

# Prologue

*Each spirit shapes its life as it rides on the Great Wheel. The spirit knows the lesson it seeks to learn and hence makes its choice.*

*Wisdom of Viero*

Heavy weights dragged on Erich's wrists.

Chains?

A violent shiver rattled and clanked the manacles.

Chains.

A vile taste fouled his mouth, rancid, like rotten meat. Sticky sweat caked in cracking layers on his hands. Erich could not remember how he came to be fettered. He did remember the walls of the Saucy Mermaid bulging near and far.

He'd stopped for just one drink after unloading the big carrack that came in from the south. Marta didn't like him drinking in the week, but he'd got double pay for quick clearance. He had promised himself just one ale.

He tried to rub his face, but the chains kept his arms below his knees. Eyelids fluttered open, breaking the crust that held his lashes together.

Grey stone walls loomed oppressively over him, damp seeping down in the corners. High above his head, a tiny grilled opening let fresh air dribble in. Had the rechtshus picked him up? Had he done something terrible?

His breath came in short gasps, heart thumping unevenly against his ribs. He yanked at the fetters, cringing back against the wall.

It had been just one drink.

Bolts shot back with a rusty snick, and the thick door opposite him creaked open. The dark portal framed two people, an old man and a woman. The woman's fist wrapped around a torch, its light illuminating their faces.

Whipcord thin, her body nonetheless gave the impression of power. A cap of black hair crowned her almond face.

Her companion brought Erich a flicker of hope. A gleaming silver cordile belted the black robe of a monk of Viero. Blotchy liver spots marred his face, spreading over his bald head. One eye held the milky film of a cataract, but his step seemed firm despite his age.

Erich coughed to clear his throat. "Brother." His voice trembled on the words. "What am I doing here?"

"You're here to help us protect the Empire. I am sorry for the chains, but you were most erratic coming in."

Protect the Empire? What did that mean? "Will it take long? My wife, Marta, and my son are waiting for me."

"No, just a few flickers." The monk smiled, his good eye shining in the torchlight as he took the burning stave from the woman.

She bent over Erich, keys clicking in the locks of his manacles. The fetters fell away.

"Give him something to drink," the monk said. "He sounds dry as a bone."

The woman produced a skin and dribbled water into Erich's mouth, a little at a time until he could swallow freely. Her arm came around his chest, helping him stand and limp out of the cell.

The corridor walls stretched into the grey distance of their torchlight. The smooth cold stone sucked the heat from Erich, starting with his bare feet. What had happened to his boots? Movement released the sour stench of vomit from his clothes.

"Where are you taking me?" Erich croaked as the woman half-dragged, half-carried him up a staircase.

"That is a question that will shortly have an answer," the monk replied.

Blue light flooded from a room at the top of the stairs. Erich tripped over his frozen feet as he stared at the glass jars that emanated the luminescence.

A short man stood by a steel table, chains dangling from rings set in its corners. Black hair flowed over his back like a cape and his eyes tilted up at the corners. The strange light made them look black, but they gleamed ice-blue and cold when the woman's torchlight fell over him.

Shivers crawled up and down Erich's spine. He knew this man. Brice Rennaud, the Emperor's maitombre from the frozen north. What did the Master of Shadows want with him? It had to be bad.

Words bubbled up, rushing from Erich's mouth. "My lord, Brother, whatever I did, I didn't know it. I'm sorry, my lord! I promise I won't do it again!"

Speech deserted him and he babbled incoherently, pleading for what, he did not know. The black-haired man's lips tilted up in a glacial smile.

"On the table," he instructed the woman, nails clicking as he trailed fingers over the chains.

Erich staggered as her arms swept around him. Crashing his fist into her shoulder, he darted for the door. Her foot swept across his, sending him tumbling down. Vicelike fingers clamped on his wrists. A desperate kick caught her ankle and she grunted, her grip loosening.

He lunged away from her, but a hand closed on his ankle. She wrestled him to the floor, a knee resting between his shoulder blades. Twisting his arms behind his back, she forced him up, and onto the table.

"Brother, please help me!" Erich squirmed in her hands, reaching for the black robe of the monk.

"You will find the Wheel today, my boy." The monk patted his shoulder gently as the other two chained him to the table. "You laid a path for yourself to walk and now you have walked it. You will return to the Wheel to plot your next life. It is nothing to be afraid of."

Erich jerked against the steel fetters. "Please, Brother, I'm not ready to die. I have a wife, a child. Marta and my boy Thom. What will they do without me?"

"Of course you are ready to die." The monk stepped back. "You chose this life as a spirit on the Wheel. It is your path and you are at the end of it. As for your family, they too made their choices. Let go of your concern for them and focus on what this life has taught you. Perhaps in your next cycle, you will make better choices."

The woman held a small vial of black liquid over him. Erich sealed his lips, shaking his head. The woman grabbed his nose. He held his breath but ran out of lungs before she ran out of patience and his mouth gasped open.

Black liquid splashed onto his tongue, a foul taste of salt and rotten fish rolling over his gums. The ceiling turned dark and stretched toward him, a drooping bowl. His skin peeled back, and he could see blood rushing through his veins.

The walls bulged near and far, like the Saucy Mermaid the night before.

A feathered head leaned over him. No, a woman's head. The room ran in pink and blue whorls.

"It is perfect." The voice rang like a jangling bell in broken halftones. "His elämää blushes."

"How does this affect the price?" An old door creaked the words.

"A thousand lives for each spirit."

Spiderwebs patted his shoulder. "It is a worthy goal. I declare this deal rattvis bit. We will leave you to it."

Air became more, people less. A porcelain mask hung over Erich. The broken halftones tolled.

"Good-bye. Good luck on the Wheel."

A hot line against his throat. The walls closed in on him for the last time.



*Naira and her masorax*

# Chapter One

*A multitude of spirits dwell before the Wheel and each has a name, a chain with which to bind them.*

*Three Gods dwell behind the Wheel, and none will know their names.*

*Lore of the Threesome*

Heat bit into Naira's mouth, grinding down to her lungs, like trying to breathe through clay. Thirst clawed at her tongue, and she patted her empty water skin. What kept Darisia?

The wind whirled sand against her legs resting on the saddle of her masorax. The great snake's hunger vibrated against her chafed skin where it met hard, shining scales. Fingers clutching on the saddle-horn, she sent soothing thoughts to her mount.

The massive neck swayed forward, arching high above the sand. As the body of the serpent rippled over the dune, its elämää enhanced the beast's already prodigious strength. They would need to stop for the night soon. Would there be prey for the masoraxi? There had not been, the previous night.

The red dunes of the desert shimmered in the afternoon sun. Eddies of wind played on the desolate landscape. Not even the desert nomads roamed here, in the heart of the Cidan Mashada.

A cascade of sand whispering along scales made her turn to see her right-hand husband. His black masorax looped long trails in the dunes, its bony neck-frill fluttering in greeting.

The cabolad swathed Darisia from head to toe, leaving only liquid black eyes visible through the veil. The traditional robe of a priest of the Right-Hand God, the vestment suited the desert, except for the color. The rigors of their journey painted the garment in stains, its original sunshine hue a distant memory.

Coming as close as the girths of the snakes allowed, he tossed a calabash bowl with a wooden lid to her. "The rock aloes yielded little water. We will need to set dew-traps soon." A gravelly burr marred his normally clear tenor voice.

"Tahil is not far ahead." The words crawled out of her dust-dry mouth. "He thinks we are close."

She gulped down the pulp in the bowl, the bitter flesh bringing some relief to her sticky thirst.

"Let us hope there is water in this place he dreamed of. Dew-traps only go so far," Darisia said, and they continued deeper into the desert, following the dream of their left-hand husband. The golden disk of the sun drowned by slow increments in the bottomless cistern of the western horizon.

The ruined stones of a temple rose in the slack between two dunes. Great basalt blocks lay tumbled about as though some giant child had scattered its toys. A single pillar remained standing, the Wheel and the Three carved in golden lines, marking the center of what would have been the floor of the nave.

Tahil waited for them there, leaning against the pillar. His ebony skin gleamed wet and salty, sweat staining his blood-red silk loincloth, the only vestment of a priest of the Left-Hand God. Sand clung to his tight black cornrow braids, a gleaming red mist in the setting sun. He had been here long enough to unsaddle his masorax as evidenced by its absence. Glass sowah charms glittered on his wrist as he raised his arm to wave them in.

"It is the place of my dreamscape," Tahil's basso voice rumbled as they dismounted. "I think the well shaft still holds water, there is a hint of life in the air."

Naira freed her masorax of saddle, bridle, and pack, slithering down its muscled flank. "Or perhaps it does not and that is why this temple is abandoned."

"Have a little faith, O Priestess of the Goddess." Tahil teased her, even as he held up a rope. "I will find water if one of you will be the anchor."

"Or you will find your death." Darisia's dark eyes widened, pupils dilating. "A desert pit with even the ghost of water might well have some lurking beast."

"If I do, you will share our Beloved's bed alone on the ride back. Come." Tahil slung the rope over his shoulder and led them across the broken floor of the temple.

Here and there, carved into heavy basalt rock, sowah images illustrated the prayers of the faithful, a cry to the Gods. It brought Naira comfort to see the familiar icons, echoing the designs of the glass charms dangling from her wrists.

A black pit yawned in the place that had once been an altar.

"Here." Tahil held out the end of his rope for Darisia. "Hold this."

Darisia turned his gaze to Naira, who nodded her reluctant assent. Tahil's skill at habi and the strength of his elämää would protect him. Few things in the desert could kill him outright. She hoped. They needed more than dew-trap water. Worry beat a tattoo against her ribcage as Tahil vanished below the lip.

The shadow of the central pillar grew long before their left-hand husband reappeared. His teeth flashed in a white grin. "The water is sweet and there's plenty." He unslung his waterskin from across his body.

Relief as wide as the sky flooded through Naira as she drank in greedy gulps. Thirst satisfied, she passed the skin to Darisia. Here, in the privacy of their desert camp, he took off the veil and hood of the cabolad, revealing his bronze skin and kissable lips. Black hair fell back in corkscrew coils as he tilted the skin over his face. Water bubbled in the corners of his mouth as he drank.

"A bucket could have filled while you were gone." Naira turned back to Tahil. "Is it that deep? Did you find anything that explained your dreams?"

"It is a deep well. I only explored a little. I found a tunnel with what looked like a sowah image carved on the wall, but I did not think it wise to enter on my own."

"What looked like a sowah image?" The phrasing seemed odd to her.

"It is the right style and colors, but I've never seen the icon." He held out his hands, palms up.

Naira frowned at the scattered stones of the temple. Desert predators would shy away from the hunting masoraxi, their camp would be safe without a human presence. They could explore the tunnel and maybe learn what called Tahil here.

It was a great risk, leaving Magadla only on the word of her left-hand husband. The other Exalted already schemed who would take her place if she died out here in the shifting sands. She would have prayed for guidance, but the Goddess had been silent for many years now.

She set the thought aside, there would be room in the cistern when they returned to the Holy City to worry about politics.

"One of us will need to stay up here with the rope." The words tripped on her tongue as she said them and the last utterance of the Goddess came back to her.

*If you would hear my voice again, remember this: I am the Balancer. Weight and Counterweight. Modesty and Wantonness. Creation and Destruction. Right-Hand and Left-Hand. There must always be Balance. There will come a time when you think you need only the one. If you would hear my voice, remember this: I am the Balancer.*

"No," she corrected herself. "We must find a way for all three of us to go down."

Tahil walked up to a massive basalt block, its black shadow mingling with the coming darkness. "This will do if we can flake off a piece large enough to cover the well but small enough that we can get past. We can lay it over the top and tie the rope to it."

"Basalt is a hard rock." Darisia walked over to join him, running his hands over the smooth surface. "This will not flake, not unless we have a drill. I will check the other stones."

"Should we wait for tomorrow to go down?" Tahil asked her as Darisia walked among the fallen stones.

"Will sunlight make a difference in an underground pit?" Naira's shoulders rippled under the thin straps of her blue khamei. Like the garments of her husbands, her vestments wore the length of the journey in red stains and small rips on her pleated skirt. "Tell me again of your dream?"

"The Holy Masorax called me to this place and in its gaze, I saw that the Goddess' silence neared its end. Here we would receive guidance to reawaken to Her grace."

Hope tingled along Naira's limbs. For twenty-seven years the Goddess had been silent. To return Her voice to the people, any risk was worth taking.

"Here!" Darisia called to them.

He had found a stone slab, a weathered lintel from long ago. Solid and thick as Naira's waist, it lay heavy on their shoulders. Shifting sand under their sandals made walking hard, even with their elämääs flooding strength into corded muscles.

Naira's back cramped with agonized relief as they lay the stone over the well, leaving a thin gap. They might scrape some skin off, but they could squeeze through.

Touching her sowah charms, she considered the setting sun. "Let us eat and pray first, then we shall go down."



The long rope coiled into the darkness, only the faint light of Tahil's torch calling Naira from below. Heat fled from the desert with the setting sun and she shivered. Hand over hand, she sank into the clammy darkness of the well.

Her feet met stone and she let go of the rope, stepping aside to make space for Darisia. A small stream ran over her toes.

"Here is the upwelling." Tahil held out the torch to show her the source of water bubbling slowly through a sandy patch onto the well floor. "The stream runs into the passageway and see the charm?"

Darsia joined them at the entrance to the tunnel, the etching on the lintel drawing their fascinated regard. The gold of creation, the red of destruction, the balancing blue—the colors of sowah were all present and in the right proportion. And yet, Naira had never seen such an image wrought in the canon.

Two chains hung from either side of a horizontal blue bar. On the right chain hung a gold Wheel and on the left a red Wheel. The icon lacked the Gods themselves or their holy animals.

"Perhaps a sign that was never written." Darisia traced the lines with a slender finger.

"Perhaps." Naira took the torch from Tahil. "Come." She led the way into the tunnel, water-smoothed stones slick underfoot.

A fragrance lingered in the air, teasing her, calling her deeper into the earth. Flickering torchlight revealed cut stone forming the walls of the tunnel.

They had not gone far when the passageway ended abruptly. The runoff water continued into a hole as thick as Naira's arm.

Three slits were carved into the rock at chest height, one straight, the other two curved on either side of it. It could be two hands cupping a third between them.

"The Eye." Darisia breathed reverently, moving to Naira's right side.

It did look like the sign of blessing. "I think our hands go into it." Naira touched a fingertip to the straight slit. "I can see no other way to proceed."

"Shine the fire on it a little longer." Tahil grimaced. "If I'm sticking my hand into an unknown hole, I want to be sure that both spider and scorpion have enough room in the cistern to leave."

"Weren't you the one who climbed down a hole without knowing what you would find?" Naira laughed at him as she brought the torch close to the slits.

"That is different." He shuddered. "That isn't sticking my hand where some eight-legged thing could crawl over my fingers without warning."

They waited for a ladle of water to pass. Finally, Tahil declared himself ready, and in concert they made the sign of the Threesome, Naira's hand straight, the two men each cupping a hand on either side of hers. Slowly they slid the Gods' Eye toward the gaps in the stone wall.

For a droplet, nothing happened.

Bright light flooded the passage, the glare blinding them. Searing pain ripped into Naira's hand, like a rod thrust through her palm, and she screamed in agony. On either side, the men's voices joined hers, a chorus of suffering in the white radiance.

Dark shapes flashed in the luminescence. The sowah signs of the Gods drawn in black lines. The two-tailed lion, the life-giving honeybee, the poisonous masorax. The comet, the breath of the Goddess, the dawn crown.

Naira hung suspended from her hand as her knees collapsed under her. Tormented tendons in her shoulders tore under the weight of her body.

Sowah signs danced in stark silhouettes about the grotto.

The relief of unconsciousness beckoned. Stars sparkled in her vision, and cramping muscles in her back creaked.

The light fled for the nooks and crannies and the pain faded, her hand released. Naira fell to her knees.

"Goddess' Tits! That hurt." She cradled her hand. The ghost of torment lingered despite a lack of visible injury.

"Look." Tahil's voice still held the echo of agony, but he managed to get to his feet. "Some of the light remained behind."

He pointed back the way they had come. A flower glowed in the water. Wrought of metal, its silver stem opened into a golden blossom shaped like a cup on a saucer.

The foreign scent that had lured Naira into the tunnel flooded her senses. The musky smell of the adeeg cat mingled with the spicy aroma of cinnamon roasting over a fire, all wrapped around with the fresh smell of rains falling over the savannah. This scent did not know the harsh desert heat.

Nerves bunched in her legs, slow steps creeping toward this unknown bloom. Her hand still ached with phantom pain as she lifted the artifact, grip cautious on the silver stem.

*Find me.*

The faint voice whispered through her mind, a memory drifting from a time before. The voice of the Goddess. Hope rising in her breast, she clasped the flower between her palms.

“Where?” She prayed out loud. “Where? Goddess, please!”

But the Presence was gone.

“Beloved?” Tahil dropped to his knees next to her as the light of the flower faded.

Strong arms embraced her as a sob welled up from the empty place left by the Goddess’ presence. Darisia’s hands wrapped about her waist. The flower blurred as tears flowed, her shoulders shaking. Twenty-seven years and a dream—for a flower? Her hands convulsed on the stem, sharp edges ripping small tears. Slick blood on her fingers brought calm.

Naira took a deep breath and answered Tahil. “I heard the Goddess, but she said only to find her.”

“Let’s get out of this hole and see what we have. Where is the torch?” Darisia asked.

“Wet and dead.” Tahil helped Naira stand. “Come, I have my hand on the wall of the tunnel.”

They slipped a few times in the dark, even on the short walk back to the rope, picking up grazes on the stone.

Naira called on her elämää and sent a gentle stream of power to her hands, speeding the healing of the small cuts. She could not contemplate abrasions from climbing on top of abrasions from the flower. Silver moonlight beckoned her up and out.

They had set a desert tent with its back to the great basalt rock that Tahil originally wanted to flake. Darisia lit some charcoal, and Naira held up the metal flower to the flames.

“What does this mean?” Darisia stretched out a finger to touch it, pausing above the gilded petals, awe written on his face. “What are we supposed to do? What happened in the cavern?”

“There is some writing in the most ancient dogma that speak of chambers of testing,” Naira mused, trying to remember. “It is lore so old the language is barely understandable. If I remember right, there were places where priests went to hear the will of the Gods. But I don’t understand what this flower means. I have never seen any like it.”

“I think we must find where the real flower grows.” Tahil spoke with his customary pragmatism, the words grounding Naira. “And perhaps there, we will find the Goddess again.”

“Wherever that is, it is not on Kisangi.” Naira bit her lip in thought. “At least not to my knowledge.”

“You think we are called to quest?” Tahil stared at the flower. “At our age?”

Naira grimaced. She'd never felt the call to go on a journey for the sake of her faith. "What else can it be?"

"What of the Hub Throne?" Tahil asked.

"I'd have to step down," Naira replied. "I spent the favors of a lifetime to come here and have the Throne waiting for our return."

"Does it matter?" Darisia's voice trembled, his eyes stretching wide. "For the voice of the Goddess to return to us, it would be worth it."

But it did matter. Decades of politics would wither unreaped, the pinnacle of power lost to them.

"What do you say, Tahil?" Naira asked. He had once held a God's mandate and had yielded it. Yielded it so that she could take the Hub Throne. "Does it matter to you?"

"As long as I have my Beloved." Tahil took her hand in his. "And my husband." He smiled at Darisia. "I am content. But it is your position. Your power to set down or no."

Naira considered that, cradling the flower in her hands. Hope lay heavy upon it. Or perhaps destiny lent it weight. Or maybe she read too much into it and the weight came from the metal that shaped it.

It had not been the politics of Magadla that had set her feet on the path of becoming a priestess. Looking up at her husbands, she made her decision.

"The Goddess calls. We shall answer."

## Chapter Two

*A year born in ghost lights is a year born in glory.*

*Proverb in Rocaille*

With his daughter's little hand curled in his, Louis approached the giant bonfire blazing on the ice.

Loyssa's mittenened fingers could touch the back of his hand. She had grown so much since the last winter festival. How much more of her life would he miss this coming year? He pushed the painful thought away. Duty cared nothing for his role as a father.

The flames reared up into the polar night, forming the shape of the Great Wheel. The frigid heart of the northern winter stole all heat from the blaze. Memories crowded his throat, a myriad of Flame Festivals gone by, aspirations for the new year rising in a tower of smoke.

Gathered around them, other denizens of Rocaille Fortress watched the dancers gyrating in the hub of the Wheel, wraithlike among the flames. Deep drumbeats jolted through their bodies as they bid farewell to the old year and welcomed the new.

Acrid, oily fumes rose from their fire-staves. The aroma lingered in the air, a sour note in the otherwise crisp winter night.

Snow-shrouded walls loomed behind them, the long shadow of Rocaille Fortress reaching across the frozen lake.

"Have you got your wish?" Louis asked his daughter.

"Yes, Pappa." She held up a small wood carving, little boots slipping as they stopped.

Louis thought that it might represent a house, though not a very well-crafted one. His eight-year-old had a lot to learn about woodworking. "It's time to send it to the Wheel."

"Can I tell you my wish, Pappa?" she asked softly.

"If you whisper it very quietly so that the spirits don't hear it." He dropped to one knee and adjusted the hood of her reindeer parka so that it sheltered her red hair, so reminiscent of his own russet locks.

She leaned close to him, holding the carving between them. Her little lips brushed soft on his ear. "I wish that you didn't have to go anywhere this year. That you can just stay at Rocaille with us."

Louis hugged her, sorrow burning behind his eyes. There was little else he could do. Her wish would not be granted.

The drums echoed their shared heartbeat in the tight space between them. He savored her breath against his cheek, small arms coiled around his neck. This memory, at least, they would both carry before duty called him away.

"Come, Loyssa." He rose reluctantly. "It's time to make your wish and then we can feed the fire."

By the edge of the great burning wheel, Roul helped the orphan, Isabella. His blond curls shone in the light, tangling with the reindeer fur from his parka. He held Isabella upright with one hand while she prepared to throw her wish into the flames.

A glow lit the little girl's face as she greeted Loyssa. The two had become friends in the days since Louis had brought Isabella and Roul to Rocaille.

Roul gave Louis a grin and a clap on the shoulder. "Happy new year, Louis!"

"Happy new year!" Laughing, he returned the buffet, sending his friend off balance on the ice. Southerner that he was, Roul was not quite steady on the lake.

Loyssa cast her wish into the flames and watched as the smoke mingled with the glow, a tall column that rose to the heavens. Fur-lined parkas hid small heads as the girls fed old bread to the fire.

"I was right." Roul lifted Isabella onto his shoulders. "Flame Festival is spectacular here."

"But no ghost lights tonight." Louis swung his daughter up to his shoulders.

"Well, we certainly saw them coming in." Roul stamped his feet. "Spectacular but cold!"

"Don't fret your southern bones," Louis laughed. "The dance is nearly done, the feast waiting in the castle."

As soot blackened an already dark sky, the dancers spun to a spectacular finale. The whirling staves climbed the night as they formed a pyramid of fire, urging the hopes and dreams of the citizens of Rocaille higher. Flaming wings crowned the pyramid, a final surge to bring forth a golden new year. The drums urged a thunderous crescendo, an echoing heartbeat that rolled over the frozen lake.

The old year was done. The new had come.

Roul took the lead as they walked back to Rocaille. "The Blood Gate is really here? Under this lake?"

"So Herself says." Louis considered the long path across the lake that ended at the entrance to his home. The pink granite of the fortress towers glistened like pale blood, a fountain rising from the snowy walls. "Don't haul out an ice pick just yet, though. I swam here as a boy and the only thing I found was the biggest pike fish you've ever seen. We'll learn more about the Blood Gate in time."

"That's all fine and well, but events aren't standing still for us. Brice Renaud isn't constrained by winter as we are, shouldn't we be doing more? We've been here a week already, and all we've done is read."

Louis grimaced as he thought of the small library of books Herself had given them, all with accompanying commentaries written in her clear hand. "Getting tired of reading about magic?"

"The magic parts are interesting." Roul kicked a bit of ice out of his path, watching it careen across the lake. "But half those books are legends, a quarter is history dry enough to put an alehouse to sleep, and the rest is magic so obscure I need to read it five times before it makes sense. My concern is more application. We're not actually doing anything and who knows what the trollkarl is planning."

"Spies are keeping an eye on him. We have all winter, and I doubt it's going to be just reading." Louis held Loyssa's ankles as the little girl wiggled on his shoulders. "But Herself might be waiting for Taika to get back."

"No." A cool voice sent icy needles racing up Louis' spine. He turned and found his mother behind them.

She wore a deep blue gown and cloak that complemented her flaming red hair. Rich velvet fabric flowed in graceful lines from a bodice that sparkled sapphire, a starry night echoing the glittering snowfields all around them.

Hanging from her shoulder, the purpure Ducal Sash cut a dark line across her body, azure snake of their family picked out in gleaming gems. Her clothing made no concession to the weather, and she seemed indifferent to the knifepoint wind whistling in from the northern glaciers.

"No, that is not what I'm waiting for. Roll your wrist," she instructed Louis.

He didn't need to ask which one. In their flight from Somfaux Castle, he had taken a fall on his left wrist to protect Isabella. The injury lingered, even with the aid of magic. He gripped both Loyssa's ankles with his right hand and rolled the wrist in question, showing the range of movement. Pleasure curled his lips into a smile. The tendons finally responded properly.

"Good." The satisfaction in her voice echoed his own. "Tomorrow we'll start more practical training. I wish to see you both in the salle, as the day candle is lit."

"Yes, Your Grace," Louis replied.

"Also"—she looked up at Loyssa riding on his shoulders—"it's time the girls started learning habi. See to their first lesson before you report to me."

Louis clung to Loyssa's ankles as she wriggled in excitement.

"Yes, Your Grace," he repeated, but his mother did not wait for his reply, gliding past the two young men and on to the fortress.

"Well." Louis took a deep breath, the cold air burning down his throat. "There you are. She was waiting for my wrist to heal."

"Is she angry with you?" Roul asked.

"Are we really going to get to learn magic?" Isabella's question edged on Roul's.

Louis rubbed a finger along his jawline. "Hard to say," he answered Roul first. "And yes, Isabella. If the two of you want to claim your sashes, it's time you started learning habi."

"Herself isn't angry with you," Loyssa's girlish voice said from his shoulders.

"And how would you know?" Louis swung his daughter down as they entered the warren of corridors that started at the fortress gate.

The heat washed over them as they stripped off reindeer parkas, intense after the aching chill of the frozen lake.

"She told me so. I asked her if you were in trouble, and she said no. So, she's not angry."

"Children." Roul grinned, his teeth flashing white against his almond skin. "No fear."

Louis chuckled in agreement as they made their way down the tapestry-lined corridors to the great hall. The white and blue colors of Laroche Duchy turned the heart of the fortress into a wonderland of ribbons and decorations.

Immense trestle tables groaned with food. Reindeer basked in cranberry sauce. Salmon, pike, and rowan swam in butter and herbs. Berrywine barrels drew the celebrants like bees to honey.

The flame from the ballroom's time candle flickered just above the final rose-flecked granite ring in the timeboard. The morning candle would soon be lit, the evening flame guttered in a puddle of wax.

Louis turned to the girls. "You two may stay up for a couple of dances, then it's bed for you both."

The children ran off to join the lines already in full swing on the floor. They stuck together, staying out from underfoot. Louis let them have three dances before insisting on bed, leading them away from the festivities.

Despite brief complaints, the two little girls yawned and cuddled into the large bed they shared.

On their return to the great hall, Roul snagged a fluted cup from a servant.

"This is amazing!" He stared at the golden liquid in the translucent porcelain with approval. "What is it?"

Louis took a sip from his cup. "Lakka. It's distilled from cloudberry."

"Why don't we have any of it in the south?"

"There's seldom enough of it left to export after the festival," Louis replied with a chuckle.

Roul savored the drink slowly as the dancers whirled about the floor. "I always feel so awkward at parties."

"Maybe it's just the wrong kind of dancing," Louis replied. "Let me have a word with the musicians."

A turning of the flame later the music changed to a tune with a drumbeat. A flute wound its way high and wild between the pulses of the tympani. A large circle of dancers replaced the couples on the dance floor, men and women stamping their feet in time with the fey cadence.

Mindful of the long year ahead, Louis let the music take him, forming another treasured memory against the coming fight. Boots hammered into the flagstones. Hands clapped in sharp accents. This was worth fighting for. His people, his family, his friends. He turned and twisted with partners and alone as the beat dictated until the musicians played another slower tune for couples. They went to find drinks, both sweaty from the wild stamping dances.

Roul drank down a glass of blueberry wine. "We probably shouldn't stay up too late. Especially as sunrise won't end the festival—will it?"

"Not unless you plan on waiting a week." Louis snorted with amusement. "But you're right. Busy day tomorrow."

"Have you heard anything from Somfaux?" Roul tapped a refill and contemplated the dance floor. "Everything that happened this autumn feels so unreal up here."

"Countess Yolanda remains unofficially in charge of Etendulat, and her court is now in Iselra." Louis pondered the news he had received from various agents scattered throughout the Empire. "Somfaux suffers this winter with the river barge trade in hiatus and their stores destroyed in the fire."

"The river ice doesn't last long in the south, at least." Roul grimaced.

"No." A guilty twinge made Louis change topics. He bore a measure of responsibility for that fire. "I also heard that the Emperor sent a delegation to Chamalle to try and smooth things over with your uncle. Supposedly, he sent one of the Imperial cousins, so he's worried enough to use his own bloodkin as ambassador."

"Unless I misjudge my uncle, it's going to take more than a high-ranking delegation to smooth over the death of my father," Roul growled.

Louis held his hands up, palms outward. "I'm just the messenger. I also think Herself is in communication with your uncle. A bluron bird came yesterday and its harness bore the crest of Tranchelag."

Roul glanced up to the high table. "Are you going to ask your mother for a dance?"

On the far side of the ballroom floor, Herself talked with a small group of northern nobles.

"Yes," he answered Roul, recklessness rising through his belly. "Why not?"

They walked across the ballroom to the high table on the dais.

"A dance, Your Grace?" Louis extended his hand.

The little crowd of nobles turned to stare at him and then turned wide eyes back to the duchess. Remote, even in their midst, her cool green eyes met his. So she had been throughout Louis' childhood. Floes of love sparingly dotted in a frozen sea. The

corners of her lips twitched, and she rose to place her hand in his. Only her fingertips brushed his palm.

“If you wish.”

Louis’ hand trembled as he led his mother, his liege, onto the floor. The musicians sensed the gravity of the dance and played an elegant tune, the delicate tones of the glockenspiel guiding the dancers’ steps.

“Loyssa says that you are not angry with me.” He led her through a complicated turn.

“I told Loyssa that you were not in trouble.” Calm and inscrutable, her voice echoed her expression.

“So, you are angry with me?”

“No.” A hint of amusement colored her tone.

Louis focused on the dance for a few steps. “You have barely spoken to me since we arrived.”

They twisted their arms together.

Her blue gown swirled as she came out of the turn. “Are you a child to need your mother’s reassurance?”

“No,” Louis gritted out.

The dance came to an end, and she rested the palm of her hand over his heart. Their green eyes, the exact mirror of each other, met, and the corners of her mouth tilted upward.

“I am glad you are home, my son.” Warmth kissed her voice like the first blush of the light returned after Winter Dark—unexpected, beautiful, and all too brief. She left Louis standing on the edge of the dance floor.

Roul had managed to snag another thimbleful of lakka from somewhere. “That looked exciting.”

“Herself is a complicated woman.” Louis ran a hand through his hair. “Come on, we’d better get to bed. It’s going to be a long day tomorrow.”

“How do you know?”

“She said she was glad I was home. Last time she came that close to expressing affection, I barely slept for a week, the training she put me through.”

Roul rolled his eyes but followed Louis away from the party.



Louis hauled Roul bodily out of bed the next morning. Dark rings encircled his friend’s brown eyes, and he yawned all the way to the salle.

Lit lanterns hung from chains, the illumination a necessity against the polar night. A fire roared in the hearth, its heat blunting icy chill to bearable cold.

A weapons rack squatted against the far wall, stocked with wooden swords, daggers, and shields.

They seated Loyssa and Isabella cross-legged before the hearth.

"Before we start, can either of you tell me what habi is?" Louis asked.

"It's the magic of the Consang," Loyssa replied immediately.

"It's making your body better," Isabella added.

Louis smiled at their eager little faces. "You are both right. Habi is the magic the Consang introduced to the Blutben. It is focused inside the body. We use it to make ourselves stronger, faster, and more agile. It can even change the body from the inside, allowing the habieur to speed the healing of his body or make small changes to his limbs. And what fuels habi?"

"The elämää," Isabella replied.

Louis nodded. "Do you know what that is?"

Loyssa's eyebrows knotted in a small frown and Isabella shook her head.

"It is the power inherent in those of us who can learn to harness the forces of magic. It is part of the life that fuels you. The first lesson of learning habi is to reach for the elämää, but before you can try that, you must learn to find your heartbeat. Now, I want you both to close your eyes." The girls obeyed at once and Louis continued. "Listen to the beating of your heart."

Loyssa's little face scrunched up, but Isabella's expression smoothed out, and her lips curved up in a smile.

"Don't try too hard." Louis kept his voice low and peaceful. "Just listen for your heartbeat. Once you have the rhythm of your blood, I want you to tap every fourth beat on your knee."

Isabella started the tap immediately, but Loyssa's candle burned down a bit before she grasped the pulse of her heart enough to tap. Louis let them practice for a nib and then brought the lesson to a close.

"That will be enough for today. I want you to practice this every day until you can find your heartbeat in an instant and tap out that tempo."

"Yes, Pappa."

"Yes, Louis."

"Pappa, is this like dusang, too?"

"Not quite," Louis smiled. "Dusang is also fueled by the elämää, but it is a different magic. You don't have to worry about that until the Trials so concentrate on habi."

"Yes, Pappa."

"And now you may go and play until two of the day candle."

The two little girls happily skipped off into the castle. Louis turned his gaze toward Roul. Back to the wall, blond curls flopped over the young man's closed eyes.

"You call this helping me train them?" Louis nudged a flaccid leg.

"Planning," Roul grunted, opening his eyes a crack. "I'm planning lessons."

Louis burst out laughing. "Plan your way to the great hall. I want something to eat before our training starts."



On their return to the salle, Duchess Claire de la Roche waited for them, hand resting on the weapons rack. Her plain black tunic and leggings could not be more different from the gown she had worn at the festival feast.

At her side stood Byron, a lanky man with iron-grey hair that flopped in tousled curls against his tawny brown skin. The shadows made his eyes dark pools.

Louis' spirits lifted at the sight of the old armorer. The man was a tyrant, but a beloved one. Fond memories of rough and tumble play while learning the warrior's craft rolled through Louis' thoughts.

"Your Grace," Roul and Louis spoke in unison as they bowed to Herself.

"Good day." Herself's arm described an elegant sweep as she waved them up. "Brice Rennaud represents a threat like no other. His ability to wield sang sorcellerie, his position as the Emperor's Maitombre, and his interest in the power that feeds the Blood Gate requires extraordinary skills from all of us who would oppose him."

She paused a flicker, considering the two of them thoughtfully. "Magic is our greatest weapon, but also his. Our application of the art must be impeccable if we are to defeat a trollkarl. Starting today, I want you to run the habi trail every morning, taking no more time than a single ring. After you've run the trail, I want you to use your dusang three times." She pointed at Roul. "You will manifest that cage of blades that your family uses to defend itself, and you"—her finger moved to Louis—"will step through the shadows of this salle."

Louis met Roul's eye as he considered this.

"Three times will see us unconscious, Your Grace." Roul pointed out.

"Then Byron will wake you up and you'll continue. You can't faint like flowers and expect to win against the likes of Brice Rennaud."

Byron grinned at that, and Louis couldn't help but return his smile.

The armorer clapped him on the shoulder. "It's good to see you again, milord. Have you been working on your sword skills?"

"Probably not enough to satisfy you." Louis wobbled a bit under the buffet. "Byron, this is Roul, Roul, this is our armorer, Byron."

"A pleasure to meet you, sir." Roul bowed at the title of armorer. The scions of Tranchelag held the art of the blade in esteem above all else.

"Now that everyone is introduced, set about your exercises." Herself's command rang clear, but without impatience. "The candle doesn't burn less while you chat." She walked past them, her long red braid the only splash of color against her tunic.

"What's the habi run?" Roul followed Louis' lead and stripped off shoes and stockings.

"It's a path through the fortress that we use to practice habi in the winter." Louis limbered up, stretching his muscles slowly. "Just follow me. Shout if you get stuck."

"How long does it take to run this thing?"

"You heard her. It takes a nub, or we have to do it again."

"Of course it does," Roul groaned.

Louis finished stretching and checked the candle. Just about on the half ring. He pointed at it and Byron stuck a nail into the wax, one nub below the burn lip.

Their candle was lit.

Louis let his consciousness sink into his body, beyond the rushing flow of life in his veins. He reached for his elämää, that throbbing power in his blood and bones, pounding in time with his heart. Reveling in his mastery of magic, he flooded its heat into his muscles. Power erupted against his skin, strength straining for release.

The first flight of stairs he took five at a time, Roul hot on his heels. From the top of the stairs, he leaped onto the balustrade of the gallery that ran along the high walls of the great hall. Bare feet clung to the smooth pink granite of the narrow stone railing.

Far below, servants ignored the two running men, well used to the eccentricities of Herself and her family.

Louis flung himself into space, his arms stretched for the heavy ropes strung from the roof. Below him, Roul latched onto the rope. His breath came in heavy gasps.

"Are you with me?" Louis called down.

"I'm with you," Roul heaved back. "Don't make us late. I don't want to do this again today."

Louis nodded with grim tenacity and started to swing the rope for the leap to the wall. As he flew through the air, he forced his fingers and toes into a longer, stronger shape. He slammed into the rough stonework of the wall and clung there, Roul landing next to him. Louis started the slow crab climb toward the roof where a nest of nets hung.

"Is she trying to kill us?" Roul panted as they hooked onto the suspended path.

Louis twisted his neck to peer ahead for the route down the far wall. "Less talking, more climbing."

They managed to complete the trail before running out of wick, dashing into the salle as the nail clattered onto the striking platform of the candle. Louis sank to the floor, Roul flopping down next to him.

"No rest now." Byron nudged Louis in the ribs with the toe of his boot. "You owe me three manifestations of dusang."

Louis groaned but extended a hand to Roul. They heaved each other up and shared a tired smile. The habi trail had exhausted Louis' reserves and the power of his

elämää came slowly but come it did. He focused his mind and reached for the shadows, seeking that slippery darkness where the candle did not burn.

The cold embrace of the shadows folded around him as the sweet tang of blood flooded his mouth. The length of the salle flowed past as he stepped into one shadow and out of another, covering the distance before the candle could flicker.

A spinning step revealed Roul, sword in hand, enveloped in a crimson haze. The sweeping dance of his blade left behind red limned phantom swords, hanging in the air like afterimages. Solid enough to block a blow, those ghostly blades had saved Roul's life more than once.

"That's one." Byron gave them a merciless grin as they paused, harsh breaths echoing through the salle. "Two to go."

## Chapter Three

*The first Good Wife was Lielt, and to her the Goddess revealed the secret of taming masoraxi. Lielt was a woman of Qubasa Kobela. The other peoples of the Cidan Mashada trembled before her knowledge and came to live in the Eye of the Gods.*

*Desert Legends*

Dawn's first light barely eclipsed the silver spray of stars as Naira leaped onto her masorax. They would travel a few mols before the heat of the day drove them to the desert tent.

Tahil tied the camp bag down and threw Darisia the food pack. Their right-hand husband hooked it onto his saddle, and the three great snakes set off across the dunes. Naira's masorax communicated its contentment through the bond of their elämääs. The serpents had found prey somewhere in the night.

"I'm worried about our supplies," Naira said. "It's more than a tenday back to Desert Gate, if everything goes well."

Darisia patted the slender food pack. "We have been longer on this journey than we thought back in civilization. With the skins refilled from the well, we should still make it, all things being equal."

Naira ran her finger along the anchor cord of her saddle to where it threaded through the masorax's bony scale. "There's a lot that can go wrong in the desert."

"Do you want to stop to hunt?" Tahil asked.

Naira gazed out over the red sands. "No. The only things alive out here are desert shrews and yanari. It would take too long to prepare yanari flesh to eat and the shrews aren't even a mouthful. I think we should look for one of the kobelas."

Darisia's dust-stained veil fluttered in the dawn breeze as he glanced around. "Would any venture this far out?"

The dunes stretched out in red rolling waves before Naira's sight. It had been more than two centuries since her childhood in the desert.

During this season, the kobelas would be gathered at the western shoreline, harvesting the schooling fish, mixing the blue yanari blood with kelp leaves to make dye, and shifting through the sands for gems.

If the fish had run well this year, some of the kikundis, the family groups that made up the larger kobelas, might be making their way inland.

"If we bear more west, we should cross the path of a kikundi," she said

Sweat glistened on Tahil's skin, soaking into the folds of his loin cloth. "Hopefully before we reach the ocean."

"We've been gone three tendays as it is," Naira replied. "Does a few days' delay really cost us so much?"

"Naira, why don't you just say that you want to visit with a kobela?" Tahil sighed.

Naira unhooked her waterskin and sipped a small mouthful. "Something is scratching at me, and I feel uncertain." The admission came hard, even though it was just the three of them. "I want to visit my people."

"Then let us find them." Darisia's voice held a smile. "I'd like to eat someone else's cooking anyway. The three of us are woefully out of practice at looking after ourselves."

"That is true," Tahil chuckled. "But is it the journey or the return to Magadla that is bothering you?"

He knew her entirely too well. "I don't know what to tell the Exalted."

"You won't need to tell them anything," Darisia said. "Once they know about the flower and the voice of the Goddess, they'll insist on the rituals of remembrance."

"That's why I'm not telling them about the flower," Naira replied.

The words silenced both of her husbands. Tahil found his voice first.

"If you're not going to tell them about the flower, how are you going to justify setting aside the Rainbow Crown?"

"I don't know yet." Naira glared at the red dunes. "But I do not want to open my mind to any of them."

"Then we certainly need more time," Tahil said. "A reason why the Balancer is stepping down that doesn't destabilize the Hub Throne will require many mols of quiet contemplation. But we'll find a way, Beloved. We always do."

Naira returned his smile, her uncertainty lessening in the face of his conviction. The three masoraxi turned west, their shadows stretching long as the sun rose.



It took two days of slow travel before they found signs of life. The kikundi was traveling east and south across their western trail. Spirits lifted by the churned sands, the threesome continued with renewed vigor.

At dusk, the day after finding the kikundi's trail, they saw the camp in the valley between two dunes. A cook fire gleamed in the gathering shadows, the aroma of roasting buck dancing on Naira's tongue. Large linen tents formed a windbreak shelter around the spit.

A rope corral held a flock of oryani at least a hundred head strong. The long horns of the antelope threw straight line shadows over the dunes. Dusty brown hides blended with the dusk, even their white collar-lines would soon be invisible.

Water slowly seeped up from a deep trench dug down to one of the ephemeral rivers of the Cidan Mashada.

"Looks like thirty families?" Tahil asked.

"About that, judging by the tents," Naira agreed. "Come, I'm hungry."

Three masoraxi gliding down the dunes in long loops could not be hidden. The whole camp came running out to greet them. The kikundi's dye-making had been fruitful, their loincloths and wraps bright as a flowerbed in spring. Bright blues, warm yellows, and cool greens stood in contrast to their red-brown skins.

Shells clinked merrily from the tips of braids, telling complex stories of relationships between the members of the families here and in the wider kobela. Sowah charms gleamed on their wrists, bearing testimony to their faith.

Naira slid off her mount and folded her thumbs against her palms to make the Eye of the Threesome. The milling of the camp stilled as they recognized her khamei, the vestment of a priestess.

A tall man with gray cornrows made his way through the crowd. Flawless brown immanis shells gleamed on the ends of his braids.

"Good Wife," he said in Cidanesh, bowing deeply to her, his thumbs folding in to echo the Eye, sowah charms clinking together. "I am Bungu, hekima of this kikundi, which is a member of Mijanja Kobela. May I offer you my hands for the blessing of the Goddess?"

It took Naira a droplet to shift her thoughts back to the tongue of her childhood. "Hekima, I am Naira, once of Kibo Kobela. It would be my honor to offer you the blessings of the Goddess."

Her name slithered around the camp, mouths rounding into O's, eyes widening.

Bungu hesitated, his hands half extended. "Good Wife Naira, there is only one with that name and lineage who took the Gods' Road."

"I am she, Hekima," Naira said, straightening her shoulders.

The camp knelt to her, mothers pulling children down with them, raising hands to hide their eyes in respect.

"I take it you told them?" Tahil said in Temple Tongue as he slid off his masorax.

"Yes," Naira answered him before turning back to the kneeling kikundi. Her hands shaped the Eye again. "The Goddess' blessings on you all," she said, switching back to Cidanesh. "May your children know the embrace of the Right-Hand God. May your elders find the swift release of the Left-Hand God. The kobelas of the Cidan Mashada stand in the Eye of the Gods. It is written."

"It is written," the kikundi echoed back to her.

As she spread her hands, they rose, crowding close with awed expressions. Bungu's hands shook as he extended them, palms up, to receive her greeting. His sand-roughened grip chafed against hers. Curling the tips of her fingers over his, Naira snapped against her thumbs, the sharp sound ringing out over the quiet camp.

"Do you speak Temple Tongue?" she asked as the gathering slowly broke up. Evening chores still had to be done despite the kikundi's unexpected and august visitor.

"I do," he replied, switching to it. "May I greet your husbands, Balancer?"

"You may," Naira stepped back as Tahil and Darisia came forward to greet the kikundi's sage.

"Would you honor us with your presence at our meal, Holiness?"

"We will, Bungu, but please, out here in the sands I would rather be just Good Wife Naira. The formality of Magadla brings no water to the sands of the Cidan Mashada."

He bowed, briefly covering his eyes. "You honor us, Good Wife. You may release the masoraxi if you wish. Our habieurs ride out tonight so that their snakes can find prey. We will only see them in the morning."

Naira nodded her thanks, and they unsaddled the masoraxi.

Their packs and saddles vanished into a large tent, rapidly emptied of other belongings. Naira felt a small twinge of guilt for whoever they had displaced. They found seating on low folding stools with leather straps.

"Where do you travel to, Good Wife?" Bungu asked.

"Desert Gate, but our supplies are low," Naira explained.

"We are traveling there also," he said. "We have a good haul of dyes, quartz, and amethyst to trade. The sea was kind, our children will remain our own this year."

Darisia looked up at that, the cabolad hood bunching, his gaze obscured behind the veil. "How often must you sell kin?"

"Many years the sea is not so kind, Good Husband," Bungu replied obliquely.

"The Left-Hand God rides the desert," Tahil murmured, knowledge darkening his gaze. "Would there be space for us to join your kikundi until Desert Gate?"

"It would be our honor, Good Husband," Bungu replied immediately. All three of them turned to look at Naira.

"It is good." She smiled. "My desert craft is old. I would welcome the surety of a kikundi."

"Come, I shall introduce you to everyone." Bungu leaped up with spry grace despite his grey hair. Naira rose to follow him on a round of introductions.



Linen walls allowed some of the evening desert cool to seep into the tent. Naira sat on the simple bedroll and slowly unbraided Darisia's corkscrew curls. The moon had risen late, dim light obscured their faces.

Tahil lay broadwise across the tent entrance, one hand propping up his head.

"We will never change the law about child slavery now," Darisia said.

Her fingers hesitated in his hair. "I know."

Slavery remained an ever-present necessity on Kisangi, fed by those falling into debt and crime as well as the occasional battle ransom. The great salt mines in the

mountains that bordered the Cidan Mashada ate too many bodies to attract free workers and other enterprises followed their lead.

Naira and her husbands had sought to change the laws regarding children so that no child could be made a slave by birth or battle. In the spring, shortly before they left on this journey, five years of careful negotiations stalled.

The Right-Hand Temple attempted to push an additional measure. They demanded that children could not be sold by their parents.

In response, the Left-Hand Temple withdrew their support for the change to the laws governing birth and battle enslavement.

The dispute had invaded her bedroom, Tahil and Darisia fighting over it until she forbade further discussion outside of the temple courts.

Naira resumed her labor, and the tent grew quiet.

“The Left-Hand cannot abide all child slavery ending. The change is too big to swallow all at once,” Tahil spoke into the silence.

Long black strands of hair stayed behind on Naira’s fingertips as Darisia jerked his head free from her grasp. The cabolad wrinkled as he sat up. Even stained, the yellow garment stood out in the darkness.

“The Left-Hand supported children being born free!”

“Yes, after years of negotiations, but The Right-Hand wouldn’t leave it at that,” Tahil replied. “No, you wanted it so that no child could ever be a slave.”

“A grown man has made choices that can result in slavery. He understands the contract he is signing. How can you say a child can make those choices?” Darisia’s hands balled into fists.

“Sometimes we pay for the sins of others.” Tahil leaned forward. “Sometimes our innocence is destroyed for the lesson our soul needs.”

“Stop.” Naira pushed Darisia back, inserting herself between them. “If we have to discuss this, then let us do so with the aim of finding the middle way.”

The men moved so that they sat before her, Tahil on her left, Darisia on her right. Naira touched the sowah charm of the two-tailed lion and prayed for wisdom.

“What does the Right-Hand seek?” she asked.

Darisia folded his hands in his lap. “We seek to end slavery for children.”

Naira turned to Tahil. “Why does the Left-Hand oppose this?”

His chest expanded, muscles rippling as he straightened his back. “It is the right of a parent to sell a child.”

A mountain of arguments lay behind those simple statements and Naira had heard them all. Her shoulders slumped at the thought of hearing them again and in her own bed at that. The middle way on this issue eluded them thus far. She touched the sowah charm of the sun crown, the symbol of the Right Hand God.

The kikundis of the desert would never sell their children if the threat of starvation did not loom over them. Before she stepped down, there would be a brief opportunity to influence the election of the next Balancer. Could these two facts form a solution?

"Let us consider for a moment children born to slave parents. Should any child be born to the collar? We will start with the Left-Hand reply."

"I could make an argument that we are born where the Gods desire us to be born, but I am willing to concede this point," Tahil said. "No child deserves to be born to the collar."

"Then how can you say they deserve to be sold?" Darisia burst out.

Naira held up her hand and his mouth snapped close with a click. "Answer the point, Priest of the Right-Hand God."

"No child deserves to be born to the collar."

"And yet, we cannot simply say that they are born free. A child born to parents in a long-term contract, or a life sentence, will incur the debt of their raising," Naira said. "To my mind, if we wish to ensure the freedom of children, there needs to be an alternative that is not the untender mercy of their parents' master and not the streets. I would hear your thoughts on that, starting with the Right-Hand reply."

"That is valid," Darisia agreed. "The children need some form of succor."

"Left-Hand?" Naira asked.

"A life started in debt is a close cousin to a life born in the collar, I agree."

"I think there lies our compromise." Naira picked through the words with care. "Parents who sell their children are driven by desperation. The whole community, children included, could well end up starving if we did not allow the sale. By the same token, children who are born free but of parents who are not free need to be more than another starving mouth on the street. Nor should they become a debt slave because of their early life needs."

She turned to Tahil first. "If we agree that the children born to parents under the collar go to the orphanages of the Right-Hand temple, could the Left-Hand be convinced to support the measure?"

Tahil leaned on his fists, tongue making his cheeks bulge as he licked over his teeth. "For how long?"

Darisia turned his hands palms up and Naira nodded that he should answer.

"I would say for the duration of their parents' contracts, at a temple as close to their place of indenture as possible. In some cases, it will be tantamount to a permanent separation, but we can work on the fine points in the comfort of Magadla."

"Would that be acceptable as a starting point?" Naira asked Tahil.

"It is a large concession to the Right-Hand." Tahil folded his hands on his lap and considered his thumbs. "I could convince the First Left-Hand Husband only if we can agree that children can be sold by their parents without prejudice."

Naira turned to Darisia. "Given the freedom of children born to slave parents and their tenure in the orphanages, can the Right-Hand be brought to compromise on parents having the right to sell their children?"

Darisia ran his fingers over the beads of his sowah charms. "I could convince the First Right-Hand Husband. Especially if we ensure the funding is there for the orphanages."

"Beloved, can we move on from formal moot?" Tahil shifted on his legs. "This compromise might work for the Right- and the Left-Hand but it will not give you the votes you need in council. The extra funding required will lose you half the Exalted."

"I can get Makena's block of votes." Naira relaxed her seat, and the two men followed her lead.

"She won't support the change," Darisia objected. "She's made it clear that the turmoil would be too great on her people, even before requiring extra coin."

"Personal ambition drives her." Tahil smiled, his teeth glittering white in the moonlight. "That's what you're thinking. If you go to her in private and tell her that you plan to step down, she will ask who you will endorse as your successor. You can trade your backing of her bid, for her votes on this issue."

"Yes," Naira agreed. "For the role of the Balancer, she'll find a way to support this measure. Once she is Balancer, it will stick. She will not be able to reverse it if she supported it. And we can levy a tithe on the sale of children to fund the orphanages."

"On that principle, I can talk the First Husband round," Darisia agreed, "though the final negotiations will require delicacy and a strongly worded law to protect the children and parents. It does give you an easy route to step down afterward. You yield the Rainbow Crown to get the law written because it means that much to you."

"And a good reason to leave Magadla," Tahil added. "Who would want to stay after leaving the role of Balancer?"

Naira pulled Darisia back to her lap, her fingers once more unraveling his coiled braids. "I'd like to achieve this thing before I step down. It will be a good legacy. No one should be born to the collar."