Many had come, abandoned optimism and left. And they had left it a condemned wreck. But where they had failed, he would most assuredly succeed. After all, he was undoubtedly the Chosen.

Breathe, he told himself, *no use in getting a prideful attitude*. A whole generation of hopefuls had been here before him. What could he do that the others couldn't? This was certainly not a riddle to be solved by standard means.

He placed his hands on his hips and tapped his foot, trying to think. But thinking was what everyone else had done and it had been futile. Sre closed his eyes and took in a calming breath, letting his mind relax. He lied to himself, telling himself that he had time.

It began faintly, and then increased to a definite buzz. His eyes snapped wide open only to find a glowing faerie, hovering inches from his face. She was beautiful with an exquisite light radiating from her entire being. He stood in awe. The faeries were bruted to be guarding the place, but he saw no weapon in her hands or ill-intent written on her face. Instead, she smiled blissfully at him. A faint smile crept into the corner of his mouth.

The buzz of her wings was somewhat erratic. But in spite of it, she maintained a smooth balance and a consistent height. He could almost swear that her wings stopped altogether at times. But that was impossible. She would most certainly have fallen if that were the case. Sre decided to attempt the impossible.

“Hello, my name is... Well, the truth of the matter is, I don't know who I am. What is your name?”

The faerie stared intently at Sre's mouth as he spoke. For what seemed an eternity, except for the buzz

of faerie wings, there was only silence. Somewhere very close by, Sre could hear the sound of a drop of water. Very odd. Dripping water in a dusty old shack? Had the rains started? No success in getting a name.

The faerie took no notice of his consternation, but floated gently away from him toward the door, pausing only occasionally to look over her shoulder.

He understood. He was to follow.

Outside, the gathering storm hid the light of the stars and Gliese's solitary, tiny moon. The only light, other than his candle emanated from the small faerie. She crossed the land to a rickety structure, a dried up well, long abandoned for its lack of life-giving properties. Here, she perched on the edge, waiting for him to catch up.

Sre hesitated. Was he being lured into a trap? He thought back to the words he'd heard earlier that evening, *without faith, do you truly believe?* Then, he decided. *If I am the Chosen, then it's time I started acting like it.*

* * *

Jarok pointed out a spot on the map marked with numerous X's.

“Ebonnai, who works the tower during the day shift, has spotted much activity in this area. I believe the Shadow's base of operations to be set here. It makes perfect sense because it's upstream, has plenty of cover,

sufficient room to bed down the troops and retreat routes here, here and here.”

“There’s still one more problem,” Peshiwah said. “We still need to get outside these walls. They’ll be watching every gate.”

“Not we,” Jarok said, pointedly, “you. Dellis has offered to watch over the kids tonight while you’re out taking a midnight stroll, and if need be to raise them as her own. You would be the likeliest of us to succeed and still go unnoticed. We’ll cover for you should there be any questions. Plus, if you’re captured, they’ll be less likely to do any harm to a woman than they would be with a man.”

“Okay, me then. But am I supposed to just walk out the front gates, hoping they’re all blind?”

Jarok looked Peshiwah straight in the eye. Just as she was growing uncomfortable with his silence, Jarok cracked a smile.

“Follow me.”

Picking up a candle, Jarok walked around the table and straight for the door. Stepping out into the tower stairwell, he paused and looked over his shoulder. Peshiwah, not far behind, pulled the hood of her cloak up for extra warmth.

Jarok spoke in whispers. “I haven’t said anything to Matt for fear that he would have it sealed, but I’ve been able to locate the secret passage the Shadow used to

gain entrance. They're not likely to use it again until they make their full-scale attack for fear of it being discovered."

There were only a few steps more up to the next landing. Having taken those, Jarok paused for a moment and blew out his candle. Peshiwah could hear a soft scraping sound while a black void abruptly opened to her right. The suddenness startled her.

"Nawgli, in the tower above, will be waiting for your signal when you're ready to return."

Time was of the essence and Peshiwah knew it. She cautiously probed the emptiness. There were stairs here. As she took her first steps into the dark, she became engulfed in the inky blackness. The door had closed behind her.

* * *

Making an alibi watertight sometimes worked against you. Tam had found this out in his early, rebellious cycles at the Kaolani Military School. If you wanted to get away with something, the lie had to be believable, but not perfect. Perfection aroused suspicions, and suspicions only excited the gambits. They could smell the blood. They lived for the mind games.

Tam was shrewd. One couldn't generate fictitious alibis often. You had to be careful to whom you passed on information. They might one day be your boss or blackmail you. Or they could collapse under

interrogation. His wife was no exception. Although she was aware of his double life as a Shadow-slash-hunter, she understood his need for secrecy. She didn't push him for details; usually, he offered none.

Tam had been up all night. Now however, he was restive, worn out from his questioning with the gambits.

"I missed you," Genkotah offered.

Tam smiled weakly. "I missed you too."

"I hope they'll give you some rest for awhile, we need to spend more time together. Besides that, there are some things that I can't do by myself. I need your help."

"Sweetie," Tam said, "Don't make too many plans. I've been on assignment for several days and that takes away from my quota as a huntsman. I'm gonna be busy for the next few days, trying to catch up."

"Just explain to them that you've been trying to hunt without Kentoh; that might buy us a little more time together. Work isn't everything, you know. They need to get a life outside their little secret operations," she said, rolling her eyes.

Tam changed the subject. "Genni, I want to tell you something, something so secret, it can never leave this room."

Genkotah tensed. This was highly irregular. It must have been so important that the burden couldn't be

shared by Tam alone. Whatever it was, she knew what he was trying to do. He needed to reconnect with her on a deeper level. This was vital to him. And he wanted to share it with her.

“I mean this,” Tam warned, “if anyone finds out, we’ll both be dead.”

Genkotah’s eyes widened. “I understand,” she whispered.

Tam began laying out the details of the events of the last few days for Genkotah. He shared the hopes he had had for Sre being the Elbakhar, how they had been dashed when he had found the tracks of the troll, the intense scrutiny of the gambits. The only thing that had saved him was Sre’s arrow that he had somehow managed to stow away. Covered with the miasmic stench of the straw spider, it provided the last convincing evidence that Sre was indeed dead. It wasn’t what they preferred, but it worked.

Relieved of his burden, Tam’s heavy eyelids finally succumbed to fatigue. Genkotah, sat frozen in fearful silence, contemplating the futility of this cruel joke called life.

22 Discovered

Billowing thunderheads, commanded by thunderous generals and flowing with armies of torrential rain, were beginning their midnight march on Komai. No defenses had been set up to withstand the invading force nor would the citizens of Komai oppose its occupation. In fact, the construction of new cisterns and canals had already begun to ensure that the citizens could reap the benefits of this army. War was always profitable to survivors.

On the outskirts of this small town, gazing down an abandoned well, Sre squinted to catch a glimpse of the elusive faerie that had lured him here. Was he supposed to make the impossible climb down the well or wait for the faerie to return? She was not returning. He could still see her glow and it wasn't moving. This blind faith thing was not so easy as he had thought. There could be anything down this well. But the rains were coming and the water level in the well could be rising even now from the bottom up. If the book were somehow down there, it could be ruined by the rising waters. Time was wasting.

A scraggly rope had been left hanging down the well by someone searching for even a few drops of the elixir of life. The well was narrow and the walls were dry, though somewhat unstable. Supported only by the

rope, he eased himself over the side of the well. Once he gained a foothold and leaning against the walls, he crept down the well, into its darkness. Within minutes, the creaking rope and cautious maneuvering delivered him to the faerie lady's side.

The faerie's glow lit a small nook in the side of the well. Inside this nook, lay a case of what appeared to be leather. Sre stretched out his hand and pulled the case from the hollow. A small rock came out with the case and dropped into the well. He could hear the splash just below him. The waters were indeed rising and would quickly be upon him.

The faerie had already left him behind and was ascending to the surface. Sre worked his way back up to the top and breathed a sigh of relief once he climbed over the side. That rope had been stronger than he had anticipated. He set the case down and pulled out the candle that he had snatched from the old shack. Searching through his pockets, he found a match which he used to light the wick.

Inside the leathery case was a book. The binding was filthy and ragged. The pages, what were left of them, were lying loose within. The leaves of the book were made of a thin, almost clear substance. It was the light and fragile paper commonly used by the faeries, containing the lost words of the legendary Shallost. Sre brought the candle closer. This was it: the writings that only a few had hoped even existed. He gingerly laid the book out upon the ground and slowly, even reverently, opened the book.

The penmanship was poor and the words were faded. It was uncertain how the words had been bound to the papers. There were no indentions on the pages where the pen would have pressed upon them. Curiosity pushed him to read.

“After having spent many cycles gaining trust with the faeries, I have discovered in their archives, the secrets of the ancient kings and queens. It is forbidden for me or any other human to know these secrets for our thoughts and desires are not as pure as theirs. I learn these now, during the waning cycles of my life, and as I may not have much time to develop them, I am recording them, as time permits, for the one who will follow me. I trust God that only the right person will discover them, for in the wrong hands, all hope would be lost.

There is a place that’s halfway between sleeping and awake. It is called, as closely as my skills can interpret, the “plastirealm” by the faeries. In reality, it’s not just one place, but there are a subtle myriad of places in between. It’s a fabric that can be as thin or as thick as you want. It can be folded, molded and manipulated to support your every wish and even your physical weight. It can propel you to heights of greatness or drag you to the depths of corruption. It is also a mighty river and an infinite ocean. One step too close and you will slip over its edge and be swept away and lost in a sea of insanity. When you understand that, you will know that there are not separate areas of imagination and reality, but that they are one in the same. Either you control it, or it will

control you. In order for you to discern the plastirealm, you will need to drink a small quantity of tea, made from the allowin plant. You must only drink this once. Additionally there are a series of exercises that will assist you in distinguishing delusion from empowerment.

Before you begin, you will need a trusted individual who can visually confirm the results of your efforts. In the beginning, you must not divulge to them that it is you manipulating your environment. Only confirm that they see what you believe you are seeing. Never attempt to manipulate the mind or will of another. This will skew your results and you will ultimately slide into a false reality.

Your motives must always be pure or you will be sorely tempted to abuse your abilities, utilizing shortcuts. If you do so, finding your way back out may prove to be more troublesome or nigh unto impossible. It is therefore of utmost importance that you always take time to thoroughly check your motives before you enter the plastirealm.

The plastirealm is also a living entity. It will speak to you and show you things that are and things that are not, things that can be and things which can never be. Never trust it. It is a greedy, selfish animal whose sole desire is to swallow you whole. It must be tamed to do your bidding.

Before you begin, it is necessary to learn the faerie alphabet and its various pronunciations. This will

be of great importance. You can learn the language later.”

On the page that followed were the strange lines and curves which Sre had seen marking the door and window frames of the shack. Beside each was the letter equivalent that he was used to and where one letter would not suffice, a pronunciation guide was also provided. Next came the recipe for the tea along with extensive descriptions of how to place oneself into the plastirealm with minimum effort and without slipping off into a trance, sleep or insanity. A page of more warnings followed with instructions to memorize a long soliloquy in the faerie tongue without ever verbally speaking it until it was flawlessly memorized. One mistake in the pronunciation could allegedly render the reader forever powerless or could have unimagined, horrible consequences.

This was not the sort of reading material that could be left lying casually around. Its value was inestimable. The original case was failing badly, so Sre closed the book and tucked it away into his own sack after wrapping it with his cloak.

Sre looked back down into the well. Its dark waters were now risen enough to completely cover the nook from which his new treasure had emerged. It was as if a dark portent somehow was rising to foreshadow the events of his life.

* * *

Wading through tall grass, large boulders and sharp, thorny bushes in the middle of a cold fall night was not Peshiwah's idea of fun. She knew where the terrador berries were; she could smell them. And as long as she steered clear of them, the howling borits were easy enough to avoid. Of course, that didn't eradicate the possibility of running into a stray sippon. A Shadow could spot pick one out, but she was no Shadow. Their natural camouflage was only enhanced by the night. The faeries at least had turned in for the night. They could have proved to be the real challenge. If they attempted to keep an eye on her, it would be a dead giveaway, dead being the key word.

She took the long trek around the open fields and scooted her way down the walls of the gully that channeled the brook into the Old Man's walls. Follow this and she would probably come upon the Shadow camp. Or at least, that's what she'd been told.

About twenty minutes into her cumbersome trudging, she thought that she heard a low groan coming from around the bend of the ravine. The gurgling of the brook had nearly drowned out the sound. Was that the sound a sippon might make? Or a Shadow alerting his comrades? She froze her advance and calmed her breathing. Slowly and quietly peering around the corner, she looked for anything out of the ordinary. There was an unusual bulge on the side of one of the trees. Beyond that, she could see the faint glow of a fire in the distance. She was nearly to the camp; but something was blocking her way.

Peshiwah gazed at the sides of the ravine, trying to gage their slope. Too steep; and the moist vegetation would be too slippery. She would have to turn back in order to find a way up and around. As she turned to make her way back, she bumped into a tree. Except it wasn't a tree. Trees don't have eyes. And they don't speak.

“Leaving so soon? You just got here.”

* * *

Tam cinched the bag of parnells closed tight. They were small critters with little in the way of what you could call fur. But the meat was good, and tasty at that. Shadows had to maintain an illusion of normalcy. A little help from his fellow Shadows brought Tam's individual catches up to the huntsman guild's required quota with a few to spare.

The quota however, was the least of his worries. He would be leaving Genni again. The uprising of Tameh and the surrounding villages was now at the top of the Shadow's list of things to squelch. That should've been the military's problem, but evidently the situation had escalated beyond their control. *So now, the Shadows are mercenaries.* Tam couldn't help but taste the acrimonious bile rising in his throat. *I'll not just be blindly following any orders. Why can't they handle this on their own? Maybe I'm being set up. Maybe the gambits saw something that they want to investigate further.*

The “Old Man” was vaguely familiar to him. He had passed it once during his training. But it had been merely an oddity and was deemed off limits... until now. The Shadows had camped upstream from the old fortress and as soon as he dropped his quota off, he was to report to the camp. They would be expecting him. No delays would be accepted this time.

Tam went over his encounter with the gambits in his mind. He answered their questions with the story he had concocted, offering information only when pressed. There were no slips that he could detect. He had followed the runner westward toward Moh, discovered his campsite, the glove crawling with ants, the arrow that was slathered with the stench of a straw spider. He had found the body and the man’s mourning gutah, left them to the creatures of the wild, made his way back and dutifully reported. And most of that was truth. Anyway, it didn’t matter; the man had been hauled off by a troll and probably eaten.

So much for saviors and such. Maybe, one day he would rise within the ranks of the Shadows to right some of the wrongs. Or maybe he would just give it up altogether and settle down to a normal life, raise some children of his own. That would be nice. Best not to count his iplins before they budded, though.

To make the trip more uncomfortable, it seemed, he had been supplied with new boots. They were just a tiny bit small, but they would adjust with wear. Not quite his style. He wasn’t sure why they kept his last set; there was nothing wrong with them. Sure, they probably

picked up a few small burrs while travelling through the reserves, but... Now here was a problem. He never told the gambits that he travelled through the reserves.

23 Dilemmas

Ellory watched his newest resident as he finished off his meager breakfast. Food was scarce for now, but the small river now flowing past the edge of town brought hopeful promises that springtime would yield abundant crops. If that were true, then perhaps the raiding tribes would decide to leave them be for awhile. Maybe it would embolden them. If that happened, his hands would certainly be full as would be the Apple of His Eye with more hurts, more greed-ravaged souls.

This man, this Bakhar, this enigma masquerading as a would-be son, taking his fill of the food reserved for those less fortunate, he was a mystery that needed solving. Bakhar turned his head in Ellory's direction, smiling. Most of the swelling and redness that covered his face and body were gone. His nose, on the other hand, was still swollen and askew. Probably broken somehow. Ellory returned the smile, more out of reflex than anything.

Ellory had been an only son, with no known relatives other than his wife and son who were both gone. Now, a stranger shows up with claims that his family ensign was not his alone. True, his son would be about this man's age, and he did bear some resemblance. But, could he allow his heart to go there? And what was this bundle that he clutched so tightly? He had nothing

with him the night before. There were no claims by any of the other residents of theft, not yet anyway, nor had anyone from the village come to complain of missing property.

He waved to Bakhar, gesturing for him to come have a seat next to him. The man tucked the bundle under his arm, rose from the table and made his way through the small crowd. As he came closer, Ellory could see the bags under his eyes.

“Sleep well?”

“Enough, I suppose.” Sre took a seat.

“Good. I would say that we had a busy day ahead of us, but with the rains and all, it looks like we’ll be shut-ins today.”

Ellory made no attempts to hide his looking at the bundle under Sre’s arm. “The people here are generous, even when they have so little to offer. Please, I know that they’re excited by your presence, but don’t take advantage of them.”

“Wha...,” Sre began.

“Look, you came here yesterday with nothing. Now, you have what, a gift? We have a long, hard winter ahead and those in this town will need everything they can spare just to make it through until springtime.”

Sre bowed his head. How could he explain this? If he had left the book, it would have been destroyed. If

he were to tell Ellory where he had gotten it, would he believe him?

The room suddenly erupted with cheers. Indwi, a young lad with mentally handicapped challenges, was pretending to be a hunter. He stood on the kitchen table, drawing back an imaginary bow. And there, perched atop his head was Sre's hunting cap, its ensign embossed boldly on the side. Ellory looked faint. His head reeled. His stomach revolted. He turned his head and spewed his breakfast.

* * *

Dellis was scrambling eggs. Her mind was scrambling to think of an excuse. Peshiwah had disappeared in the night to reconnoiter the Shadow's camp. Very few knew this. She did; she was taking care of Chasha and Pekko. The children would want their mother soon and others would be asking questions. It was light and if she was okay, Peshiwah couldn't just sneak in during the light of day. If something was wrong, it was only a matter of time before someone in command found out. That someone being Matt. She had already fended off two inquiries.

While the two kids were playing quietly by themselves, the soldiers were sparring in the courtyard. How blissful to be unaware of the complex problems of life. One day perhaps, they would learn of their mother's bravery and be compelled to follow her example.

A knock on the door startled her. She could see through the window that it was Matt. There were others with her. Steeling herself, she walked to the door and opened it.

Matt was holding a curled slip of paper.

“Dellis,” Matt stated, peering into the room, all the while handing her the slip of paper. “I assume that the kids are here?”

Spotting Pekko and Chasha, the four men forced their way past her.

“What are you doing?”

The men scooped up the kids, who began squirming and kicking and crying. Matt pushed himself into her face so that she began to back up.

“Seeing that these children are now without parents, they are now wards of the state. And unless you want to face charges, you need to back off. Once they’re settled in, we’ll let you know when you can come for a visit.”

With that, they left. That quickly, they had come and gone like some vortex of disaster, ripping away all things of value. She stared down at the paper in her hand and began to read.

Your spy lady is now ours.
A simple trade is in order
Peshiwah for Mattowee and freedom.

* * *

As much as he hoped that they had missed it, Tam knew that the gambits had not. They were trained to account for every little detail. But if they knew, why hadn't they said anything? Were they using it to break him? Was he being watched at this very moment, hoping that he would bolt, leading them to the runner? If he ran, his guilt would be confirmed. Genni would be in danger. She could be kidnapped and used as leverage against him.

If he continued with his current course, he would have to break with his conscience. He'd been played from the beginning; he knew it now. He was trapped like a bug. If he abandoned his morals, he was theirs. There would be no going back. Guilt and secrecy would bind him. He would be pushed up the line for advancement; but at what cost, his very soul?

The brume hung low and thick today. It was an eerie feeling being above the mist without a gutah. Being at ground level was certainly no advantage. He could easily be picked off by the wildlife. But at some point, if he wanted to save some time, he would have to move to the ground. Inspiration hit.

Tam ran out to the edge of the branch as far as he could go and leapt to the branch of an opposing Sado. As he swung his arms, his thumb snagged the rope holding the bag of parnells to his waist. The rope complied, untying itself and plummeting into the fog.

Tam yelled out the obligatory curse as he watched it drop. Feigning anxiety for the benefit of anyone who might be watching, he paced back and forth for a short while before squatting on the branch and peering down. He cursed again.

He hastily shoved his hands into his pack and drew out his grappling gloves. He slid his hands into the gloves and planted one in the side of the branch. He swung his body underneath. Another branch, now barely visible through the fog, appeared. He calculated, swung and released. He landed solidly on the limb. After repeating the process a few more times, Tam was close to the ground.

He had to move quickly. His “Shadow” would have him in sight within seconds. He slipped off one glove and dropped it onto the branch. As deftly and silently as possible, he ran back along the branch toward the trunk of the Sado and planted his remaining grappling glove into its side. Next, he rapidly skirted his way around the trunk to the opposite side and waited.

A pterosaur, not too big, but big enough to carry him away swooped over the branch that he had just abandoned. Tam reached into his quiver and launched an arrow after the creature. The arrow just nicked it. The winged death let out a screech as it disappeared into the fog bank. The illusion was now complete.

Tam hung his head. Genni would be informed of his apparent death. He couldn't help that. When he felt

it was safe, he would visit her in the night. For now, he had nowhere to go, but she was safe.

24 Provocation

Once the nurse had given Ellory a quick once-over, and with his fever the most prominent aspect of his now waning health, he was pronounced sick and left to recover his strength. Sre knew that their conversation was not over; he had simply been given a temporary reprieve.

After some questioning, he was able to locate a clump of the allowin plants with the stern warning, “Wash your hands if you touch them, they’re poisonous.” The small, scraggly clump was growing under the awning around the back of mercantile three doors down and across the street from the Apple of His Eye. He stuffed this into the bundle along with the book he’d retrieved from the well.

Moving from awning to awning, Sre avoided, as best he could, the gentle, soaking rains. He kept the bundle wrapped tightly before him as he hunched over it to keep it as dray as possible. Still, he was saturated by the time he made his way into Shallost’s abandoned hovel. The faerie lady was already there. She must have spent the night somewhere amongst the debris.

Sre gently pulled out his book and the allowin plant from his pack. He opened the book and began to memorize the words that he was to speak along with their pronunciations. Though he had never heard the words before, they seemed to roll into each other to produce one long, beautiful wave. As he memorized, he

put a pot on to boil and began to sort through the leaves of the plant.

The faerie lady stood on the table, calmly watching Sre sort through the leaves. Occasionally, she would pick out one allowin leaf and discard it. Maybe they weren't dry enough; maybe she saw something that he couldn't see. Either way, she wasn't saying. When what was evidently the proper amount was accumulated, she stepped in between the remaining pile of the plant and what had already been set aside to make the tea. Sre scooped the small amount of leaves into the cup that he had set aside and pulled the kettle from the flames. Slowly, watching the faerie lady for her cue, he began to pour in the boiling hot water. She held up her hand just before the cup was half full.

After about seven minutes, the tea having properly steeped, Sre picked up the cup and held it to his lips. This was it. He closed his eyes and went over the words in his mind that he was to recite. There could be no mistakes. Had Shallost ever attempted this, or was this only recorded from the faerie's records? It was time to put away fear. He tilted the cup back, draining every last drop, leaving only the leaves in the cup. Slowly, methodically, he began to make a purposeful enunciation of each word from the book, pausing between each word to make sure that he got them in the right order. When he had completed, the faerie lady smiled approvingly.

Five minutes passed. Nothing. Ten minutes, fifteen minutes. Still nothing. Sre watched a single dust particle floating in the air before him, the faerie lady

eyeing him carefully. The dust particle was joined by another. Together, they formed a little dance before his eyes. They rode the currents of air and moved upon the heat that still rose from his cup. Startled, Sre suddenly realized that he could see the currents of air, the heat and the cold that drove them. There were also waves of something else that rose from the ground and pulsed out from everything that he could see. Some waves were stronger than others. Living things had weaker pulses than most inanimate objects. Somehow, none of these things diminished his vision of the everyday things that were going on around him. Somehow, they enhanced his vision.

Was he imagining this? He looked to the faerie lady. She held her hands slightly out to her sides. The currents, the waves, dust particles and pulses gathered together around her. They increased in thickness and slowly began to lift her from the table. She had never moved her wings one bit. Sre stared down at his own hands. There were small tendrils of energy emanating from his fingers, his arms, his entire body. As they touched the waves and currents, he could feel them moving like tiny marbles, just beyond his ability to gather them.

Sre had entered the platirealm. The elements that made it up would squeeze out between his fingers every time he tried to touch them. A tangled mass of them floated out past his fingertips. People, barely visible, out of nowhere, were beginning to come in and out of focus before him. Sometimes, a person would split and go separate ways, splitting again, becoming nothing. The

faerie lady touched his arm. He looked at her as she shook her head. This was not something that he needed to pursue for now.

“Move them with you mind,” Sre heard the faerie lady say. Whoa! She spoke. Or did she? Her lips didn’t move, but her wings did. As her wings beat, waves of the elements were pushed in his direction. They moved so quickly that he couldn’t keep track of their movement, but he had heard her.

An enthusiastic grin spread across his face. He spread his fingers, concentrating on the elements. Slowly, they began to gather around his hands, forming themselves as he saw fit. They became an extension of him. They were not nearly as easy to manipulate as were the members of his own body, but that could change with time. How many people had longed to know this secret? How many of the faerie folk had killed to protect it? Sre suddenly began to realize the danger that this lady was risking by teaching him. *Why?*

“You must never teach this to anyone. Do you understand?”

“I do, but why me?”

“I am a teacher. It has been in my heart to teach this to someone from your kind since my childhood, though I could never speak of it to anyone. You were at the right place at the right time. The Creator has brought you here for this time.

Sre understood. He truly was chosen. It wasn't because of who he was or what he had done. He had simply been the one chosen for reasons beyond his wisdom. It was humbling. If someone else had been chosen, would he have accepted it? He must be extremely selective in who knew his secret. Otherwise, he and the faerie lady would both become moving targets.

She explained to him that they were not elements. They were winds. Some winds you could control with your thoughts, some you could not.

He refocused, gathering the winds. He willed them to lift his body from the chair. He was weightless. *Amazing!* The faerie lady swung around in front of him. Distracted, Sre abruptly thumped down into the chair. This was going to take some getting used to.

“You must let this become natural for you. Try again.”

Sre and the faerie lady worked on the manipulation of the winds for the remainder of the afternoon. All the while, something was nagging him.

“Teacher, what is this mass that I see before me?” He reached out toward the tangled sphere.

“This is who you are. As you discover more about yourself, it will begin to unravel. You can pull the strands apart with your mind, but more will only take their place. Be honest with yourself; this will speed up

the process. You can work on transparency in your spare time. We have work to do. For now, let it be.”

* * *

That evening, after the rains had finally subsided, Sre made his way back to the Apple of His Eye. This time, he left the bundled book behind, stashed away beneath the floorboards of the shack. Here, a warm and delicious cup of crifton soup, along with some large mavery crackers sprinkled on top, and he was feeling his old self, with the exception of the ever-present winds that were now laid out before him everywhere he looked.

The mass of winds that he had first noticed was still hanging before his eyes, just beyond his reach. The strange thing was, he noticed nothing before anyone else. Were their lives so unencumbered that they had none, or was this accumulation of winds his alone to see? If they were, then he would have to revise his ideas of what the winds were. He made a point to ask his teacher later.

Hildimara, a scrawny girl of one hundred seventeen cycles, came stumbling through the front door. Her clothes were tattered and covered with mud. She was crying and trembling. People started gathering around her, both from inside and outside the shelter. Empathy rose up in Sre’s heart as well and he made his way through the crowd to kneel beside her.

“They killed my mama and papa,” she managed.

“What? Who baby; who killed your mama and papa?” Janniphar asked.

“Arimon,” she wailed.

The marauders had come and gone, leaving a wake of disaster and broken lives. The Stonewedge home lay miles outside of town. Meeke and Seli were quiet folks who kept to themselves and enjoyed their solitude. They had been advised not to move out of town because of the risk, but they insisted, saying that Arimon could just as easily destroy their lives in town. They never got the chance to regret it.

Some pulled Hildi close to comfort her; some paced in fearful circles. Still others dashed out the door, helplessly scanning the horizon for signs of the bandits.

Sre looked up in time to see Ellory, who had come out of his room, hanging his head in despair and disgust. Another heart to mend, another mouth to feed. His face knotted up in fury. Would it ever end? If he could, he would put an end to it once and for all. That much, Sre was sure of.

Sre rose and walked toward Ellory who folded his arms and turned his back to walk away. There it was: that dream that had kept him restless the night he and Tam had first met. Only, the man was about two hundred fifty cycles older than in the dream. But it was him. There was no mistaking it. One thread of the mass before his eyes fell away, joining itself to the constant flow of the winds. Another dangled precariously. He had to pursue this.

He hurriedly made his way through the press. Ellory had gone into his room, leaving the door open behind him. Sre cautiously entered behind him.

“Shut the door,” Ellory stated. Sre closed it.

“I have been a fool,” he began. “When you came here, I was in denial.” He turned to face Sre, his eyes welling up with tears.

“Funny how when the thing you search after for so many cycles presents itself to you, you turn away from it. I’ve longed to make this a place of peace and refuge for anyone who came through those doors. It’s never been what I had hoped it would be, but it has offered some comfort. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I’ve tried to make up for my wife and son being taken from me by offering protection to these poor folks.” Ellory hung his head, his lips quivering. Sre, feeling awkward stared at a benign spot on the floor.

Ellory continued. “I can never fulfill the dreams that I’ve had here. I am dying.”

Sre’s head snapped up in astonishment. Other than the incident this morning, he would never have had a clue.

“The doctor tells me that I’ve got maybe a few cycles to live at the most. It has something to do with something inside my head. I’m telling you, because I want you to take my place, run it as you see fit.”

“What?” Sre was dumbfounded.

“They say that the talent for some things runs along family lines. Hopefully, you’ll do better at this than I have... my son.”

Sre’s eyes grew wide. Two more strands of the winds fell away before him.

* * *

He sprinted through the misty clouds that crawled along the forest floors like a thick soup. At times, the thick undergrowth around these parts threatened to stop him altogether. He didn’t need a compass or map. He knew the way by heart, knew how to avoid the Shadow routes, knew when to pass the one he couldn’t avoid, how to keep from springing the traps that had been planted along the way. Tam had clarity of mind while the forest tried to pull a thick veil over his eyes.

Before his disappearance, he had been assigned to the Shadow camp outside the Old Man, that ancient fortress which, if properly shored up, could reportedly, still prove a formidable obstacle to any would-be attacker. He would have to make it there before the melee ensued, not to offer help to the Shadows, but to render aid to the resistance. He didn’t know them, but they at least deserved a fighting chance.

Night would come soon. Traveling in the semi-dark without fire was strictly madness. Even with a flame to light the way, it could draw the attention of the less desirable creatures of the wild, not to mention those whom he had gone to such lengths to separate himself

from. Every nerve, every fiber of his being was already on full alert.

Tam heard, long before he saw, the man drop to the ground ahead of him. He slowed his advance to a slow walk. He had been discovered. There was no getting around him. He would have to face him. He would have to defeat him. He would have to kill. Genni's safety depended on it. Nimbay stepped out to meet him.

Nimbay had given himself the title of King's bane. The only king around these parts was the king of the faeries. Nimbay made it his personal goal in life to wipe out the entire faerie race. His brother Fí-yeld had lost his life to the faerie king when he had trespassed their sacred grounds. It wasn't an accidental thing. His lust for power drove him to seek out the secrets of the faeries, and he was determined to wipe out anyone and anything that stood in his way. The faerie ended up droving him bleeding, in a blind rage over a cliff. Nimbay took up where his brother left off, but he was more subtle about it than his brother. He had covertly taken out nearly one hundred of the faeries.

"You almost had me, Tam," he said, slipping off his hunting pouch.

Tam approached cautiously. They began to circle.

"What gave it away?"

“It’s what I would have done. All I had to do was do a little searching.” He pulled an arrow from his quiver. “By the way, I found your arrow,” he said as he snapped it in two. “Poor Genni; do you really think she will come out of this unscathed?”

25 Prelude to War

Sre knew that Ellory's proclamation must be true. The dropping threads bore witness to it. He frantically searched his memory for the slightest recollection of his childhood. Micro-flashes, glancing pictures came and went. A doting mother, a game of hide and seek on the forest floor with his father, a feeling of fear and abandonment. The incredulity was slipping away; he could feel it. He could see it. The whole mass trembled before his eyes as thread after thread began slipping away. There was another man. His name was there on the tip of his tongue.

“Mmm, Matt, Mattowee?” Sre finally managed.

Ellory was startled. It was a name that he hadn't heard in many cycles.

“What about him, son?”

“He, he raised me.”

Sre groped at a chair and slowly lowered himself into it. There was another name taunting him. He'd heard it before; he was sure of it. His eyes narrowed as the reality of it hit home. The mass was a jiggling blob and his head felt like a thousand spiders were crawling through it. Their webs were disintegrating and they were scrambling for somewhere to hide.

“Sre... My name is Sre.”

He glanced up into Ellory's eyes. Ellory's chest was heaving as he tried to catch his breath and swallow down his tears simultaneously. He was obviously struggling. He wanted so much to reach out and embrace his son, and yet, he was giving him the necessary room to come to grips with his memories. The dam was breaking. All the cycles that Sre had spent wishing for his own father to come to his aid, to laugh and play, to simply sit and enjoy life together, they all found their rightful places in his head.

"Papa?" Sre began to shake. He sprang from his seat and threw his arms around Ellory.

Sre and Ellory held each other for a few minutes, enjoying the quiet affirmation of each other's presence.

Outside the window, the last sun was setting. The approaching night was only broken by a soft, warm glow of a contented faerie lady. She would have to find shelter soon. The creatures of the night would be hunting insects and they weren't necessarily bright enough to distinguish the difference between a glow bug and a faerie.

Sre unexpectedly broke the hug.

"I uhm, I need to go."

Ellory looked into his face. He appeared distraught.

"Peshiwah... my wife, my kids..."

“I’m a grandpa?” Ellory asked.

“They must think I’m dead. Oh,” he paused. “There’s so much that I have to tell you.”

Sre was about to hyperventilate. He was severely torn. There was much to explain, but also much to do. Time was ticking away. If there was one thing that he had learned from his experiences, it was that usually, it wasn’t a matter of right or wrong, but merely of trust. He didn’t know the right thing to do, but he could trust. Right now, he had to trust that events were unfolding exactly the way that the Creator had intended and that he was leading him now.

“I have to go, now. I’ll be back.”

Sre threw his arms around his father one more time, clutching him so tightly that he had difficulty breathing. Then, without warning, he turned and ran out the door and hurried out onto the streets. He gazed longingly in the direction of the mountains and the riverbed that had led him into Komai only two days before.

“I know what you’re thinking, but you cannot go that way,” the faerie lady buzzed. She hovered just over his right shoulder. *“Your travels through the ancient paths have gained much attention from my people. They are guarding the way. You may only go around the mountains to the east.”*

Sre knew that she was right. He was not experienced enough to hold out against the faerie guards.

If he went west, it would take several weeks to make it to Tameh. There would also be those that were hunting him, looking for him in or on the way to Moh. As it stood, his journey would take days to make the trip eastward to the gorges that the Tivy River had dug through the Jasto desert after making its way out of the Sados. He could greatly speed up the trip by flying. But if he wanted his secret to remain a secret, he could only do that at night. If he left now, he could make much progress.

“Thank you for all of your help. I will be back.”

“It was my pleasure. But I will not be here when you return. I must return to my people.”

As Sre began a slow jog to the edge of town, From his window, Ellory watched the curious sight of a man speaking to a faerie. *Wow, things must have really changed in the Sados.*

* * *

With the exception of a few soldiers on watch in the towers, every able-bodied man had been summoned to Matt’s new war room. He had been plotting, scheming and pacing all night long. He collapsed in his bed for a few hours and woke some hours later with renewed strength. This is what he was good at. It was what he had been born to do.

A topographical map of the Old Man and the surrounding area had been painstakingly chiseled onto the floor by some long forgotten ruler. When it was

discovered, Jarok pulled together a team that had spent hours wiping away the rubble and debris which had accumulated over the many cycles and running out the mibbots, the glaidors and the errits that made it their home. Its reliability was ready to be put to the test. Matt stepped out into its center with all the men gathering around.

“Alright, listen up! This is why we’ve been training so hard. It comes down to this. The Shadow camp is located up here,” he said, pointing to a marker that had been placed on the map. Every eye and ear was focused.

“There has been a lot of faerie activity here, here, here and here. That’s where their lookouts will be posted. They will be watching for any activity that might give away our intentions. Fortunately, we’ve got a trick or two up our own sleeve. We will covertly deploy an elite squad beyond their positions. When they are operational, they will signal the tower which will, in turn, create a distraction.”

Matt himself, during his sleepless, pacing nights, had discovered the entrance to a tunnel within the ancient king’s chambers. It was undisturbed. A search through the king’s private library yielded the plans of the tunnel and other hidden passageways. Unbeknownst to everyone else, Matt had discovered how the Shadow in the gilly suit had made his way in and out. There could now be spies in their camp. In fact, he was sure of it. He couldn’t prove it, but the very real probability of it kept him from revealing his discoveries to anyone.

When preparations for battle were complete, he would lead his elite squad into the tunnel, blindfolded and point them in the right direction once the blindfolds were removed. They would come out behind enemy lines. The Shadows were no longer misguided individuals to Matt; they were now the enemy. And he would do everything in his power to see to it that they were destroyed.

“Once the sentries are taken out, the squad will signal the tower again. We’ll move out from the south exit. I’ll need troops to circle south to flank their camp. Karimay, I need you in charge of that detail. Quinton will take his men south and meet you over here. Everyone else will form up in the field outside the edge of the forest over here. Any questions?”

Matt searched the eyes of those in the room.

“When do we do this?” Karimay asked.

“Tomorrow at dusk, anything else would be too soon. This will be about two hours before their shift change. All the faeries will be turning in also. That will make sure that we’re not giving ourselves away. Quinton, I need you and your men to meet me at sixteen hundred in the eastern corridors. Everyone else is to keep clear of the area until I give the okay. Clear?”

Grunts and nods of affirmation filled the room.

“Guys, we take no prisoners. Be sure of this, they will take none either. Anyone finding Peshiwah, hold your place and call for backup. She will be heavily

guarded. Some of us will fall; let's not focus on that. It is an honor to fight alongside such bravery."

Matt narrowed his eyes and smiled large, looking around the room. They weren't ready. But they were as good as they were going to get. He didn't have the cream of the crop to pick through. Courage would have to fill in where experience fell short. He had seen it before. Sometimes, the ones you least expected to shine, rose up in the heat of battle and became the greatest. Sometimes the knees of the greatest buckled. Although he could already see the lack of confidence in the eyes of some, at this point, there was no sense in disheartening the rest.

"Get some rest. Tomorrow is a long day."

* * *

Some say that time slows down when you're fighting for your life. Others say that it speeds up. Tam couldn't tell which was happening. He wasn't fighting for his life alone. Genni's life was at stake as well. Neither Tam nor Nimbay had drawn a weapon. There was no need. They took turns landing blow after excruciating blow, a knuckled fist to the ribs, a choke hold or two. Once, Tam had been thrown into a tangle of vines where he became ensnarled long enough for Nimbay to wrench his left arm almost from its socket. He had gotten out of it by sweeping Nimbay's feet out from under him and then wrapping the vines around his throat in return. But predictably, Nimbay had found a

way out of that too. Their skills were nearly equally matched.

This was a war of attrition. Both were bruised and bleeding. But in spite of the toll it was taking on him, he knew that the real battle lie ahead. Every sound they made, every drop of pungent sweat that fell to the ground was a dinner bell to the creatures that were lurking just outside of their circle. He could hear them in the darkness. He could smell them. He could sense their prowling presences. Whoever lost would be devoured while the victor escaped.

But fear could be your own worst enemy. If he gave in to it, he might freeze if something leapt out of the gloom. If he stood still too long, something would undoubtedly spring out of the dark. If he bolted, he would leave his back vulnerable to Nimbay's attack.

They were locked in. At this point, there was no turning back. With barely any time to plan his moves or countermoves, Tam still needed an exit strategy. Nimbay would have to be completely disabled. On top of that, Tam would need the energy to make his escape. At this rate, neither of them would survive this.

Finally... the breakthrough that he had been waiting for presented itself. But he needed to position himself just right without giving it away. And Nimbay would have to be lured to the exact spot to pull it off. This was going to be extremely difficult. He could sense the trembling in his hands brought on by the weariness in his limbs and the adrenaline flow surging through his

veins. A knife throw would be out of the question. His accuracy was severely hampered. He could never take his eyes off of Nimbay.

Tam and Nimbay circled one last time. Each man was a master predator in his own rights. When he felt the timing was about as perfect as it was going to get, Tam let Nimbay see him reach for his hunting knife.

“Oh, it’s not going to be that easy, little brother,” Nimbay spewed, lunging toward Tam.

The trap had been sprung. Tam met him head on. The impact knocked the breath out of him and the knife from his hand. The two of them were crouching helplessly on the ground.

He fought through the temporary discomfort and oxygen deprivation. Nimbay did the same, but he moved with more speed and agility. He rolled on top of Tam, pinning him face down, securely to the forest floor. Tam’s arms and legs were spread wide with no hope of freeing himself.

He could see the knife just off to his right. With over two hundred pounds on top of him, it was hopelessly beyond reach. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see the vines directly above them. Perfect. A smile slowly crept onto his face. Nimbay’s stomach dropped as the realization hit him. If he let him go, Tam would be able to retrieve the knife first. If he didn’t release him...

It hit him hard. The sliggard dropped from the vines onto Nimbay's back, sinking its tiny, ravenous claws and teeth into his back and neck. First blood had been drawn. As he raised himself to the new attack, he was hit from the left by a glaidor. A virtual onslaught ensued as, one after one, more creatures joined the melee. Tam scrambled out from under Nimbay, snatching up the knife in time to bury it in the rib cage of an attacking tettis, its jaws still snapping. The others abandoned the assault on him in hopes of easier prey.

Nimbay's screams for mercy went unanswered as Tam fought to put distance between him and the banquet table.

26 The Goal

He had been airborne for only a short while now. It was amazing how much ground you could cover in so small a time when you weren't on foot. It beat travel by gutah hands down, too. He kept the mountains just off to his left and maintained an altitude of about fifteen feet. If something were to suddenly loom up before him in the night, he wanted to avoid it. Nothing in the desert grew that tall.

In the back of his mind, Sre went over the day's events. So much had happened today that he was still trying to take it all in. Sure, he had learned one of the greatest secrets ever hidden from mankind, but it couldn't hold a candle to the revelation of who he was and who his father was. The Creator must have gone to great lengths to make sure that he made it to Komai in one piece. He didn't have to see Him, he could feel his presence now within him. He never saw the winds before, yet they had always been there.

“Thank you,” Sre found himself saying. “Thank you for your abiding presence. I know it's not about me. You have greater plans than that. But I trust you. You've brought me this far when I never did anything to deserve it. I believe that you will preserve me through all of this that I'm going through.”

He could feel the joy rising up inside himself. It came from a simple gratitude, not false motives.

A light on the horizon caught his eye. Sre slowed his approach. He could make out tents and a campfire. When he was a couple of hundred yards out, he let himself be lowered to the ground and continued on foot.

It was only a small raiding party, about ten men in all. They could be the ones who pillaged the Stonewedge home and murdered its occupants. But what could he do about it if they were. He was one man against ten and all of his weapons were somewhere on the other side of the mountains with Ekoomuh. They seemed to be reveling in high spirits, all but two. These two patrolled the outskirts of the camp, keeping the watch. It sickened him to think of how it must have gone down, ten armed men against a defenseless man and his wife. It was such a senseless disregard for life.

Sre crouched low as he moved in closer. They couldn't have picked a safer spot for their camp. There was nothing to hide behind, no shrubs, no rock cropping, not even a small bluff. The only thing standing between him and the camp was distance and the night. They sat in the light and warmth of the fire while he crouched in the cold darkness. The night seemed to be his only advantage. The light from the two distant suns at least was minimal.

As he shuffled his way in, it became more apparent that these were the ones. Their clothes were covered with blood. They hadn't even had time to wash up. As they drank themselves into a stupor, they pulled their plunder from their bags to examine them. Sre pounded his head, trying to think of a way to stop the

madness. He couldn't just walk away. His weakness taunted him.

Lord, this is not right. Why have you brought me here to see this? I need your wisdom. All I have is myself and miles of sand. They would strike me down before I got close enough speak a word.

An idea began to form inside his head. It just might work. He had to experiment.

Maritok paced the perimeter of the camp. His bag of goodies was stowed securely inside his tent. In a few more hours, it would be his turn to quench his thirst. But his feet hurt now. His groin hurt too. That dirt farmer had got in a lucky shot before he went down. He paid for it, paid for it with his life. Filthy scum. Still, he had to bring home the meals if his family and he were to survive the ruthless winter. If it meant taking another low blow like that, he would do a hundred times. But they would pay. These lowlifes looked down their noses at people like him. Everyone had to find a way to survive. Those that had more just had to contribute to those who had nothing. Life hadn't dealt him the best hand, but he took it without complaining. It was only fair that they should share. Why couldn't they see that?

Something moved. Maritok reached over his shoulder for the cold steel of his longblade. He quietly slipped it from its sheath. Were the winds playing tricks on his eyes? Whatever it was, it was gone now. Probably just a small dust demon. Besides, he needed to continue his rounds. He could relax for now.

There it was again. In the cloud of dust, a small girl strode forth toward the camp. There was something odd about her. All of her movements were staggered and jerky. Maritok quickly scanned the horizon. She seemed to be the only one out there. The girl took a few more steps and crumbled. She disintegrated into a pile of sand.

He stared at where she had been. He allowed himself a small chuckle and shook his head. *I must be going mad. Best not say anything about it. If I look weak, they'll kill me and say I died in the fight. Then my family will have nothing.* It looked like the girl that he let get away. Now his mind was playing tricks on him.

Maritok felt the winds gust at his back. He pulled his scarf up to shield his eyes and nose. He could feel the hair on his neck standing rigid. There had always been stories of desert ghosts. *But they were children's fables, right?* He was spooked and he knew it.

A hand rested on his shoulder. Maritok spun around with his longblade, nearly slicing through Felidor's sleeve.

“What the hell? You need to relax or you're going to be the death of us all. You see something?”

“Just a dust demon,” Maritok said, wondering where the term got its origin.

“Yeah well, put that thing away or I'm gonna take it and shove it where the sun don't shine.”

Chagrined, Maritok huffed out a sigh of relief and nodded.

Behind Felidor's back, he saw a man rising up. This was no ordinary man; he was completely composed of sand and he was a good eight feet tall. Maritok's eyes grew wide. He could feel the blood draining from his face as his hands beginning to tremble. As hard as he tried, he couldn't get the words to form. Instead, he took a step back. Felidor, seeing the look on his face, swung his head and shoulders around, coming face to chest with the demon.

Completely taken off guard, he lost his footing, falling backward onto Maritok and his longblade. He felt the cold steel slicing through his gut, the blade protruding from his abdomen, his own life beginning to pour from his body with the dark red blood. Strangely, it hadn't hurt as much as he had always imagined it would. The blade hurt more coming out than going in. Powerless, he slumped to the ground.

Maritok finally found his voice but it only came out as a low screeching. He spun around to flee into the desert, only to see an army of eight foot tall demons suddenly rising up from the sands. They began their slow, advance on the camp. He turned back to where Felidor had fallen. The demon was gone. Seeing his opportunity, he ran into the camp shouting obscenities, "Frig, frig, frig!"

The eight men stared at him in confusion. There was blood dripping from his longblade. They glanced at

each other. Maritok continued running through the camp, dropping his longblade and stripping everything from him that might slow him down.

“By all that is holy...,” Grinoff mumbled.

The men, whose gazes were following Maritok’s retreat, turned in time to see the demons entering the camp. With total disregard, the beasts trampled everything in their path, tents included. Denni flung his spear at one in desperation. It passed straight through with no visible effect. Hopelessly outnumbered, the scene rapidly turned to chaos. It was every man for himself. All eight scrambled and stumbled over each other in their attempts to escape with Maritok. The demons walked straight through the campfire.

When the bandits had run far enough into the wilderness, Sre marched one demon into the fire and let it fall. The others collapsed into similar piles of sand. Sre floated down from his position high above. All but one man had survived. It was better this way, he told himself. They would return to Arimon and all tell their stories of how the deserts on the route to Komai were haunted. It would be a long time before they would return. He had at least bought them some time.

It was mentally exhausting. Sre felt drained. But he had to salvage the stolen goods. Using the winds, he dug a large pit, and after going through the tents and gathering what weapons he could find, he dropped them in the hole and covered it again. He saved Denni’s spear for himself. It could come in handy. *One last thing, just*

in case they return... This was going to be gruesome, but if the bandits returned, he wanted them to know. Gathering the sands with the winds, Sre sandblasted Felidor's fallen corpse.

With all loose ends tied down, Sre browsed through the other contents of the camp. There was very little of much use. He pulled about ten feet of cord from one of the tents and pocketed it. He didn't care for the liquor, but he did salvage a canteen that still contained a quarter of its capacity of water. A few dry crumbs were all that was left of the food. They must not have been far from the main group. He couldn't stay the night; they might return.

He gathered the winds around him and lifted himself into the air. Fortunately, flight took little concentration. He was weary and the long day was beginning to exact its payment. He would need to sleep soon. Sre turned so that the mountains were to his left and continued his flight.

The thought of Peshiwah pressed on him. He had to clear the cobwebs from his head and push on if he wanted to see her or his children again.

* * *

"Here," Fatsah said, pushing the bag of draigors across the table, "you've earned it."

"Much appreciated," the hooded figure returned.

"How on Gliese did you manage it?"

“Does it matter? You have what you want.”

“No, of course; you’re right. In the end, it never really matters how, so long as justice is served.” But it did matter. If they could accomplish this feat, why hadn’t they taken the fortress?

“Justice? Do you think I’m as weak minded as your soldiers? This has nothing to do with justice. We simply happen to have similar goals for the moment. And we will do whatever it takes to accomplish those goals.

Fatsah was not used to being recused and he could feel the hot blood surging in the veins of his face and neck. But he was not on familiar turf here and no one ever truly was let off the hook when they spoke that way to him. It might take awhile, but he was the master of paybacks.

“Well then, I’ll just be taking what’s mine and we’ll be going.

The hooded man raised his hand and motioned to the Shadow keeping watch over his shoulder. He turned and opened the tent flaps wide. Another Shadow led Peshiwah into the tent, bound, gagged and blindfolded. Fatsah felt a great sense of satisfaction. His raging temper was under control once again. Finally, after all this time, she was his.

27 Travel

Tam had to keep his breathing slow and shallow. Every inhalation sent unmitigated pain searing through his chest. Along with some deep bruises, he probably had a couple of broken ribs. Yet, there was no blood in his sputum. If that wasn't sheer luck, he didn't know what it was.

He had also lost precious time. A hunting knife alone was not sufficient protection for traveling along the forest floor. But he couldn't retrieve his bow and quiver immediately. He reasoned that two hours should be adequate time for even the smallest of the creatures to finish their ghastly meal. When he returned, there was no sign of Nimbay's body. All the pieces had been drug off to a burrow or consumed on the spot. Even the smaller animals that lost their lives in the attempts to fill their stomachs had vanished. Nothing was wasted in the forest.

In keeping with this premise, Tam retrieved his bow, arrows *and* Nimbay's hunting pouch. In the absence of a gutah's saddlebag, it would contain everything necessary for his survival in the wild. He released the locking mechanism and pulled back the flap. Tam allowed himself a slight breather when he spied Nimbay's grappling gloves that were dropped unceremoniously on the top of the other contents. He might have some difficulty explaining the indisputable fact that they belonged to a Shadow who had now gone

missing. But that was the least of his worries for the moment. Right now, he needed to stay alive.

Tam slipped the gloves on. They were slightly large. He popped the release located on the back of each glove. The steel hooks shot out just beyond his fingertips and locked into place. His ribs hurt too much and his exhaustion level was far too high to even dream of pulling himself up above the mist. They would provide protection from most of the wildlife. But, in order to escape anything really large, he would have to endure the excruciating pain that would most certainly come with the battle for survival.

Sitting in place was not an alternative either. He had to keep moving. His only hope was in navigating the treacherous forest floor in the dead of night. In spite of the cold night air, Tam kept his hood pulled back. If something was trying to sneak up on him, he wanted to hear it. He had no desire to end up lying as dung in some glaidor's den or swallowed whole by a vishtay. The anticipation of the sleepless night, creeping along through the forest's dense undergrowth, all the while being hunted by the most vicious creatures known to man, would keep him alert. Still, if he ever wanted to see Genni again, it was the thing that he had to do.

* * *

Sre woke to the relentless red sun baking his head. Even with the hood pulled up, its heat was miserably unbearable. He finished off the last of the water from the canteen. A small beetle scampered along,

leaving behind its faint trail which was only swept away by the gusting winds. During his flight, he had felt himself nodding. His body followed suit, dipping dangerously close to the ground. There was no shelter to speak of, so he pulled himself into a ball and putting his back to the winds, he settled down for the night on the desert plains.

He didn't know how long he had been asleep. He held his left arm out in front of him with the palm extended to the right. The sun was about two palm widths above the horizon. So, perhaps six hours.

There was obviously no breakfast here. Even if the tough plant life here was edible, he was unfamiliar with it. Sre glanced back in the direction he had come from. He had covered a lot of territory. The peaks that had grown familiar over the last couple of days were now distant.

The winds had disappeared overnight. Once again, he began the long, slow chant of memorized words. Soon, his peripheral vision grew grainy and the images began to stagger. His body began to numb. This was it. He was getting used to the feeling. He slowly began to increase the push. Not so much as to make it falter and just enough to control the flow. Now he had to add depth and solidity. Sre began searching his environment, testing the items one by one for reality and then slowly incorporating them into his field of vision. Next, he gathered the winds before him and spread them out like a vast blanket.

He took to the air. The wind blowing through his hair and across his body offered a temporary comfort from the heat. But the air in these parts was extremely dry. He could feel the moisture wicking off of him, leaving his body to deal with the dry heat. *Lovely! Freezing at night and then you get broiled during the day. Who would want to live here?*

Sre raced alongside the mountains, skirting its southern edge. Pushing everything out of his mind but the task at hand, he found that he could increase his velocity exponentially. By the time the sun was high overhead, he had travelled nearly to the end of the mountain range. Here, the peaks were little more than high hills.

Sre turned northward and increased his altitude. Within minutes, the hills loomed up before him. They were still rugged and rocky, but there was a sparse smattering of vegetation dotting the landscape. In addition to the minimal plant life, he spotted a small herd of godes at the foot of the hills. He had to be extra watchful now. Where there were godes, there were usually gode herders. But the herd was disorganized. Perhaps they were strays. His stomach reminded him of his need to feed. If he wanted, he could easily spear a gode. But then what? There was no wood for a fire and his appetite wasn't demanding enough for him to eat raw gode. And if they weren't strays, then what? He would rather starve than steal. It could be the difference between life and death for a herder.

As he crested the hill, he could see the Sados in the far distance. It would be night when he arrived home. But then, that was fine. It would allow him to spirit his family away without detection. It wouldn't do for him to be seen by a faerie. He would have to go it on foot until dusk, when they would turn in for the night. Visibility at night was never a real problem. When the red sun wasn't up, there were usually the other two more distant suns providing a faint glow. He did however need to stay above the rolling fog. Most men would not travel at night. He was counting on that if he were to remain undetected.

Still, Sre had not gone unnoticed. There was a faerie taking shelter from the sun's rays behind a large boulder. He blinked and shook his head in disbelief as he blew right past him on the down slope side of the hills. *Impossible!*

Another hour and dust and sand abruptly gave way to forest greenery once he passed the tree line. Creepers, vines and moss provided covering for the smaller trees. The soil here was rich with life. Though teaming with vicious predators, its familiar smells and variegated colors were most pleasant to the senses. But still, those who lived in the desert did not venture beyond their paradigm. And for the same reasons, those who dwelled in the forest did not seek the open skies and plains; they felt exposed to the unknown.

The sun would set in another five hours. Sre had to get his bearings. It would be safer the higher he flew, so he made his way quickly to the tree tops. He put the

trees another twenty feet below him. It was exhilarating to see the beauty of the forest colors. He had never seen its splendor from these heights. In the distance, he could see the familiar outlines of Kriss, Desmond and Law-ree peaks. If he kept them just off to his right, he would have a straight line to home.

Home. His sadosta could no longer be called home. But home was where the family was. They could make a new home in Komai. He could feel the love and a longing welling up inside of him. Peshiwah, Pekko, and Chasha were waiting for him. They would meet his father, Ellory. Oh, the things he had to tell them.

The winds carried Sre to a long, sturdy branch where he released himself from their solid hold. Breaking into a jog, he used the winds to carry him from branch to branch only when the distance was too far to easily jump. He forced himself into a steady pace. No sense in wearing himself out. No grappling gloves either. There was going to be a problem skirting around trunks to get to the opposing branches. He might risk floating around the trunks if he was sure that no man or faerie was lurking somewhere close by. Once, he did see a faerie that only paused for a moment to eye him curiously. But then, it had passed on ahead of him. For now, Sre had to content himself with the slow progress he was making using a zigzag pattern, hopping from one branch to another. It was tiring.

Animal life, though plentiful, was not always edible. At least now, he could pick something up on the way. He felt confident that, if he used the winds, he

could throw his spear with accuracy and distance that would be impossible for any other person. In fact, it would be necessary, seeing that his skill with a spear was nowhere near perfect. Heck, as long as the animal was large enough, he could be so far from it that it would never see him coming.

He did spear an ossibron and, although it wouldn't be filling, it would be enough to satisfy his hunger for awhile. He found a small knoll where there was a break in the mist and the trees were not as dense. He built his fire there and cooked his catch. While it cooked, his mind was troubled. When he had thrown the spear, he could see a trailing wisp of winds. It would not have been visible to humans. Was this why the faeries were following his arrows? Was he inadvertently drawing them with the winds that he had previously been unaware even existed? If so, maybe it could somehow be turned to his advantage.

After his meal, he popped above the canopy to confirm his bearings. The peaks were getting much clearer now. He could make out the snow covering the top of Kriss peak, the only place in the forest where snow ever accumulated. There was something else, something he had never noticed before when hunting in the area of the peaks. But it was still too far to make out. Its edges were angular, not natural. This was closer to Law-ree peak. It was slightly out of his way. He would not waste too much time by checking it out. He altered his course in order to inspect this *thing*. The red sun was about to pull the shades on the Sados. Another couple of

hours and it would be dark. If he wanted to inspect it, he had to do it soon.

* * *

After Matt had funneled Quinton's men into the narrow, hidden passageway that he had discovered, they were given permission to remove their blindfolds. Each man, with the aid of the occasional torch, gazed intently at his surroundings. The tunnel had a strong earthy smell and stank of mold and rats. Its walls and low ceiling were shored up by ancient, rotting timbers. The men were not instilled with confidence.

“Listen up!” Matt boomed.

“When we get to the end, I will go first. When I've made sure that the way is clear, I will give the signal to exit the tunnel. You will exit as quietly as a multipede. You know where your targets are. Take them out quickly, quietly and return. When everyone has made it back, the others will be signaled and you will proceed south where you will meet Karimay's men. I will join the other troops. You will wait outside the camp until you hear the sounds of chaos. Once the fighting begins, you will have only about ten minutes until they realize that they've been duped. Find Peshiwah and get out.”

Words of encouragement might have served well, but time was of the essence and if he spoke the words, they would only fall on deaf ears. If the words were spoken, it would only mean that they were sorely needed

to instill confidence, confidence that they should already have.

“Move!” Matt called. As one, the group jogged forward.

* * *

Nawgli, Jarok, Karimay and Gell, all having been recently promoted to the position of commanders, had gathered the men near the southern gates of the Old Man. Each had twenty men under his authority. They would lead a four-pronged preemptive strike on the Shadow camp. Karimay would lead his men directly south into the woods, then sweep eastward toward the brook’s head while Nawgli and his men would draw the bulk of the Shadows out through a shower of arrows. They would then fall back while Gell and Jarok would engage the Shadows in brutal hand to hand combat. While they were occupied, Karimay’s men would turn north and slip into the camp to free Peshiwah and take out the command center. Cut off the head, and the whole snake would die. At least that was the theory.

To these men, it was a very unproven theory. This was no snake; these “Shadows” knew how to think for themselves. Matt’s soldiers might not question him directly, but still, they used their chain of command to voice their unease. This attack would also virtually deplete the reserves of able-bodied men who would not be guarding the walls. It would be an all or nothing bet. If they lost or incurred heavy casualties, holding out behind fortress walls would be a pointless act.

Jarok and Karimay were both large men whose presence commanded and got respect. If they said it could be done, then there was no argument.

Gell, although respected for his heart and determination, did not garner the same reverence from his men. Although he hadn't had a drink in a weeks, his predisposition toward alcohol and his lackadaisical appearance worked against his men's confidence.

Nawgli was well aware of the trepidations that his troops were experiencing. He felt them too. And it showed in his overall deportment. He fidgeted. He paced. He kept glancing toward the watch towers. Dusk was nearly upon them. Matt and the others were no doubt already making their way through the tunnels. If they were successful, the signal to move out could come at any moment. For him, it couldn't come quickly enough.

28 Flight

Tameh, mother of the hope of liberty, where has your child gone?

You have thrust him out to be hunted with the mibbots of the wild.

His heart is turned from you and he shall dwell with the Old Man

By the cliffs of Fi-yeld.

Matt, after surveying the area carefully, motioned for Quinton's men to make their way out of the tunnel. He was behind the line of where the Shadows were expected to be, but one could never be too careful. He crouched low and as they made their way out, he gestured for them to keep low. Their backs were aching from the long trek through the cramped tunnel, but discipline meant life. They kept down as they moved out to their assigned positions.

Each man executed their duties flawlessly, devoid of any emotions. An arrow, a dagger, a garrote. Each one lethal and swift. Upon completion, they quickly made their way back to the tunnel entrance. When everyone was accounted for, Matt pulled a sparker and its reflective shield from his pouch. He aimed it toward the fortress and pulled the trigger. He heard the tiny click as the sparker flashed the lookout tower.

Quinton and his men moved south into the forest.

Matt watched from a distance as soldiers began to pour out from the fortress. They began to split up. Karimay's men swept south as the main group continued east.

Gell's, Jarok's and Nawgli's men had covered a quarter of the distance to Matt when a separate spark flashed in Matt's peripheral vision. He studied the location where it had come from. This was where one of the Shadows positions was located. Obviously, one was still alive. If he hadn't been successful in signaling the camp, he soon would be.

Matt took off in a sprint to cover the distance between him and the Shadow.

There was another flash. Only this time, it was much closer and off to his left. Matt closed on it within seconds.

The Shadow lay face up on the ground, eyes wide open. On the back side of a nearby bush, Matt could see the familiar sparker. There was a thin line tied to the trigger. Matt traced it back to a hidden timing device.

Unfortunately, the Shadows, unbeknownst to Quinton and his men, were utilizing a new strategy – an opt-out signal. Should a Shadow fail to disable and reset his signal before its designated time, it would trigger automatically. This plan allowed covert activities to be carried out without the constant signaling that was prone to giving away locations.

A flash from a sparker on a timer meant that someone else had to be watching. They didn't need to be watching all the time, only when the sparker was scheduled to go off. Matt surveyed the woods in the direction of the Shadow camp. He cursed himself as two more sparkers flashed off to his left. The element of surprise was gone and there was no way to warn off a good portion of the men.

Matt began running back to the main group who were closing in on the halfway mark.

Within moments, an arrow flew past him and embedded itself in the ground off to his right. The next one found its mark, sinking into the back of his leg. He went down hard, smashing his right shoulder and face into the ground.

The pain was excruciating, but he had to move fast. The next arrow wouldn't be so forgiving. Hot, thick blood oozed from the wound. Matt reached back and snapped the shaft off and began searching for cover. There was none.

Matt picked himself up and began running as best he could, dodging back and forth.

A swarm of arrows flew past him. He could hear the screams of agony as they landed in the midst of the soldiers coming his way. Matt watched helplessly as the group split up, chaotically. Most began to run back toward the fortress, while others fled for the forest. One lone man continued running in his direction. By his size, it was unmistakably Gell.

He weaved through the hail of arrows with impunity. Matt couldn't help but admire his instincts or lack of them.

“Fool!” Matt yelled, trying to wave him off. “Get out of here!”

With a stab of pain from the arrowhead still lodged in his leg, Matt collapsed into Gell's arms. Gell swung Matt's arm over his shoulder and began a three-legged race back toward the safety of the fortress.

* * *

Sre wasn't sure why he had never noticed it before. It was as if it had sprung up out of nowhere. The easily recognizable walls of a fortress lie before him in the fading light of day. More unusual was the fact that a flag had been hoisted high atop one of its towers. Even at this distance, he could tell it was a flag that he knew all too well. It was the flag that he grew up under. It sported a tree with a green and white striped background.

It was dark enough that the faeries would be out of the picture until morning. It was time to kick it into high gear.

* * *

The Old Man was in sight, but Tam's lungs were burning and his rib cage ached horribly. He dragged himself to a tree at the edge of the clearing and collapsed. He slid his tunic up to inspect the damage.

Where he ran his fingers over the tender, swollen areas, the skin was deeply discolored and he could feel the protrusion where one rib was obviously broken. More were likely cracked. His lips were parched and his legs ached. He was in no shape to fight another battle. Still, he had to make it to the fortress before nightfall. He might have escaped the wildlife for one night, but he would not make it another.

He looked to his right and up. The fortress lay just across the clearing and up the steep, winding pathway. Straight up the cliffs, it must have been a hundred feet easily. He could still pull himself up the path alone, but an army would have a difficult time at it.

Tam could feel the skin on the nape of his neck prickling. He could hear the faint sound of something in the trees above him. He tightened his grip around the shaft of his blade and slowly craned his neck upward.

His mouth tried to form the words of astonishment and his eyes grew wide. Perched high above him, surveying the fortress stood a dead man. He looked to be in pretty good condition for a dead man, though. Before he could signal him, Sre moved out to the end of the branch that he stood upon.

Tam's eyes grew wide in amazement as Sre slowly leaned forward, not just a little, but so far that it was physically unattainable for any human to do so

without falling. His mouth dropped open as Sre's feet broke connection with the limb and he drifted forward. He floated gracefully at first and slowly gained momentum.

Tam's hands grasped the sides of his head as he struggled to wrap his mind around what he was seeing. No one would ever believe him. For that matter, could he believe himself? He had had no sleep for over a day, he was dehydrated and weary. On top of that, it was dark. He was growing delirious. He needed a savior at the moment, an Elbakhar, and viola! his mind had created one.

The heights opened up beneath him, working in vain with gravity, as Sre effortlessly slid across the void between himself and the castle. Within a matter of seconds he had disappeared over its walls.

Tam could hear panicked voices. But they weren't coming from inside the castle; they were outside. Dozens of men came rushing around the protective walls of the fortress, headed in his direction.

The western walls of the castle lay nearly flat up against the cliffs. They had nowhere to go but down. One man stretched out his arm and horse-collared another who nearly went headlong over the precipice. With nowhere to run, the men rapidly bunched up before the cliff ledge.

* * *

Despite having the ability to maintain a gutah at its normal summertime readiness through artificial means, Bassapo was moving at a lethargic pace through the forest. It would be a long trip home. This aggravated Fatsah even more.

“You realize, of course, that your precious hubby is no longer around,” Fatsah stated flatly. He wanted to goad Peshiwah the same way he did Bassapo. Unfortunately, they both had thick hides. He could feel her in the saddle behind him, struggling against her bonds.

“Whoa now,” he chided. “It’s a long way down. Besides, you do want to see the kiddos again, right?” Her resistance eased off some.

“First things first, okay? Before we can bring them in to see mommy, we need to get everyone inside the castle to lay down their arms.”

Fatsah had no intentions of ever letting her see Pekko and Chasha again. In fact, they could all die for all he cared. He could claim that those within the fortress walls had resisted to the point that the Shadows had to set fire to the lot of them. It was a nice, clean ending to an otherwise drawn out affair. Besides, if they lived, they would most likely be brought up to hate him and to eventually turn against him.

“In time, you will come to appreciate me, if not grow to love me.” She gave her ropes another violent jerk.

Although Peshiwah couldn't see it, Fatsah allowed himself a slight smile.

29 Respite

Gell had managed to get Matt to the southern gate of the Old Man, but the gates weren't opening. Across the open fields, Matt and Gell could see Shadows apparently coming out of nowhere. They gathered into a group and with one tall, stocky figure leading them, they methodically closed the distance. Occasionally, a Shadow would nock an arrow, draw back and finish off a fallen soldier.

Matt understood the process. As much as it was a mercy killing, it was also intended for intimidation.

“Lower your weapons,” Matt ordered his men, motioning with his hands in a palm down gesture. He looked to Gell who wore a blank expression.

“It's okay, Gell,” Matt said.

From where he sat leaning against the wall, Ghellatahn continued to stare straight ahead. Matt sensed something was wrong. He waved his hand in front of Gell's face.

Nothing.

Matt stooped down and placed a hand on his shoulder, leaning him forward. An arrow was lodged in his back with a broken shaft.

He was gone.

Matt could feel the fury surging within himself. He pulled himself up, puffing out his chest. “Arrrggggh! You want me, well here I am,” Matt screamed defiantly.

The lead Shadow warrior stood motionless before him. Matt snatched a bow and arrow from one of his men before pushing him away. He drew a slow bead on the man. He didn’t move. Even now, he was attempting to intimidate him.

Matt had had enough. He released the arrow.

It zipped along at a frightening speed and yet, the man snatched it out of the air as easily as if Matt had thrown him an underhand ball. He let the spent arrow fall to the ground.

Keeping his gaze fixed firmly on Matt, he lifted his gloved hand. The Shadow warriors all drew out arrows from their quivers and nocked them. They weren’t aiming at him. Their intentions were to eliminate every one of Matt’s men. Then, after they had inflicted the maximum pain on Matt’s psyche, they would finish him.

“Cowards,” Matt spewed. “The Shadows have become men without honor.”

The hand fell. The fading sunlight was dimmed even more as arrows filled the air.

Matt closed his eyes and relaxed. As he waited, he could feel the cool autumn breeze as it wafted over

his tired body. He was ready. There were no regrets. But the only pain he felt was from the arrowhead still embedded in his leg.

It began with a light chuckle. Matt opened his eyes. Some of the men were snickering. Every arrow had flown by over their heads. Not one had struck a single man.

The Shadow leader looked around at his men who were staring at each other with amazement.

He lifted his hand again. Each warrior nocked another arrow. Once more, the hand fell, the arrows sailed through the air and Matt felt the breeze pick up. The trajectory of every arrow changed and they sailed harmlessly overhead.

Furious, the leader drew his bow and sent shaft after shaft sailing through the air. Some fell suddenly short. Others veered off course and sailed over the cliff.

The Shadow leader stood huffing and puffing. He glared at the soldiers and Matt. If there was fear, he showed no signs of it. Instead, he simply turned and walked away. Matt stared in wonder as the others cleared a path for him and followed him back into the dark forest.

* * *

The light gradually dragged Tam mercilessly into the day and pain. His head was pounding, his mouth was dry and his lips chapped. Yet, his ribs felt slightly better.

He could also feel the soft cushion of a bed, a real bed. And there was warmth.

After having crossed the clearing to the fortress, he had begun the tortuous trip up the winding path to the gate. It was the last thing he remembered.

Now, he could hear the clatter of objects being moved around in a room nearby and the crackling of a fire.

As he forced his eyes open, they adjusted to the light. He was not the only one in the room. There were others lying on other beds with casts and bandages covering various wounds. The smell of antiseptics hung heavy in the air.

“Well now,” a soft, feminine voice said, “we’re finally awake. Would you like some food and something to drink?”

Tam looked up to see a woman who had been attending to another man. She smiled at him pleasantly.

“Yes, please.”

She obligingly turned and poured him some water into a mug from a carafe. Tam took it from her hands, feeling the sharp pain in his rib cage. He looked down and saw that his ribs were wound tightly.

“That will take some time to heal. Here, let me help you sit up.”

She scooped an arm under him and pulled him into a sitting position. Then she placed several soft pillows behind him to hold him up.

“Comfy?”

“Yes, thank you, ma’am.”

“I’ll be back shortly with the food. Are we allergic to anything...” She drew it out.

“Tam, the name is Tam. And no, no allergies.”

“Fine then, Tam. I’ll see you again shortly.”

As she walked out, the man across from him craned his neck and followed her intently. He could tell that the man had eyes for her.

“Wow, I think my recovery is going to be a long one,” the man said with a grin.

In spite of the pain, Tam couldn’t help but chuckle a little. But then there was Genni. His ribs weren’t the only thing hurting. It would be a couple of days before he was anywhere near ready for travel and it made his heart ache. As far as he knew, she was safe for now.

* * *

Matt leaned, nearly sitting, against the long table in the war room with his arms crossed and his head hung low, brooding. There were funerals to arrange. There seemed to be no end to the suffering. Wives, teenagers

and friends were demanding an explanation for their losses. Other than the fact that modern tactics had finally outpaced him, Matt had none. That would never meliorate the pain.

He was confounded. How he and the others had managed to survive when so many others had not was beyond him. Why were they preferred over the men who lost their lives? Would the hand of fate continue to be upon them? How far could he push this thing?

Sre stood across from him, against the wall, sulking. Quinton, along with Karimay and their men had shown up under the cover of night. The word: no sign of Peshiwah anywhere in the Shadow camp. Thankfully, they had no losses. At least Matt had made the right call when he put them in charge.

The only consolation he had was that his children were back with him. Pekko was ecstatic when he came walking through the door. He wouldn't stop jabbering in the simple child words. And he followed him everywhere. He sat playing quietly in the room with him now. Chasha seemed happy too, though somewhat subdued.

Sre thought it best to skirt the subject of Elbakhar. Coming out with that sort of revelation would only make him out to be something that he wasn't even sure that he wanted now. And, as Barikor had stated, it could also make him a target.

When he had crossed to the castle in the evening hours, he heard the ruckus below and decided to

intervene. Luckily, no one else had seen him. But from his vantage point, he could see Tam struggling up the path to the castle. After the melee outside the fortress walls, he had let the winds carry him down to where Tam lay unconscious, scooped him up and brought him in through the western gate.

“He’s a friend, take good care of him,” was all Sre needed to say.

Everyone who knew him smiled as best as they could, wanting to meet the man who, in their minds, had initiated their exile. But the smiles couldn’t hide their heaviness of heart.

In his own disheartened state, Sre now knelt to pray. Pekko, seeing him come down to his level, came waddling over. Sre wrapped an arm around him.

“Father in heaven,” he began, “I do not know what to do next. Please show me the path to take. My eyes are turned to you.”

Matt eyed him curiously. “Since when did you become religious?”

Sre hesitated. “Since I met my father.”

“What! He’s alive?” Matt exclaimed.

“Forgive me, but with everything else going on, I didn’t think it the right time to mention it.”