

The Veiling

A Story in the World of Sanctuary

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CHAPTER ONE



The colored lights and beating music of the Festival of Kage faded in to a dull memory as Nyeyon hurtled over the pothole-laden alleyways of New Kurast's scummy underbelly. Alone in an endlessly intertwining maze of ruined stone walkways and backroads, he cursed himself for his carelessness. The resident guard on duty, the Iron Wolves, had caught him. Again.

He looked down at the rough leather pouch in his right hand. *It was worth it- this should pay for food for a while. If that stupid Old Man hadn't gotten in the way...*

Had he been watching where he was going, he might have avoided the pool of stagnant liquid that he sank into shin-deep. He quickly got to his feet, bruises forming in the usual spots where his body slammed against the cold stone-brick paving. Nyeyon tossed his head about to see if he was still being followed. The flicker of torchlight on the slick ground behind him and the calls of threat he wished were empty were not reassuring.

He would have kept running- he ran a lot these days since the price of food was on the rise- except for the nondescript wall of fresh lumber that rose a heady two stories in front of his face.

When the hell did that get there? His mind reeled. "Don't panic now, Nyeyon," he whispered to himself, "there's got to be some place to hide around here!"

His eyes darted around the grimy alley. Boarded windows, a high balcony supported by ancient, scrolled pillars, and a heavysset door with rusted iron hinges were all decorated the otherwise empty alley. Time was running out- he could see the short swords of the Iron Wolves coming around the bend.

"Running away, are we?" came a sudden, musty voice.

Nyeyon spun around in surprise. "I didn't steal any- Oh, it's you."

The Old Man nodded and then Nyeyon suddenly remembered how he was spotted in the first place. "Oh, it's *you!*" he whispered venomously. "Get the hell away from me! It's *your* fault they're on my tail!"

The Old Man squinted his eyes. "Now, now, young boy, it is the thief that opens his own prison cell. Hot hands come at a heavy price."

"Whatever, just don't get in my way again or I'll slice you up," Nyeyon snapped back, fondling the handle of his dagger in his shoddy leather belt. "Wait a minute, how'd you get all the way here before me, Old Man?"

"You young city folk, always bustlin' about, bothered about *something-*" the Old Man started, getting to his feet as he leaned heavily on his cane.

"Wait, no, I don't care," Nyeyon interrupted him, remembering his predicament as the dark-skinned Wolves came charging down the alley.

"There he is!"

"Don't move!"

"Freeze!"

"Good talk, Old Timer," shouted Nyeyon as he scrambled toward the wooden portal.

"Nyeyon, lad," shouted the Old Man as Nyeyon reached for the wizened door handle. "There'll be one star shining tonight in the sky. Not much good all by its lonesome."

"I don't have time for your- wait, my *name*? How do you-?" he said as he snapped his head around.

The Old Man was gone.

"Whatever."

He jerked the door open with a strong yank, stepped in to the dark without a second thought, and slammed it shut behind him.

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The sharp crack that the old wooden door made as it settled back in to its frame echoed throughout the seemingly empty home. Like most of the backways of New Kurast, the home was obviously built on some older, more primitive stone structure, one which had been integrated into the new design; however, it was choked with dust, cobwebs, debris, and frail

vines, and for now was nothing more than a foreboding domain for darker purposes.

Nyeyon creaked to his knees and crept to an opening in the masonry to observe his pursuers. They were, indeed, Iron Wolves, from their blood-red cloaks to their shiny metal breastplates and bucklers. There were four of them and none too pleased with the marathon Nyeyon led them on.

"It's rats like these that spoil the markets," muttered a heavily shadowed Wolf in the fringe of Nyeyon's view.

"It's the fat cat merchants that make us chase the ugly things. The city's loaded with them, though. It's pointless trying to jail them all." The Iron Wolf lowered his silky crimson hood against the fiery dusk, his dark-skinned features cast in to dramatic relief. He appeared little older than Nyeyon, himself.

Another came across the way and nudged the hoodless one in the shoulder. "Come now, Yatiraj. Your father wouldn't think very highly of that." It was obviously a female voice and heavy with the old Marshland accent.

The first Iron Wolf stepped between her and Yatiraj and shoved her away. "Kaeriil didn't approve of ladies in the Iron Wolves, either, least of all a jungle *tribby!*" He slurred the last two words with heavy distaste.

This time Yatiraj was the one to jostle the hooded Wolf aside. "I don't need my father's drooling fans to defend me, Ashak."

"Enough!" boomed the deep voice of the fourth Iron Wolf. Ashak grimaced and reluctantly stepped out of sight while Fourth moved to the middle of the alley. He was tall, sturdy, and decked in polished, heavy armor. He crouched and put his hand to the ground, feeling. "En'sha has certain skills that are pivotal to our success as rat trackers, tribby or not. Now, we need to find this street trash before nightfall or we'll be facing more than just our own bad attitudes in these backways."

Ahsak moved to the front and made wild gestures with his hands. "They say witches still haunt this sector. You know, if you believe in that crap about magick and daemons—"

The heavily-clad man motioned to Ashak for silence. "None of that nonsense, now."

En'sha stepped back in to the fierce evening light. "Not to mention the ground, itself, is stained with the magick, blood, and pain of our ancestors. The Lord of Hatred was none too kind to anyone," she paused, "city folk included."

"We also don't need to hear *fairy tales* from the yesteryears of our parents, En'sha, and as captain I order you to stop your foolishness!" shouted Fourth, an edge of unease about his voice.

"Captain, you were alive, then. Surely you remember the evil that was?" En'sha was stern.

"I was a child, and it was a child's tale. Now we have more accurate ways of measuring the world. Science, for instance."

En'sha waited a moment, and then shook her head. "One day the dried corpses of our forefathers will rattle their mangled bones in the deep temples that they rot in, Captain Udze. The prosperity of New Kurast alone cannot seal ancient evil thousands of years in the making into dungeons beneath the city--"

The Captain reeled his arm about and smacked her across the face. En'sha stumbled to the ground, scarlet blood streaming from her nose. "Those were orders, *tribby!*" He repeated the name with equal venom as Ashak. He was shaking.

Nyeyon could hear Ashak muffling a laugh a short distance off. Yatiraj assisted En'sha to her feet, who maintained a nondescript visage. There was a rustle outside the door.

"Say, Captain, do alley rats often run alone? There's only one set of tracks going in to this door..." It was Ashak.

The door fastenings rattled in their places. Nyeyon felt his blood swirl in his head and slowly backed away from his viewing crack.

His heel suddenly caught something gangly and pale white. A skeleton. He bolted in the opposite direction out of instinct and the skeleton followed, its tattered clothing twisted around his boot laces. His butt fell in a pile of twisted, dry vines and cobwebs.

"We know you're in there, street rat!" shouted Captain Udze. "Stay where you are and I can promise you a dungeon with a marsh-side window!"

Nyeyon fumbled his hand all over his waist until it fastened on his dagger. He drew it quickly and sliced the old, dry cloth free from his boot. Wandering aimlessly in the half-light, he found himself stumbling

over other carcasses, some less decayed than the skeleton, and whacked his forehead on an aged stone piling.

"He's barricaded the door, Udze, it won't budge--"

"You will address me as *Captain*, Yatiraj!"

"What does it matter what Yat calls you? The thief is getting away!"

"He's not going anywhere if he knows what's good for him. These buildings host worse things than street rats!"

Just calm down, man. Look around.

An orange flare of dying sunlight fell upon a frayed maroon curtain hanging on rusted iron fastenings. It was stained in spots with an unwholesome browned red. *I can hide behind that!*

"It's no use, Captain. It won't move."

"Move aside!" yelled the captain.



Nyeyon made for the stained curtain, hurtling over piles of broken-down crates, remains, and pottery. Cold sweat was beading on his nose and streaking down his cheeks. *It can't end like this. It just can't! No one will even remember me...*

He is back in the alleyway. The Old Man is behind him.

"There'll be one star shining tonight in the sky. Not much good all by its lonesome."

BANG!

The door was being rammed down.

Nyeyon shook his head to rid himself of the memory. He reached for the curtain, musty and dust-laden, and pulled it aside, stepping in to the deep, suffocating darkness behind it.

"Wait! Captain, wait! This door has been magicked!"

"Magicked, En'sha? Can you feel it?"

"Yes! It's very strong here. It... It feels like daemonic magick..."

"May the Gods be with him, then. I will not let my men step over a cursed threshold."

The Iron Wolves' footsteps were the last sounds Nyeyon could hear

as they faded in to the distance.



Daemonic magick?

The phrase played over endlessly in Nyeyon's mind. It was not a pleasant thought.

He laughed nervously, but the tension that consumed his spine could not be ignored. *Those were just legends, right? Weren't they? The daemons from Hell? Just some Zakarum religious dementia?*

He curled the threadbared maroon fabric in his hands as he stared at the doorway. The darkness, mustiness, and silence was giving him an unpleasant feeling in the pit of his stomach and up the length of his neck.

I should get out of here.

He was rooted to the spot.

But what if it's a trick? What if they're really waiting right outside the door? Bastards.

He gulped and took a deep look behind him. There was only one other way: he had to find another exit.

He took a deep breath, turned the rest of his cowardly, shaking body around, and took an unconfident step in to the smothering blackness. A moment of dark surprise twisted in his gut as his right foot fell farther than he anticipated, and he stumbled down a few steps before he could steady himself on the slick walls. He *felt* the architecture around him, watching him and ready to collapse the moment he was not suspecting it.

The stairs dropped nearly vertically, the steps thin and slick. Nyeyon could feel the temperature plummeting, the air becoming thick and damp, and unseen fibres dancing across his face and arms. The walls became progressively less smooth as he went, as rough-hewn and solid as the day, so many centuries ago, that they were likely laid.

Unintelligible words were carried on a stagnant draft to greet his face. He was not alone in the shadowy underworld he trespassed.

"-what does it *matter*, Lamia?" croaked a miserably ugly voice.

"The Tender could be here any moment, Lera, that's what bloody well

matters!" replied a conversely silky voice, obviously female.

"It was written in the journal that the Tender would always come to the aid of its Candle." The third voice was also female but maintained an arrogant lilt. "The journal, might I remind you, Archvadoonnes, that we should have found by now. If I had been entrusted with such a task, I would have completed it. I take the Void Lord's requests seriously, unlike some witches-"

"Well, the Tenders di'n't do a good job of i' in the Sin War now did they, Ipa? Damn well nearly wiped the world clean of the ugly Candle worms, that War did," scorned the ugly voice, the one called Lera.

"Laben's journal can wait now that we will have the Master with us," came the silky voice in reply. "Now both of you, be silent! I cannot find the Void Essence..."

There was then the sound of a small object falling in to liquid and a resulting wheeze followed by a sizzling hiss. Nyeyon heard all three of the voices cackle and roil in laughter. They did not sound sane.

Nyeyon took a few more steps and found a faint purple light drenching the stairway. There were roots dangling just above his head and large, hairy spiders crawling alongside the walls. Had he been of some other breed and some other city from beyond the jungles, he probably would have shrieked in terror.

"What about those guards? What are they called-?" hacked Lera in a fit of laughter.

"Oh, the Rusty Puppies? They shouldn't pose a threat to us; at least, not since their ilk forsook their magick a score ago." The enchanting voice gave a dry, dull *hmph*.

"Lamia-," began the ugly voice.

"Please, my dear Lera, do *not* call me that. That is what the children call me. Always the children, before I have my fill..."

Nyeyon was now just above the landing of the purple light and cackling trio. He bent low to observe.

An enormous cauldron boiled above a stark white flame which was both smokeless and soundless. The oddly-colored light pulsed from the contents of the cauldron, and two woman and something else stood low about it.

The one named Lamia stood up first, taller than any normal man,

with full, plump breasts, a fine complexion, and hair knotted-up in coils and twirls. "Stupid animals, those Iron Wolvesies. All paranoid about the repercussions of magick after the Three Masters left our world... Alas, Master Oblevo still beckons for us to complete our task."

She cast her hand to her hip and leaned on it, regally flipping her other hand high in to the air. "Your wands, ladies. *Aer virgam veneficam vocas!*"

In a flash of crimson light and golden orbules a bony wand twisted in to being in her hand. The other two repeated in like fashion. Nyeyon could have sworn he heard a high-pitched, muffled moan from somewhere in the darkness.

Snobby Ipa twirled her wand idly in her fingers. "Do you not find it strange, Lamia, that in Sanctuary we must always create before we can destroy? Does not the babe come before the warlord and the arrow before the wound?"

Lamia frowned. "A painful truth, Ipa. Sanctuary is poisoned with creation. The Lord of the Void would remedy her destruction. Ah, sweet oblivion, sweet nothingness, sweet blissful ignorance!"

"What is not is never known and all that is begets pain! Were that we were rid of all creation! Those stupid fools, the World Guardians! It was said that Trag'Oul would mate with Miscara and their son would bring his ruin!" Ipa sang the words like a joyous hymn, her voice vaulting into lofty bliss.

Lamia and Ipa stood high in their revelry for a long moment, and then Lamia's eye caught the third figure who was hideously disfigured, stooped, squat, and fat. "Oh Lera, will you not join us?"

Lera grunted like a hog. "I' was creation that made me as I am: ugly and loathsome. Truly, I detes' i' mos' of all!"

"Then why do you not bask in happiness at the thought of the Coming of the Void?" Lamia persisted.

"There is none left i' 'is ugly ol' bag o' sin. No laugh'er or goodness. Leave me be."

Ipa's mouth twitched a bit at the corner though she maintained her posture.

Lamia shook her head, her eyes glistening in the purple-hued light. "Be that as it may, Lera, the final ingredient is needed."

Ipa's smile snapped in to a tight frown. "His Lordship grows weary of our frivolity. Quick, the child! The potion must be completed!"

"Your Sight is always most helpful, Ipa," Lamia nodded. She then turned sharply to Lera. "Fetch the girl!" she barked, her soft beauty broken.

Lera smiled an awful, twisted smile, pointed tusks glistening in the drool gleaming in her grin, and she stalked off in to the dark. She returned dragging a lumpy, patchwork sack in to the light. Nyeyon noticed for the first time that there was a crude circle chiseled in to the stone floor all the way around the cauldron.

"Empty the wretch out, already!" muttered Ipa.

"Very well. Have a 'er!" Lera snarled and tore the sack open.

There was a small, frightened, and completely destitute girl wrapped in tattered rags inside, no older than Nyeyon.

Lamia bent low, her breast coming to the full height of Lera, trinkets, amulets, and other charms tinkling softly along her flawless flesh. She cast over a hand to the child, whose eyes were as large as spoon heads. "Just a few drops, my dear. Just a few splashes of that shiny, scarlet, deep..." Lamia's lips curled and she ran her moist tongue along their curves. A voluptuous smile stretched across her features and her eyes deepened in to a wild glare.

BANG!

Lamia flew back from the girl in a heap of green light. Ipa stood between them, her wand smoking lightly at its tip. "She is not her for your dining pleasure, Lamia! She is for the Void Lord and no one else!"

Lamia bowed away to the edge of the circle. "Of course, of course. I had forgotten myself, dear Ipa. Here," she threw a jagged knife to Ipa, "you do the honors."

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Nyeyon had grown up alone in the streets of Kurast. Born nearly fourteen years after an age wrapped in legend, he was soon lost in the flow of civilization's rebirth. He had learned that he had no parents, no distant relatives, and no friends to rely on, and that he must be alone.

To be alone means to be a coward much of the time, to live for the sake of himself and no other. As such, he could not believe what he was seeing, where he let himself wander, and why he was still rooted to the aged, mortarless stone brick floor as he was.

There was a terrible hacking cough behind him. "Ah, yes," it rasped, "the heart of the Tender. It is chained forever to its Candle. You couldn't run away if you most wanted to."

Nyeyon shivered a nod, tiny beads of cold sweat now forming once more along the contours of his face. He accepted the presence of the voice without question. He was too terrified to do anything else.

"In fact, you will most likely end up running to her rescue. It is who you are, lad; no Tender can escape it. And, to make matters worse, you are a lad and the Candle is a lass. You must accede to your manly duty and save the damsel in distress."

Involuntarily, Nyeyon's right hand began to creep toward his dagger. As the voice said, he could not help himself. There was a small flame inside his chest that was consuming his logical thinking. His hand curled tightly about the handle and he drew it.

Nyeyon could feel the source of the voice bend close to his own face. When its rasping sound came once more, it was a harsh whisper. "And the damsel is doing *much* distressing."

Nyeyon pinched his eyes shut. Deep inside the lonely, cowardly shell of a young boy drowning in his thieving misfits, something of an animal seemed to burst forth; something of a flower bloomed wide and proud. Adrenaline surged from his chest down his arms and to the tips of his fingers. Blood channeled down his thighs and calves to the tips of his toes. An unsurpassable focus remade his mind and vision.

Ipa stood proud and noble, erect in her act of perfect defilement. The blade shone ebony in the purple halflight. A loathsome glint caught the corners of her eyes and Nyeyon felt that at that moment he could hate no other as he did Ipa.

Ipa's slender, wizened hand lifted the trembling wrist of the frightened girl above the boiling hell of the cauldron. The jagged knife descended to the youthful, if malnourished, flesh, a farmer harvesting her yield. What could only be described as cool fire slipped through Nyeyon's veins.

He leapt from the threshold of cowardice and in to the den of self-sacrifice with single-minded determination. The Candle was all that he could see, all that he cared about. The fact that he had no idea what she was or why he wanted to act the way he did could not have mattered less.

With a speed that he developed in years of running away, Nyeyon sprinted to the cauldron and struck the blade from Ipa's grasping hand. As it clattered into the outer darkness, Ipa's eyes flared open.

"The Tender has come; I am indisputable," Ipa heralded to her vile companions. "Laben does not lie."

Nyeyon's dagger slipped through the air in one fluid motion toward the beating heart of Ipa. At last moment she twisted her body about and Nyeyon's blade rendered only the fingers from her hand. She shrieked and gasped, blood oozing from her nubblly once-fingers, and stumbled back from the Candle.

"*Inritus cursa!*" Lamia screamed.

A snap cracked through the air and a force like a cannon ball hit Nyeyon full on, tossing him aside like a storm does grass. Bits of nondescript fire twisted about his body and he found himself unable to move as he lay beside the Candle. "It will be alright," he whispered to her without thinking.

Her eyes, immense and enchanting, consumed his, and immediately the Candle's face calmed. *I am Meikara*, a soft, airy voice told him in the confines of his mind. *Protect me.*

I want to, Nyeyon's heart screamed, *but I can't move.*

Lamia stalked to the center of the circle, her eyes glistening with hunger and her lips wet with lusty desire. She bent low over the cauldron and inhaled its twining vapors in a massive breath. "Lord Oblevo will be most pleased when his body is made from not only the blood of a Candle, but the *flesh* of a Tender. No stronger bond could exist." She craned her head to its full height. "No more *loathsome* waste of existence could putrefy my presence such as yours."

Lera stumbled forward and clasped a clawed hand about Lamia's right arm. "His Lordship needs only the blood, Archvadonnes. The flesh of the boy is yours."

"I so wish it was, Lera, but would the summoning not be more powerful with the complete magick of Miscara? Would it not be the most

perfect defilement of Miscara's power, to raise the Void Lord with her most sacred weapons?"

Ipa crawled across the stone floor, an expression of complete bliss set in her features. "The Lord has blessed! The Lord has blessed! My being is undone!" She held her fingerless hand high, its mutilation streaming down her arm.

"Blessed are we, Chosen of Oblevo, Coven of Vadon," they sang in unison.

Without a further thought, Lera stepped forward, took the knife, and once more took up the wrist of the Candle.

A loud crack shook the dust from the architecture and the witches were thrown to their bottoms in a tangled mess of gaping limbs and ornate dresses and black cloaks.

"Who dares?" Lamia screamed, quickly coming to her feet and raising to her full height.

"Not nearly as successful as I imagined it, this rescue," spoke a defiant and scratchy voice from the doorway. "Candle, touch your Tender and the Void curse will be lifted."

A sturdy cane composed of twisted branches supported the scruffy figure, hunched and wizened. Thick locks of grey hair were held back in coils of cloth, and his dressing was simple. It was the Old Man. Nyeyon felt relieved to see him, an abrupt change of heart.

Nyeyon looked to Meikara. Startled, she reached down and did as she was bidden. Upon her light touch, Nyeyon felt an unimaginable amount of deadweight lift from every facet of his body. Without a second thought, he flipped to his feet, drew back his hand, and flung his dagger straight for Ipa's chest. It did not miss.

"Archvadonnes! Lamia! Please, help me!" gasped Ipa as she slid to the cold stone floor, blood trickling from her chest. "I haven't the strength to pull the blade free! Lera! Please!"

Lera grunted indifferently and raised her wand to the Old Man. "Atollos!" she barked. He instantly vaulted from the ground, suspended in middair. "Aye, a tribby! Tha's wha' them ci'y folk call 'em, don' they?"

Lamia kicked the grasping arms of Ipa from her leg, "Yes, yes. An Agonok, no less. Maybe we shall rid the world of the last tonight, Lera! *Carnificina!*"

A dull red glare of amorphous light shot from the tip of Lamia's wand and tore in to the Old Man.

"You cannot torture me, witch!" he rasped.

"Quite the contrary, Agonok. I can destroy you in ways you would never have thought possible!" Lamia's grin returned, creeping from ear to ear. She spat the spell from her mouth again, twisting the wand with even greater vigor. The Old Man gasped a dry scream from his mouth, drips of blood trickling from his ears and nostrils.

"Do something!" Meikara shouted.

"I don't have a weapon!" Nyeyon shouted back, panicking.

"Ah, yes, the Candle." Lera flung her wand at Meikara. "*Desino!*"

A faint blue spark warped over Meikara's body.

"Ugh," whispered Meikara, "I can't move! Go get the dagger!"

Nyeyon looked to the Old Man, then to Lera, and took off toward the motionless lump of Ipa's body.

"Oh, jus' 'old still, ya li'l maggot!" Lera croaked, firing off sparks and spells of all kinds.

Nyeyon reached Ipa's dead body. *This is so messed up.* He tore the dagger from Ipa's chest with a sharp tug. It was stained red.

Just as he turned around, Lera shot a blast of shivering flame towards him. He dodged behind an ancient stone pillar and it exploded in a rain of debris and smoke. He poked his head above the tumbled wreckage only to see Lera's hideous visage contorted in to a maniacal rage.

"Come out, come out, come out!" she sung. "I'll jus' blow yer pre'y li'l head off!"

"Help Utusku!" Meikara screamed.

"Who the hell is Utusku?" Nyeyon hollered back.

"The old guy!"

"You! Shu' yer mouth!" Lera reeled about and slapped Meikara clear across the face, her long talons leaving brutish, scarlet stripes across Meikara's face. "Children these days don't know when to stop yappin'!"

"Old hag!" Nyeyon shouted compulsively.

"Don't worry, just help Utusku!" gasped Meikara.

"Whatever." Nyeyon rolled on his side and crawled behind the rubble to the feet of Lamia. Upon closer inspection, he found that she rank of the odor of spoiled meat. Slowly, he stood up, cupping his free hand over

his nose and mouth. As he drew back, Lamia spun about.

"Little street rats should know where they belong in the world; go back to your spoils, nightcrawler! *Interficio!*"

A fierce eruption of light and flame exploded in Nyeyon's face. He hurtled back, knocking his head on the cast iron cauldron.

Nyeyon knew he was dead, but he heard a solitary scream nonetheless. Concern for Meikara clouded all else from his mind that instant, and once more he was on his feet; however, he was too late.

Lera held the jagged, ebony blade high in the air. A fine thread of ruby glistened along its side. "Lord Oblevo, your flesh awaits you! Des'roy our Sanctuary; cas' us all in to swee' Nothingness!"

"No! Nyeyon, do something! Stop her!" It was Old Man Utusku.

"*Desino!*"

Nyeyon motioned to hurl his body straight in to Lera, but a flash of cold blue blurred his vision. Yet again, he could not move.

"I do not know how some boy survived the death spell; alas, he will not accomplish much frozen in his tracks! Let the blood drip in, Lera! The blood of the Candle must finish the potion!" Lamia shouted joyfully.

Nyeyon felt his dagger slip free of his fingers.

"Oh, how I have *waited!* Oh, how I have *longed* for this moment! Lord of the Void, reward your servants for their work!" Lamia sounded as though she was choking with tears.

"Miscara, yer day 'as come! The Void Lord conquers all!"

Lera's face froze and slowly melted in to a mix of confusion and pain. A shiny, metal blade emerged from her chest. Meikara stepped back from Lera's body quietly, trembling.

"NO!" Lamia screamed, more emotionally and powerfully than ever before.

"YES!" shouted Utusku in equal manner.

Lera's body crept forward. "If it is for 'is Magnificence, may my body serve the Lord Oblevo..."

Lera fell head-first in to the cauldron, her ebony blade plunging in to its depths.

Lamia hurtled forward. "*Venenum virgam somes!*"

Shreds of pure blackness burst from her wand's tip in a terrible mess, her own body staggering backwards with the force, and they slammed

in to the cauldron. It fell over, the purple liquid boiling and frothing madly, Lera's body oozing and melting in to a fleshy mixture with the potion.

Nyeyon's body relaxed, freed from the curse, but the potion had already been completed.

"My work is done! Forgive your servant, my Lord- her cowardice is for her life!" With that, Lamia struck her wand straight down and erupted into a rush of billowing darkness and was gone.



The monstrosity before Nyeyon boiled like tar but squirmed like small animals caught in a net. Thick streams of black smoke clogged the ceiling in a dark smear. An odor like that of burnt flesh and animal droppings overcame the ancient darkness in moments.

A sturdy hand nudged Nyeyon toward the neolithic archway to the stair. The Old Man's voice followed. "Nyeyon, lad, the damsel is saved and the witches are gone. This battle may be well over, but much war is still to come. Hurray, we must leave this place!"

There was a sudden booming cough as the potion fermented and sent a sickly gas in all directions, bricks tumbled from the ceiling. Meikara dropped to her hands and knees, her chest heaving deeply.

"I... I cannot breath!" she cried.

Utusku stumbled forward, slamming his cane down with every haphazard step. "The Void power is growing with the birth of Oblevo. The power of Creation is suffocated by its aura. Candle Meikara, climb aboard my shoulders."

She did as she was bidden and in moments Nyeyon, Meikara, and the Old Man were going up the steps. After a short while, Nyeyon was able to see a dull glow of light at the top. They were almost free.

A sound then came from far below and behind them. It rasped open wide and then rattled loudly, resonating up the stairwell.

They quickened their pace.

Bursting through the thick, musty curtain stained with blood, the three quickly made for the door.

Utusku put his cane against the door and it was thrown back with a

flash of green sparks and a hiss. "Daemonic magick. The Coven must have mistakenly believed their magick could keep the Tender from the Candle. The Bond must have nullified the magick... Interesting. Laben would have much to say of this, I am sure."

The threshold to the stair creaked and the stonework spouted dust from its cracks. A thick, complete darkness began to trickle from behind the curtain. Meikara screamed as if struck with a branding iron.

Utusku put his hand to her head. "I know, I know. We must escape."

"Hold it, Old Man- how did you get in here?" Nyeyon asked smartly.

A curious look struck Utusku's face. "The same way you did, my lad. I magicked myself in behind you before you closed the door."

"Can't you *magick* us out again?" Nyeyon lidded the phrase with thick sarcasm.

"Oh, no, that would be too dangerous. The daemonic magick is unpredictable at best. I would need some manner of opening unobstructed by the curse to get us through."

A grinding, pounding sound began to emanate from the stairwell.

"It is coming! *Please!*" Meikara was struggling on Utusku's shoulders.

"Here, take the lass," Utusku barked as he handed her over.

Nyeyon backed away. "I'm not a baby-sitter."

"She can't yet walk on her own."

"That's not my problem, I didn't ask for this!"

"It is your *duty!* You are the Tender, *her* Tender!"

"I don't even know what that is!"

Without another word, Utusku shoved the intrepid girl in to Nyeyon's chest. Reflexively, he caught her in his arms. She seemed lighter than air, soft, as if she would disperse in to the darkness if he let her go. Her face rested against his heart. He was lost for a time, his mind wandering back to a place in a distant memory. Wandering, wandering...

"I WILL DEVOUR THE FLAME OF CREATION! AS OF OLD, THE VOID WILL CONSUME THE LIGHT!"

As if thrown from a cliff, Nyeyon's consciousness fell back in to his body, his mind returned. The Candle was in his arms. Utusku was frantic.

"-must be a hole, a crevice, something in this old stone!" he shouted.

A *crevice!* Nyeyon's memory flashed. "Utusku, to the right of the door! I watched the Wolves through that hole!"

The Old Man observed it curiously and tapped his cane to it. Nothing happened. "Well said, my lad! Here, come quickly!"

Nyeyon carried Meikara in his arms to Utusku and they huddled together.

"Do not move until the clouds are gone!" Utusku whispered harshly.

The Old Man slammed his solid wood cane down on the hard stone floor, yet it made no sound. Instead, plumes of wispy smoke began to twist about their feet, climbing around their ankles and up their legs.

"What is this, Old Man?" Nyeyon shouted at Utusku.

"Hold still, Tender. There is much we must yet discuss!"

The tendrils curved over Meikara's small, frail body, slipping through her strawberry-blond hair, and then wrapped about Nyeyon's throat and face.

The curtain ripped apart and flew across the room in a heap. Nyeyon could feel the heavy, brooding breathing of the creature that followed. The stonework began to crumble to dust. The floor was shaking horribly, and its contents, dry bones and pottery, dust and refuse, trembled.

Then, in a flash, they were gone. Thrown through a bizarre world of mist and fog, Nyeyon flew like a bird with Meikara in his arms. The thick, sticky aroma of a swamp constricted about his nose, replacing the dank, musty smell of the ruined, backwater house. Orange, red, and green lights rose high above him, pillars and stands taking form from the mist. A vague murmur of sound rushed over his ears. Smears of red, orange, and deep purple swelled in the sky.

With a final, resounding *crack*, Nyeyon found himself on his back, Meikara draped across his body in a tangled mess. He quickly got to his feet, setting Meikara carefully against a sturdy wall. He looked up and down the alley they landed in. Far behind them was the turn where he stuck his foot in a pothole and was nearly caught by the Iron Wolves. Before him was the flashing gaiety of the Festival of Kage. They had escaped, but Nyeyon felt he was no better off than he was in the first place.



The Festival of Kage, a celebration of the refounding of Kurast in the honor of Kage, the son of the traveling merchant Warriv, was the highlight of the typical New Kurastian's year, lasting for the entire month of Ratham. Ropes sloped high in to the deep evening sky to the tops of ancient pillars and renovated temples, laden with green, red, and orange lanterns glowing with a fiery internal warmth. Strings of multicolored beads and cloth were draped from balconies, banisters, and window sills. The sides of the wide main thoroughfare were clogged with street vendors shouting their goods to the swelling crowds. Dancers twirled their ribbons and stretched their limbs from entertaining platforms while more than one lustful eye scanned their sensual curves. Fire-breathers and magicians, all of the fake sort since magick's practice had been abolished in the lee of the twenty years of peace, portrayed their skills with all the practiced perfection of the real practitioners. Caught up in the loud music and an outlandish display of fireworks, none noticed the collapse of the house just one street over.

Had Nyeyon not just experienced first-hand some of the darkest and strangest magicks, he might have been of mind to snatch some purses from drunken revellers.

Purse? Nyeyon suddenly remembered the small pouch he had stolen just before his run-in with the Iron Wolves. He patted himself down. It was gone. *I must have lost it back in the abandoned house.*

"-ah, yes, and make it a *pint!* Delicious, delicious!"

The voice was strangely familiar, but a bit displaced from where its owner should have been.

"You should not be spending his money like this, you know..." It was Meikara.

Nyeyon spun around. Utusku and the Candle were seated at a shabby outdoor tavern. The Old Man was in unusually high spirits.

"Yes, well, the money was ill-gotten. 'Easy come, easy go', as they say in Caldeum!" Utusku's voice was gruff and slurred. He heaved up his mug and gurgled a frothy slosh down. "Besides," he continued, "it wasn't *his* money to begin with."

"But what about the daemon? Surely it will not let a festival keep it from killing us." Meikara stared off in to the distance, reliving her terrifying moments of captivity. She turned to the Old Man, his eyes wobbling about the dancers across the street. "Oh, you stupid lard! Are you even listening to me?"

Nyeyon charged over to the Old Man and snatched the purse off the counter. "You old bastard! This is *mine!*"

Utusku's head lolled toward Nyeyon. "Yours, mine, what's the difference when we all go about taking each other's things? What's yours today could be mine tomorrow. There is no comradery among thieves!"

With that, the Old Man's face met the woodwork of the bar with a resounding thud. Meikara lurched backwards on her stool in surprise.

The tavern keeper's eyes lifted in half acknowledgement. "You have five seconds to get him off my bar before I call the Wolves. I'm not having some tribby slummer scaring off my business."

"Whatever." Nyeyon grabbed Utusku around the belly and hauled him off to a pile of crates not far from the tavern. "And I'll be taking that," Nyeyon stated with a relished glee as he snatched the stolen purse back.

He fumbled his fingers in its depths.

"Empty! You old *bastard!*" Nyeyon kicked him in the ribs with his shin, but in Utusku's drunken sleep he did not even budge. Nyeyon sighed and reclined against the Old Man. "Bastard."

"Don't say that!" Meikara scolded him.

"He stole my money!" Nyeyon retorted.

"You stole it in the first place! Besides, he saved our lives. You should be a little more grateful." She nibbled on some tentacle meat with brown bread, thoughtful. "That would make it twice, actually..."

"What?"

"Nothing."

There was an awkward and prolonged silence.

"So... You can talk to other people? In their heads?" Nyeyon tried to relieve the tension.

"Only yours, since you're my Tender."

"Yeah." Nyeyon relaxed his head against Utusku's slumbering mass and gazed in to the sky; there was only one star. "Weird night, eh?"

"It was the most normal one I've had in a long time. I've never seen the city before." Her eyes were wide with wonder.

"Never seen the city?" Nyeyon repeated. "Where are you from?"

"Northbank, I think. That is what they call it? The city people?"

"Northbank! The old Travincal? That's were all those uppy noble jerks bed their whores!" Nyeyon was incredulous, but then it dawned on him: "Wait a minute! How were you *born* in the city and never saw it?"

Meikara was silent.

Nyeyon crossed his arms. "Fine. Be that way. Just like all the other snobs on royalty hill. I don't need you. In fact, I'm outta here."

He stood up, took a sharp kick at the Old Man once more, and trudged off in to the crowd.

CHAPTER TWO



Witches chase Nyeyon, naked, down a dark path while silver-furred wolves join in the hunt with howls of bloodlust. A dark, vile, thick darkness chokes him as he runs, belaboring his already intense breathing. Everything about him is cloaked in mist and fog except for vague shapes of lanterns and smears of dull colors.

Suddenly, Meikara is bathing in a cauldron of steaming blood before him, her porcine body deteriorating with every passing moment. She cries and moans, her eyes tearing, as her flesh sizzles.

"You are the Tender! You were supposed to keep me safe! Nyeyon, it hurts! It hurts so badly! I think I am going to die here!"

The cauldron bursts to a monstrous new size, as wide as a lake, and Meikara disappears. Nyeyon finds himself dangling from the rim, his feet gracing the top of the frothing scarlet.

"I WILL DEVOUR THE FLAME OF CREATION!" roars a deep, gurgling voice as the center of the cauldron begins to bubble and swirl.

There is a sudden quake and Nyeyon loses his grip, falling deep within the mess, his mouth filling with gore. He is drowning in human blood. He is going to die.

Suddenly, Nyeyon is falling through the center of the mix, a hoarse, powerful laughter weezing at him from all around.

"There is no comradery among thieves!" it teases him.

His body slams against a solid, cold surface. When he opens his eyes, his naked form lies alone in a small circle of light emanating from a lonely star in the otherwise dark heavens. All around him is Void. Three figures dance around him, chanting:

"Blessed are we, Chosen of Oblevo, Coven of Vadon! Blessed are we, Chosen of Oblevo, Coven of Vadon! The Lord Oblevo rewards his servants!"

In a burst of gore they explode, their foulery splattering all over Nyeyon's bare body. The ground then shakes and begins to rupture,

hideous, deep-throated laughter emanating from within the cold ground.

Nyeyon jumps to his feet and begins to run. He cannot run fast enough. The Thing is catching up to him. He looks to the sky to see a single star's light, but it is not enough to light his way, and it is fading. Its light extinguishes without warning and Nyeyon is in complete darkness, running blind.

"AS OF OLD, THE VOID WILL CONSUME THE LIGHT!" booms the mammoth voice.

A shrill, feminine scream echoes and then fades in to the background. Meikara?

He turns to run again, fumbling over unseen obstacles, when his foot suddenly falls farther than he expects it to. A pothole.

An alley materializes around him, the windows shuttered with rickety wooden beams, the stone brick road littered with refuse. The Thing is bounding behind him, but before him is the wooden wall. He has no place left to turn. The door to the abandoned house is gone, replaced by a small crevice barely wide enough to see through.

Frantic, he bounds to it. Stooping low, he presses his face to the hole and peaks in. Gaeity and flamboyance greet his eyes: brightly-colored lanterns warm with firelight, dancers in the streets, mobs of families and friends, rich and poor, are eating and enjoying themselves under a burning dusk sky.

"COME HERE, TENDER! THE CANDLE IS DEAD!"

Failed, failed... I've failed her! Without fully understanding why he thinks it, it comes to his mind, nevertheless.

"FACE ME, WORTHLESS MORTAL! THE VOID HAS A SPECIAL PLACE FOR YOU!"

Nyeyon turns slowly around. The world bleeds of color, everything passing once more in to fog and mist. The vague sound of the celebration roars fleetingly in his ears.

The face he sees is his own, but the voice is not.

"NYEYON, LORD OF THE VOID OF HIS OWN MAKING! FAILURE! STREET RAT! GARBAGE! REFUSE OF THE WORLD!"

The real Nyeyon gropes to his side for his knife, but the belt is gone. Nevertheless, his hand finds a small pouch. In desperation, he tears it open, but it is empty.

Then, the pouch begins to grow rapidly, consuming everything in a

rush of sounds and colors and smells. The False Nyeyon, the Thing, desolves in to nothingness.

"I am Meikara. Protect me."

Darkness.



Nyeyon awoke with a start. Curled in the corner of the Silver Silk Inn's basement, a fierce cold sweat had drenched his clothing during the night. He shivered, not only from the damp, pervasive chill of the cellar, but from his disturbingly surreal nightmare.

Was that all it was? A nightmare?

The thought was meaningless to contemplate. He had been having the same nightmare for the past two nights, ever since he stalked away from Meikara and left her to take care of the drunken Old Man.

Was that the right choice?

He had nothing to eat since he left them, his body adopting an all-too-familiar uniform soreness. He could barely move.

I'm so tired.

Dazed and alone, he slowly climbed up the cellar wall and crawled out the tiny hole that led to the streets of Kurast and another day of self-indulging misery.

Nyeyon lurked through the early morning, silver sunlight borne on a breeze of fresh air from the riverside, and found himself in a strange state of mental numbness, all the while tainted with a faint, sour tinge of lack of purpose.

He kicked at a fat, patchy-looking rat as it scuttled across the uneven stone brick road. All around him the Achta Polls were being taken down, the ones that had held long ropes of lanterns only last night and for the preceding month. Now they were bare and garish looking things surrounded by the prevailing bleakness of morning.

What am I really doing? Where am I really going with my life?

The thoughts had been coming to him for the larger part of his time away from the Candle and the Old Man.

When did I start thinking like this? What the Hells does it matter?

I make my own way.

With all of the festival-spawned apothecaries, tradesmen, and vendors gone with the last day of Ratham, Nyeyon was finding it harder to swipe the usual places he had been for a month. The nobility was forced back in its upper-city sanctuary, Northbank, the rest of civilization was back to its daily routine, and Nyeyon was back to his own: wandering the streets of middle Kurast.

Candles... Tenders... Witches... What was it all, some kind of stupid faerie tale?

Then, someone was walking by him. The details were obscured by the limits of Nyeyon's peripheral vision, but he could tell the person was short. Without a thought, he swiped the first thing that shimmered off its person.

He walked calmly for a little while so the victim would not be alerted, and when he turned around a corner he looked down in to his hand. A tattered piece of cloth with a single golden bead dangled there, staring back at him, daring him to keep it.

"H-hey, mister! That's... that's mine! Give it back!"

Nyeyon turned around slowly, an unfamiliar warm haze growing over his face.

...Guilt?

The voice came from a small boy, no more than half Nyeyon's age, with a strange look of fear mingled with anger on his face. Streaks of dirt, sweat, and tears all dried to his mucky face. His clothes were riddled with tears and holes and he had no shoes.

"You- you give it back or I'll stick you!" The boy sheepishly raised a rusty knife.

Nyeyon noticed that the subtle breeze was gone and the stagnant aroma of the marsh had returned. A thick fog began to mingle with the silver sunlight.

He's gotta be just old enough to talk and he's ready to stab another person... What kind of life is this? How did this happen?

"You know, I'm pretty strong! My parents are gone, but I don't need them!" The small boy was gaining confidence.

It felt like a blade had pierced the long-silenced heart in Nyeyon's chest. *Is this how it was with me?*

Nyeyon simply observed him. The boy's two small, skinny, malnourished arms held forth the rusted knife shakily. Nyeyon took a few steps toward him and the boy got ready to bolt.

"Hey, wait. Here," Nyeyon tore the gold bead from the cloth and threw it to the boy, "you need this more than I do."

"Um... Yeah. Whatever." And the child was gone.

Nyeyon stood there for a few awkward moments, the beadless cloth clenched in his right hand, and then went on his way.

Not long afterward he found himself walking through the Rut, the dirtiest and poorest street in middle Kurast. On his right and left were the rejects of society: the poor, the slaves, the tribesmen, and the thieves. They sat silently against the buildings and lamp posts for the most part, silent, except for a few more adventurous ones that eyed Nyeyon up and down, judging whether he was worth the effort of mugging.

Bits of mist began to twine their snake-like fingers around every corner, cold dampness consuming warmth where ever it was found. The sky grew steadily more overcast and the destitute pulled their meager wrappings tighter about their ghastly forms.

Is this what I want to be when I'm too old to steal and too sick to move?

Nyeyon thought back to the night he met Meikara, small, frightened, and no older than himself. He remembered the strange awakening his soul felt upon seeing her, upon knowing her as a Candle, that compelled him to do what any self-serving street thief would never do for anyone: fight for someone else's skin. He remembered the strange way she spoke to him in his mind, the way she dispelled the Void curse on him with her touch. He remembered her quivering form as she stepped back from Ipa, Nyeyon's knife plunged in to the witch's back by Meikara's own hand.

No, I need to do something with my life. I won't die alone.

Nyeyon walked for what seemed countless hours down the gloomy length of the Rut. Human depravity, more physical than moral, plagued every corner and curb. Children ran across the streets, draped in tattered cloth, shoeless, ignorant of the mirthless future that lay before them. Nyeyon knew it all too well now.

But what would protecting some girl accomplish?

Logic battled with some suppressed, but growing, heat in Nyeyon's

chest.

This just doesn't feel right.

Getting yourself killed over some stupid girl doesn't, either.

But what do I have to lose? Nothing! I'm just a penniless kid stalking the purses of the Golden Way Highway, Cobblersroad, and where ever else the coin jingles idly.

You could lose your life.

More time slipped through Nyeyon's fingers as the war waged on for dominion of his will. For some peculiar reason, Nyeyon could no more drop the subject than take it upon himself to fulfill it. Every thought led to another doubt, and every doubt led to another irrational feeling. He was a maelstrom of misery.

When his thoughts finally quieted, Nyeyon realized that he had wandered far from the Rut and all the other roads he knew so well. Before him, the stone block road was consumed with tall, green grasses. A small, abandoned courtyard laid before him. On three sides it was flanked with massive, four-story walls. Looking heavenward, Nyeyon could see that a vaulted roof once graced the top of the ruins. An ember of fading sunlight pierced the topmost crevice and cut down to the center of the courtyard, falling upon some kind of ancient basin, held up from a surrounding pool of water by a patch of hard, mossy earth. A banyan tree twisted around and over it, filtering the orange glow with its many leaves and hanging moss.

In a word, timeless.

Nyeyon did not look back, though his self implored him to leave this foolishness behind him. His veins once more filled with icy determination, and he knew that he could no more resist the urge to go forward than strangle himself to death with his own hands.

He stepped in to the still pool, which seemed as though it had not been disturbed in hundreds of years. Smooth ripples slid across the glassy surface, kissing the roots of the banyan as they passed. Nyeyon stepped up on to the earthen mound to the basin.

It was empty, cracked on the edges, and filled with moss and moist, but dead, leaves.

Suddenly, all indictators of place and time were dilluded with a persistant blur in Nyeyon's mind, a mental mirage that framed the borders

of his consciousness.

Beside him had formed a small flicker of light, like a candle flame, and slowly the light of dusk was drawn from the peak of the ruins to its glow. It grew more brilliant, the light seeming to have a life of its own, mixing and swirling. Then it spoke.

*"The Candle cries,
The Tender saves,
The Candle hides,
The Tender braves.*

Welcome to the selune, descendent of Achumentos. I bid you bend o'er the basin and you will find it quite different now."

Its voice came from no specific place, echoing unevenly off everything around Nyeyon.

"Wha-what the heck are you?" he blurted.

Nyeyon sensed it relax, as if in a smile, as its wisps of light slowed and lowered.

*"I am Elder Gloam,
The last of my kind,
I' th' mortal home,
Of Light am of mind.*

I must show the Tender the way back to his Candle."

A sheet of light spun from its body, if it could be said to have one, and graced the top of the basin.

*"The selune will show you the way.
Time is short, the dusk flees away."*

Nyeyon turned to the basin, and as Elder Gloam had said, it was changed. The debris was now gone. Water that flowed like clouds in the sky stirred in the basin, its edges illuminated by the burning colors of dusk, and it was an opaque mix of swirling orange and golden light.

"Holy Hells," Nyeyon gasped as a rush of wind blew from the basin through his hair, the clouds shifting and coalescing into surreal blends of color and light. "How do I use it?"

*"Grasp the rim and it will take
To th' majestic c'lestial lake.*

*From the beginning and to the end
You now must go and thus ascend
To stand in primal waters still
And know what must be done to fill
Destiny."*

Nyeyon curled his fingers around the basin's edges. "I don't need to go to some stupid lake, I--"

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In the twinkling of an eye Nyeyon found himself in complete darkness. All was cold, he felt as though he were wrapped in ice, and he could hear drops of water plopping in a pool.

"Hello?" he questioned the passive blackness. His voice echoed for a long time until it faded in to silence.

"Much trouble, this whole matter with the Dragon and the Lady. My *children* are troubled." The voice felt prickly, like shots of coldness tingling through his body.

"The Dragon and the Lady? What are you talking about? Who are you?"

"My children," the voice repeated, yet bodiless. "I have many, they number more than anything you know, but you have never seen one of them." Silence. "I am the First Cause, the Father of Being, and the Mother of Form. In some worlds I am known as Ruah, though seldom am I spoken of."

"Why... am I here?"

"Yes, that is the question. Come, step forward."

Nyeyon could not see his feet. He remembered his first step in to the stairwell of the abandoned house, where he could not see and fell down the stairs in the slippery darkness. Instinct was telling him not to move until he could see.

"The first thing a Tender must know is that he must trust without knowing. Step forward, Tender Nyeyon."

Well, it doesn't look like there's any way of getting out of here, anyway. Nyeyon took a heavy breath, lifted his foot, and took his first step.

A ring of icy light emanated from his footstep, and what Nyeyon saw

disturbed him greatly. The light expanded for countless miles until it was beyond his sight. Nyeyon stood on water.

He jumped in surprise. "What in the world is going on here!"

"Fear not, Created cannot enter again in to the womb of its bearing. You cannot fall through the Lower Water."

There's an Upper Water...? Nyeyon looked up. Sure enough, the sky was an endless expanse of ocean, though it was not smooth and glassy like the Lower Water; it heaved and roiled in chaos, an ocean in a storm.

"Behold, the Upper Water. It is where all living things dwell. It troubles me greatly, however. Madness stirs in its depths, evil purposes are at work, and the time is coming when my children will war against themselves. It was foretold."

"Foretold?" Nyeyon repeated.

"Yes, by your own race. Humanity has proven to be the most interesting of my grandchildren. A man named Laben was born forty years ago, by the standard of Sanctuary, with a powerful gift. He was the child of two worlds. The father was of Sanctuary, your own. Do you know what world the mother was from?"

"How would I know? I didn't even know there were other worlds until you told me."

"I had hoped the Shaman had told you."

"Yeah, well, we've got problems of our own, you know. Daemons n' stuff."

The Upper Water shuttered.

"Trag'Oul, the Dragon, was not the wisest of my children, but his foolery did birth yet more interesting things. Regardless, I know not from whence the mother came. It is a mystery even to me, as your mother's spirit was not created in the Lower Water, an enigma."

Nyeyon shuffled his feet, watching the ripples glide across the glass surface of the Lower Water. "Yeah, so? What did Laben do?"

"Ah, yes. Laben was a powerful prophet, and in his journal he recorded each of his prophecies. To keep them from falling to the Dark, he sealed the journal with his dying breath and had it hidden by a friend."

Nyeyon waited for Ruah to continue its story, but when it did not, he pressed: "And what does this have to do with me?"

"You have not yet guessed at it? You must find the journal with the Candle."

"Why?"

The Upper Water rumbled intensely, and then settled.

"Before Laben died, he spoke one last prophecy:

*'Before the Three will rise again,
Daemon will cause the Worlds to wane
In to the dark for evermore
Beyond the grand Celestial Shore
And 'low the Lower Sea.'*"

"So? What does that mean?"

Ruah did not speak for a long moment, and then: "Below the Lower Water is the third and final ocean: the Void. You know the power of the Void well, Tender Nyeyon. You saw its daemonic servant."

Nyeyon's mind wandered back to their escape from the deep dungeon below Kurast, running from that consuming, lumbering beast. He remembered his last vision of the building before Utusku magicked them from its collapse; he remembered the chilling darkness it emanated.

"You know what you must do. Find the journal, unlock its hidden prophecies. Only you can open its secrets. Discover its riddles and protect the Candle. Only she can fulfill its charge."

The waters begin to fade to darkness once more. Nyeyon could feel a cold wind rushing around him, whipping-up the Lower Water in a dazzling mix of ice and sparkling liquid.

"Wait! Where will I find this journal? How will I know where to go?" Nyeyon was shouting now, the sound of the maelstrom consuming his eardrums.

"Follow the Shaman but do not tell him where to go. Only then will you find the way to the journal. Do not fear the Dark or Void, the Lady Miscara's power will protect you so long as you are with your Candle. Do not fail, my children depend on you."

"But I have more questions! Please, wait!"

"I have no more answers. Go."

All was gone.



Nyeyon was before the selune basin once more, his hands gripping the edges as if for fear of his own life, his knuckles shock white. The strange water was gone from the basin, the dusky light of sundown gone, and Elder Gloam was nowhere in sight. It was a chilly night, cloudy, and the silver disc of the moon peaked over a mountain of heavenly mist. The banyan tree crooked over him, its branches laden with long trails of moss softly flowing in a breeze tinged with the rotting smell of the marshland. He was alone in the ruin.

Damn, he thought to himself, thinking of all the things he was never able to ask Ruah. It was all too bizarre, too fantastical. Nyeyon had seen daemons, powerful magick, and the birthplace of the gods, himself, and could hardly believe it. Maybe it was all just a dream.

He remembered Ruah's charge. *"Do not fail, my children depend on you."* It was not a comforting thought. *So now I have to find that drunkard old bastard again. Just my luck.*

Nyeyon started to leave the ruin, wading through the pool surrounding the selune and stepping back on to the adjacent bank. He looked down the road before him. He was looking straight down the Rut, the homeless curled in corners and sprawled before lightless lanterns in the cold night with little but the rags they wore to keep them warm.

Trag'Oul, Miscara, Tender, Void, Candle...

Nyeyon repeated the foreign words in his head endlessly so that he would not forget them.

"Do not fear the Dark or Void, the Lady Miscara's power will protect you so long as you are with your Candle."

Nyeyon remembered when he had first met Meikara, when her touch had set him free from a Void curse. *So, that was some kind of magick?*

A sky made of water, a rhyming, speaking blob of light, and the weight of countless worlds on my shoulders... Weird day.

As he walked up the Rut to the alley beside the Silver Silk Inn, he cast a weary look back to the ruin. It was gone.



When Nyeyon awoke the next morning, his only complaint was the

crick in his back from sleeping on the cold, damp floor of the Silver Silk Inn's basement. His sleep had otherwise been undisturbed, free of any strange nightmare or prophecy of doom. The usual mist of the morning, always thick in Kurast from the warm air of the marshland meeting the cold air of the Twin Seas, trailed sleepily down from the usual entrance he used. He felt fresh with a new sense of purpose, despite how much that purpose would demand of him.

Sudden thuds rammed against the ceiling above, from the tavern. Nyeyon could hear muffled screams and yells, catcalls and jeers, and got to his feet to begin his morning routine of finding goods to liberate for breakfast. He climbed out, right beneath a boarded window, and leaned his ear close to hear what the commotion was about.

"No tribbies allowed! Didn't you read the damn sign, old man? We don't serve your kind! Get out if you know what's good for you!" The bad temper of the manager of the inn was flaring.

"No, don't hurt him! He didn't do anything to you!" A female voice, pitched with fear.

A typical day in the Silver Silk Tavern.

Nyeyon started to take off for the Gold Way.

"Utusku, do something! Don't let him just hit you like that!"

The name caught Nyeyon by the neck and yanked him backward a step. *Meikara?*

He ran quietly around to the front of the tavern. He was not the only spectator the brawl had drawn in; merchants and peasants, alike, hovered around the front door and the large windows to either side.

"Damn tribes should know their place- out there in the Fringe with the rest of the freaks not fit to live in civilized society!" jeered a short, bald man in a red cloak lined with white frills and gold trim.

The throng blocked all entrance to the tavern. Nyeyon could not even manage to squeeze an arm through.

"Hey, move out of the way, my friends are in there!" After saying it, Nyeyon thought it odd to consider the two people who dragged him in to this whole mess his friends. No one paid him any attention.

For the love of money.

He snatched the sack hanging from the bald man's fine belt and shoved it in the hands of a man with a large pack slung across his back.

"Hey, look mister, that guy's stealing your gold!" Nyeyon chided the bald man as he tapped him on the shoulder.

The man turned around sharply, "Kid, I don't have any patience for--"

Nyeyon motioned his thumb to the sack in the peasant's hand, who shrugged innocently.

"Ah, we have a thief on our hands, do we? Eidor, Tharn, please take care of this man!"

Nyeyon backed away slightly and watched as the two largest and burliest men stepped to the fringe of the crowd, one cracking his knuckles and the other drawing an immense mace from his back.

The peasant fumbled the sack in his hands nervously and bolted.

"Come back here, you coward! Thief! Thief! Wolves, a thief!" shouted the bald man as he pointed and chased after him. His henchmen followed suit.

Nyeyon grinned. *There's some things magick can't do.* He slipped through the gap and in to the tavern.

A crowd as diverse as the one outside was packed in the benches, tables, and around the room of the tavern. Utusku was on his back over the bar, his cane shielded in front of his chest, and the inn keeper was trying to wrestle it out of his grip.

Nyeyon! Meikara's voice was clear in his head.

He scanned the room and found Meikara standing to the side of the scene, her hands frozen in a helpless gesture, her head turned toward him.

We've been looking for you for days! She whispered in his mind.

Yeah, well, I think you guys need me, so I came back. Why doesn't Old Man Utusku use his magick or whatever?

He can't, it's in his cane and he can't move it!

Nyeyon reached for his dagger out of habit, but it was not there. *I really need to get myself another one of those,* he thought as he remembered losing it to Lera's beastly body.

Nyeyon shrugged his shoulders. *I don't know what to do.*

Meikara gasped, her eyes fixed behind him.

He turned around. Three Iron Wolves shouldered their way through.

"Alright, outta the way, Wolves are here," proclaimed Ashak, leading the trio.

"I'm sorry, excuse me- oh, sorry, my fault- no, I'm sorry," stuttered Yatiraj as he bumped through the crowd.

En'sha made her way through in silence, her hand to her short sword.

The inn keeper relaxed his attack as Ashak came to the front. "The old guy came in- I clearly have a sign at the front: 'NO TRIBBIES!' It's bad for my business, you see. People don't like *their kind*," he glared at Utusku, "skulking about."

"Ah, damn, more of these stupid freaks! Yat, slam some chains on this tribby! That's an account of trespassing, assault--"

"He didn't *assault* anyone! The inn keeper is the one trying to steal the poor old man's cane--" En'sha was cut short.

"Tsk, tsk, En'sha. You're not the squad leader!" Ashak shook a ribbon in her face that was dangling from his shoulder. "Actually, hold off on that, Yat. I hereby *command* you, En'sha, to put this tribtrash in chains!" He laughed, quickly joined by most of the onlookers and the inn manager.

"Oh, come on, Ashak, you know she's an Aganok. That's just mean. Why don't you just escort the old guy out? He's not even doing anything to anyone." Yatiraj was empathetic.

Ashak threw up his hand. "Shut it, Yat. En'sha, slap this guy in irons or I'll have you tried for murder--"

En'sha slapped him across the face, catching him off guard, but then retreated backwards a few steps. "You *snake!* You said that was just between us! I murdered no one!"

"Ah, and shall I have you tried for assault of a squad leader, as well?" He winked at her.

Trembling with rage, she took a pair of iron handcuffs from her sack and walked over to the old man. "I am sorry for this, friend."

Utusku managed a weak smile and put his wrists out. "I don't want anymore trouble." He looked over to Nyeyon, and then to Meikara. "Meik, you know what to do."

She nodded and stared at the floor.

"Come on now, gramps. The prison on the Fringe could use some more

tribtrash." Ashak yanked Utusku to his feet, the Old Man's cane clattering to the floor. Meikara quickly picked it up. Ashak gave her a nasty look, but Yatiraj caught his arm.

"What are you gonna do, arrest an innocent girl?"

Ashak sneered at him. "What are you, jealous your father made me the squad leader and not his only son?"

Yatiraj had a cool temper. "I couldn't care less about a ribbon."

The three Wolves left with Utusku, all eyes on them. After they were gone, the inn keeper grinned wickedly and went back to work behind the table. "Drinks all around, on the house!" he shouted.

Cheers rang around the room and everyone began to bustle to the bar. Meikara came up beside Nyeyon, cane in hand, and together they left the Silver Silk Inn to the Gold Way, a street basking in the golden aura of the rising sun.

She grasped his arm with surprising strength and turned him to face her when they were safely away from the chaos. "Where in Sanctuary have you been?" Her face was almost tear-struck.

Nyeyon stuttered, wondering how much, if anything, he should tell her. "Well, I did a lot of thinking, and," he paused, looking around the city, back to the alley that led to the Rut, over to where the ruin should have been and the old building that he found by fate not more than a week ago. "I think I'm coming with you guys."

"Well, that's just great. Now you decide. Meanwhile, we've been searching all of Kurast for you and Utusku got *arrested!*" Her sorrow gone, her face was now livid with anger.

Nyeyon rolled his eyes. "It isn't my fault the Old Man got arrested. He almost got *me* arrested in the first place!"

She turned away from him, her strawberry-blonde hair catching the new daylight so that it seemed like burning gold. "We finally found a boy. He said you tried to steal something from him, but that you gave it back. He said that you were living near the Silver Silk Inn."

"Ah, yeah, so?" Nyeyon knew his face was beat red and was glad she was not looking.

"So? So, I think you have had a real change of heart, especially coming back to us- to me."

"I guess you could say that," he mumbled.

"So it's settled," she declared, turning back around.

Nyeyon blinked. "What's settled?"

"You're going to help me get Utusku out of prison. The Wolf said it is near the Fringe- do you know what that is?"

"Who *wouldn't* know what that is?" he asked incredulously. "Kurast has been battling the Aganoks there for years now. I don't think this is such a great idea, though."

"It's your fault he's there! You're helping me whether you like it or not!" she screamed at him.

Nyeyon started backward, his hands coming up defensively. "Er, yeah, sure!"

As he turned to lead the way to the Fringe, Nyeyon remembered Ruah's words: "*Follow the Shaman but do not tell him where to go. Only then will you find the way to the journal.*"

I guess this is supposed to happen. Just my luck.

CHAPTER THREE



The Lord Oblevo twisted his charred, calloused fingers. Christened with cruddy, black nails as long and thick as claws, they were emaciated and bulging at the joints. It was midday, a cloudless sky streaming down waves of light and heat, the humidity enough to drown in. He did not enter the light, however. Light was the lifeblood of the earth: it fed the plants, which fed the animals, which fed mankind. It was anathema to everything the daemon stood for, to everything he was. Centuries of isolation in the soundless, lightless Void taught him that.

He stood upon his three-toed feet, each tipped with a twisted black talon, his legs ghastly stitches of flesh and bone. The shadow ended just beyond his toes, a fine line between life and death for the Void Lord. His pronged tongue slithered as he hissed in detest, an inhuman scowl crossing his face. In the shaded alcove of the ruins of an old Zakarum church, he watched as the Shaman was led away by the Iron Wolves. He watched as the flaw in his plan marched to jail.

Yes, good, excellent. Perhaps he will stay in that prison until I have the journal in my hands.

He smiled despite his predisposition for pain and misery. If it had not been for the boy, the guard never would have been alerted and the Shaman would still be free to ruin his plans and beat him in the race for the prophecy.

I can deal with the Shaman later, however. For now, I must focus my efforts on replacing my servants from the Vadon Coven. The fools. Who would have believed that my most pitiful, mortal servants would be the ones to free me from my banishment?

He shrank back from the sharp sunlight, knives from heaven, in to the softness of the dark.

Again, Miscara challenges me with her toys, the Tender and Candle.
He glared at the two as they walked from the Silver Silk Inn.

And so it begins once more. This time, however, I have Laben's prophecy on my side! This time, the worlds will tremble to dust before me and I will blow them in to the Void! The World Guardians will be powerless to stop me; none can deny destiny!

When he spoke, he did not move his glare. His voice came in a harsh, slithering mess of clicks and hisses. "Lamia, I trust your affection for his fool of a father will not affect your readiness to kill him when the time comes."

Lamia fumbled to his feet, prostrate. "No, my Lord, that was another life, long ago forgotten. Forgive your servant for her humanity."

His eyes slid to their corners, expending as little energy as possible to look upon the Archvadonnes. "Good. I would not like to think that you became the Archvadonnes of the Vadon Coven for your weakness. Rise, I have a task for you."

She rose immediately, composed once more, and strung a stray lock of her spiraled hair behind her ear. Lamia had to crouch to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling. "Yes, anything for your Lordship."

"You have proven yourself worthy of this task with my rebirth. Go now and follow the Candle. I must know the whereabouts of the journal of Laben."

"Forgive me for doubting your Lordship, but why is the journal needed? We know the prophecy: '*Daemon will cause the Worlds to wane | In to the dark for evermore.*'"

"Yes, my servant," he snarled, "we know the first prophecy; however, I have reason to believe there is another that followed. Should the plan fail because I know only half of the complete prophecy, I will be very, very unhappy. Go."

Lamia left wordlessly to the light of day and the Golden Way. The Lord Oblevo grinned. *Ruah, that ancient fool, will know no defeat such as this. His children will die by my own hand!*



Nyeyon found himself striding along the well-kept main thoroughfare of Kurast with a slight smile on his face. Not only had the Old Man finally gotten what he deserved, but Nyeyon was now part of something

bigger than himself. For some reason, the irrational, whimsical part of him was giddy with excitement. His mind wandered to every tale he ever heard wandering the streets, taverns, and inns of Kurast that mentioned the world beyond the city, thinking of all the places the journey might take him.

Us, he corrected himself, remembering Meikara beside him.

The quest seemed easy enough for now. All he had to do was follow the Old Man. Ruah told him that the way to the journal would become apparent along the way.

What seemed like a road stained in nightmare only days ago was now brimming with the feeling of adventure and hope. The fabric from the street boy that had once held a golden bead flapped from his leather belt. He tied it there to remind himself of his past and where he never wanted to go again.

He took a fleeting look at Meikara, who was enthralled in thoughts of her own, and pondered her mystery. *Born in the city but never saw it?*

"That just makes no sense," he muttered without thinking.

"what?" Meikara asked, hauled back to reality.

"Ah, nothing." Nyeyon hid his eyes from her, afraid she might look in to them and surmise that he was thinking of her.

"Nyeyon, I wanted to apologize," she started suddenly.

Nyeyon waited for her to continue, but it seemed she thought he instinctively knew what she was talking about. "Apologize for what?" he pressed.

She bit her lip. "Back when we had just escaped—"

"Oh, yeah, and Utusku was wasted?"

"Right, then." She rolled her eyes. "Anyway, you have a right to know some things about me, about us. You *need* to know: you have to look out for both of us."

"I'm listening."

She frowned. "You know, you could be a little more polite now and then."

"And you could be a little more open now and then, right? Do you know what I've been through? I've fought things I didn't even believe in until three days ago, was nearly *killed* magick, and saw a daemon form out

of a human body. I had my own body taken over by some stupid Tender thing and now I'm charging straight in to a battlefield without a weapon and—

He stopped. *And with a completely useless girl to look after.*

She blushed. "I know you've been through a lot for me, but please, hear me out." Nyeyon shrugged, and she continued. "Utusku has been teaching me all about what we are. He said that I should tell you when I got the chance. It's a long story, though."

"It's a long way to the Fringe from here, we've got all day."

"Okay. Well, I guess I should start where he did. Utusku is a very good story-teller. I don't think I will do as good a job as him."

"There won't be much time for telling stories when we break him out of the prison," Nyeyon said sarcastically.

She returned an equally sarcastic smile.

"Right, sorry; no more interruptions." Nyeyon pretended to zip up his mouth.

"A long time ago, I can't remember how long, Sanctuary was born, supposedly created by angels. Utusku said that nothing can be born unless the World Guardian wills it, so I guess even though angels created it, the Great Dragon allowed it to be created. The Dragon, Trag'Oul, was surprised when humanity was born, halflings of both angel and demon blood, his most prized creations. Ever since then, Trag'Oul has created nothing. Only the spirits of the Lower Water were brought in to Sanctuary from then on, new humans. There was another World Guardian, though, that took great joy in creating. Her name was the Lady Miscara, and her world was called Miscarcarand. Trag'Oul," she paused for emphasis, "fell in love with her."

"Romantic."

She gave him an angry look.

"Sorry, sorry, continue."

"Anyway, Sanctuary was soon caught in the Sin War. Countless lives were lost, and much was being destroyed. Trag'Oul could not intervene by dictate of Ruah and the other World Guardians, and Miscara was beside herself with grief at the loss of so many. In secret, she struck a deal with beings from the elemental plane of wind, called Gloams, to create a door far from the battlefield. This door led to her own world, to

Miscarcarand, and the Gloams used their most potent magick to erect the Veiling to hide it from prying eyes.

"Through it, she sent her own children, the only ones able to traverse the Veiling. They were called Candles, because they brought the Light of Creation to Sanctuary. She gave them a mission: to heal the world of the devastation wrought by the War."

"So, where do the Tenders come in?" Nyeyon interjected.

"I'm getting to that part, be patient. The Candles only had the power to create and to heal, so they could not defend themselves from the angels and daemons of the Sin War. Most of them were slaughtered in the battle, and by the end, the only one left was a Candle named Ameiry."

"So, if Ameiry was the only Candle left, he must be your great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great grandfather?" He grinned.

"She was a woman," she sighed. "And I guess so. Anyway, Miscara decided that she could not lose her last Candle, and so she told Trag'Oul of what she had done and what happened. He was very angry, but mostly afraid. He knew that Father-Mother Ruah and the other Guardians would be very unhappy that the trust was broken. Trag'Oul loved her very much, though, and so together they created a special new bloodline, secretly taking a spirit from the Lower Water and infusing it with their own bond. This being was the first Tender, and the bond created a magickal protection that he and the Candle shared. It warded them death by most magick so long as they were together, and it prevented any magick from keeping the Tender from helping the Candle, and vice versa."

"Oh, so *that's* why I could get through the door but we couldn't get out of it, because you were inside and I needed to get to you. Weird."

"Yes, and it is also why the witch's freezing curse wore off of me and I was able to take your knife and stab her."

Nyeyon stopped and turned to her. "Wait a minute, now that the Sin War is over, why would there *need* to be a Candle?"

"Exactly. There hasn't been one for a long time. Utusku told me that Candles and Tenders only surface when there is need of them now, so the challenge for us is figuring out what I am supposed to do."

They walked in silence for the better part of an hour down the Gold Way. As the day wore on, horse-drawn carts packed with goods passed by

them, their masters whipping the beasts to drive them on. Merchants, wealthy and poor, travelled along the sides of the road, greeting farmers with their produce and charm and potion peddlers with their trinkets and vials.

When Nyeyon could see the ruins of the Fringe, he knew they did not have much time until they reached their destination.

"Meikara." Nyeyon stopped and wait until she followed suit.

"Yes?"

"This is going to be very dangerous."

She smiled. "I know, and we're going, anyway."

"Just stay with me, that's all."

She nodded.

Nyeyon frowned, but did not let Meikara see. As before, she was hiding something. Despite telling him the story of the Candle and the World Guardians, she still refused to tell him anything about herself. The Old Man was a mystery, as well. He remembered when Meikara said Utusku saved her life not just when they were trapped by the Vadon Coven, but once even before that. The two of them had a combined history that Nyeyon could not even guess at. It angered him on a deeper level for reasons he could not explain.

When they were only yards from the barricade, Nyeyon led Meikara behind a pile of blocks and rubble. "We can't just walk in to the Fringe-civilians are not allowed. We're gonna have to sneak in some how. Do you know where the prison is?"

"I'm just getting used to walking on my own out here and you expect me to know *that*?"

"I guess we'll just make it up as we go along."

Nyeyon scanned the road and barricade for anyway around the crisscrossed wooden pilings and stone refuse. Iron Wolves patrolled the only way through, a wide gate in the middle.

That's gotta open some time, they need supplies to keep up a war.

"We've got to wait for a little while. I need to see who gets in. Here," he dragged over a heavy pot and turned it on its top. She sat down, lost in her own thoughts once more.

Nyeyon paced in the shadow of the stone rubble, kicking at festering weeds and yanking on twisting vines to ease his boredom. The sun was just beginning to set and he was becoming very hungry.

"What a waste of time," he sighed as he slumped to the ground next to Meikara, his back to a smooth block.

Within the hour came a heavysset woman hauling a cart behind her. It was almost dinner time. Nyeyon jumped to his feet, nearly knocking Meikara from her pot.

"What's going on?" she whispered. "You nearly killed me of fright!"

"Dinner is what's going on. The Wolves need to eat, the farmers need to make money. Here, come with me and stick close."

The cart pulled in front of the Wolves and blocked Nyeyon and Meikara from their line of site. The woman was in business talk with the shortest Wolf and had her back to them. Nyeyon wondered at their luck and how long it would hold up.

Meikara followed behind him without making a sound, her footsteps careful and silent, much like his own. In fact, Nyeyon was surprised how perfectly she played the thief's most noble art of silence. Another mystery of Meikara he would never know.

When they reached the cart, he turned to Meikara with a finger to his mouth, and then motioned for her to climb underneath the canvas covering the goods. She did so, pulling in Utusku's cane behind her. Nyeyon made to get in the back with her.

"Oi, what're you doing there, little man?" It was a rough, deep voice.

Nyeyon's eyes widened. He struggled thinking of a strong alibi.

"Ma'am, is this guy yours?" He continued.

"No, no, sir. Not mine. Don't have any children."

Nyeyon was grabbed softly by a sturdy hand and turned around. A bearded, weathered Iron Wolf, middle-aged, was regarding him with a curious look.

"What're you doing out here, young man? Not a place for boys to play, the Fringe."

"Ah," Nyeyon's mouth dropped open, tongue-tied. He glanced back at the cart nervously, but Meikara was safely hidden. "Just...checking the

cart! Cart inspector," and, he added, just for clarification, "I inspect carts."

He would slap himself later for such an idiotic story.

"Ah, Mr. *Cart-Inspector*," nodded the man, his eyes big, his voice taking on the tone of an adult acknowledging the fantasy of a child. "Right, well, Ms. Rekya here can assure you that this cart is quite well." He gave an important look to the woman and she nodded with a goofy smile on her face. "Now, why don't you run along and play with your friends, little guy? Go on, it's a good day for that sort of thing."

The Wolf shuffled Nyeyon from the gate, and as Nyeyon stood there, watching in horror, the cart, along with the Candle, entered the Fringe.



As the Iron Wolf slid the gate closed, dropping the iron lock bar down with a *clank*, Nyeyon stood agape, unbelieving of the horrible stroke of luck that just transpired, his hunger completely forgotten in his state of dumbfounded fear.

She has no weapon, she's probably heading straight for a camp, and I'm supposed to be protecting her. Great.

The Iron Wolf was giving him a parental smile, the kind that insinuated that although he was on friendly terms with the guard, he was in no position to request any help from him. Nyeyon turned and walked a long distance until he was sure the Wolf was not paying him anymore attention, and then he looped around and quietly fell back behind the pile of rubble he and Meikara had been hiding behind earlier.

He could not risk waiting for another cart to go in, or for the same cart to come out. He had to reach Meikara before she was spotted. Not only would she be in a lot of trouble, but Nyeyon was sure that word of her would reach Ashak and the others, and they would be ready in case they attempted to rescue the Aganok.

Of course, that may have been pure fear-driven hysteria. Who would believe children would break in to the most dangerous sector of Kurast with no weapons and try to free a prisoner?

For a moment he longed for the cool of mind and boldness that his Tender blood lent him in the dungeon below Kurast, that it would rise and

replace his fear and worry with direction and purpose; however, when he remembered how it made him leap without thinking, he regretted it. Now was not the time to act foolishly. He had to enter the camp unseen, but how?

CRACK!

Blue lightning zipped through the air, catching the Iron Wolf in the chest and slamming him against the barricade. His body convulsed as his eyes rolled white, sparks sizzling on his flesh. He did not move.

Nyeyon started in surprise. There was no one in sight.

Quietly, he ran back to the gate and leaned over the guard. A smoking hole was blown through his chest, his body charred black. *What the heck just happened?*

No, I need to get to Meikara.

Seizing the moment, he reached for the Wolf's short sword. His hand jolted back, sharp pain whistling through his body. It was supercharged with whatever hit the man.

No good, I can't touch it. I really could use a weapon, though.

Nyeyon pulled the iron bar up and pushed the gate open slightly, just enough to admit himself, and slid it closed behind him.

⊙ ⊙ ⊙

The path from the barricade was a continuation of the Golden Way. Pointing due south, straight in to the Torajan Jungles, it became steadily more disfigured, whole chunks of stone missing, overgrown with weeds and brush. For a mile laid the ruins of progress, the Merchant Council's failed attempt at expansion of the city. Nyeyon noticed that smoke arose in some places along the far edge of the Fringe, but the whole was oddly quiet.

However, Nyeyon did not follow the Golden Way. Tents and barricades were placed periodically down the road and he could hear patrols marching about the ruins. For better cover, he took to the shadows and alleyways of the ruined city, familiar with the twists and turns of backstreets from his life dwelling their ancient cousins in Middle Kurast.

Occasionally, he found himself sneaking through stores of provisions, foodstuffs and other supplies, stacked in hollowed-out

buildings and along the roads. Rubble became more prominent as he progressed forward, not knowing where the cart with Meikara would have gone to. In roughly an hour, his vigilance paid off.

Coming around the corner of an abandoned high-profile brothel, Nyeyon found himself at the crossroads of the Golden Way and some other equally wide but equally decimated street. With the first words he heard, he dropped to his knees and scuttled behind a weather-worn crate.

"I always hate draggin' this damn thing around, you know. My muscles aren't what they used to be." It was the woman from before.

"Ya, well, we don't *pay* ye to complain. 'Sides, you got callouses on yer shoulders now, ye do. They ease the burden."

"Fine, you won't be *payin'* me at all from now on, then. I *quit!*" The woman slammed the handles of the cart to the stone pavement, a wheel spoke bursting from the cart, and stormed off toward the better part of the city.

"Women, these days. Think they can pull a fast 'un on old Michi!" It was an old man, his arms bare and wiry, his chest clad with leather armor overlapping a nondescript tunic, grey hair a tangled, wispy mess. "Well, I don' need ye, anyway! Plenty of suppliers where ye came from, yes ma'am! Ye'll see!" he shouted to her, throwing his hand in the air as if to pelt her with a rock.

Old Michi took up both the handles of the cart and began to haphazardly drag it further along the street, his back cracking as he lifted and his eyes popping as he moaned in agony. "Oh, these bones!"

Nyeyon saw an opportunity and put his quick wit to good use.

"Hey, old guy!" he hollered.

"Hm?" Michi turned around, his wrinkle-wreathed eyes squinting in the harsh sunlight, beads of sweat streaking down his bare arms in the humidity. "Oh, and what might a little 'un like ye be doin' in these parts? Dangerous, dangerous!"

"Need some help with that? I can pull it for you," Nyeyon offered, taking a few steps closer.

Michi dropped the cart and put his finger to his lip, considering. "Hm, *well,*" he said at last, "I don't see why not. Old Michi could use yer young strength for a bit."

Michi motioned Nyeyon over with a wild gesture of his hand. Nyeyon picked up the front of the cart and began to pull. "Don't worry, I've got you, Meikara," he whispered.

"Aye, what's that you say? No, don't got no mice. My hearin' ain't too good, anymore, sonny."

After a quarter of an hour, Nyeyon was surprised how not tired he was. The cart felt incredibly light weight for carrying goods and Meikara at once.

"Yeah, this war's been goin' on for half the decade, it has. Merchant Council tryin' to expand, tribbies not lettin' 'em at their land, the Torajan. Hired out a bunch of mercenaries from the West, came with their pokers n' such, and them with the Iron Wolves damn well wiped out every tribe but the Aganoks. Scary, eh? That the Merchant Council 'as enough gold to squash so many lives like rats in the street. They say them Aganoks got magick, they do, but I ain't seen none. A prisoner said that they don't fight men unarmed with magick with their own spells. I remember how it was, twenty years ago. Magick everywhere, killin' as easily as gold does tribes these days. Scary times, then. Not so scary, anymore--"

Michi rambled on for the rest of the hour with his tales of high adventure in the days of the Three, how he slew Urdars from the Burning Hells, their mauls ready to hammer him to the earth, how he travelled the seas to the Skovos Isles and back, a feat no man had ever done before. Nyeyon's patience was wearing thin.

Then he had an idea.

"Say, Michi, you said you talked to prisoners?"

"Aye, lots of 'em. Especially when I deliver supplies to the prison." He raised his pock-marked, bony hand and pointed a lone finger to the west. "See 'at over there? That be the prison. Wolves cram it with tribbies, tryin' to get 'em to rad out the hidden pockets in the jungles. Damn resilient lot, they are. Gotta give 'em some respect. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," Nyeyon smiled.

"No one believes old Michi's tales, though. Crazy, they say he is. Can you believe that? Michi, crazy? I'll be damned." He stopped suddenly, grabbing the cart and yanking Nyeyon to a halt. "Aye, here we be, the far outpost."

Michi patted Nyeyon on the back. "Ah, that be a good lad, thank ye. I'll be takin' it from 'ere."

"No, wait, erm—"

"Yer a good lad, helpin' the elderly. Here, have a naranja."

"Really, I'm okay, I'm not hungry, I just need to see under the—"

"Good fer the bones, they say. Dunno who, exactly, but someone does."

He drew the canvas from the cart.

Meikara was gone.

Damn! Why can't you make this easy, girl?

Old Michi unfettered a sack and drew out a large, round, fuzzy naranja, juicy red. He threw it to Nyeyon, who caught it just in time, and tied the sack back up, tossing the canvas over the cart once more.

"Now, don't go *sneakin'* on Michi. If the Wolves know I gave ye that, they'll have what with my head, they will." He nodded, as if approving his own assumption. "Off with ye! Get back to the city, where it's safe. No place fer young 'uns out here."

Confused, disappointed, and slightly annoyed, Nyeyon began to backtrack.



The sun was banking low on the horizon, the clouds flaring in shades of pink and mauve on a baby blue sky. A scattering of stars began to twinkle, precursors to a night arriving a bit too early. Nyeyon was hopelessly lost.

"I know I've passed that pole at least ten times by now," he muttered to himself. The naranja had sedated his hunger for a half hour, but now his stomach was rumbling once more.

What if Meikara already knows where the prison is? What if she's waiting for me?

The questions had played in his mind repeatedly. He was accomplishing nothing circling about in the ruins of neo-Kurast except wasting time. He was becoming very agitated.

It would be nice if another lightning bolt blew these stupid ruins to dust so I could see for half a mile, he thought darkly.

A pebble struck him in the head.

He massaged his scalp. "What the Hells?"

"*Psst!*"

Nyeyon circled around. "Who's there?"

Meikara jumped from around a corner and hugged him tightly. "You idiot," she beamed, "I thought I would never find you out here!" She put on an overtly serious face: "*'Just stay with me, that's all.'*"

Nyeyon pushed her off. "Yeah, well, I just carried a stupid wagon halfway across the damned ruins while listening to some old guy yap about his fantasy life looking for *you!*"

He regretted his harshness almost immediately, but Meikara seemed unaffected.

"So?" she chided him.

"So what?" he echoed her.

"Do you know where Utusku is?" she elaborated.

"Ah, yeah. The old bag of wind told me right where to find him."

"Hey-," she started.

"Some *other* old bag of wind. I wasn't making fun of your precious Utusku. Gods."

She shied away, her smooth, pure face shadowed with the dusk. She looked heavenward. "Beautiful, is it not? This sky, it looks just like a pastel painting. I have never seen a sky so full of hope."

"Yeah, well, it usually looks like that around this time of day," he mumbled.

"I have never felt so free in my whole life, Nyeyon. First that prison, then the city, itself. I wandered very close to the jungle at one point. The air was so clean, so free. In the books, they said it would be all stuffy."

Prison? Did she just say she was in jail?

"Not this time of year. The city gets really humid because of the river, but the jungle isn't that bad on its own until the rain season. Or at least that's what the people in the taverns say."

His curiosity was overwhelming him. He had to think of a way of prying the information out of her even if it threatened their friendship, if their relationship could be called that.

"Hey, Meikara--"

"You can call me Meik, if you want. That's what Utusku calls me."

"Yeah, whatever. Listen, when did you discover you are a Candle?"

"Oh, yes, that must have been odd for you. The Tender blood is very potent, or at least that is what Utusku told me."

"You have no idea," he muttered. "That didn't really answer my question, though."

"Oh, look at the sun! We need to get to the prison. I do not want to be sneaking around in the dark."

"You seemed to sneak well enough back at the barricade," he started, but she was long gone, ignoring him.

Meikara took off immediately in a random direction.

Michi pointed west when he told me where the prison was, so...

Nyeyon made a quick gauge of the position of the sun to head westward. "Hey, wait up! It's this way!" Nyeyon shouted.

"Oh, yes, my apologies."

They took off immediately to the west, Meikara staying ahead of him at every step.

"Meikara," he called her.

She did not respond.

"Meikara!"

She walked faster.

"Meik, hold on a second now!" he grabbed her by the arm.

"Don't you *touch* me!" she ripped her arm away.

Meikara was crying, her face red and eyes irritated.

Nyeyon backed off. "*Woah*, wait, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to hurt you."

She shook her head. "No, no, it's nothing. I am fine."

He put his hand on her shoulder, lightly this time, drawing her back to him. "Meik, what's wrong?"

"Nyeyon, I- I just..." She heaved a sigh, shaking her head. "It's nothing. Please, let's go. Utusku needs us."

They traveled on in silence, but Nyeyon retreated behind Meikara and let her be alone.

CHAPTER FOUR



Meikara and Nyeyon hiked through ruined suburbia for roughly a half hour, twisting around abandoned shells of homes, ruined and overgrown. Light splashes of mauve, pink, and pale blue sank to the eastern horizon, and soon pinpricks of silver light, stars, winked in to the growing night. A curtain of thick, deep purple stretched across the sky, cloudless, and the humid air was rank with mosquitoes. Nyeyon was accustomed to the pests, but Meikara swatted them vigorously until she realized it was futile and settled for twitching her body whenever one graced her skin for dinner.

Nyeyon's stomach was caught in continuous, grinding pain from hunger, but Meikara kept her silent pace ahead of him. She had not spoken a word since he pressed her about her past. Now, as she glided through the darkness, footsteps as sure as a cat's, Utusku's cane in hand, Nyeyon was reminded of how well she handled herself in the dark; she made very little noise, but Nyeyon found himself struggling to keep up at times, despite his life in the streets.

The prison of New Kurast loomed in the not-so-far distance, four massive, nondescript towers serving as the corners for a simple yet gigantic block of stone, the brunt of the building. It dwarfed the incomplete and ruined homes, shops, inns, and taverns around it by many stories. The shadows it cast seemed to consume what little light was left in the dusk. Narrow slits, pitch-black inside, served as windows; however, they were few and far between, and they adorned only the top level of the prison.

How the Hells are we gonna get in there?

Nyeyon was beginning to worry.

The prison was close to the edge of the Fringe. As they traveled on, Nyeyon could make out fires and the Iron Wolves encamped around the base of the prison. Tents and banners hung limp in the absence of a

breeze, and it was eerily quiet. Without a word, both of them crept behind a barricade, its crisscrossed beams of wood vaulting above their heads, to plan their next move.

"Okay, I have an idea. We can wait for a cart to come by and—"

Meikara cut Nyeyon short. "If you even *think* I'm willing to go through what we just did, you're dumb as a stump. And I don't think we can wait for a cart, anyway, because it's getting dark. They won't need supplies until the morning, when they get back to whatever it is they do all day out here."

Nyeyon was taken aback by her acute thinking. "Well, ah," he stammered, "have any ideas?"

Meikara frowned and shrugged. "It doesn't look like we can just sneak in, there's a lot of Wolves."

After a tick, both of their eyes snapped to Utusku's cane.

"The magick!" they whispered in unison.

"Do you know how to work it? You've been around the old guy more than me." Nyeyon traced the twisted wood with his fingers.

"I've only seen him use magick twice, once when we escaped from Oblevo and once when—" She paused. "Well, I've only seen him use it twice."

Nyeyon was almost tempted to press her for the avoided memory, but thought better of it. Her past was not important at the moment. They needed to rescue Utusku.

Just as soon as their hearts had been lifted with inspiration, they sat down in resignation. They could not figure out how the cane worked.

For all we know, Nyeyon thought darkly, the cane has no magick at all. It might have just been the Old Man that had it. And now he's gone.

"Why does he have to make stuff so damn difficult," Nyeyon whispered to himself.

"What?" Meikara was observing the cane with a bored glaze over her eyes.

"Nothing. Hey, Meik, question."

She set the cane down and turned to him. "Yes?" There was an apprehensive look in her eyes.

She's probably afraid I'll ask about her past again.

"Meik, why do we even *have* to bust the Old Man out of jail?"

Meikara laughed airily. When she realized he was serious, her expression melted and she turned away.

"Oh, come on, Meikara. I shouldn't have to pry *everything* out of you."

"Okay, okay!" She steadied herself with a sigh. "I... know some people, people who've been there." She gave him a look that told him she would not be telling him who exactly the *people* were. "They said that terrible things happen to prisoners, really bad things. They said that whoever is in there tortures them without mercy." She paused. "Especially tribesmen."

Nyeyon gulped, remembering the foreboding, immense prison, dark and ominous, that now waited to engulf them on the other side of the barricade. His thief's mentality was quickly returning to him, his fear for his own life and unconcern for anyone but himself.

But I have to go, Ruah said that. I have to find the journal.

"Lady Miscara's power will protect you so long as you are with your Candle."

"Nyeyon," she put her young, pale hand on his knee imploringly, "Utusku is the only friend I ever had, and he might be my only real family. Please, we have to do this. Please."

He was taken aback by her sudden forwardness. "Where ever you go, I have to go, I guess. And I'll protect you. That's what the old guy said I had to do."

Meikara giggled. "You know, you shouldn't call him old all the time, it isn't very respectful."

"Who said I wanted to be respectful?"

Meikara folded her arms in resignation. "I guess I just have to get used to this."

Nyeyon nodded wordlessly.

They worked tirelessly trying to call the magick of the cane. They tried rubbing it, stroking it, whacking it on the ground, shaking it, and whispering all kinds of strange words to it, but nothing worked. Meikara gave up momentarily, staring off in to the distance, in to the jungle.

Nyeyon followed her gaze to the scene, not far off from where the barricades ended. Ferns, bushes lit with the bright colors of berries and night flowers, vines twining about every unearthed root and trunk, and

masses of soft-flowing leaves all rustled in the dark, the starlight reflecting on waxy leaf sheens and dancing across silky-smooth flower petals.

"Nyeyon," Meikara whispered, more quietly than before, almost dreamlike, "Somewhere out there, Utusku has a family. Not like ones people usually have. He said it was like a bunch of people that aren't always related, like a lot of friends, but they all work together and love each other like they were really a family. He told me that blood isn't what binds you to a mother or a brother. He also told me that a sturdy roof isn't always what a home is, that his home was where ever his family was in the jungle."

Nyeyon did not understand where she was going with this and did not quite understand what she was saying, but kept silent. Whatever she was saying seemed very important to her.

"The Iron Wolves say that the tribesmen are invading Kurast and killing lots of people, but what if it's the other way around? What if we were the ones that got too big, that invaded their home? What if the Iron Wolves are the murderers?"

Nyeyon remembered Utusku being hauled away, a sad visage of resignation on his shadowed face as he went, and he suddenly understood why Meikara was afraid for Utusku.

She might not be really related to him, but for some reason they're good enough friends that they're family. What if the Iron Wolves are just murderers? What if they kill the Old Man?

After another couple hours of trying in vain to summon the magick of the cane, Nyeyon slumped back, defeated, and Meikara sat down next to him, their backs against the barricade. Exhausted, they fell asleep without another word.



Yatiraj stalked silently down the courtyard of the prison of New Kurast, his short sword gleaming in his hand in the silver dawn, his shining buckler fastened on his wrist, and his scarlet Iron Wolf cloak flapping harshly in an unusual wind. The shadow of the colossal prison

soon overtook him, pacifying his clean, shimmering armaments in to dull, distorted mirrors. It did not quell his anger.

He gave the guards in the gatehouse a stern look and they began to raise the massive door of the prison with its corresponding wheel. It took longer than Yatiraj's anger wanted it to, but it gave him time to regain some of his usual composure. He was still not happy when he stalked in to the Wolf Den.

Ashak was leaning back in a heavy wooden chair, his booted feet laying on the top of the long, polished table, his arms crossed behind his head. He was grinning to himself.

Yatiraj caught a foot of the chair with his boot and yanked it, crashing Ashak to the ground. "What the Hells did you do?"

Ashak jumped to his feet, drawing his own short sword. "You have no right to do that to me, just 'cause your father--"

"My father has nothing to do with this, *Ashak!*" Yatiraj was seething with anger once more, unable to maintain his composure in the face of Ashak's ignorance. "These were your orders, and you had no right to issue them!"

Ashak raised his hand to his mouth and advanced toward the other side of the Den, his hand cast to his chin in mock thought. "Orders?"

"You know *damn* well what orders I'm talking about!"

"Oh, yes," Ashak started without turning around, "the tribby."

"He did nothing against our laws besides enter a tavern and get assaulted by its keeper! You had no right to- to..."

"To kill him?" Ashak had turned back around, a grin spread across his face. "Weak, so weak! You have nothing of your father's strength!"

Yatiraj felt as if his eyes would shoot flames. "Is a man only the measure of his father's mistakes, Ashak? Your own was a drunkard, died in a pool of his own piss in some backwater brothel!"

In one fluid, powerful motion, Ashak upturned a chair with his boot, caught its back with his scarred hands, and threw it in to the stone wall, shattering it in to splinters. "Leave him out of this! I have no father!"

"You're so damn blind, Ash! You killed an innocent man for what? Some prejudice?"

The anger remained on Ashak's face, but it mixed with his grin. Together, they made him seem inhuman. "The old man isn't dead yet, and besides, these damn tribbies are destroying Kurast. Jungle shit, slime of the sewers- you know they won't stop until they've ruined us. Look at what they did to the Fringe! They're all murderers, animals! Savages, unfit to live with civilized mankind!"

"If they started building their homes over the graves of your forefathers, what would you have done?"

"I have no damn father, Yat!" He looked dangerously bestial, feral. "If these so-called tribesmen are angry because we need more space and built on the bones of their dead people, so what? What would dead people be doing with this land in the first place? Maybe they should have thought again before they decided to bury them right next to Kurast!"

Without pausing to think, Yatiraj grabbed Ashak by the back of his cloak and brought his short sword's point to Ashak's throat, staring down its length straight in to his eyes. "You may be my father's pawn, but I am not. One day, you will regret this. One day, I promise I will kill you."

Yatiraj released him, sheathing his short sword and stepping back. He turned to leave.

"Today, the northern Torajan Jungles will burn all the way to the mountains in the west, by order of Commander Kaeriil. After that, we will go south, and we will kill anyone that stands in our way." Ashak then laughed, "And you're gonna help us, because you're an Iron Wolf and you have no choice. If you don't, I'll charge you with conspiracy against the council."

Yatiraj shook in his rage for a moment, and then he was standing in the threshold of the Den. He spoke without looking at Ashak. "Ash, I remember when we were younger and we both wanted to grow up to be in the Wolves. We would play in the streets of Northbank with the stuff we stole from my dad's elite guards that followed him everywhere. We said we wanted to uphold justice in Kehjistan, and that we would do it by the code of the Iron Wolf." He turned around and noticed a hollow smile frozen on Ashak's face. Yatiraj remained emotionless. "'Defend the defenseless.' Do you remember?"

Ashak did not move his head or otherwise show any acknowledgment.

"The Iron Wolves now kill the defenseless and decided to burn their home. Perhaps I no longer serve the Iron Wolves. Perhaps I am the only Iron Wolf left."

Yatiraj paused, observing Ashak, giving him the chance to speak. When he did not, Yatiraj turned once more to leave. "I am resigning today, and I am going to stop you. You may come with me if you want and hope for salvation from what you have done. If not, and I see you again, I cannot promise that my blade will not continue its journey through your guttural."

"Like you, I now no longer have a father."

He left.



"Nyeyon, Nyeyon! Wake up!"

Nyeyon had a dreamless, perfect sleep. Now, as his eyes opened ruefully and silver morning light threatened to burn his eyes to ashes, he found Meikara jumping up and down in unfettered excitement.

He groaned. "Meik, calm down or you'll attract all the Wolves." His stomach rumbled, and he rolled to his side pathetically. "And I really gotta eat." He thought back to Old Michi and the juicy naranja he would gladly trade his life for at the moment.

"The cane, I think I got it to work!"

Nyeyon bolted upright. "How?"

"I don't know. I was sleeping, and then I woke up. It was the strangest feeling, but I could feel someone talking to me, though I could hear no words, and then I looked down at the cane- it was alive, Nyeyon! The coils of wood were moving like snakes. And then it got longer, much longer!"

Nyeyon lifted his left eye to the cane as she held it before him. Indeed, it was no longer a simple cane, but a staff. It was a head taller than Meikara.

"Why in Sanctuary did it grow? How did you do this?"

"I don't know, it just happened suddenly." She turned away, fingering the long twists and curves of the wood.

"Well, do you know how to use it?"

"I- no. No, I do not." She frowned, and then looked to him, sitting down. "Nyeyon, why did it suddenly come alive like that, though? Why did it change?"

He shrugged, reclining backward once more. "No clue. I do know, however, that we've got to figure out how to use it before much longer. I expect the Wolves have other prisoners coming in, and we will probably be seen."

Meikara curled up next to him, sharing his warmth in the cool, sudden breeze. Nyeyon started as she leaned her head of strawberry-blond hair on his shoulder, but just as quickly he suddenly felt that if he disrupted the moment, he would destroy a part of himself, lose a valuable part of his life that he could never take back. He felt comfortable, and his side prickled where she laid against him, like pinpricks of fire.

"It's cold," she whispered.

"I know," he returned.

"I'm afraid."

He nodded.

That was when the carriage turned down the ruined road, its rickety wooden wheels, heavy but no match for the rock and rubble strewn about, wobbling and clunking down the way. It was drawn by two mules in yokes, a driver sitting atop the carriage with a whip cracking on their backs. His eyes shifted fearfully around the ruins, searching for any reason for him to bolt. He was drivinh through the Fringe, a war zone.

Nyeyon momentarily thought how odd it was that a grown man was terrified of the Fringe, but that he and Meikara had boldly invaded its boundaries. Sense of duty, and love, made people do strange things. When he realized that it was lumbering straight toward them, his sense came back and he nudged Meikara, silently hoping that they had not been seen yet. The driver was distracted for the moment in his paranoia, but that might not last long.

She started in a fit, and then, when she noticed the carriage, slipped silently off with Nyeyon. They were out of eyesight for now, but the carriage was lumbering closer, and they could not keep running.

Suddenly, there was a shout from inside. The driver instantly pulled the reins on the mules. The carriage wobbled as it steadied, the mules bustling their legs nervously, and then the side door burst open,

whacking sharply against the polished exterior. A wooden step extended as its cross-woven metal accordion supports contracted in a shriek.

Captain Udze stepped forward, his heavy boots slamming against the step as he unfurled his massive body against the cold wind. The carriage shook as he descended. Nyeyon did not recognize him by his looks, but by his gruff, flat voice, one which he heard issue orders for his capture so long ago in Middle Kurast.

Thick brown hair cascaded down his head, forming in to a tightly-kept beard at his chin. His face was chiseled as from stone, eyes set on angular cheekbones, and his mouth remained taugt. His eyes squinted against the harsh early morning's light, wrinkling his tanned, weathered skin. He then turned around, knelt, and offered a hand to the door of the carriage.

"There will be no need for that, Udze. Get up, you weak shell of a man."

Expressionless, Captain Udze rose, his blood-red Iron Wolf cloak whipping in the harsh wind.

The carriage rattled, and despite his distance from the scene, Nyeyon could hear a wheezing cough shake the air. It echoed against the barricades and battlements, multiplying its diminishing shadow of sound into the distance. A man then stepped out.

A heavy robe of foreign craft cascaded down the step, preceded only by thick, embroidered boots. Cloth hung everywhere from the man, he seemed to consist of little else. A thick hood concealed his hair from the sharp sunlight, but his face was a miserable wreck. Where Captain Udze's had been strong and rigid, this man's seemed only a limp covering of his skull. He did not seem old, but everything about him echoed weariness. His hair was blonde, lightly tainted with splashes of pale red. His eyes, mortal holes not only in his face, but to his soul, seemed to suck the light from the day.

Meikara gasped.

"General Kaeriil," started Captain Udze, "forgive me, but--"

"Only weak men need forgiveness," General Kaeriil spat.

Udze seemed to shiver with anger for a moment, but suppressed it and continued. "You informed the driver that we were bound for the prison, correct?"

"Why yes, Udze. Do you take my words for lies?" Kaeriil took another step and was now on equal ground with Udze. In terms of power, however, Kaeriil still stood on a mountaintop.

When Udze did not respond, Kaeriil regarded him silently and walked, a hint of a wobble to each of his steps, toward a weather-worn pillar, once constructed of fine polished marble. He leaned on it heavily, and peered out to the Torajan Jungles beyond the battlements and ruins. If Kaeriil turned even a fraction to the left, he would be staring straight in to Nyeyon's own eyes.

Meikara fidgeted next to Nyeyon, but he ignored her.

"Udze," he said at last, "do you understand why I war with the savages of the Torajan?"

"Well, yes, sir, they are stiffling the spread of the city of Kurast, against the wishes of the Merchant Council, and have killed many--"

"No, you fool. This is why you are weak. I did not ask you why you or any of the other fools in the Merchant Council fight a meaningless war. I asked you why *I* fight this war."

The words had a sharpness to them that could cut stone. The effect was not lost on Udze. His fist was closed around the hilt of his short sword, trembling.

"No, General, I do not."

Kaeriil shuffled in his thick robes. It was a wonder he was not crushed by their weight. "I have lost more to the Aganoks than mere land. I have lost my soul."

There was a prolonged, awkward silence.

"I do not understand," said Udze, a slight quiver of anger in his voice.

Kaeriil's head lifted, his back to Udze, and he laughed, mirthlessly. It devolved in to a fit of coughing that forced him to his knees. He put out his right hand to steady himself on the rubble. "No," he wheezed, "I don't think you shall ever understand, Udze; however, I have endowed you with parts of me, stories of my life, that I have revealed to no other. You came to me as a young boy, seeking my wisdom in battle, and you are yet a young boy even now. Perhaps you would understand matters of childhood better than I, in that case."

Kaeriil stood up once more, a blighted hand resting once more on the spoiled pillar. "More than a week past, my daughter escaped my vigilance."

Udze laughed heartily, but when Kaeriil's icy silence persisted, his laugh diminished in to a dumbfounded silence. "Sir, I have never known of any female descendent of your conceiving."

"Of course not, I have kept it a secret. Regardless, she has been gone for over a week. Many strange things have happened since then. I hear tell of stories of demons running a-muck, and that old witch covens are coming back to power in Kurast, as it was long ago, before the Zakarum came--"

"Faerie tales, General, and nothing more." Udze's tone made it clear he thought just as he said.

"I have reason to believe that the Old Magick is returning, magick that I thought I had seen the last of with the death of my wife."

Meikara nudged Nyeyon. "Nyeyon, we should be going. We cannot risk being seen." There was an uneasiness in her voice.

"Magick?" Udze was speechless but for that single word. "Magick?" Kaeriil nodded.

"General, you cannot possibly expect me to believe--"

"--that the power that birthed Kurast, that at one point was the strength of the Iron Wolves, that still resonates in the jungles and marshlands, has returned? That Mephisto was not the end of our troubles, but only the beginning? Did you really believe that twenty years of peace transpired? Did you not think that evil would ready its snares while the people of New Kurast slept fat and happy in their freshly-hewn homes?"

Udze was irate but remained silent.

"I fight this war, Captain Udze, because these savages cost me my wife, my love, and all that I held dear in this world. I sacrificed myself for her in ways you could not even fathom. They have destroyed me, to the most central level, and have left me no better than you. I fight them because they took my strength, and for this they will all die. Do you wonder why I tell you this, Udze? Did you think of that question on your own?"

"Why, General Kaeriil, have you told me these things?" Udze's voice shook with contempt, his mouth twisted in a frown.

"I have told you, Udze, because I believe I go to my death, and you will soon take my place, no longer a babe. I tell you so that you will never make the same mistake I did, that you will never let your heart consume your brain and leave you a shell of a man. I have reason to believe that by dawn tomorrow, an attempt on my life will have transpired, by my daughter's hand"

"General, please, no more of these foolish prophecies. The Elder Gloam you spoke of before was only a hallucination, no such creature exists outside of myth."

"No, I am afraid it is quite the opposite. My daughter is to destroy me. The Elder Gloam told me many years ago that my daughter will 'forsake the prison of the father and kill him in the grave of his enemies.' She will try kill me in the deathbed of my enemies, the prison of New Kurast, built on their ancient burial grounds. I will defy prophecy, however. It killed me once when it took Ceilya from me, but it shall not take from me my last breath!"

"General, I--"

Kaeriil raised a hand for obedience, his thick, foreign robe sleeve sliding down a pale and bony wrist. "No, you have no words. Now, kill the driver. This was for your ears only. We walk the rest of the way. I need time to think on these things, to think on how I will kill Meikara."

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Nyeyon was beyond words. He squatted over the sea of strewn stone bricks and undergrowth, dumbfounded. Meikara was silent and knelt beyond the fringe of his vision.

"Meikara, your father--" He shook his head. "No, that can't be."

Nyeyon remembered when Meikara told him that she knew people who had knowledge of the secrets on the prison, what was done to prisoners. Now he understood why she could not confide in him. She was the daughter of a genocidal monster.

He turned to her, speaking softly. "It's true, isn't it?"

She averted her gaze, her starkly-white face red against the cold morning wind. She nodded.

Despite the facts laying before him, Nyeyon did not want to believe it. Meikara was kind and quiet, and she was giving her life as a Candle to discover what she must do to better the world for everyone. She was nothing like her father, save in her looks. Nyeyon glanced over to General Kaeriil, noting his pale skin and thin frame, but mostly his blonde hair tinted ever-so-lightly with red. Meikara was the spitting image of her father.

She swallowed, nearly unable to voice her fear. "He wants to kill me."

"How could he? He's your damn father!"

She shook her head. "It doesn't matter. Remember what I said to you about Utusku's family, that being family is not just being related by blood? He does not see me as his daughter." Her face was streaked with shimmering trails of tears. "Nyeyon, I'm sorry for not telling you, it was just too hard to say."

She whispered something to her self and turned away.

Nyeyon waited a few minutes, and then decided that they needed to get moving. "Meikara, we need to go." He put a hand on her shoulder reassuringly.

"No, no, we can't! I can't go in there or he will kill me!" She was suddenly choking in tears, her face stained red. "Nyeyon, why does this have to happen? If we go to rescue Utusku, my father will kill me, and if we stay out here, Utusku will surely be tortured, maybe even killed! That cannot happen! He's the only family that cares for me! Nyeyon, please!"

"How the Hells am I supposed to know what to do? You're the Candle! Think of something!"

Her eyes suddenly went wide as her head lifted to the air, looking beyond Nyeyon's back.

"And what do we have here, Captain?" The voice was sharp and icy. Nyeyon turned slowly around.

The gaunt, blanched face scowled to them from above, locks of blonde hair framing a face set in a hood. The eyes, frighteningly devoid of emotion, regarded them as little more than annoyances.

Udze strode beside them, wiping the blood of the driver from his blade. His flat mouth betrayed nothing of his thoughts.

"Did I not tell you that the Elder Gloam is never wrong? Look, prophecy fulfills itself."

He smiled, but Nyeyon could detect no warmth in it. Kaeriil's eyes regarded him for a moment and then flicked to Meikara. He held out a hand to her.

"Come my daughter, I trust you understand what I have said? It is almost time for you to die."

Liquid ice poured through Nyeyon's veins. Fear and insecurity were gone from his mind in an instant. In one fluid movement he rolled to his side, leaped up, and snatched the sword from Udze's hand. He held it with both hands, the point gleaming before Kaeriil's chest.

"Get away from her!"

Kaeriil looked down at him as if in pity. "So it is true, then, that Meikara has inherited Candle blood. I had hoped that the curse did not pass to her. And you must be her Tender." He grimaced. "I do not envy you. I trust she told you what you must do in the end? What must be done to break the Bond and set her magick free to fulfill its destiny?"

Nyeyon's brow scrunched. "No, she didn't."

Kaeriil carefully laid a finger on the sword and pushed the point toward the ground. "There will be no need of that."

Nyeyon jerked it back up, closer. "This is the last time I'm warning you. Get away from us. Now."

Kaeriil laughed. "Oh, and you think that you are a match for me and a trained, if incompetent, Captain of the Iron Wolves?"

Udze moved closer, unharnessing a small mace. It gleamed in the morning light, thirsting for blood.

Nyeyon brandished the sword in front of the General, trying to keep distance but not show weakness.

'What must be done to break the bond'? What else hasn't Meikara told me?

"Old guy, what makes you think I should listen to what you have to say and not run you through right now?"

Kaeriil laughed again, a scratchy, ugly laugh. "Because, young Tender, I was once as you are now. I was once a Tender. My wife was a Candle not twenty years ago, during the terror of the Three."

"And what happened to her? Where is she now?"

"And here I thought you were eavesdropping on my conversation with the Captain, here. My wife died many years ago. I took another to further my line without the taint of Miscara's curse. I will not have her toying with my descendents as she did with Ceilya." His face was slowly melting in to a vague shape of anger. "The Lady had no right to send her to her death, no right in Sanctuary! This is not her world! Laben had no right to ask it of her! Damn him! Damn him to the Burning Hells!"

A vein pulsed in Kaeriil's forehead, and his eyes were framed with strained wrinkles of madness. His teeth were bared. Then, suddenly, his anger melted in to sorrow, and he turned from them as a tear trickled down his shallow cheekbone.

"But no more. Tonight, you will die, my daughter, and Miscara will have no hold on Sanctuary."

"But the Candle exists to heal the world! She is going to do something to help everyone!"

"Oh?" Kaeriil's shoulders sunk. "And what might that be? You do not know, do you? She has to 'discover' it first! By then, it will be too late. You will have journeyed too far, you will be unable to say no to the quest, even if it is more terrible than letting Sanctuary spin to its own demise! What became of Ceilya? She took that damn book and ran in to the jungle, back to her father's people, the *tribbies*, and killed herself at Laben's dying word! It's their fault, those subhuman savages! Miscara sentenced her, Laben encouraged her, and the *tribbies* executed her! Now she is nothing more than a magick prison!"

"A 'magick prison'? What the Hells are you talking about?"

"Hopefully, Tender, you will never have to know." Kaeriil moved in his robes. "But now, I am afraid, I must take my daughter to be punished."

In a flash, Nyeyon was lying on his back, a terrible throbbing pain seeping through his skull. Kaeriil stood over him, a heavy boot crushing Nyeyon's abdomen. A cudgel was in his hand, and Nyeyon could see, in addition to stars dancing around in the air, a splatter of blood slipping down its length.

"Take her to the west tower," Kaeriil shouted at Udze.

"What of the Tender?"

"Leave him. He will not be moving on his own any time soon, and he will not be walking in to the prison on any terms but my own."

The last thing Nyeyon could remember hearing was a quiet sob as Meikara was carried away, the staff clattering from her hand.