

The Craft of Blasphemy

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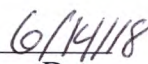
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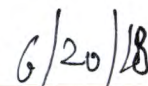
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Abstract

_____ In the fantasy world of Meynas, Art is magic, and Art is power, and none are more powerful than the five Sacred Artisans, the five gods that rule the Continent and walk amongst the people. Meynas is a land choking on plenty, with the five gods preventing war and providing for the basic needs of all inhabitants of the five Great Cities. War is a distant memory, and starvation little more than myth. Even in this peaceful world, however, discontent brews as the dispossessed, Artless masses chafe underneath the rule of the upper class, who have the ability to Craft their realities, using art to perform magic that mimics the feats the gods perform. Overpopulated cities bulge with restless limbs and angry mouths, and in the midst of the bubbling unrest, Veinos, God of Secrets, stumbles upon the greatest secret of the world--that gods can be killed.

Veinos reaches out into the mortal world to assemble a cadre of malcontents from different cities and different specialties, including Isoba, a slave that is an illiterate Umbrascibe, Mist, a Stormsculptor who balks at the excesses of her own noble family, and Ashe, a young Flamechanter that watched a god be murdered before her very eyes. With these imperfect tools, Veinos hopes to write the ultimate blasphemy--and end the rule of the gods.

The Craft of Blasphemy

Alexander Kalathia

The Addict

Gods never sleep, and the God of Secrets is never at rest.

In the deepest reaches of the Umthal Teeth, beyond peaks that gleam like dew in the sun, through roaming cragstorms that fling screaming lightning between smoldering orange clouds, at the end of a maze of caves as tangled as a spider's web, a god toils.

The fields of stalagmites that populate the curvatures of the Cave of Constellations infest every inch of the remote cavern, save for where he steps. Where his arachnid limbs fall, the sharp deposits shift and flow out of his dread wake. His claws puncture the rock floor like blades through paper, and as he moves, new stone covers the old like a scab over a wound.

The laws of nature are naught before the whims of a god.

Stretching like tattered clouds across a tired horizon, his web of thoughts radiates throughout the cave, riddling the air with cerulean threads comprised of mortal whispers. The strands of web, more voluminous than any mundane spider's masterpiece, glisten and glimmer like morning dew under a sky that has never known dawn. Thousands of webs coat the massive cave's interior, each woven of the secrets the mortals of the continent of Meynas harbored in the deepest reaches of their minds. The ceiling of the Cave yawns open to reveal the triplicate moons of Meynas all sharing an impossible orbit, dancing a limbless waltz through an unnatural black sky.

Where there is light, there is shadow.

And where there is shadow, there is

Veinos

Sacred Artisan of History, Spinner of Tales, Emperor of the Unseen, Weaver of the Heavens, and Warden of the Unspoken. God. Crafter.

Bored.

The multitude of bone-white eyes that coat Veinos's head spin, searching the many layers of the Lattice of Thought for anything to capture his frayed attention. Where a spider's jaws might normally sprout, instead the torso of a man, muscular and featureless, stretches from the spider-god's body. Eyes surround Veinos, yet this human outcropping has none, staring out at the webs with a gaze blank and meticulous. Space warps as his massive thorax passes through it, reality bubbling and hissing in its' haste to render itself more conveniently for the god's perusal.

New threads materialize every minute, creeping into existence as another human hides away some part of their lives. They glimmer in varying intensities, light red threads representing white lies and petty secret dreams, and deep azure threads representing secrets that held the core of one's entire being within them. These are rare, and it is these that Veinos craves.

He craves them like a merchant craves profit, like a flower stretches towards dawn, like a casket yearns for a body. Without secrets, he is inchoate. Without complete knowledge, he is less than perfection.

A god cannot be less than anything.

One long arm reaches out and plucks a single thread of the Lattice, sending vibrations out through the web. The vibrations begin as an unruly chorus of movement and sound, resolving into the unsteady tones of human speech.

“Master Dunn filched seven coins out of Lord Bentley’s purse today,” The voice of a human child, tremulous and eager, is birthed from the cacophony of translation. The air fills with a secret the boy had whispered to himself, not knowing that Veinos was always listening, *“I saw him. He -- ”*

A violent flick of the god’s six-fingered hand severs the thread, silencing the child’s secret. All heartfelt secrets found their way into Veinos’s web, but this one was infantile. The boy clearly believed it to be important, hence the azure coloration of his thread, but it was uninteresting. Unworthy of a place in the masterwork of divinity.

Another of Veinos’s many hands strikes a separate thread of his Web, and another voice blossoms into putrid existence.

“She won’t tell anyone. Right? If my wife finds out what I did...I won’t hear the end of it. Stubborn bitch. Maybe if she would let me -- ”

A harvest as fruitless as the last. Veinos snaps the thread and continues on, pruning his web of the ichor of mediocrity that so taints mortal thought.

As his work continues, over days—months—hours—years—lifetimes—sunless eternities--Veinos’s patience frays along with his Lattice. His myriad limbs saw through the threads of human mutterings, tearing through impassioned monologues and halting confessions mid-sentence. Smug pronouncements of cheating merchants and the cloying lies of corpulent nobles meet the same, messy end. With every housewife’s lament, with every aristocrat’s machination, with every declaration of forbidden lust, Veinos’s forbearance withers.

With a bestial growl, Veinos seizes hold of an entire section of his Lattice, and tears it asunder, allowing the shredded remains to fall to the floor.

The stars themselves grow dimmer at his displeasure, and all throughout the world, mortals shudder in their beds as the god's irritation radiates through their slumbering consciousnesses. Thousands of believers would wake the next day, weary and sore, complaining of bad dreams, but Veinos cares not. A night of their unease was a spark compared to the collapsing star of his patience.

Such tawdry mundanity. The fickle yet unchanging concerns of man.

Such *waste*.

Veinos rends another swath of his web into nonexistence, banishing the mutterings of a hundred mortal fools into abjection.

His inexorable opus, his beautiful lattice, was meant to be an ode to humanity's greatness, a lasting tapestry of dreams and secrets, the two things humans cared about the most. When he had been caged, entombed in these mountains for daring to dream that humanity was owed something *better*, it was this task that was meant to give immortal life meaning.

Such stagnancy. The unchanging tranquility of a crypt, the blissful boredom of happy endings, the mothballed shelves where stories come to rot.

They had nothing to offer him. Nothing *interesting*.

On days like this, Veinos would entertain the idea of ceasing work on his eternal project. To abandon his Great Work and consign the secrets of mortals to the forgetful oblivion of time. Such an idea was ludicrous, beyond the most improbable of human fancies, and Veinos was uniquely acquainted with the limits of mortal imagination. A cobbler would sooner bed a Merchant Baron than Veinos stop weaving his web. He could no more stop his work than could the sun refuse to rise in the morning.

He does not know *why* he weaves. Perhaps once, in the screaming expanse of infinity, his Purpose had purpose. The secret of *why* remains opaque even to Veinos himself.

He'd tried to stop once.

By the third day of his fast, He'd been reducing to a quivering wreck, wracked with spasms as every ounce of his being howled for more work. He envied humans their brief existences, sometimes.

But it matters not.

He needs this.

To choose is to be human.

To toil is divine.

With many of his eyes half-lidded, Veinos activates another thread, and begins to listen to its tale, as is his duty and penance.

"My sister is gone," a young girl's voice unfolds and Veinos begins to raise his hand to cut short the girl's whining. Death was one of the duller realities of human existence. He wants to sympathize. He had, once. Sympathy is exhausting. Healers and cremators grew heavy with it over the courses of their lives; hardness in positions like theirs is not a sin, but a symptom of sympathy's toll on the flesh. Veinos wasn't sure when his ability to taste that nectar had atrophied, but it was as dead as the stars that had filled the sky at his birth.

"and that...something took her. A god, it must be, took her...and I...I saw it kill Goddess Beya."

Veinos freezes, and turns every eye onto the thread. For the first time in lifetimes, his attention is piqued.

“My sister, she...she...I don’t know what to do. I’m so afraid.” The girl’s voice breaks off into sobs, before it reassembles with a hardness that does not fit her years, *“I hate the gods. I hate-”*

Veinos’s hand slices through the air and cleaves the thread from the rest of his masterwork, and allows it to fall into another outstretched hand. Veinos glides across the fluctuating cave floor until he reaches a massive stone obelisk. Godscript runes coat the obelisk’s smooth exterior, each scrawled over the course of millennia by the spider-god’s own hand, detailing the secrets of the world.

Long ago, he’d decided that there must be a reason for his addiction. He needed answers, and he’d created this obelisk, hidden within the Cave, to record his own secrets. It had remained blank for years and years, his search fruitless. Hidden from the eyes of the other gods, hidden for thousands of years without him needing it, but if gods could die—if they could be killed—if there was a god that someone did not recognize--

There were things in this world that Veinos did not know.

That was unacceptable.

“Ashe, daughter of Eia,” Veinos breathes, his voice echoing throughout the cave for the first time since it was constructed, “Thank you.”

Every tale had to have a conclusion.

And the Weaver of Tales would bring it.

Ashe

The city reeked.

The second she walked through the ostentatious gilded archway that served as the entrance to the desert city, Ashe's nose was inundated by a wave of scents. The odors that infested every city were present here—the delightful olfactory cocktail of sweat, body odor, and shit from beasts walking on both four legs and two was there if you looked for it, but the citizens of Ulien had staged an aromatic insurrection.

The air was awash in savory fragrances stemming from the cooking fires of the many ha'rish, the street vendors that dotted the sandy streets of the great city. Whenever someone passed by, whether they were a robed maiziq or a veiled peasant, they trailed behind them a hint of perfume that further added to the chaotic conglomerate of aromas that defined Ulien.

The Dune District was the most populous of Ulien's five districts, and its limits ringed the city, so that any and all traffic into Ulien was forced to pass through it. The Dune District unfolded in a haphazard array of multicolored stalls and squat copper clay domiciles that clustered together like desperate lovers. The architecture parted only reluctantly to allow the gushing torrent of humanity a space to walk, haggle, and get in the way. Further into the city, Ashe could see the beginnings of grander structures rising about the humble rooftops, like a palace of oasis palm trees over an endless sea of dunes. It was a tapestry of people and sand and chaos, all stitched together to create the most populous of the Great Cities, the City of Eyes under Eyes, Ulien.

“The descriptions didn't do this place justice. Isn't it fascinating, Ashe?”

Ashe glanced back--and down-- at her companion and shrugged.

“Sure, you could say that,” Ashe replied, and Mist’s amber eyes narrowed.

“Oh, hush. We made it; you can stop whining now.”

Mist tugged on the cloth that had been wrapped around her head and it unraveled, freeing her hair, which tumbled free, a flowing patch of night escaping a sunlit cloud. Mist shook herself, scattering a light layer of dust and sand from her person, and tilted her head back, savoring her reclaimed freedom.

Even swathed in the dirt-colored bundle of robes she wore for the journey from Hearth, Mist still managed a certain radiance. Though her diminutive height and plump physique granted her little in the way of physical gravitas, Mist always carried herself with a sort of authority that drew people to her. Mist wielded more poise in one tiny brown finger than Ashe seemed to possess in her entire body, but she’d never once made Ashe feel lesser for her upbringings. She managed to exude stability and a sense of belonging whether she was dressed in the lavish silken *rai* of the Bulinari court or in the functional traveling rags she found herself in now, still wrapped around her waist and over her shoulder to give the effect of the *rai* of her home city. The nondescript robes she wore did little--very, very little-- to mask the curves that had drawn the eyes of many a suitor who hoped to win the hand and fortunes of Mistiarille ae Shiqui, scion of one of Bulinar’s seven Founding Roots families.

Ashe, for her part, looked like she felt — tired, irate, and ready for a bath. She was as tall as most men, and possessed a figure that could be generously described as ‘slim’, and had been more often described as ‘boyish’. Ashe’s wild onyx hair had never made more than a passing acquaintance with a comb, much to Mist’s continued chagrin. What Mist saw in Ashe’s harsh angular features, Ashe would never quite understand. Ashe’s height, eyes, and hair betrayed her

Althomi ancestry, clashing rudely with her vermillion eyes and her garish, freckle-strewn pale skin that she'd gotten from her Peakborn mother. The mixture had brought her no end of grief throughout her childhood amongst the xenophobic mountain tribes, earning her such creative nicknames as 'squinty-eyed half-breed', and 'soothair' from the village brats.

Though Mist's accent in concert with Ashe's eyes marked them as foreign, they drew few looks from the milling crowds around them. Ulien's spices tempted the appetites and purses of all of Meynas, and the populace had grown used to outsiders crowding their streets.

Accents from across Meynas filled the air, and as Ashe and Mist walked—and often shoved—their way through the teeming streets of the city, Ashe's sensitive ears were forced to endure an unruly composition of dueling dialects as people of all Meynas's nations shouted over each other. Here, the languid tones of an Uleni ointment merchant were trampled by the storm-and-gravel growling of her Gem'ya customer. Next door, the telltale lilting dance of a Bulinari traveller's voice, so like Mist's own but twice as high, wove around the slow, yet animated cadence of a Benyari adventurer-priest's rebuttal. The dialects from across the continent composed an ambitious symphony, but it was not a pleasant one. Rather like many of the songs Ashe had attempted herself. She'd never had her sister's talent for composition.

She'd never had her sister's talent for much of anything.

Pushing uncomfortable, unwelcome thoughts aside, Ashe refocused her attention on navigating the busy streets she found herself trapped in. Every person she bumped into seemed possessed with a fervent will to be somewhere yesterday, and every jostle made her fingers itch to form a fist.

Cities. Overwrought cesspools of stink and noise, every one. Perhaps the Sacred Artisan Xen had the right of it, secluding himself in his Conversatories and shunning contact with

humanity. In that moment, Ashe would have traded all the glamour of civilization and its chamber pots for the comforting silence of the forest, no matter how many thickets she had to squat in. Mist complained enough about that on the road, though, so pushy passerby and crowded streets it was.

These streets were crowded indeed, as pilgrims and revelers from across the continent flocked to the city for the Feast of Bulin, the harvest festival that honored the Sacred Artisan of Dance. The Cult of Revels was out in full force, the green-robed adherents from all curves of the continent, that followed the Dancing God wherever he went, to feast and celebrate with religious abandon. The streets were flecked with the brightest greens Revelers could persuade a tailor to dye, and Ulien was stuffed to bursting with the pests. Ashe's father had always taken a dim view to them and their lackadaisical tenets, content to spend their days laughing and drinking and copulating with no regard for what decent working people had to contend with. For her part, Ashe wasn't sure if the Cult just attracted morons, or if a steady stream of Lifedancer-brewed wine just obliterated one's mental faculties on a more permanent basis. The Feast was the reason Ashe and Mist had come to this desert city as well, though for different reasons than the rest of the eager populace.

"Excuse me," Ashe muttered as she tried to shoulder her way past a purple-robed form in front of her. A violent oath stole out of her lips as her shoulder encountered not pliable flesh, but rigid metal that sent an insistent pain through her side.

"They say too much sun drives you mad," Mist said, her tone ripe with affected solemnity, "I guess they're right, whoever 'they' are, if you're talking to statues."

"Statues?"

Ashe took another look at the robed man in front of her, and found that he was not a man, but rather a lifelike statue, clothed head to toe in the garments of an Uleni priest. He was not even a statue of a man—though his general shape was humanoid, the eight black eyes that decorated the back of his head and his chest were anything but. Three of the statue’s six hands held golden sheets of paper, while the other hands were depicted scratching runes onto the gleaming canvasses.

“Veinos, penning the laws of mortal consciousness, I believe.” Mist said, tilting her head and studying the statue. “From the beginning of the—”

“Yeah, yeah, I know the Rite, Mist. ‘and Veinos, full of guile and bitterness for his loss, constricted the minds of the Children, binding them to mortal...mortal...’” Ashe made a face, and waved a hand, “Mortal whatever.”

Ashe turned her gaze towards her surroundings once more, and now that she was looking for them, found several other statues standing in the streets and on the rooftops of the city. It didn’t take a theologian to recognize that these statues depicted the five Sacred Artisans, in romanticized human forms. Veinos, the spider-god, had multiple eyes and arms. A statue they passed of Bulin, Artisan of Dance, had two faces, one male and one female, both grinning like fools. A golden semblance of Kyrei, Queen of Storms, that decorated an archway had her legs draped across either side in symbolism that refused to be missed.

“This really is the most devout city in Meynas, huh?” said Mist.

An awakening scowl tugged at Ashe’s lips, and she buried it deep. Now was not the time for that. Later, though. Later was another story, a symphony she yearned to compose.

“I just can’t wait until we can get out of this—” Ashe gestured upwards at the cloudless abyss above where the second moon, the Lover, meandered across the afternoon sky, offering no

reprieve from the insistent desert heat, “and out of these.” Ashe plucked at her mottled brown traveling clothes, which were covered in sand and soaked in her sweat.

“As long as I’m around for the latter.” Mist gave Ashe an impish smirk, and despite her foul mood, Ashe couldn’t help but grin back in return.

An hour and twenty-seven minutes of wandering and poorly given directions soured Ashe’s mood once more.

“Why couldn’t Bulin descend amongst us mortals somewhere up north? I can deal with the cold, at least.” Ashe complained, as she and Mist continued to push, shove, and stumble their way through the milling crowds that clogged the main road of Ulien’s Dune District.

“What a novel thought, Ashe. You certainly haven’t said that twelve times since we’ve left. Who knows? Maybe the thirteenth time will be the charm.”

Ashe muttered several unkind insinuations regarding Mist’s ancestors and farm animals, and began to walk forward again. The sound of breaking glass was Ashe’s only warning, and a gust of freezing wind rushed upward past Ashe, sending her into an abrupt fit of shivering. As her teeth chattered, Ashe glared back at Mist, whose smile was just a tad too venomous to qualify her for innocence. Unless Ashe had somehow attracted the enmity of some other Storm-Sculptor, or that of Kyrei herself.

“Was that really worth wasting one of your precious baubles for?” Ashe growled, and Mist’s grin grew even wider.

“Of course, my heart. Anything to relieve you from this oh-so-dreadful heat.”

“Go fellate a cactus.”

“Besides, I have plenty to spare,” Mist added, drawing back her cloak to showcase her array of phylacteries.

At first glance, it would appear as if Mist had an excessive amount of ordinary, if bizarre arranged jewelry draped around her neck and tied to the sides of her travelling cloak. And although Mist's eccentricities of fashion could not be denied, the menagerie of baubles and trinkets that lined her person were anything but ordinary, and the mark of her station as a Crafter.

Mist had Crafted each Relic herself, infusing every shape with the essence of whatever weather condition she liked. By crushing one of her Relics, Mist could unleash a gust of wind, a brief torrent of rain, or, with considerable effort and the help of other like-minded Crafters, induce a full-blown storm.

"Is something the matter here?" A deep voice intoned, and Ashe turned to face its owner. A tall Uleni man stood before them, wearing a uniform even blacker than his skin, save for several golden stripes that radiated out from the middle of his chest, a sunburst in an empty void. For some reason the man's face was covered by a golden mask, a ridiculous, gaudy thing.

"What's it to you?" Ashe retorted.

The Uleni man's head tilted to the side in confusion and Ashe crossed her arms like a duelist's rapiers in front of her. She knew his type. Tall, strong, and used to getting his way. Stupid too, probably. An ox on two legs here to throw his weight around and intimidate two outlander women. Well, he had another thing coming.

"Nothing's the matter here, sir." Mist spoke up, stepping in front of Ashe while shooting her a glare, "Just a harmless prank. Won't happen again."

"Mist, what—"

"My travelling companion can be rather difficult sometimes, as I'm sure you understand. She means nothing by it, really."

The uniformed Uleni man looked as if he was unsure of how to respond, and he seemed to settle for just nodding and moving on, likely to accost some other innocent bystanders. Once he was out of earshot, Ashe drew herself up to her full height and scowled down at Mist. Using the great disparity in height between them to her advantage was something of a petty move, but Ashe would take whatever she could get in their frequent squabbles.

“I had that handled, Mist.”

“Had what handled? Getting us locked up in an Uleni holding cell for some novel charge along the lines of ‘reckless, goat-brained belligerence towards an officer of the law’?”

“No, I was—sorry, what?”

“Or maybe the judge overseeing your case would be merciful, and downgrade the accusation from ‘goat-brained’ to just ‘infantile’.” Mist said, planting her hands on her hips. They were there so often, Ashe was surprised they didn’t take root.

“Ashe, don’t you know what that man was?”

“I’m sure you’re just going to tell me anyways.”

“He was an Obligator, Ashe. A sunburst in a field of night, that’s their sigil.”

“Ah. Xen’s ineffable testicles, I almost screwed that up, didn’t I?” Ashe said, scowling.

Obligators, also known as The Hands of Veinos, the Rays of Justice, and other such florid titles—the Uleni loved their titles—were the bedrock upon which Ulien’s judicial system rested. They were all Umbrascibes, Crafters that could trace ancient runes in the air that would impose their wills on the minds of their chosen targets. For reasons known only to the insane people of this city, Obligators served as a twisted concoction of judge, jury, and executioner in Ulien. Uleni Umbrascibes were often trained from a young age to understand the contours and secrets of the human mind, and Obligators utilized that knowledge to peel through a suspected

wrongdoer's mind like a rotten onion. No jury of peers was needed to determine guilt in Ulien—an Obligator would Craft your case for you out of your own psyche.

"It's a good thing you have me around, my heart," Mist said, "I don't know what you'd do without me to keep you safe in this dangerous world of yours."

"Remember what I said about fellating a cactus earlier?"

"Oh, I think my mouth can be put to far more...productive purposes than that, don't you?" Mist almost purred, and Ashe put thoughts of Umbrascibes and insults out of her mind.

"Oh? Like what?"

"Like..." Mist drew nearer to Ashe, placed one slim hand on her waist, and tilted her head upwards. Ashe leaned in with barely disguised hunger, eager to hear the promises that wonderful mouth of hers would profess.

"Like...reminding you that I won, again. The score's sixty-seven to thirty-eight, my love." Mist managed to get through the rest of her sentence before breaking into peals of delighted laughter, while indignant fury painted Ashe's face.

"Y-you, I—" Ashe babbled, while Mist continued to chortle.

"Anyways," Mist said, choosing to ignore Ashe's petulant stammering, "we should find an inn. The thought of an actual bed has me salivating, and after we get some rest, we can start searching for the target. What was his name, again?"

Ashe growled some vicious profanities under her breath, but still rummaged through the many pockets that lined her traveler's cloak, and withdrew a crumpled, battered scrap of parchment.

"Isoba Amibola, from the Fountain District," Ashe read, "weird name."

Isoba

The skies were alive again.

Deep purple lines scarred the heavens above the desert city of Ulien, carving glowing grooves in the space between stars and moons where darkness rested in the sun's absence. Violet streaks coruscated from star to star, connecting distant infernos with their bright cousins eternities apart, forming constellations that moved--that seemed to breathe. Histories bloomed in the cold soil of space, as heroes from Meynas's myths donned starry skins and began to tell their story--*the* story, the Gan'renna, the Tale of Tales, the War of the Gods. In one patch of sky, the stars formed Myrrh Sevenshards, resplendent in ochre battle robes, miming acts of battle, sweeping her blade through invisible enemies. In another patch, Olo, the Foolish Dancer, stumbles through a cluster of stars, clouds of brilliant dust exploding from the ground beneath him as his lifedancing earned him his place in time's memory.

Veinos, Sacred Artisan of History and Shadow, Monarch of the Heavens, had taken the stage above his holy city once more, and his devoted exulted.

All throughout the city, people turned their eyes to the gleaming firmament. Merchant barons gathered in viewing parties, reclining on their moonroofs, cradling sparkling glasses of spicy *ghi* and murmuring appreciation to their peers beneath curated vines and trees plucked from across the continent. Not a one was native to Ulien, each encouraged to grow in the harsh desert by lifedancers, paid to make each noble's moonroof more exotic than their neighbor's. Competition was currency itself for the Merchant Barons, the most powerful merchants in the ostensibly classless society of Ulien, and it leaked into every aspect of their lives. Looming over

the clay and straw huts of the Dune District like gilded mountains over clumps of sand, the Fountain District rose as one to claw at the stars above, to yearn for the touch of Veinos himself.

Laborers and shopkeepers, the blood of the city, swaddled themselves in bulky robes and clambered to the tops of their cramped apartments. Calloused hands grasped handholds on the sides of buildings, smoothed by generations of eager audiences, as all ascend to the canopy of Ulien. Long having run out of space to expand into the Rainbow Desert that surrounded the city, the Dune District's exploding population had elected instead to explode upwards--building houses on top of shacks on top of huts, squeezing humanity into increasingly precarious arrangements, connecting the city's veins in a latticework of ladders and wooden bridges. They, too, rise to the stars, and the Merchant Barons forever work to maintain their lead in the race to the realm of the God of Secrets. The gnawing winds of the desert night air blow against ardent limbs, not a soul willing to forgo the spectacle unfurling above.

On nights when the skies dance, Ulien is a city of eyes. An audience that is a people, all united to see their god perform, to carve with his multitudinous arms patterns in the skies, to create that which is most holy--entertainment.

"Enough star-staring, my friends. You have all seen it before. Look here, and I shall show you something *interesting*."

Crouched within a nameless street in the Alms District--outside of Ulien proper, a scattered collection of blankets and tents, of stacks of sticks that could generously be termed a place to live, of a collection of people willing to not die and not an ounce more than that--under a bridge and away from anything and anyone that mattered, a smaller congregation gathered.

Less of a congregation, and more of a crowd.

Stragglers, if one was being generous, which few ever were in the Alms.

It was a diverse, if not a prestigious company Isoba Amibola addressed, but an artist did not discriminate with his audience. Well, should not, at least. Isoba had always found it was important to have principles, where it was convenient.

Isoba shook his hands out of the massive sleeves of his stained robes, the color of baked bread gone moldy, and clapped his hands together to gain the attention of his motley audience, such as they were.

Nobody looked up.

A snoring pile of blankets clumped next to the flickering fire in the street's center was the most talkative of the crowd, the muscled legs and calves poking out of the pile naming their owner some sort of construction worker or merchant guard, having spent his meager paycheck on alcohol or gasha. His drool leaked out into and was soaked up by the parched desert sands. He was, charitably, a mess. A pity, too. Those were some well-shaped calves.

A cluster of children clad in ill-fitting tunics and smocks, young enough to be awed at the moving skies enough to occasionally lose themselves in the spectacle above, even as they crept around the noisy slumbering worker with the nice legs, relieving him of what little money he still had. They crept around the edges of storefronts that had been closed for years, and through the half-dressed homes of sleeping Uleni, more interested in another hour of sleep than the works of their god. Miracles could never compare to the salacious allure of a few moments' more rest, before a full day in the irrigation fields and the golden shores, under the ever-watchful eye of the sun, Veinos's cruelest eye. It was no wonder the Fathers of the Congregation of Sunlight had made their way into the District all those centuries ago, divvying up the expanding shantytown into Dogmas and seeking to bring a touch of godliness to the Alms. A touch of godliness, and a fistful of profit.

A man, wearing heavy black robes, almost the color of the night-clad veiled priests, argued in hushed tones with a woman standing next to him, whose posture screamed discomfort and ‘Please, darling, not here.’ He wasn’t very attractive, she more than passable. Clearly she was with him for his money, and was regretting the purchase all the same. And he had money, to be certain. One didn’t stand like that, pompous and haughty, like you expected society itself to drop to its knees and suck your cock - unless you had the means to pay it to do so. Which begged the question, what on earth would a man with more than sand in his purse be doing in such a cozy nook of the Alms? Secrets evaporated in the desert sun, and rarely outlived those that harbored them.

An old woman sat against a wall, wearing a collection of colorful Bulinari body sashes that, like their wearer, were surely once beautiful. She shook her head with the weary haughtiness of the elderly and unimportant, her narrow eyes and pursed lips decrying the decline of the youth as clearly as if she’d shouted. The wall she lounged against separated the Dune District from the Alms, providing thorny consolation for the Uleni within. Even if they might be envious of the Merchant Barons with their lofty homes, candied dates, and streets with scents more varied than smoked meat and sun-baked shit, at least they weren’t in the Alms.

Another woman lay across the road, arms stretched in an awkward embrace of nothing, her long blonde hair, an exotic oddity, strewn messily over her pale features and massive nose. Her giant, bulbous nose, that looked like belonged on a man thirty years older than her. It was a fat shit-colored rat in a nameday pastry, a bubbly drink with somersaulting eyeballs floating in it instead of ice. She would have been beautiful, if not for that nose. If not for that, and the small fact that she’d been dead two days. Isoba wasn’t certain which was the greater tragedy: her death, or that nose.

Isoba scowled. The gods would forgive him some slight discrimination, perhaps. They certainly seemed to forgive a lot worse.

“My friends,” Isoba intoned again, “There will be many days for staring at the sky, our god is going nowhere. He cannot, really, that is...the point. But tonight, only tonight, can you see...this.”

Isoba whirled, his robes spinning around him, and dropped to his knees next to the cracked wall behind him, pressing against it so that his shadow hugged his body tight. The sudden motion caught the notice of the children, the arguing couple and the old woman, finally, who looked up in alarm. In the Alms, quick movements foreshadowed quick deaths, more often than not. The sands of Ulien had been fed liquids far more potent than the spittle of sleeping addicts. A shark’s grin surfaced on Isoba’s features, and he raised a hand, styling his fingers in an arcane symbol.

“Behold, gathered citizens...”

Isoba moved his hand in front of the fire, and the dancing flames cast a shadow, Isoba’s shadow, on the wall. On his canvas. On his stage.

“...A terrifying beast!”

All eyes turned to the wall, where the shimmering, dark clone of Isoba’s hand hovered. His hand raised two fingers, his other fingers curling, in the unmistakable image of a rabbit’s head.

Isoba’s eyes gleamed, and the couple went right back to their discussion, and the old woman shook her head a few extra times, and went back to gazing upwards. The children,

however, cracked smirks. One even giggled, a frizzy-haired girl wearing what appeared to be her father's bedshirt as if it were some sort of gown.

Isoba smiled and beckoned with his non-rabbit hand, and the children ambled over, one of the older boys jingling with his newfound coins. An audience of children was an audience many artists shunned, but Isoba had found that to be a failing of his peers. A child's attention was tenuous and flighty, a trembling chrysalis impatient to be elsewhere, to be otherwise. It was like a *heni* plant--beautiful, with its crystalline leaves and flowers that emitted perfectly tuned notes when touched just so, but requiring constant tending, lest death and rot follow quickly in its' gilded wake. Tended poorly, a corpse might provide a more attentive viewing. Cultivated well, and there existed no more passionate devourer of tales than the mind of one unharmed by time.

"Adults like me have no imagination, I am afraid." Isoba said, mournful as a *maiziq* at a merchant baron's cremation, "But all of you, you can appreciate art. Real art. I can see it in your eyes, and your elbows."

"Our...elbows?" Gown-girl asked, her voice slightly deeper than he'd expected. Not so young after all, just malnourished. Such a state was rare even here, in the armpit of the continent. The Sacred Artisans, in their infinite tedium and erratic grace, had 'blessed' each city with a staple crop that flourished if you so much as breathed on the seeds. Gaaram cactus tasted like water and smelled like air, but it could grow in sand, and it was plentiful as virgins in a Althomi monastery. Nobody went hungry in Meynas, not unless someone was forcing them to.

Someone needed to die for that. Once tonight's business was ended, perhaps someone would. Someone, for once, Isoba actually *wanted* to kill. Isoba could allow himself these fancies, they were harmless enough.

“You’ll understand when you’re older,” Isoba said, waving a dismissive hand. They wouldn’t, but this gave them a little something to look forward to about getting older. As the old adventure-priest saying went, lies are the soil from which dreams bloom. “Now, watch...the others, they looked away because to them, a rabbit means nothing. Nothing that matters.”

Isoba flexed his fingers, and the rabbit’s ears drooped. Behind him, Isoba’s other fingers began to trace symbols in the air. At first, his finger left the same marks on the air as everything else ever did.

At first.

“It is very easy to ignore something small. Not that I know what that is like.” Isoba arched a challenging eyebrow over at the older children, who were abashed enough to stifle their smiles--Isoba was scarcely a hand taller than some of them. The younger children, however, had not yet learned that it was rude to laugh at a man’s structural failings, and they released peals of laughter that made Isoba’s haughty act crack like a dropped dinner plate, and he allowed an easy grin to coat his face once more.

“It’s easy to do, but definitely not the *right* thing to do...”

“Gymi! Gymi, look at *that*!” A little girl, eyes wider and mouth wider, tugged on Gown-girl’s--Gymi’s--sleeve.

The rabbit had grown, several times its original size, looming across the wall in its two-fingered glory. Several younger children clutched at each other and gasped, while the old woman lying against the wall glanced over, and rolled her eyes so hard that it should have been audible.

Grumpy old bat. Isoba sent a quick prayer to the Artisans that his sense of humor never wrinkled and shriveled as his flesh did.

“It’s just a trick of the light, Maari.” One of the boys said, wiping his nose across his hand, then wiping his hand on his shirt, before beginning to pick at something in his teeth. “He just moved his hand closer to the fire to make it look bigger. Kid stuff, no wonder *you* fell for it.”

The children goggled at him, and then Isoba, who allowed a sheepish note to enter his smile, and he nodded.

“Very perceptive, my young friend.”

“My name’s Kgosi, and I’m not your friend.” The urchin managed to pry whatever morsel had been stuck in his back teeth out, inspected it, and then sucked it off of his grimy finger. Isoba’s stomach threatened to revolt. Just because you lived in squalor didn’t mean you had to give up *all* manner of manners.

“Why, I have a friend named Kgosi as well!” Isoba exclaimed, though he didn’t add that there was little chance Kgosi himself saw it that way. The last time Isoba had seen Kgosi Maraan, Kgosi had been trying to break open Isoba’s ribs like a cactus, eager to get to all the juiciest bits inside. Not that Isoba blamed him.

“But yes, as Kgosi here--who is only an acquaintance, I promise-- pointed out, perspective is so very important in life. In the right circumstances, something small--”

Isoba moved his fingers away, and the rabbit shrunk, before drawing them forward again, and it returned to its’ larger size.

“Can appear much, much more than it is.”

The older kids nodded, as if they understood some deep truth about the world, instead of the lesson of a basic children’s tale. Isoba favored them with a winning smile. Even more important than understanding was appearing to understand, any merchant or politician could tell you that. The younger children didn’t search for a moral or hidden mystery, and instead began to

place their hands in front of the fire, and laugh as they marveled at their newfound shadow manipulation techniques.

Above, armies of mortals formed of stars of every shade and color, massed as the Gan'renna raged, each god marshaling their starry forces against one another. The Painted Demons, red and glowering, formed of stars on the doorstep of death, hover alongside the battlefield, waiting to prey on mortals as their gods were distracted. The Godstorm, the surging maelstrom that surrounded Meynas, had yet to form, and the other continents of the planet had been torn asunder by the conflict. The rivers dried up, and then flowed with blood, choking and starving thousands. Armies formed barricades of corpses against the onslaught of foes, for bodies were in ample supply, but wood was limited. The throttling fingers of chaos had their hands around the throat of the world, and all the while, the spider-god, a cluster of dark motes in the air, schemed.

Isoba continued to hold his fingers in front of the fire, and stole another glance at the other members of his erstwhile audience.

The blanketed man, he of the sculpted calves and empty pockets, had turned over, still blissfully unaware of his lighter pockets.

The old woman had joined the man in sleep, her gray bun propping her head up against a door that almost certainly did not belong to her.

The couple continued to speak, though it was now the woman who was speaking angrily, harsh whispered words occasionally cutting across the night over to Isoba's ears. Insults, and very creative ones at that. She really was too good for him.

The dead woman remained dead. Dead and still cursed with that nose. Such a pity. Isoba couldn't help but wonder what her skull would look like, picked free of flesh and sinew. Would her skeleton be doomed to a repulsive eternity as well?

Isoba raised his hand, and sent a small prayer to the Artisans, that he did not leave an ugly corpse. That if he should take a fatal wound, it be on his side, or his chest, or anywhere that wasn't his face. After all, how else could women and men alike swoon over his fallen form, as they wept, wept for opportunities and orgasms lost, that nobody should ever again know the touch of the greatest lover to ever walk the surface of Meynas. Ah, their sorrows would be sweet enough to gather and serve as dessert. The parades held would be--

"Gymi?" Mae's voice rose, unsure and unsteady, like a foal taking its first steps. "Why is the rabbit still there?"

The hubbub of the children, chatting and chuckling, shattered into silence. Isoba's rabbit still loomed large on the wall behind them all.

Isoba's hands were nowhere near the fire.

"Ah, my young friends," Isoba said, turning weary eyes on his gathered audience. "It has been fun. Remember the lesson about the rabbit, but remember this one next lesson well. Keep it close to your heart, and inscribe it upon your minds."

Isoba met Gymi's eyes, and hers widened as she met his gaze. Her mouth moved, and Isoba moved before she could scream.

"Ignorance of small things can kill."

Isoba moved his left hand from behind its back, where his fingers dripped violet ichor, staining the air and reality itself with several scrawled runes, each one a jagged wound.

"Umbrascibe." Gymi whispered, where Isoba had expected a scream.

Above, the cluster of dark stars in the night that formed an ethereal representation of Veinos himself, broke off from the other four Artisans, and thrust his winged staff at his fellow divinities. His betrayal had been uncovered, his heretical ambitions laid naked for the world to see. His army, the largest and most fervent, bristled in a shower of spinning galaxies that churned as Veinos raised his many arms. The final act of the Gan'renna, the Duel of the Gods, was about to begin.

Isoba gave Gymi a sad smile.

“Almost.”

A scream carved through the stillness of the night, but not from any of the children, but from the old woman, who was not asleep, but instead staring open mouthed at Isoba, pointing one shaking finger at him.

“It’s the Demon!” She shrieked, and silence cloaked the alleyway once more.

The tableau stretched on for a moment that felt an eternity--the old woman, pointing. The children, frightened, but not understanding. The inebriated man, sleeping. The dead woman, decomposing.

The couple finally stopped arguing at the woman’s shout, and turned to face Isoba, and then the wall where the shadow rabbit remained, outlined in purple that shone bright in the darkness.

The man’s eyes went from Isoba, to the wall, to Isoba again, and even from across the alleyway, Isoba could see recognition explode in his features.

Master Zarrun wanted this done in public--witnesses would spread the tale. Sometimes, death had to be brought silently, but sometimes, it had to be brought howling and screaming,

clawing and biting, sending a message even the deaf could not fail to hear, painting a picture the blind could see inscribed in crimson on the backs of their eyelids.

“The Shadow Barons know, Merchantlord Reinza.” Isoba said. “They’ve always known.”

It was always a fun game Isoba played with himself, wagering with himself which targets fled, and which targets tried to fight. He had Reinza pegged as a runner. Reinza, Merchant Baron of no small renown, was known as being a cautious, canny man. Niggardly with his time and coin, but reliable. Too reliable. Suspiciously reliable. Zarrun Solum, Isoba’s master, always said: “If a man never makes a mistake, never trust him”. So Zarrun investigated Reinza’s personal bookkeeping. By having Isoba steal the man’s books in the middle of the day, while he was out visiting his mistress, a whore in the Alms district.

Zarrun was not happy with what he found--a record of falsified accounts and the paper corpses of deals of Zarrun’s that Reinza had siphoned profits from.

And when Zarrun wasn’t happy, people died.

Reinza, to his credit, chose his action quickly.

He ran.

But not before seizing the shoulders of his mistress and flinging her in Isoba’s general direction.

“*Catch,*” Isoba commanded, and the shadow on the wall behind him buckled and writhed, rippling like a pond after a small boulder was dropped in it, before a sleek arm lunged out of the darkness and seized the woman, stopping her before she could collide with Isoba. The arm, six-fingered and glowing a sickly violet, pushed the woman away, and slithered back into the shadows from whence it came with a sound like a man slurping the final dregs of a bowl of soup.

Reinza made a sound like a man choking on the final dregs of a bowl of soup, and began to run again as Isoba's audience began to scream.

Isoba wasted no time, and darted after the man, leaving his mistress dazed and offended at his feet, snapping his fingers together with a shower of purple sparks. As he moved, the pulsating mass of darkness continued to follow him, bubbling along the ground next to him. Reinza yelled for help, rounding a corner, and throwing himself into a mad dash between a line of rickety shanties, plunging through makeshift ceilings and bedrooms as he fled.

"*Throw,*" Isoba instructed, scribbling another rune into the air, and the mass of shadows, now running along by his feet, shivered and released two shadowhands, each grabbing at the air like an drunkard reaches for a bottle. Isoba shook his sleeves, and daggers, simple and sharp, fell into his hands. Isoba tossed the blades into the air next to him, and the 'hands seized them, and then hurled them forward. One flew right past Reinza, clanging uselessly off of a pot on someone's porch, but the other plunged into the meat of his shoulder, feeding the blade and the sand a fresh spurt of the Merchant Baron's blood.

Isoba scowled. He'd been practicing for years, but the shadowhands' accuracy left so much to be desired. They could accept basic commands, rarely more than two words, and follow his general intent, but they were imprecise tools to work with. For the first few years Isoba had trained with his unique brand of Umbrascrying, the 'hands had trouble picking up weapons at all--they needed to be trained in the same way human limbs needed, and they'd started as infants. They wouldn't be fashioning needlework anytime soon.

But this would do.

Reinza howled in pain, collapsing to the ground. Many heads poked up from the tops of the few Alms buildings that could support a human's weight, curious Uleni citizens drawn away

from their gods' theatre long enough to see the conclusion of Isoba's work. Isoba glanced up at the skies as he strolled towards Reinza's squirming form.

Above, Lyn, the Oathmaker, bent starry knees to four Artisans, pledging allegiance to the gods, and ending the War of Creation. The cluster of stars that were Veinos were sent flying to the mountains, to be entombed in the Umthal reach, his human army having scattered, his bid for human supremacy having failed. Lyn's fabled tresses flowed in nonexistent wind, and from her eyes, two shooting stars flew downwards, two meteoric tears for the world. Most of Meynas saw the tears as tears of joy, but the Uleni, worshippers of the outcast god, punished for starting the *Gan'renna*, saw them as tears of remorse, of sorrow at lives lost and freedoms forfeited.

Scholars debated endlessly over the specific meanings of the gesture, but Isoba cared not. What mattered more was that the show would be ending soon, and the Uleni would be descending from their rooftops and becoming witnesses he couldn't afford. This had to end now.

Isoba produced another small knife, and ambled closer to Reinza. Isoba usually preferred a measure of thematic gloating at the end, all for the sake of a more interesting story. All the best tales had delicious banter before a gruesome killing, but this story would have to be abridged for practicality. Pragmatism was the death of art, reality's confines the foe of every artist.

Above, the Sacred Artisans settled in their homes across the sky, each a glowing star soaring towards the location of each of the Great Cities. The war ended, civilization would be built, and the gods--all five working together for the first time in centuries--would join their magic to wrap the wounded continent in the Godstorm, to stave off the Painted Demons and other horrors that lurked outside it, still waiting for the day when the gods would falter once more. All of Ulen, and all of the rest of Menyas would lay down to sleep, whether they rested under regal canopied beds or tattered blankets that tried their level best to imitate ceilings, all

would rest knowing that the tale the gods had written had ended, and peace would stretch on, as it had the one thousand and fifty-seven years since the Gan'renna had ended.

But the Demon of the Penumbra District only writes one kind of tale.

“Please,” Reinza gasped, as Isoba drew nearer, but Isoba could tell the man’s heart wasn’t in it. He knew how this story went.

And every story ends.

Ashe

“Now what?” Mist asked, as she and Ashe began their return to the Sun’s Web, once again empty-handed.

Ashe just shrugged in response. This had been the third night in a row their search had failed to bear fruit, and repeated failure was beginning to erode her pride and patience.

As per the instructions they’d been given Ashe and Mist had taken rooms in the Sun’s Web, a popular inn in Ulien’s Fountain District. Like everything else in the Fountain District, the Sun’s Web was extravagant, and expensive. The Fountain District was not subtle with regards to its’ namesake-- numerous ornate structures dotted the plazas and squares of Ulien’s most exclusive residential area. The fountains gushed water into the thirsty desert ground every hour in a beautiful, if wasteful display. Like the statues that populated the city’s streets and rooftops, every fountain seemed to tell a story of some sort. Most were opaque to Ashe--each Great City had their favorite myths, and the Ulieni especially delighted in tales that exalted their patron god, tales that other cities shunned. As Ashe and Mist passed a particularly imposing structure, obsidian, several stories high with archways for traffic to pass under, Ashe’s mouth dropped. It was a rendering of a battle--*the* battle that ended the Gan’renna. The Day of the Closed Sun, when Veinos, desperate and spiteful, shut his third eye, quenching the sun and plunging the world into blackness.

Every child on Meynas knew this tale, if they knew any from the Gan’renna, but while every rendition Ashe had seen of the event had been one of triumph or glorious conquest, this fountain, despite its enormity, was somehow somber and subdued. Veinos stood at the top of the

fountain, myriad arms spread in an almost beseeching gesture, while the other gods stood around and below him, equals but lesser. In exquisite and maddening detail, Ashe could make out the faces of thousands of human soldiers, all frozen in marble conflict, so lifelike that Ashe could almost believe they would begin slaughtering each other at any second. Water, pure and unfettered, fell from Veinos, pouring out of the several eyes that decorated his torso. The god was crying. How curious.

“Kyrei’s arms enfold me,” Mist’s voice drew Ashe’s attention, and she looked over and down at the woman by her side, who had laid a trembling hand on one of the soldier-filled pillars of the fountain. “This was made *by hand*.”

“What? No, that’s---that’s---” Ashe’s voice trailed off as she took in the fountain again, awe settling into her bones and soul. Stormsculptors were capable of making monuments and creations that did not contain the essences of weather inside them, but they always bore the mark of their Craftsmanship--just as Flamechanted steel would stand out to an expert’s eye from across a room. This would have been a project that consumed weeks of time for even a team of skilled Stormsculptors.

For an Artless, this was insanity.

For not the first time, Ashe found herself considering what kind of people she found herself among.

The Fountain District, in truth, shared little in common with the rest of the city aside from the climate. The *ha’rish* and the organized chaos that accompanied them were absent, and the places of business were all confined to indoor shops and restaurants, a stark departure from the open-air establishments that populated Ulien’s other districts. The garb of the people in the Fountain District resembled that of the common folk in general style—robes with hoods for both

men and women—but as opposed to the dark, sandy colors of the Dune District residents, the Fountain District men and women wore bright pinks and blues and other ostentatious colors, each attempting to outdo the other. Every person Ashe walked by was decked in some sort of finery, and what kind of jewelry a man or woman wore seemed to have some kind of significance, but Ashe couldn't be bothered to talk to these people any more than she had to.

The people of Ulien would be fascinating if they weren't so irritating, Ashe had decided. The women—even the prostitutes—all dressed modestly, but every other word seemed an invitation to immodest diversions. What counted as blatant flirtation in other cities didn't seem to register as abnormal here, but Ashe had yet to see a *hint* of cleavage or leg from any woman. The proprietor of the Sun's Web, Iesha, a curvaceous, doe-eyed woman almost as tall as Ashe, had seemed somewhat scandalized when Ashe had worn a tunic that bared her shoulders in the common room. On the other hand, Ashe had also watched her make a pass at a visiting Bhatari merchant, asking the massive, ivory-skinned man if the rumors about the size of 'Bhatan anacondas' were credible, and if he would like to show her if he had any 'in stock.' Even if one were to somehow not catch the obvious innuendo, the look in her eyes was hungrily evident. What's more, the woman was *married*, but her husband seemed to find it all amusing.

The men were just as bizarre. Facial hair, it would seem, had some connection to social standing. Most servants and slaves she saw went clean-shaven, but otherwise, all the rich men of Ulien seemed to be part of some grand, city-wide competition to wear the most ridiculous style of beard or mustache possible. She saw men with beards down to their chests, and men with mustaches that were gelled to point upwards, downwards, or in one curious case, both. They attached bells and gold ornaments to their beards and mustaches, and made every effort possible to outdo the other performers in the citywide circus that Ulien's elite took part in. There was one

particular patron who Ashe had grown to loathe, a silk merchant as wealthy as he was round named Bassam, because you could always tell he was leaving his room by the sound the veritable forest of bells hanging in his beard made as he heaved his corpulent frame through the building. Everyone in this city, it appeared, was stark raving mad.

Mist was able to navigate through the chaos, of course. Despite her clothing, it was evident to all the shopkeepers and passersby who spoke to her that she was of noble stock, while Ashe's ever-present scowl and curt accent gave away her barbarian roots. Ashe had been happy to let Mist do all the talking. It gave her more time to sulk.

While Ashe had balked at the exorbitant fee the proprietor of the Sun's Web had asked for, the inn was a local hub for merchants, artists, and their wealthy patrons. Anyone who was anybody, Iesha had boasted, came to the Sun's Web. And yet, none of these 'anybodies' had ever heard of anyone named Isoba Amibola. 'Isoba' was a common name in Ulien—at least three of the people they'd questioned had been named Isoba themselves—but Amibola wasn't a name anyone had ever heard. Or at least, that was what they *said*.

While Mist spoke to the various artists and socialites, Ashe took care to watch their eyes. Most people's ignorance seemed genuine, but a few people—a pair of priests and a passing slave—reacted in a strange way whenever Mist said their target's name. It was often something small—a slight widening of the eyes, or a tightening of the lips—and though they all denied ever having come across anyone with that name, they all denied it a little too fast. But despite Mist's best efforts to coax additional information out of their recalcitrant subjects, nobody produced anything of worth. With nothing to show for their efforts, Mist and Ashe found themselves walking back to the Sun's Web once again.

Ashe scowled at the world, directing her sullen gaze at any and all passersby that happened across her miserable path. A merchant with eyebrows plucked into thin, almost invisible lines, stepped out from his shop holding a purple container of perfume, wearing a welcoming smiling on his face. His sales pitch died in his mouth as Ashe fixed him with a stare that sent him darting away, perhaps in search of a customer less likely to disembowel him. Ashe growled, and spat to her side. Coward.

“It’s on days like this that I remember why I fell for you, song of my heart.” Mist popped a candied date into her mouth, and chewed on it thoroughly, going through each of the prescribed twelve chews she always preached that sweet food deserved. Salted foods needed fourteen, and fruits a mere nine. The way Bulinari nobles ate was so mechanical. So many rules, for a culture with more celebrations and holidays than the other Cities combined. The Bulinari paradox of tradition and chaos was one that Ashe had yet to figure out, though she suspected the same was true for actual Bulinari themselves.

“Like you’re any happier than me, *dear*.” Ashe tried not to snap. Well, she tried a little. Mist always snacked when she was irritated or worried. On the first night away from the Living City, Mist had put such a dent in their provisions that Ashe had taken to keeping their supplies safe by her side.

“It doesn’t mean I’m going to take it out on innocent merchants, honey.” Mist gave a cool smile to a passing woman offering her a taste of something pink and wriggling, and gave Ashe a weary look. “The day’s been miserable enough without the two of us bringing further misery into it.”

“Maybe that’s the problem, the people around us aren’t miserable *enough*.” Ashe jerked her head towards a clumped gaggle of humanity ahead, milling together like goats before a

cragstorm. The idiot animals always seemed to believe that if they crowded together, they'd have a stronger chance of surviving the haphazard bombardment of lightning that flung down from the peaks of the Umthal Teeth, but all that ever did was allow the storms to kill more at one time.

They surrounded a man, lithe and tall, with a figure Ashe assumed someone would find comely, dressed in impractical black and gold silks that were designed to emphasize certain features that, again, another audience might enjoy. His muscles were tight and trained, a perfect dancer's figure, and Ashe noticed many an eye drifting slowly across, and then down his chest. From the cooing sounds the Uleni women were making as they whispered behind covered mouths to each other, the display was appreciated. He was moving through what Ashe recognized as the Dance of the Blossoming Lotus, the most basic of Lifedancing techniques, designed to center the mind and prepare the land for impending change. Basic, but the showy gestures and undulating--there was no other word for it--hips were certainly not part of the traditional Dance. All the same, he was capturing the attention of the gathered throng.

Mist glanced where Ashe had indicated, and smiled up at her with eyes that said entirely too much.

"I'm glad I'm entertaining you, at least." Ashe heard the bitter child in her words, and she masked her embarrassment in a deepened scowl. Whatever she did, Mist seemed to find some humor in it.

"Would you begrudge them some harmless titillation? It's almost the Feast of Bulin, it's only natural for certain...appetites to be stoked. Just because you'd prefer to drink wine doesn't mean others can't enjoy ale, princess."

“It’s *not* that.” Ashe glared at Mist, who grinned with the innocence of an army of infants back at her. She knew she hated that name. “They can have their rotting ale, ale or wine, I don’t care, it’s just...rot and pestilence, do they have to drink it out here?”

“My, my, how prudish of you, Ashe. One would have never thought it of you, after how eager you were this morning. One would think you’d been lost at sea for years, not a woman in sight, the way you--”

“There are things,” Ashe growled, pushing past Mist’s gleeful recitation, “that are best kept behind closed doors and mouths. Kyrei’s teeth, Mist, just because these people don’t have the slightest notion of shame doesn’t mean you have to--”

“Judgement comes!”

A voice, as vast and as clear as the sky, struck through the crowd like a crack through a frozen lake.. All around the square, motion slowed and then stilled, until the people--chattering merchant lords, the scurrying couriers, and the scandalously dressed lifedancer--had become as mobile as the golden statues that stood along the roads. Ashe halted a half-measure after the rest of the city seemed to, and even that stutter felt sacreligious. Like a singer in Althom’s Opera Inferno, tripping after the rest of a chorus, only an offbeat off but lifetimes behind.

“Judgement comes!”

The words were coated with power, anointed with purpose, and expansive in their brevity, drawing in attention like a maelstrom in the Centersea sucks in a dinghy. It was not a voice you fought, it was not a voice that brooked debate, it was a voice that demanded submission or blood. Ashe had fought under men and women with voices like this, during her time travelling Meynas, dispatching outbreaks of Deathscorned. In the howling sonata of battle,

with the ethereal screeching of a kaleidoscopic-skinned monster filling your ears, it was voices like these you clung to and clove to. Voices that traffic not in ifs, but in whens.

“Judgement comes!”

The source of the voice surprised her--a woman, crooked with the strain of time, drawing herself forward with a cane made of wood as gnarled as she. Her face was covered by a mask--golden and gleaming, inscribed with silver-inlaid spider webs, with openings in the web patterns for her eyes, and none for her mouth. Black robes draped over her shoulders, riddled with stylized rays of gilded sunlight, pooling on the fine multicolored sand like liquid night. Aged, bent, and frail, this woman, this Obligator, moved with the steady gait of the moons, untroubled by the rippling of humanity that pushed outwards as she passed through them--among them, but not of them.

Behind her trailed a small contingent of Obligators, black-clad with undecorated golden masks, hauling before them a young woman. Her dark hair was braided with teal beads that proclaimed her unmarried, and of modest means, and she dressed in flowing silks that were too rich to belong to a commoner, but too unadorned to be that of a Merchant Baron or city official--Ulien had no nobles, at least in theory. A maid or another sort of servant then, someone who had to look nice, but not threatening to the fragile Uleni social sensibilities. Uleni seemed to find every excuse to show a person's social status--how a man styled his facial hair carried immense meaning, as did the colors of a woman's beaded braids, or the kind of jewelry she wore, or what order rings sat on her fingers--there was so much, and it all mattered.

As the procession passed, Ashe's eyes flicked down to the woman's hands, which bore the signs of her station better than her clothes ever could--chipped nails, scabs covering skin scrubbed raw, the light, but callused skin of someone who worked indoors, but worked in truth.

She held her head high, beaded, braided locks of hair clicking against each other as she walked, but Ashe saw no true haughtiness or defiance--just resignation.

“Ashe,” Mist whispered, and Ashe turned scandalized eyes onto Mist’s delighted ones. Couldn’t Mist see that there was only room enough on this stage for one voice? But Mist had not become who she was today--the delightfully disgraced scion of a noble family who dropped everything to follow a peasant from the mountains--by being concerned with what she *should* do.

“The webs on her mask, she’s a Judge.” Mist said, glee practically leaking through her teeth, testing her whispering abilities, “Ashe, this is a trial! Uleni trials are famous, and *fraught* with so many ethical conundrums, oh, how I’d hoped--”

“Children of the Artisans, attend me!” The Judge raised a hand and drew a neat line in the air, that gleamed a radiant purple, the same color the eyes of her mask now shone. Ashe recognized the rune--the simplest and most central Godscript rune, the letter for ‘life’, as well as for ‘law’. “By the Craft granted to me by He Who Travels the Heavens, the Artisan of History, Lawgiver and Chainbreaker, Father of the Forgotten, the great god Veinos--”

The moment the god’s name was spoken, the Judge and the other Obligators quickly touched one eyelid, and then the other with practiced and routine, yet reverent motions, an action that was mimicked by many of the Uleni in the crowd.

--I call this trial to order, and request that all true children of Creation bear witness. Witness, and listen to the crimes this woman confesses, and know them for the truth of her own mind, for none may hide deceit where the eyes of the Emperor of the Unseen cast their terrible and beautiful gaze!”

The Judge raised one wrinkled, steady finger, and carved a glowing oval around the first rune, the rune for ‘truth’, which formed the rough outline of an eye. Ashe snorted. Godscript was

full of all manner of conveniences of metaphor and seemingly poignant meaning. Writing it was a nightmare, speaking it was an ordeal that required more years than most mortals had to master. Most learned men and women counted themselves lucky to know and pronounce correctly a phrase or two. It was one of the few mercies the Artisans granted the world that the language they shaped for mortals was a simpler one. The rune seemed to pulse, and the Judge plucked the rune from the air, and held it up to the eyes of the accused woman, shimmering like the hazy horizon in the desert.

“Shadow swaddles truths

That the sky knows not”

As one, in a monotone that was absent the music that flitted through the usual tones of human speech, the Obligators spoke, committing their Sentence to reality. Ashe leaned forward, despite herself. She was not Mist, with her overexcited blend of traveler awe and scholarly fascination, but it was rare to see an Umbrascibe’s work so publicly--in most of the Great Cities, Umbrascibes were seen as little better than criminal. The power to dig around the recesses of people’s minds, merely by drawing runes and reciting stories, was seen as dangerous and borderline profane--befitting the magic of the Heretic God himself. In the sky-towers of Kei Doen where the goddess of sculpture, Kyrei, reigned, Umbrascibing was outright illegal. In Ulien, it formed the backbone of their legal system. The poem continued on, always in that odd songless verse, and as the Obligators spoke, the subject of their Craft stared into the rune the Judge held, sweat beading on her face as she seemed to try to resist--something.

“Speak, and let thought

Be as air

Shared by all

Speak, and let thought

Be as fire

Consuming and-- ”

A scream ripped through the toneless chant, and the accused clutched her head into clawed hands, tearing her arms away from the Obligators that held her, but they made no move to recapture her, and she made no move to leave. The Obligators and the Judge stopped their Craft as one, and the Judge, for the first time, addressed the woman directly.

“Lyra Ghoi, tell the world of your secrets. Let mortal ears hear what our god already knows, for no secret is hidden from Veinos.” The gathered Uleni touched their eyelids again, and Ashe raised an eyebrow at Mist as she did it as well. “Speak, and commit your sins so that the world may hear them, and know your punishment is deserved.”

“I...” Lyra’s eyes closed, and a smile spread across her face, a beatific calm seeming to spread across her entire person. “I murdered Merchantlady Alnout’s daughter. I did it for coin, and I did it because I had never liked her. Always, she was cruel without reason. She beat us. I went into the Penumbra District, and I bought a dagger. It rests underneath my pillow. I cleaned it after I cut her throat with it--it seemed a shame to get rid of the blood. I licked the blade to see how it’d taste, if the blood of the rich tasted different from ours. It did not.”

Ashe’s eyes threatened to jump out of her skull, and Mist gasped. The woman spoke of her crimes the same way a mother might speak of her newborn, all with that unnerving grin on her face.

The judge nodded, and waved her hand, dispelling the rune, and Lyra opened her eyes, and color drained from her skin as her smile slid off her face.

“You have heard from her own mouth, the truth of her actions.” The judge turned to the crowd, now. “The magic of our god allows for no untruths to be spoken or forged from his majesty, and so you know the words she speaks to be honest. The evidence lies before you all. Now, as decreed by our god before he charged us to govern ourselves, this woman’s fate belongs with the people. With you.”

The judge raised one fist, and held it aloft over her head.

“The law prescribes death for murder, but law is nothing if not supported by those it protects. Citizens and outlanders, we, your servants, ask you this--do you find this woman worthy of death, or mercy? It is in your hands we leave this decision. One fist, if death.” The judge opened her fist, and held out an open palm, as if asking for alms. “An open palm if mercy. Choose, children of the Artisans, and choose knowing that your choice will dictate justice.”

Ashe knew this part of the ceremony was coming, but she was still unprepared--the Uleni had such bizarre ideas of justice. Obligators would force the truth out of your mind, but then would leave sentencing to *anyone* who happened to be nearby--rich, poor, old, or young. An infamous case involved a thief being granted clemency because a seven-year old child was the only witness, and had thought the man looked like his own father. Althomi scholars touted this as the failures of a city without an Artisan to rule them, but the Uleni were deliriously proud of their legal system.

A few moments passed, and then several of the gathered makeshift jury raised fists. After these first pioneers, there came a rush of movement as everyone surged forward in a race to not seem indecisive about justice. Ashe found herself raising a palm as Mist raised her fist, and the two women locked eyes. Ashe shrugged, and Mist shook her head, exasperated, but not surprised.

The judge seemed to take a moment to tally the votes, and then nodded.

“Your will be done.”

The judge bowed deeply, and then clapped her hands together twice. At her signal, the other Obligators seized the woman by her shoulders, and finally, Lyra seemed to find some fire within the smoldering embers of her resistance, and she struggled and screamed and thrashed, but the Obligators held her fast, and the judge took slow, inexorable steps towards Lyra, producing a gilded ceremonial knife from a sheath at her side. Ashe barely had time to process the blooming inevitability before the blade slid into Lyra’s chest. The judge moved with efficient, brutal grace, twisting the blade and pulling it out as easily as if she were a baker pulling a loaf from the oven, and with as much fanfare. Lyra died with a shout frozen on her lips, and the judge dropped the knife on the sands below, and began to walk away. One of the biggest Obligators reached down to collect Lyra’s corpse, slinging it over his shoulder like a human-shaped bag of grain, and the party of Obligators began to make their exit, without a single other word or element of ceremony to be found.

Life resumed.

Shopkeepers began to hawk their wares again, laughter began to fill the air as people finished jokes and japes they’d begun before the trial, and the salacious lifedancer began the first steps of his dance again, recapturing the lustful attentions of his audience. Life continued with a sort of desperate normalcy, but the facade was weak--everyone pointedly avoided looking at the bloody blade that still rested on the ground, and nobody spoke of what had just happened. It was as if time had stuttered, and if Ashe blinked she’d discover that there had never been a trial.

Yet the blade remained.

Ashe turned her head back to Mist, who was staring thoughtfully after the receding backs of the Obligators.

“Fascinating,” Mist said, “I’d always wanted--”

“Let’s go back.” Ashe said, and Mist frowned.

“Why? The day’s still young, and we might--” Mist looked up at Ashe as she spoke, and whatever she saw in Ashe’s eyes made her stop, and a concerned look entered her face that made Ashe feel a sudden stab of guilt.

“Okay, let’s do that. Not a problem at all.” Mist nodded encouragingly, and Ashe started back off towards the Sun’s Web, away from the site of the trial.

She’d seen death before. She’d killed, killed Deathscorned, killed bandits, killed men who’d thought two women on their own were easy prey. The woman had deserved death, she admitted it from her own mouth. She was a murderer, and whatever sympathies Ashe might have for those under the heel of oppressive nobles and ‘not-nobles’, that did not change what she was, what she did.

Ashe had opened her palm. Tried to save her, after a fashion.

She failed. Did it matter?

The sooner she was out of this godsforsaken city, the better.

Isoba

The serrated edges of Isoba Amibola's dagger tore through the soft flesh of the sanctum guard's throat. Blood sprayed into the air and splattered onto one of the garish purple tapestries that blanketed the hallways leading up to the main hall of the Sanctum of Sands.

Isoba's lips twisted into an irritated scowl.

This assassination was *not* going well.

"Or, I suppose, didn't go well. Hasn't gone?" Isoba muttered to himself as he shouldered past the guardswoman, whose fallen body stained the lush teal carpets a deep red. Well, purple, really. If his mission had been to defile the decorations of the second most fortified palace in the city of Ulien, then he would have been off to a great start.

Isoba wiped his blade on his mottled grey-and-black work clothes, turned a corner, and resumed his flight through the Sanctum. A horn sounded three times, an ugly undulating tone that deaf goat-herders in Althom must have heard. Isoba picked up his pace, thankful for how the carpeting muffled his footfalls. The convenient interior decoration did not, however, muffle the obnoxious clanking that announced the arrival of a pair of sanctum guards approaching from around the corner.

"Kyrei's tits," Isoba swore, as his practiced brown eyes scanned the hallway for possible routes of escape. This deep into the seat of government for The Three, the ruling body of Ulien, there were no windows to drop out of, and the only doors down this particular hallway were too

far away for him to reach before the duo of yes-men came across him. He'd have to fight, and worse, he'd have to fight someone who knew he was coming.

The guards appeared from around the corner—as it turned out, one of the yes-men was a *yes-lady*—and Isoba dashed towards them. To their credit, the guards' surprise at Isoba's aggressive approach lasted only moments, and they raised their blades in one well-practiced movement. It took years to acquire the skill to handle such a weapon with the fluidity of motion that this pair possessed.

And it took Isoba's hurled dagger mere seconds to bury itself into the male guard's throat, robbing him of all those years of training, as useless as an empty wallet in a whorehouse.

The fallen guard's partner released a furious bellow, and she swung her rapier in a fierce arc towards Isoba. Isoba danced backwards out of the way of the guard's vengeful swing, sliding a second throwing knife out of his belt.

"I am sorry," Isoba said, "Was he a friend of yours?"

The guard let out a very unladylike roar—fitting, as her features had precious few traces of femininity, though her breasts didn't seem as disappointing as her face—and slashed at Isoba again.

Apparently, he'd touched a nerve.

The guardswoman, heedless in her fury, raised her blade for an overhead slash, and Isoba darted forward. He sidestepped the guardswoman's heavy blow, gave her his most winsome smile, and then flipped one of his knives straight into the air. The guardswoman was a practiced warrior, but her eyes still flickered upwards for a second to follow the trajectory of Isoba's weapon as it soared towards the ceiling.

In that second Isoba stepped forward, and as the guardswoman's eyes snapped back to him, he rammed his second throwing knife into her chest. The guardswoman dropped like trousers on a wedding night, crashing to the ground, though Isoba noted that she didn't try to take the blade out of herself. If a Lifedancer got to her soon, she might even live. He hoped she did. It was always good to leave witnesses to spread the legends about his exploits.

Assassinations were always messy, and Isoba had been in the business long enough to know that things never went quite as you planned them, but the assassination of Ayana Ndiaye, Voice of the Three, was proving to be a spectacular failure.

The best Isoba could hope for was that, somehow, this mistake could fit into Master Zarrun's schemes. Not that a man as secretive or powerful as Zarrun Solum, Arbiter of the Three, would ever inform someone like Isoba of the particulars of his meddling, but it would have helped to at least have an inkling of this assassination's true purpose. If nothing else, so that he could know what he was going to be executed for.

Not that the idea of one member of the Three trying to kill another was unheard of. The history of Ulien was strewn with the bodies of those who had made many one too many missteps in the Waltz of Veinos, the affectionate name Ulien's elite gave to the tangled skeins of intrigue, false piety, and backroom deals that passed for politics in Ulien.

Ndiaye was one of the most popular rulers the oasis city had elected in centuries. Ayana Ndiaye's outreach programs into the Alms District, the haphazard array of shantytowns and slums that ringed the city of Ulien proper, had made her something of a folk hero amongst the common people. Her visits into the district drew crowds and parades worthy of a god, commoners stretching hands out like branches in a forest, eager to grasp a coveted touch of her robes. Visiting the Alms District was almost unheard of at all, let alone for someone of her

standing. Her efforts had earned her the ire of Ulien's criminal underworld, the Penumbra District, but the aristocracy and commoners alike loved her. She was even one of the few politicians Isoba couldn't be bothered to hate. She'd ended Mwenye's dogma, after all, when she evicted the

Why Zarrun would desire her death, Isoba didn't know, but he wasn't paid to ask questions. He wasn't paid at all, for that matter, but much more powerful men and women than he had strangled themselves on the threads of Zarrun's schemes. Zarrun Solum wove manipulations and plots like Veinos spun his fabled Lattice, and his motives were often as inscrutable as those of the Sacred Artisans themselves. The less Isoba knew, the better.

"Halt!" roared a new voice. Isoba looked up to see yet another sanctum guard ahead, wearing that same expression of self-righteous haughtiness that all the guards he'd killed today seemed to have.

"Like hell."

One guard, he could handle. He'd dart in, fake an advance, and plunge his dagger into his left eye. Or his right eye. Isoba had never been picky about his eye gouging.

The guard began to sing.

In any other situation, it would have been a soothing, even enjoyable experience—the man's voice was a resonate tenor, and the hymn he sang was suffused with passion. The guard's powerful voice filled the hall, each sung syllable setting up residence inside Isoba's ears. As he sang, a sphere of fire spun into existence in front of him, growing larger as the song's intensity grew. The guard plunged his hand inside of it, and as the song crescendoed, drew out an ornate scimitar—with a blade surrounded by shifting, crackling flames.

A flame-chanter. Bulin's *balls*, this day kept getting worse.

Isoba halted his advance, his scowl deepening further. Of course, Ayana would have the funds needed to purchase the services of a Crafter. The woman was idealistic, but she wasn't stupid. The flame-chanter's presence was not surprising, but Isoba could have done without it.

"Turn yourself in, vagrant, and perhaps Her Radiance will show your worthless hide mercy." The flame-chanter said, leveling his smoking scimitar at Isoba's face.

Even in a situation like this, Isoba was unable to ignore how beautiful the man's voice was. Something about the magic they used granted flame-chanters melodious voices. Though Isoba had heard a flame-chanter speak before, the experience never got old. In fact, the man was quite attractive — broad shoulders, a commanding voice and presence, and a body that had exchanged every ounce of fat possible for muscle. In different circumstances, ones involving less naked steel and more naked flesh...such a pity. It'd be a shame to disfigure a pretty face like that.

Isoba settled into a knife-fighter's stance, holding one knife in his left hand, and a dagger point down in his other.

"Not feeling that one," Isoba said, "How about this for a counteroffer? You run back to your mistress, and I will not feed you your fingers through your asshole."

"Insolent urchin," The guard said, and the flames that wreathed his blade leapt upwards. "This is your final warning. I shall not tell you again."

"Sorry," Isoba said, "I was not paying attention. The blank walls behind you were more interesting than your tired threats. Could you repeat that? I promise, I will listen this time. Well, I will at least try."

The guard released a furious bellow — even that sounded sonorous — and charged Isoba. Isoba tried to parry the incoming scimitar, but the impact of the flame-wrought scimitar crashing against Isoba's blade almost knocked the weapon out of his hands. Isoba recovered, slashing at

the hulking guard with his dagger, but the guard leaned back to dodge and began his assault anew.

Isoba backpedaled, feet scrabbling across the soft flooring, as the guard swung his weapon faster than seemed fair. The flame-chanter would have loomed over all but the tallest men, Isoba was average only by the most generous or sycophantic of descriptions. The guard was stronger, faster, and more skilled than he, with skills honed in training halls that would never admit someone of Isoba's ilk within their hallowed halls. Isoba's ramshackle collection of techniques, on the other hand, were mainly acquired through getting his ass beaten by people who had such skills.

With one notable exception.

Isoba threw his dagger at the guard's face, and moved his left hand behind his back. The guard knocked the small weapon out of the air with a burst of fire from his sword, a slow, contemptuous smile emerging on his face. Isoba snarled and thrust his dagger at the guard's chest, but the guard parried the desperate attack, and backhanded Isoba off his feet with his free hand. Isoba fell in a tangle of limbs, steel, and vulgarities that grew more blasphemous as his tumble across the floor continued.

"Paying attention now, urchin?"

"I am getting around to it. The question of the hour, however, is are *you*?"

"What do you mea—" The guard trailed off, as he met Isoba's gaze, and Isoba grinned. Isoba knew what the guard was viewing--Isoba's eyes, a bright hazel color minutes before, were infused with a luminous purple mist. Anyone who lived in Ulien would recognize that particular color, and Isoba saw realization dawn on the guard's face.

"You are a—"

“Yup,” Isoba replied, and he drew his hand out from behind his back, as his fingers continued tracing shapes in midair. Where his fingers moved, a violet trail of ethereal smoke followed, remaining in the air in the shape of a rune, before dissipating to make room for another. There were five disciplines of crafting—flame-chanting was one, but Isoba belonged to another.

“I—”

“Too late. *Seize him.*” said Isoba, and he crushed the final rune in a fist, finishing his Sentence. The shadows cast by the tables and chairs lining the walls shuddered and stirred, and tendrils of darkness erupted from the floor. The spires of liquid shadow sprouted two six-fingered hands, each of which seized one of the guard’s legs, holding him in place. The guard howled, straining against his bindings. Umbrascrying took an irritating amount of time to begin, but the guard’s haughtiness had afforded Isoba enough time to Craft his Sentence.

As the guard thrashed like a vargor in heat, Isoba rose to his feet and walked over to where he was held.

“How are you doing this?” the guard asked. “This is—this is not possible! This—”

The guard’s face blanched, and fell still, eyes widening as his eyebrows ascended towards the top of his depilated scalp.

“You are *him*?”

“I mean, I am *a* him. I can prove it to you, if you want.”

“You...you are not supposed to...the Demon of Penumbra is a myth, a fireside story told by superstitious criminals, a fabrication of the Shadow Barons, you can’t be real—”

“It is always nice to meet a fan.”

A smirk bloomed on Isoba's features as he gestured, and the shadows cast by the guard's own body quivered before gushing forward in a rush of bubbling, seething blackness. Legions of grasping limbs overlapped and fused together, settling into the form of a gigantic hand that seized hold of the guard's head and forced him to look right at Isoba.

"But...how? There is no Craft that does anything like--" The guard whispered.

"Truth is, I can't read, which gets in the way of normal Umbrascrying, as you might imagine. Never had the head for all those scratches and marks you people call a language. Only problem is, Arbiter Solum wants this kept a secret. Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes! Yes, I...wait, the Arbiter...wait, *what?*"

Isoba flipped his dagger into the air, and carved a single, jagged rune.

"*Catch.*"

The massive hand holding the guard shuddered, and sprouted another limb out of its wrist which seized the airborne dagger and plunged downwards it into the guard's left eye and out the back of his head. A small geyser of blood erupted from the hole that now decorated the guard's face, splashing Isoba's sable skin with gore as the shadowhand oozed back into the shadows from whence it came.

"Yes, I thought you could."

Isoba stepped over the guard's wreck of a corpse, retrieved his dagger and sighed in relief. He didn't like fighting, but that didn't mean he couldn't enjoy his hard-won victory like any other red-blooded Uleni man. Isoba admired his handiwork for a few seconds, impressed with the way his shadowhands had interpreted his command. He'd expected one or two 'hands to appear, but so many had risen up. He felt the requisite drain of energy that had taken, but it was better than being dead. Nobody had ever studied an Umbrascrybe who was unable to read--

nobody, until Zarrun. His powers always found ways to surprise him, but this was at least a pleasant one, unlike other, less savory incidents.

Another blast of that gods-damned horn sounded. This time its ear-rending warbling tones sounded closer.

Much closer.

Isoba had time for a single, particularly blasphemous oath before a hallway door exploded outwards, and a cadre of guards in gleaming armor poured through. Too many to fight.

Isoba raised bloody hands in the air, and sighed.

“What now?”

Whispers--Scorned

Gods never sleep. The Weaver is always at work.

Pluck, listen, *snip*. Unworthy. Pluck, listen, *snip*. Unworthy. Pluck, listen—

Listen—

Veinos selects one gleaming strand, and inspects it. The haggard commander. The undying conflict. The sword that weeps for a sheath. A tale worth including? A tale worth experiencing.

Veinos holds the string of human memories aloft, and allows the inscribed tale to envelop him.

Sensations unfurl.

Touch appears first, the worn and comfortable feel of leather under callused hands, twining between restless fingers. The soothing roughness of a saddle beneath the human--beneath him.

Taste follows, the salted remnants of the jerky the human's--his--companions had prepared, sharp like a spear with Bulinari spices to make up for its simple beginnings.

Scent—the scents of the forest, of apples and gemrafruit and pears wafting generous aromas throughout the area, tempting noses and whetting appetites of both man and beast. The Artisans crafted the world to be both convenient and beautiful, and Xen, Artisan of the Wilds,

had cultivated nature such that none would ever go hungry. The joyful smells of fruit eager to be eaten were dampened by the bitter, acrid undercurrents of sweat and steel, of men come to kill.

Sound—the too-casual chatter of men and women too proud to admit that they spoke only to avoid silence, afraid to languish in the soundless tyranny of waiting. Laughter comes, raucous and unwarranted, in response to japes that would have gone unnoticed elsewhere. Chortles and banter born of fear, fear of letting the only sounds be the trampling of leaves beneath hooves and feet, reminders of their trek towards battle, reminders that their return might be heralded by fewer footsteps.

Sight—the cadre of warriors tramping through the purple and cyan hues of the Vyad Conservatory, the eccentric signature of the Painting God’s brush evident on every tree, on every animal, on every blade of grass. Trees soar towards the skies, dwarfed only by the monstrous spires of Kei Doen, with leaves that shone with colors not found in nature anywhere else. The grasses sway, ignorant of the wind’s blowing, as if underwater--stepping on them merely caused them to bend around your foot, and then return to their dance. Luscious fruits, shining and slick with dew, protrude from the trunks of trees instead of the branches above, all so that they could be plucked easily, without harming the trees. When one was taken, another emerged smoothly from within the trunk, emerging with a satisfying sound not unlike a small belch. In some arcane way that Reyn could not understand, removing fruits seemed to *feed* the tree somehow. The Artisans were inscrutable and powerful, but sometimes, in little things like this, you could see the evidence of a sense of humor lurking within their divine minds.

On a single tree, one might find seven kinds of fruit, and Ryen had yet to find a pattern in them. The Mercurial Majesty had taken great and excessive care to make sure that each of their conservatories had been filled with sights unattainable elsewhere in Meynas. The penalty

for attempting to mar or change Xen's genius in any way was severe. On his right, Reyn passes a tree with an uncomfortably human silhouette. This tree has plums across its' middle, but somehow, these tempt Reyn less than the other fruits in the area. There was much to admire about the god Reyn served, but much to fear as well.

Branches, stretching from tree to tree like bridge above, rustle as animals flee across them, and Reyn catches glimpses of crystalline, six-legged deer, rippling like disturbed water as they prance through their wooden roads. The skyroads were much more elaborate than the path cleared for humans, which seemed to have been begrudgingly created, not a hand larger than it absolutely had to be. In every conservatory, Xen finds ways to have nature avoid humanity's corrosive touch. The penalty for killing an animal in a conservatory was even more severe.. Reyn follows the shaking branches with wistful eyes. Where he went, beauty would be in short supply.

“Commander!”

Reyn turns his attention forward, towards the sound of hoofbeats announcing the arrival of a scarred Benyari woman with a messy ponytail--Shethi, his scout. The grisly reminders of battles past that decorated Shethi's face did little to mar the radiant smile that seemed to have taken perpetual residence on her face, though one nasty scar by her lips made her grin permanently lopsided. Shethi's joy, at least, was not forced, though it did little to little to bolster Reyn's spirits--quite the opposite. The rose-and-teal-skinned Benyari and their adventure-priests considered it a religious necessity to lead as exciting of a life as possible, and Shethi had a sacred lust for danger. He'd met her in a tavern on the outskirts of Althom seven years ago, while she was in the middle of carefully and thoroughly insulting the mothers of every patron, seeking a bar brawl worthy of song. When Reyn had talked to her afterwards, seven tankards of ale and two

glasses broken over head later, Shethi had claimed she'd done it because there was a dearth of songs being written about bar brawls, and she aimed to change that.

Reyn had hired her the next morning, the moment she'd sobered up. You needed a certain degree of madness to hunt Deathscorned professionally.

"Yes? Report, how does it look?" Reyn asked, though Shethi scarcely gave time for Reyn to respond before unfurling her news in a tapestry of tumbling words.

"Magnificent, commander, *absolutely* magnificent!" Shethi stroked the skin near her horse's ear, and the beast came to an abrupt stop and reared violently, it's kicking hooves missing Reyn's head by handlengths, before turning and beginning to walk alongside Reyn's own, slightly spooked, mount. Reyn grimaced, though she'd done the same Veinos-brained trick several times before--Benyari mounts were tempestuous, talented creatures, and utterly unrideable unless you knew the secrets to controlling them. The Benyari thought it great fun to give their mounts to outsiders and lie about those secrets. The lifedancer medics that treated their victims find it less entertaining.

"It's definitely an outbreak, and the portal is newsome mature, it is! It's a big one, Commander. Xen smiles on us today, that he does!"

"How...splendid." Reyn said, and Shethi nods, missing or ignoring his tone. The two of them had such different ideas of what devotion to Xen entailed. "Inform the group of what you found, we'll need to start planning an ambush. How big is the site? What sort of terrain are we dealing with? Where--"

The vision freezes, sound vanishes, and Veinos coaxes the memory's time forward, skimming through tactical gibberish. Beya might have found such a discussion interesting, or perhaps one of the plump tacticians that spent hours pouring over theory from the Gan'renna for

their games of war. Even during the Gan'renna, tactics had never been a talent Veinos possessed, and he wouldn't be fighting any battles anytime soon. What he sought lay deeper in.

Sound resurfaces, and the vision resumes.

Shethi grins, having found her glorious purpose, her two-toned skin flecked with earth.

She would grin until she rotted.

Reyn half-drops, half-collapses into the the mud next to her, and frantically digs out a scrap of parchment. It was worse than they could have ever imagined.

Shethi had reported that the portal--the cinereous gashes in reality that birthed Deathscorned--was newly mature, which should have given them days to prepare an ambush. Portals appeared first as what appeared to be cracks in reality--thin lines that hung in midair, lines that appeared to be Godscript runes, but in no order that made any sense. When the cracks appeared, if it was noticed early enough, the area would be immediately evacuated, and a group of warriors like Reyn's own would be summoned. Within a week of appearing, the portal would be mature and formed, the cracks having resolved into a bubbling sphere of grey, waiting to release its' bounty unto the world around it. A mature portal would hover for days before rupturing. Deathscorned were dangerous, but could usually be contained early enough.

But when they'd arrived, the portal had burst, gushing acrid, diseased liquid that killed all living matter it touched, fountaining the stuff all over what had once been a placid, modest plot of farmland outside of the Conservatory. They should have had *time*.

But they had none, and the Deathscorned were here.

A shriek, godless and beautiful, blasts through the sound of boots squelching through mud and blood, almost drowning out the shout heralding the death of another another warrior and friend, but Reyn can't afford to give the man a second thought. Every attention had to go to

his Art. Reyn shuts his eyes tight, and then opens them, veiling his vision in the aquamarine film that Wavepainting conjured for him, shielding his eyes and perfecting his vision. Working with a manic and practiced speed, Reyn plucks a brush an array sheathed on his belt, and begins to paint.

No ink was needed for what he did--as his brush moved, his eyes shone with iridescent hues, and paint blossomed onto the page, mixed and balanced perfectly. Reyn sketches only the roughest of outlines of an animal, beyond what he'd ever accept from a student, but there is no time. The exhilarating surge of Creation rushes through his body, and the outline on the page shines a brilliant cerulean. The essence of nature, savage and triumphant, beats within his mind, and the image on the page *shifts* and rises off the page, growing by every passing moment. Delicately painted, stump-like feet slam into the earth as the painted elephant lands, a massive trunk curling into the air and trumpeting a call loud enough to reach the ears of Veinos himself.

Reyn regards his creation, and cannot forestall a measure of professional disgust. He'd forgotten tusks. And the rough sketches he'd outlined gave no thought to the precise biology of the animal, and the elephant he'd summoned would never be as responsive, as *real* as it should be. What an *amateur* mistake. The further away from reality a painted creature was, the weaker it was, or the greater toll it took on his vision. It'd have to do for now, though. If he survived long enough to go blind, Reyn would count himself lucky.

Another shriek wraps itself tight around Reyn's eardrums, and only practice from years of campaigning against the Deathscorned allow him to spin around and face his coming foe, his elephant stomping around in tandem.

The Deathscorned, a female, lopez towards him from where the mangled body of Aziv, his cartographer, has just finished collapsing to the ground. Even after a decade of putting down

the abominations, the nightmarish proportions of the Deathscorned still manage to threaten Reyn's dinner. And his lunch and breakfast, for that matter. The Deathscorned looked like failed attempts at depicting humanity, like a artist's watercolor painting had been doused with rain, slurring outlines and features like a drunkard's words. This ghoul's eyelids droop down into her nose, and her mouth stretches across her face, past her ear, a blind madman's rendition of countenance. Her skin glows the same luminous, sickening pale rainbow hue of every other Deathscorned, making her erratic movements even more difficult to follow. Colors change rapidly, every shade a different hue each time his eyes manage to focus on the Deathscorned's body. Her mouth opens wide, and that soul rending, hauntingly gorgeous screech threatens to unman Reyn on the spot.

His massive friend was less affected.

Responding with a forceful trumpet of its' own, Reyn's Elephant surges forward in a rush of watery flesh and rage, bearing down on the Deathscorned with a purpose only a being with no sense of preservation of self could have. Massive feet, no less heavy for their painted origins, trample weeds and dirt underfoot, as the elephant surged towards the Deathscorned, sucking energy from Reyn with every step.

Moving in a fashion somehow both jarring and fluid, the Deathscorned darts underneath the elephant, and drives a crooked hand through its' underbelly, splashing watery blood and muscle across the ground. The elephant shudders and wilts at the Deathscorned's mere touch, cracks like broken stone spreading like a virus from the point of contact. As it struck, Reyn began to move himself, plucking a compact, already crossbow from his side and firing it in one practiced, smooth motion, sending a bolt whirring through the air and through the Deathscorned's blonde head.

As they all did at the end, the Deathscorned let out a small, sad gasp, before exploding into a kaleidoscopic mist, swirling with the crumbling essence of the elephant Reyn had summoned, vanishing with the blowing wind. Reyn drops to his knees as the whiplash of the elephant's borrowed energy leaving his body slams into him, and only awareness that it was coming stops him from burying his face in the mud from the shock.

Shaking his head, as if that would ward off the magic taking its' toll, Reyn looks up, only to view another Deathscorned clawing its' way out of the portal, dropping to the ground drenched in the acrid afterbirth of its' creation, a second reaching a blurry hand through the rent in the air behind it. His men had spread out around the farmlands' perimeter, taking the fight to the demons where they could, but there was no telling when the tide would end. Ghouls left no corpses, but the grassy fields were littered with the remains of his friends. Forty had set forth, less than half would return. A portal would eject Deathscorned until it could not anymore, and then would fade away. Nobody, not even the gods, seemed to know why these occurred or what, precisely, the Deathscorned *were*. Theories spread like a rash in a brothel, some claimed they were the Painted Demons from ages past returned, others believed they were the ghosts of unbelievers, come to take vengeance on the faithful. Whatever they were, they had appeared a century ago, and bands of warriors like Reyn's had been patrolling the Continent, fighting them until they vanished.

A war had not been fought in thousands of years, not since the gods outlawed mass conflict after the Gan'renna, but this fight--this was war, except the enemy fought not for a god or for a city, but against creation itself.

And it was getting worse. Where once, outbreaks occurred once or twice every few months, this was the third in as many weeks. And the rate at which the portals were maturing...if

this continued, they wouldn't just arrive late to battle, they'd arrive to find they'd missed a massacre.

Reyn gathers himself and begins to trudge on forward, reloading and resetting his crossbow as the new Deathscorned, a dark-haired male with shoulders that bent backwards like wings, took notice of him.

Reyn closes his eyes, and sends a desperate prayer to Xen, and speaks a hidden question to Veinos--how could there be something beyond the knowledge of the gods?

Why was this being allowed to happen?

Why didn't the gods *fix* it?

Why?

Why, indeed?

Snip.

Ashe

Later, back in the Sun's Web and away from the bloodstained sands of judgement, Ashe allowed herself to collapse into a wooden chair that creaked in protest at the suddenness of her arrival. She wasn't made for this type of work. When she had just been an mercenary guarding merchant caravans from bandits and outbreaks of Deathscorned, she had become used to more direct challenges in her line of work. Fighting bandits or ghouls without two coins, or as many wits, to rub together was refreshing in its directness. In the heat of a fight, the world boiled down to a simplicity that Ashe treasured, especially after being forced to follow Mist in the nightmare world of politics that she called home. But at least in that labyrinthine nest of intrigue, Mist had known what to do. Here, they were together in their cluelessness. Ashe almost found herself missing trudging through the mud with old Reyn, Joia, and Shethi, at least then, she'd known what she was doing.

"We didn't think this through, did we?" Mist said, settling into a chair next to Ashe.

"I didn't, but that's your job anyway." Ashe said, nodding at Iesha, who had just dropped a plate of food onto the table.

Tonight's dinner was some sort of haphazard assortment of meats and vegetables, all speared on a long wooden stick. The bounty of meats were slathered in an array of spices and sauce that made Ashe's mouth water, though she was certain that after she finished eating this her eyes would start watering as well. The Uleni enjoyed their spicy food, but Iesha seemed to pride herself in making her dishes hot to the point of being near inedible, even by the standards of this insane desert city. Ashe and Mist had learned to ask for extra portions of *rhoa*, the cool,

creamy yogurt that the Uleni ate with every meal. If not for the *rhoa*'s soothing properties, Ashe feared she would have had to face either death by starvation, or otherwise drown herself trying to put out the fire Uleni cooking kindled in her mouth. The traders in the Sun's Web found the two Outlanders and their 'fragile tongues' to be an endless source of amusement. Ashe had a sneaking suspicion that Iesha was at this point taking great pleasure in making their food hotter than everyone else's. The food was almost delicious enough to make it worth it, though. Almost.

"Finding this Isoba character is like trying to find a virgin whore." Ashe said around a chewy piece of vargor meat.

"And you know this from experience?" Mist asked.

Ashe dredged deep into her mind to find a pithy retort and found her repository of wit wanting, settling instead for a scowl and a noncommittal grunt. The day's events had not done wonders for her mood.

The two women sat in silence for a time. Mist cast her gaze around the room, never settling her attentions on anything for long, while Ashe attacked the speared meats and peppers with a savage gusto, filling the air with the contented sounds of her feast. Mist's lips curled as her eyes rested on Ashe.

"Wha?" Ashe said around a mouthful of food, before spooning a generous quantity of *rhoa* into her mouth to chase the charred meat down her throat, licking her lips to catch any wayward bits of sauce.

"...Nothing."

"Is this chair free?"

Ashe looked up from the disconcerting smudge on the table she had been glaring at to see a round-faced robed man standing above her, motioning towards an empty seat.

“Uh, sure, I guess.”

“You are too kind.”

The man sat down, and grinned at Ashe as he adjusted his tan robes. The wrinkles near his mouth and eyes spoke to years of prolific smiling, but something about him didn’t seem quite right. Ashe had the distinct feeling that he was aware of a joke that she hadn’t yet heard, and wouldn’t appreciate the punchline of. He was clean-shaven, which indicated that he was a servant, but he didn’t have the air of submissiveness that servants in Ulien took great pains to project, nor did he have eyebrows. At all.

These Uleni would never cease to amaze her.

“So, Outlander, what brings you to our fine city?”

“Well—”

“I am sorry,” the smiling man said, raising a hand, “I was just being polite. Force of habit. You know how it is, Mistaria, in the upper echelons of society. We must observe certain niceties, or endure all sorts of disapproval from our peers. It is a tiresome thing indeed, society, but we must dance along, no? I am sure things are much simpler in your mountain home, Ashe, no? The truth is, Ashe, Lady Mist, is that your intentions are no real secret to me or my employer.”

“How do you know our names?”

“You do not need to worry about that, my dear. I—”

Ashe's hand snapped forward and seized the smiling man's upraised hand, gripping it until her knuckles whitened. The man's smile faded somewhat, and he attempted to free himself, but found himself unable slide his fingers out from Ashe's grip.

"How. Do. You. Know. Our. Names?" Ashe growled, punctuating each word with a tightening of her fist.

"So hasty. So reckless. Though I suppose that is to be expected. You barbarians never did quite grasp the concept of civilized society."

"I'll give you to the count of tell me right rotting now —"

"There's no need for that," the man said, "it is really no secret. But if you could, ah, release me?"

Ashe responded by digging her nails into the flesh of his hand.

"Tell..." Ashe began, and the man's smile dissolved.

"Veinos's eyes, okay, okay!"

Ashe released his hand, and the man scowled, massaging his fingers.

"I had hoped that we could be civilized about this."

The robed man breathed in and exhaled, attempting to restore some of his previous air of affected superiority. Mist glanced over at their table, turning over a crystalline bauble in her hands, and met Ashe's eyes. Ashe nodded and crossed her arms. The robed man coughed.

"Well, Ms. Selis. As I was saying. You and your companion have made your intentions quite...obvious. Asking questions. Very...sensitive questions."

"Questions that you'll now answer?" Ashe asked, and a wry smile crept onto the man's face.

"Not exactly—"

“Then we’re finished here.”

Ashe rose from the table, and the man cleared his throat. A number of chairs scraped back against the floor in answer, and Ashe found herself standing along with three others, dressed as day laborers. Day laborers who were now brandishing a sword, an oddly-shaped short sword with indents on the sides of the blade, and a cudgel, all items which had little place in the gem mines and irrigation farms that most Uleni spent their days working.

“You see, Ms. Selis,” the robed man drawled, rising to his feet, “I am afraid we cannot—”

Ashe took a single step back and kicked the edge of the table, sending it into the robed man’s soft, unprotected stomach. The man let out a half-gasp, half-gurgle, and dropped to the floor, clutching his chest. Mist lobbed the bauble she’d been holding into the air, and it exploded, releasing a bundle of winds that unfurled into a miniature twister. The twister hurled tableware and food through the air, setting the men off balance, and sending the other patrons of the establishment scrambling—and in Bassam’s case, jingling and waddling— for the doors. Ashe took a deep breath, and began to sing.

A cascade of words in fluid, confident Godscript issued from her lips, and Ashe’s Hymn began. As the melody issued forth from her lips, she focused her will, and began to Craft. A smoking, white-orange sphere of fire whirled into existence before her, and she commanded it through her song to take physical form. She tempered her blade in her wordless aria, and cast it in the conflagration of her Hymn. The flames bulged and thrashed, and Ashe drove her hand into the fire. Ashe pulled out her flame-wrought sword, and ducked under the incoming sword of a rather tall man, whose robes were such a vibrant array of pinks and orange that it almost hurt to

look at. The streak of red her blade painted as it tore across his chest did wonders for his fashion sense, if not for his health.

Ashe turned back to face to the final member of the smiling man's murderous entourage, a rather lean, lanky, horse-faced man—

Who was fleeing through the entrance as fast as his gangly limbs would propel him.

Ashe scowled, allowed her sword to dissipate in a coda of flame and echoed song, and broke into a run after their onetime assailant. Loose ends like him had a habit of turning up again when they were least desired, like a persistent, clueless former lover. As Ashe exited the Sun's Web, she caught a glimpse of her lanky target stumbling down a nearby thoroughfare, and charged after him.

Even at this late hour, the crowds that decorated Ulien's streets seemed undiminished. Ulien's nightlife was as vibrant, if not more so, than its days, and much of Ulien's citizenry was out in force in anticipation of the coming festival. Citizens wandered through the streets, stopping to peer into grand boutiques and eclectic erected stalls alike, all coated in the soft orchid hues of the Pilgrim moon's reflected light. Scattered like straw-woven spooks in a glowfruit orchard, the golden-masked Obligators lounged against walls and ambled down streets. Ulien had assembled legions of bustling bodies to impede Ashe's way. Despite their sheer numbers, there was a meandering air about the public, as if nobody was in any particular hurry to be anywhere. Nobody, of course, save for Ashe and her craven acquaintance.

While shouldering past unassuming Uleni citizens and breaking apart laughing couples was annoying, the progress of Ashe's quarry was hampered as well. If Ashe were ever to lose sight of the man, she could track where he'd been by the disgruntled parties he'd shoved aside in his haste to escape her sword.

The fleeing assassin ducked into an alley, and Ashe ducked underneath a mustachioed lord's palanquin, skirted a drunken swordsman's unsteady path, and almost crashed into a scrawny footwear merchant. Ashe began to stammer out an apology, but the shopkeeper leapt up from his blanket to accost her.

"Ah, welcome, welcome!" he gushed, seizing Ashe's hand with a strength that belied his thin arms, "If tonight be your first night in this most glorious of cities, this resplendent jewel of the desert, this most stupendous—"

"I really don't have the time—"

"Ah, a punctual woman, right to the point. I like that. No time for tales, or for breathless pitches, just hard facts. Ah, my mountain flower, if only more shared our proclivity for brevity. But alas, the world of commerce is full of blowhards and blatherers who would shroud the imperfections of their wares in a web of promises and lies. Such a pity, miss, such a pity."

"I—"

"Ah, look at me, going on again. My wife always says I allow my tongue too much freedom in the workplace. But she sings quite the opposite tune about that particular appendage in our palace of sheets, I assure you."

The shopkeeper winked at Ashe and grinned, exposing an impressive array of gold and silver fillings.

Ashe took advantage of the shopkeeper's momentary lapse in conversation to peer down the alleyway her would-be assailant had run down, and found it empty.

"Fantastic." Ashe muttered to herself, and the shopkeeper nodded vigorously.

"That's what she always says! Why, miss, are you an Umbrascibe?"

Isoba

The talons of fevered memory raked across his consciousness once more, and Isoba's mind recoiled as his body bent in on itself, attempting to protect itself from a pain all the armor on the Continent could never hope to shield him from.

Immaterial blows rained down on his weakened psyche, assaulting his very soul with shifting landscapes of emotion. His brain was oversaturated with sensations one moment, a discordant cocktail of pain, loss, hunger, fear and pleasure in varying intensities, and then deprived of feeling, a sensationless vacuum that left him yearning for the return of any feeling at all, pleasant or otherwise, just to free himself of the crushing sense of non-being conferred onto him. Razors danced the *sarang* on his spine while feathers drifted like autumn leaves down his gullet, tickling his throat, causing Isoba to choke out laughter through tears as he succumbed to a gentle smothering.

Images teetered in front of his eyes, overlaying themselves onto reality and each other until Isoba could no longer tell whether he was in the dungeons of the Sanctum of Sands, or whether he was again a brat in the Alms District, rummaging through refuse and the pockets of corpses, being punished for stealing in the square, dragging his mother's broken body—

His mother—

Isoba screamed, and the images vanished, the blades scraping his back ceased, and his mouth once more sucked air into. If he had been standing of his own accord, he would have collapsed, but the chains attached to his arms that were holding him aloft kept his knees from kissing the floor.

“I don’t understand. I’ve never seen anything like this.”

Isoba’s eyes cracked open for the first time in what felt like days, and focused on the source of the voice, a swarthy, pudgy, sweaty man whose drooping mustaches and glittering nose ring named him a high-ranking member of the Ghanem merchant family, but the single silver bell on the end of one mustache that lacked a twin on the other also marked him as a son in minor disgrace. For the first few days of his torture at his hands, Isoba had hated the man, cursing him with every free breath, but after enough of the corpulent Umbrascibe’s ministrations, Isoba’s passionate hatred had dulled to a quiet but forceful loathing.

The man might be fat with some sort of unpleasant glandular condition that caused him to glisten like a stuck pig roasting on a spit, but Pudge here was skilled in the delicate art of torture.

In his precious lucid moments when Pudge ambled off to do Veinos knew what with his free time, Isoba had cultivated a grudging professional appreciation for his attendant’s talents. Deprived of traditional Umbrascibing’s abilities, Isoba had always had to improvise and get creative with both physical tools and his solid shadows when it came time to coax information out of an unwilling second party, but though he counted himself somewhat talented, he could never be as effective as a true Umbrascibe, with their ability to carve runes that reached deep into the inner workings of peoples’ minds, and Pudge was an artist.

Traditional torture, at its most basic level, involved the manipulation of increasing levels of pain and isolation, but a skilled Umbrascibe had access to so much more. A rune accented a certain way could stimulate the pain sensors of the body, but the same rune carved with a different accent could invoke enrapturing ecstasy instead. Traditional Umbrascibing, as a rule, took too long to be of practical use in any urgent setting, but in a setting like this, or in a trial, there was plenty of time to work an Umbrascibe’s subtle and meticulous Craft.

As Isoba could now attest, feeling intense arousal following the distinct feeling of your testicles being torn from your body and forced down your throat was a unique sensation. Just as a singer could never be great without being a Flame-chanter, or how an Artless performer never be as lithe or graceful as a Lifedancer, pure, artistic torture could be found only in the realms of Umbra-scribes.

“You don’t understand what?” A gruffer voice, a full octave lower than Pudge’s, sounded, and Isoba noticed for the first time a tall, muscular man in an officer’s uniform standing next to Pudge. He was well-muscled, but his nose was a bit too small for Isoba’s personal tastes. The bulging, rippling muscles beneath that thin silk fabric of his tunic, however, most certainly would have been enough to whet his appetite in different circumstances.

“This man, he...” Pudge shrugged his shoulders, and his collection of chins wobbled as he shook his head. “I’ve never seen anything quite like it. He possesses an impressive will, to be able to resist my Crafting, almost like that of one of the Blessed, but I can find no traces of the ability in him.”

“You cannot break one of the Artless?” Incredulity coated the guardsman’s voice, and scorn rushed in to accompany. “Perhaps Her Radiance should seek elsewhere for an Umbrascibe less cursed with...incompetence?”

“I didn’t say I couldn’t break him. I did. Days ago.”

“Then what in the name of Bulin’s toes are you blathering about?”

Pudge winced, but somehow found it in himself to continue.

“I entered his mind, but he...uh...he doesn’t seem to remember...er...coming here.”

“I imagine he wouldn’t, Alar, considering he was unconscious when he dragged his scrawny *gothra* hide in here.”

Despite the weariness and emptiness conferred upon him by Pudge's—or Alar's, as it were—attentions, Isoba still managed to feel heat rise within himself at the guardsman's use of that old worn slur. *Gothra*. Beardless. One without status, family, or power. The men corralled within Father Mwenye's section of the Alms District were never allowed to have more than a day's growth of hair on their faces—anything more could earn you a trip to the Barber, who would remove the aberrant hair from your face, along with whatever else she felt like removing at the time. The Barber in Isoba's time had been a capricious, sadistic woman. Isoba had enjoyed killing her.

“No, no, Khari—er, Captain Akintola, you're not understanding.” Pudge said, wiping his forehead with his stubby, ringed fingers, “He doesn't remember coming to the Sanctum of Sands *at all*. Veinos's eye blind me if I'm lying, this man doesn't even remember where he *lives*. If I use my Craft to view through his eyes, I can see him eating breakfast last week, I can taste the pomegranate he picked at and then threw at a passing priest outside his window, and I can hear that priest's profanities, but if I attempt to direct his attention to where exactly he was—nothing. Blackness. No matter what sort of...persuasion I employ, these swaths of blackness that infest his memory refuse to dissipate.”

“Swaths? So there's more than one of these...dark patches?” The anger had vanished from Captain Akintola's voice, and he looked, for the first time, at Isoba. Isoba offered the Captain his most winning smile. The man's nose was too narrow, but his face wasn't entirely unattractive. He had striking eyes, this one. There was something about them, though, that Isoba couldn't quite make out in the feeble lighting available in his cell. Which was fine—a little bit of mystery was always appealing.

“Do you mind if I...?” Captain Akintola’s eyes flickered over to Pudge, who nodded, and as Akintola moved closer to Isoba, Isoba realized what was so noteworthy about the halfway handsome guard’s eyes. His pupils were a perfect, pale lilac hue. The color of an Umbrascibe close to Euphoria, close to succumbing to the sweet madness that all Umbrascibes spent their careers flirting with.

Ayana Ndaiye had herself a regular menagerie of Crafters, it seemed.

Akintola’s eyes flared violet and he began, with the patience of a weaving spider, to carve a rift in reality with his forefinger. The ethereal afterimage of Akintola’s tracings hung in midair, as Isoba’s did, but rather than remaining static, dripping purple ichor, they dissipated quickly, forming words in the script of the gods that only scholars, priests, and umbrascibes used. Isoba couldn’t read a word of it, of course, but understanding was not a requisite part of his end of this experience. Once Akintola finished what Isoba could only assume was a complete word, Isoba felt *something* invade his consciousness. Even though Pudge had been subjecting him to the sensation for days on end—and Master Zarrun had done it far more often over the years Isoba had served him—it was a difficult feeling to get used to. No matter how many times it happened, the presence of another personhood inside your own head was unsettling, to say the least.

While Pudge preferred a hardier touch, the presence of Akintola’s mind felt more like a gossamer web unfolding around Isoba’s consciousness. Isoba’s vision blurred, and he felt the distinct sensation of Akintola rummaging through his memories, as snatches of half-remembered images flashed across his vision.

Time lost meaning, as if Isoba had been deprived of the fluency needed to comprehend it. The perusal Akintola was making should require hours, some part of Isoba’s lurid mind knew,

but an Umbrascibe close to insanity was more powerful, and more reckless, than any single Umbrascibe would be.

As suddenly as it had arrived, Captain Akintola's presence vanished from Isoba's mind, and his finger concluded its waltz of words.

"I've seen this before." Akintola said, taking a single step back and turning his back to Isoba.

As he turned, Isoba noticed his expression shift—from one of beatific ecstasy to naked disgust. Another sign of his Progression. Isoba was given to understand that the more time an Umbrascibe spent in the minds of others, the less appealing reality became for them. The control afforded to them in the realms of thought was stripped from them when they returned to the mundanities of the normal world. Even disregarding the color of his eyes, Akintola was close to Euphoria—losing himself in the shadows of his own mind, a prisoner of the pleasures of his Art.

"You have?" Pudge asked.

"A few times. Her Radiance has been tracking agents with this Warping for months, now. It is the handiwork of a powerful Umbrascibe. A Warping that obscures the target's own memory. It is very useful for espionage, as having an agent who cannot divulge your secrets is quite desirable. I have seen it done before, but the Warping always left the target...shall we say, somewhat cracked. Wiping out a person's memories can have a curious effect on that person. So much of who we are is based on who we were, and if you take the latter away..." Akintola shrugged. "Well, there is a reason Warping is illegal."

Akintola frowned, fiddled with a cord on his chest, and continued.

“But this...this is unique. It’s the same basic spell, but the precision and specificity is incredible. Every other case of this I’ve seen, the umbrascibe had just ripped away whole years out of their subject’s memory. They’ve managed to somehow obscure, not remove, concepts and specific bits of information—his home’s location, his employer’s identity, and anything that might lead back to them, and they’ve left the rest. This *gothra* knows the information we seek, but is incapable of ever divulging it. If we ask, or if we attempt to find out any taboo information, it doesn’t just vanish—he *forgets*. It’s quite remarkable craftsmanship. Beautiful and utterly devoid of humanity--this poor *gothra*’s mind is an unsalvageable wreck. I would be surprised if he makes it another couple years. I would enjoy meeting the architect of this deception, right before I locked them up for the rest of their lives.”

Isoba tried to picture Captain Akintola arresting Solum Zarrun, and grinned. Zarrun would find some obscure loophole in the law that would somehow prove that either what he had done wasn’t technically Warping, or that Warping was somehow not *really* illegal. Likely with a loophole he’d written in himself. Few intrepid souls ever mustered the courage to comb through the labyrinthine mess of traditions, familial exceptions, and obscure Crafting ordinances that comprised Ulien’s legislations, but Solum Zarrun had always made a point to count himself as one of those precious few.

“So what you’re saying is, all my work these past few days has been for nothing.” Pudge groaned, slumping against the dungeon wall.

“You’ll still get paid, don’t worry.” Akintola said with a wry smile, and Pudge rolled his eyes.

“I don’t do this for the money, Khari. It’s for the art, and for the pleasure of serving Her Radiance, of course.”

“Ah, but of course.” Akintola turned away without a second glance at Isoba, and opened the door to leave. “So I’ll inform Paymaster Imbala that you won’t be needing your fee.”

“Well, I didn’t say *that*...”

Akintola barked a laugh, and the two men left the room bickering good-naturedly while Isoba hung from the ceiling, staring once more into the now-familiar darkness.

Ashe

“Here, I bought you these.”

Ashe dropped a freshly wrapped pair of leather sandals onto the table in front of Mist, who eyed them with equal parts befuddlement and suspicion.

“When you ran out that doorway, Ashe, I wasn’t under the impression you were moving with such haste to go...shopping.” Mist said, unwrapping the sandals, and turning them over in her hands. “Not that I’m ungrateful, these do look nice.”

“It’s a long story.”

Ashe reached down, picked up a chair that Mist’s Crafted whirlwind had knocked over, and righted it before sitting down. Ashe took a cursory glance around the common room of the Sun’s Web, and grimaced. The common room looked like an angry drunken bear had taken ballet lessons from a maelstrom within it, and Iesha’s formerly immaculate floor was now strewn with toppled chairs, overturned tables, and unfinished dinner meats.

“Iesha is not going to be happy.” Ashe said, and Mist grimaced.

“At least tonight isn’t a complete waste.”

Ashe and Mist turned as one to regard the third party who sat steeped in unease at their table, the robed man who had led the cadre of toughs. The fashion-challenged swordsman Ashe had dealt with was still bleeding out onto Iesha’s patterned Bhatan rug, and the woman that Mist had dispatched didn’t seem ready to rejoin the world of the living just yet, collapsed as she was over an upturned table. But their leader remained conscious and breathing, at least. For now.

The robed man plastered a smile on his face that attempted to project some sort of semblance of serenity, but the panicked look in his eyes betrayed him. This was a man used to being in control of a situation. He'd bluster and ramble, taking desperate refuge in the familiar swaddling tones of his own voice, as if his mere words could forestall whatever Ashe and Mist might do to him. This was a man used to cruelty, both inflicting it and experiencing it. He'd expect the same of anyone else, and Ashe could use that against him. She'd never much had the stomach for torture, and the sight of blood still sickened Mist after all these years.

But he didn't know that.

"Lady Mistaria, Ms. Selis, I'm sure you will find that we can come to some sort of understanding. My employer is a dangerous man, but also a—"

"Ah, here comes the blustering. Sure as the tides." Ashe said, and the robed man's imposter smile withered on his round, hairless face.

"I—"

"Why is it," Mist mused aloud, "that every brigand, cutpurse, and charlatan we tie up seems to be under the impression that we're keeping them around for the pleasure of their conversation?"

"Well, if you would—"

"You know what the fantastic thing about a rhetorical question is?"

"I—"

"Clearly, you don't."

The robed man fell silent, and Mist fixed him with a practiced unreadable stare while Ashe fiddled with one of the abandoned skewers that had once held someone's dinner.

Interrogations with Mist were always fun. She could use her awesome powers of condescension at someone else's expense for once, and Ashe could sit there and look intimidating.

The silence stretched onwards, and the robed man began to fidget under the weight of Mist's heavy gaze. People were so odd. Despite the fact that Mr. Robes was being held prisoner, the looming specter of an awkward silence was still a daunting foe for him. His dark eyes darted towards Ashe, who stretched her lips in a languid smile at him in response until he returned his eyes to Mist for a few seconds before directing his attention at the table, finding it a more palatable perch for his focus.

"So. As Ashe was asking you earlier before you so rudely tried to intimidate us, how do you know our names?" Mist said.

"Well, Mist—"

"Getting awfully familiar with her there, Cheeks." Ashe said.

"C-Cheeks?" Cheeks sputtered, and Mist raised an inquisitive eyebrow as well. Ashe shrugged.

"Guy's got fat cheeks. Have call him something, right?"

"How dare you? My *name* is Ma'rah Az—"

Ma'rah blanched, and a satisfied smile curled Mist's lips.

"Nice to make your acquaintance, Ma'rah. Now that we know your name, could you perhaps tell us how you became familiar with ours?"

"I'll—"

"Or you could do us a favor, and we skip the part where you insist that you'll never tell us, and the ensuing part where we threaten and cajole the answers out of you, and the requisite part that involves you realizing that you don't have another option. Can we get to the inevitable

conclusion where you just tell us what we need to know, and you get to walk out of here instead of being cooked like a Feastday boar by my partner here?”

Ma’rah’s eyes flickered over to Ashe, who had begun humming during Mist’s speech. While mere humming couldn’t bring to bear the full weight of her Crafting, the hummed version of the Hymn she performed was beginning to slowly raise the temperature in the room. Not that Ashe yearned for it to be even hotter in this sand-blasted oven of a city, but it made for an effective intimidation technique.

“And as I was saying, before you so rudely tried to intimidate me,” Ma’rah said, provoking an eyeroll from Mist and an amused smirk from Ashe, “I will tell you what you want to know. I have no desire to be, ah, cooked to death. As I said, it is no secret how we know who you are.”

“You didn’t seem this forthcoming before we took out your friends,” Ashe said, and Ma’rah sighed.

“Friends? Please, threaten me all you like, but don’t associate me with *gothra* like them. They were cheap tools, nothing more.”

“*Gothra*?” said Mist, brow furrowing, “That’s...what, furless, in Godscript? No, the accent is on the ‘go’, so...beardless, right? But aren’t you...” Mist gestured towards Ma’rah’s head, which was devoid of hair of any kind—even his eyebrows were as absent as rain in the desert.

Ma’rah sneered.

“Foreigners. How you uusha call the lawless, primitive societies you come from ‘civilization’ is beyond me. I am without a beard, but I am not *gothra*, in much the same way that a temple is not an outhouse just because both buildings have doors.”

Ma'rah made a curious sound, a sort of guttural scoffing noise from the back of his throat. Ashe had noticed several Uleni make this sound, as some sort of cultural expression of mocking disgust. She'd tried to replicate it, but had only succeeded in almost gagging, which had amused Iesha to no end. For days afterwards, the men in the common room called for the 'Choking Peakborn' to perform. Idiots.

"No, *lady* Mistaria, I am privileged to be sonari."

"Sonari...that's...directionless, right?" Mist guessed.

Ashe had never had the ear for Godscript, but all nobles were expected to understand at least a little of the language that the gods used to communicate with humanity. Ulien, more than other cities, seemed to work Godscript terms into its common parlance more than the other cities of Meynas. It was a little infuriating. Another irritating stick in the bonfire that had been Ashe's patience.

"That would be a literal translation, yes. A better, more refined understanding of the word would be 'both above and below'. We sonari are servants of the highest order, serving only the greatest of men and women in this glorious city. We are servants, and as such we lack the freedoms of even the basest of common laborers, but our service exalts us to the highest tiers of society, for our Work is to realize the wills of those closest to the gods." Ma'rah exulted, his features awash with fanatical zeal.

"You're a servant? So you're just a tool, too." Ashe said, scowling. This man needed to be taken down a peg or seven.

"A tool? Most certainly, I am, but what grants a tool, or a servant, meaning is the way one is used. A common paintbrush in the hands of a master is divine, the same paintbrush in the hands of the uninitiated is profaned. Those yokels—" Ma'rah waved a dismissive hand at the

corpse of one of his thugs, “—are inadequate implements, unworthy of my Lord’s time or consideration. But I shall serve unerringly, for we sonari are the most elegant of tools, the most worthy of—”

“We get it. Really, we do.” Ashe said, and Ma’rah scowled at her interruption.

“Very well. Regardless, I was instructed by my Lord to bring you to him, whether you were willing or not. Clearly, you wish to meet him, so I’m sure we can come to some sort of accord.”

“And who is this ‘Lord’ of yours?” Mist asked.

“Also, you still haven’t answered our original question, don’t think we’ve forgotten about that.” Ashe added.

“Who he is matters not. And as for your original question, when it came to my Lord’s attention that some outlanders were searching for Isoba Amibola, well, he could not just leave that be, as I am sure you understand. Imagine his surprise when he discovers that it is the Crystal Lord’s own daughter and her lapdog. You two were quite careless, delving into a subject like this with all the deftness and grace of an infant piglet falling face-first into a puddle of mud.”

“A subject like what?” Mist said, and Ma’rah made that throat-scoffing sound again.

“I thought we were being frank with each other, Lady Mistaria.”

“No, seriously. Who is this Amibola person, anyway?” Ashe asked, and for the first time since they’d come to make his acquaintance, Ma’rah seemed lost for words.

“You...you do not know?”

“I thought that was obvious, given the fact that we were asking around about him.” Mist said, but Ma’rah didn’t seem to hear her.

“How can that be possible? Where did you hear that name? Where?”

“That’s for us to know, and for you—” Ashe began, but Ma’rah cut her off with a snarl.

“This is not the time for childish games, little girl, you do not have any idea what you are getting yourself into. Nobody knows that name. Nobody, but—”

Ma’rah paused, blinked a few times, and then unleashed a scream that seemed to come from the depths of his soul before he slipped out of his seat and collapsed on the floor, spasms rocking his howling form. Mist jumped violently at their captive’s sudden shift in mien, and Ashe leapt to her feet, and readied herself to sing a weapon into existence.

“What in Kyrei’s name—” Mist managed to exclaim before the door to the Sun’s Web shattered and exploded into a tempest of splinters and broken hinges that were hurled across the common room.

“Misbegotten whoreson pieces of *shit*—” Ashe swore melodically, her vulgarities becoming one with her song before they were lost within the roaring flames and soaring melody of her Hymn. This Hymn wasn’t one of her best works, but it served when pressed for time. Ashe’s voice fluctuated from high to low as the ball of Creation warped and leapt in concert with her rushed Hymn, and she ripped a smoking long knife, jagged, cherry-red and only just finished, out of the small sphere of fire she’d conjured.

The man behind their current predicament entered the room, and Ashe found herself wishing she’d had something a little larger.

The person who stepped through the sundered doorway was a giant of a man, barrel-chested and muscled to an almost egregious extreme. He was smiling, as if he hadn’t just destroyed the common room he was now standing in, his white teeth standing out starkly against the darkness of his skin. He wore a striped orange vest that showed off his powerful physique and bared his arms, and a necklace that bore a single, massive fang hung around his neck. His

beard was wild, curly, and untamed, and he possessed one of the most luxuriant mustaches Ashe had ever seen, waxed to points with ruby-encrusted bells on their ends. This man was flamboyant even by Uleni standards, and by the standards of any other city, he'd stop traffic and conversations with the sheer force of his presence. It was his eyes, however, that drew Ashe's attention.

They were a luminous violet.

An Umbrascibe. Fantastic.

"Ashe, his eyes." Mist hissed.

"I know. Keep a look out, if it isn't him, there's a Stormsculptor around here somewhere." Ashe whispered back.

"Now, that is no fun!" The interloper boomed, his baritone tones filling the room.

"Secrets are no fun at all. We are all friends here, are we not?"

"Of course. My friends always enter the room by destroying the door, it's what friends are for." Mist said, and the man laughed.

"A fair point, my sarcastic friend. But nonetheless, I have done you a favor."

"That so?"

"But of course! I have relieved you of the need to listen to that hairless worm's prattling. Hearing that man's voice is enough to drive a body mad with boredom."

Ma'rah began to scream again, and the newcomer rolled his eyes and chuckled.

"See what I mean? Even now, he makes a liar of me. Although to his credit, he is being much more to the point than is common for him."

The man shook his head, smiling, and then stomped down on Ma'rah's neck, breaking it with a sickening snap that ended his shrieks forever. He moved with the same degree of passion a man might take to put on his sandals.

"Oh, my departed grandmother would scold me so, I have not even introduced myself. I am Kgosi Maraan, and you two are looking for the same person I am. I thought that we could work together."

"Kgosi Maraan?" Mist breathed, and Ashe glanced over at her, a sinking feeling brewing strong within her stomach, like one of the teas Mist's own grandmother had been so fond of.

"You know him?"

"Of him. Kgosi Maraan, the Lion of Penumbra. Ashe, he's one of the Shadow Barons."

"Oh, hell."

Ashe's grip on her long knife tightened. A Shadow Baron. One of the five crime lords that ruled Ulien's Penumbra District, the network of back alleys, storerooms, speakeasies, and hidden places that comprised Ulien's underworld. It was somewhat paradoxical that the city with the largest, most powerful, and most pervasive judicial system in Meynas would have the most infamous criminal underworld in the continent, but it was true nonetheless.

"Ah, my reputation precedes me!" Kgosi said delightedly, clapping his massive hands together. "That will make introductions even briefer, once you two care to inform me of your own names."

"You...don't know who we are?"

"Should I?"

"Um." Ashe shot a befuddled look at Mist, who shrugged.

Kgosi Maraan ambled further into the room, went behind the bar, and began to pour himself a drink, mixing together two of the absurdly potent liquors that the Uleni were so obsessed with drinking. The two colorful liquids settled into an amber mixture, and Kgosi raised a glass to his lips before his eyes widened.

“Oh, my departed mother would skin me alive if she could see her son now, serving himself before two guests. How rude of me, I am sorry. Might I offer you anything to drink?”

Kgosi gestured in the direction of Iesha’s treasured collection of bottles. His ‘departed mother’ seemed to have no issue with offering someone else’s booze in the name of hospitality.

“I think we’ll pass.” Ashe said, and Kgosi shrugged.

“If you insist.” Kgosi downed the concoction in his glass, and Ashe winced. That stuff felt like it was an open flame prancing through a parched forest down your throat, setting your gullet aflame as it went on the warpath towards the final assault on your liver. Kgosi didn’t seem to mind. He nodded appreciatively, and then began pouring himself a second drink’.

“Now, I did you the politeness of introducing myself, so one would think I have earned the same from you.” Kgosi said, and Ashe noted a dangerous glint hidden in his jovial features, the telltale volatility of a man ruled by his passions.

This was a man who could laugh and drink with you one second, crush your skull against a wall the next, and return to his revelry with nary a care in the world as your blood dribbled down the wall and stained the carpet he stood on. She’d known men like him while patrolling Meynas, and they tended to get themselves killed early by picking a fight with the wrong person, or by fatally overestimating their own capabilities. The Deathscorned feasted on their overconfidence. That Kgosi Maraan had reached the station he had without being assassinated

for his troubles meant that he had the luck of the Artisans themselves, or that he was dangerous enough to make up for his nature.

“I’m Ashe. I’d give you a surname, but my family wasn’t important enough to care about things like that.” Ashe said, earning yet another raised eyebrow from Mist.

“We’re telling him?”

Ashe shrugged.

“There’s no chance he doesn’t have us surrounded. I don’t think we gain anything from hiding anything from him.”

“So we’re surrendering?”

“Not quite,” Ashe said, regarding Kgosi as he waited, hands clasped, for the two of them to finish. He looked, for all the world, like a patient child waiting for Mother and Father to decide what was for dinner. “We’re just...negotiating.”

“Right. Well, Lord Maraan, my name is Mist.”

“Ashe and Mist?” Kgosi said, tilting his head. “How...elemental. But now that we have exchanged pleasantries, we can get down to business. You two have caused quite the hubbub in our little desert hamlet the past few days amongst those who know what is not known.”

“So we’ve been told,” Ashe said, trying to avoid looking at the broken corpse that had once been Ma’rah.

“I had not been able to make up my mind about the two of you. Two *uusha* women come into our city, and begin asking questions about a name they have no business knowing. After all, anyone who knows that name knows better than to bandy that fact around for the whole world to see. So clearly, you two must have been some sort of trap, set up by the Demon himself, or whoever pens his tale, because nobody that blatantly oblivious could possibly be anything else.”

“Maybe your first guess was right.” Ashe said, testing out an angle, but Kgosi waved a hand.

“Do not bother. We have watched you for a while, and in the face of all the logic of gods and men, you appear to be...sincere. Which makes you either dangerous, stupid, or dangerously stupid. I have decided to rule out stupidly dangerous. No offense meant, of course, the way you disposed of Ma’rah’s men was very impressive.” Kgosi turned concerned eyes on Ashe and Mist, as if he was genuinely concerned that they might have taken offense. By the Painted Demons, he actually seemed to care.

“Or perhaps just ignorant, Mr. Maraan,” Mist said, crossing her arms, “Perhaps you can finally help us. Who *is* Isoba Amibola?”

“You really do not know.” Kgosi said, wonder in his eyes, “How do you know the name but not who he is? Most know only the opposite, if they believe at all.”

Ashe stifled the urge to fidget uncomfortably under Kgosi’s bewildered, yet intense gaze. She didn’t think any false answer she gave Kgosi would satisfy the man. She might as well be honest.

“We were hired to find someone by that name,” Ashe said, keeping it simple, “A man from Bulinar gave us the name.”

Calling their employer a ‘man’ was stretching the truth a little, but it was close enough.

“A third person who knows that name? What a world.”

“Why is it so shocking that we know that name? Ma’rah said the same thing, it’s just a *name*.”

“Have you ever heard of the Demon of Penumbra?” Kgosi asked, and Mist frowned.

“No, I—”

“Yeah. A little.” said Ashe, and Mist scowled.

“And you didn’t tell me?”

“It didn’t seem important at the time. I heard a couple of the merchants mention it, it’s some sort of monster or something. It haunts the shadows, tears people apart without touching them, controls darkness itself, eats little misbehaving children if they don’t eat their porridge and vegetables, that sort of thing. That about right?”

“Right on all counts, save for two. One, He is far more the type to encourage misbehaving children. And two,” The Shadow Baron spread a grin that held all the mirth and malice of a cat looking upon a boxful of mice, “The Demon of Penumbra is very, very real. And you, for reasons known only to the Artisans themselves, know his name. So tell me, my new friends. What exactly do you want with my oldest friend?”

Isoba

Isoba Amibola, the Demon of Penumbra, Scourge of the Underworld, and Assassin of two Shadow Barons, pissed on the floor again, and found that he'd gotten used to the stench of his own urine. As it turned out, would-be assassins weren't considered worthy of having chamber pots. So Isoba was afforded the singular luxury of being permitted to live in his own filth. He'd made the most of his current predicament as best he could, but trying to draw crude shapes on the wall in his urine could only entertain a man for so long.

Occasionally, he considered attempting an escape. They'd released him from his bindings, as Captain Akintola had decided that as an Artless he couldn't hurt anyone, so his hands were free. So the next time the door opened, he could try throttling his captors with Umbrascrying and fleeing, but the rational part of his mind knew it was a fool's errand. He had no idea where he was, and if he happened to emerge into the middle of a barracks or something, he'd get slaughtered. Not to mention, if he failed to escape *and* revealed the nature of his Crafting to the world, Master Zarrun would most certainly not bother rescuing him. So he'd continue to wait, and reign over his domain of stone, shit, and piss until it came time for him to abdicate.

Isoba scratched an itch on his chin, and was surprised once more by the resistance his fingers felt in the form of the stubble he'd procured. Isoba had never had facial hair before in any

significant amount, as Zarrun had never thought it proper for someone of his position to grow any, even after his escape from Father Mwenye's dogma, so his internment here was at least providing him with new experiences. It did itch like a gasha-drinker's right arm, though.

The sound of clinking keys and rigid footsteps appeared behind the doorway, and Isoba's brow furrowed. He'd already been fed tonight, what could they want with him now? A game of 'poke the *gothra*', perhaps?

Isoba heard the sound of the key sliding into the keyhole, and braced himself for the sight of Pudge's drooping, sweaty jowls appearing in the doorway. Watching the rotund Umbrascibe's attempts to fit into the tightly-wrapped silks favored by Uleni nobility was, another of the many tortures Isoba was forced to endure. Isoba laid down on his back, and pretended to be asleep.

The door opened, and Isoba cracked an eyelid to view a figure step through the doorway that was much less circular than Pudge. A figure that Isoba was intimately familiar with.

Nia. Oh, hell.

Nia Solum, only daughter of Zarrun Solum, stared down at Isoba's lounging form, and Isoba was suddenly very aware of the fact that he wasn't wearing any clothes, that he hadn't bathed in days, and that his tenure as the Lord of Shit, Piss, and Stone had left him smelling like...well, two of those things. Not that Nia hadn't seen him nude several times before that, but it was always in more flattering circumstances.

Isoba met Nia's dark, disapproving eyes, and plastered a cocky smile on his face.

"About time you showed up. I've been waiting for days." Isoba lied.

Nia regarded Isoba, arms crossed, left foot tapping an irregular beat on the stone floor of the prison. Her vibrant, flowing green dress made an odd contrast with the bland décor of the

cell, like a stubborn blooming lotus in a putrid marsh. She was wearing her black hair in long, thin braids with grey beads on the ends today, a look Isoba thought was flattering, though now didn't seem like the best time to point that out. Unless it was?

"I uh, like your hair. Did Shera Dione braid it?" Isoba offered, and Nia's face remained expressionless. Rot and pestilence, it wasn't the right time. Apparently. Maybe he was supposed to be more specific, after all, any idiot could tell a woman he liked her hair. Should he try again?

"Also, um..."

"Hush." Nia said, and Isoba fell silent. After a minute of silence, Isoba dared to speak again.

"So—"

"Be quiet. I am busy."

"Busy doing...what?"

"Busy etching this moment into my mind forever. Isoba Amibola, wallowing in his own excrement, laid low by a handful of mere guardsmen. This will warm my heart for years." Nia said, and Isoba rolled his eyes.

"Yeah, yeah, drink it in. I'll have you know that as soon as you stepped within that door, you entered the domain of the King of Excrement, and we find your lack of filth unacceptable. In fact, clothing is illegal within our borders, so I'm going to have to ask you to disrobe."

Nia smirked, and Isoba broke into a grin for the first time in what felt like years. He'd never admit it to her face, but it was damned good to see her. It always was.

Growing up as Zarrun Solum's slave and test subject had afforded Isoba precious few opportunities for human interaction, save for that of Zarrun himself, his assistants, and Isoba's fellow experiments. Because Zarrun Solum was a man of upstanding ethical character, he'd

counted his own daughter amongst those experiments, seeking to find the limits of what mortal Crafting could be pushed to do. She'd made out better than Isoba had, of course. Being Zarrun's daughter had its perks to make up for the fact that she was actually related to that walking disease of a man.

And even Isoba, present state of affairs included, had ended up better than poor Vei.

"So, what brings you to my palace?" Isoba asked.

"Officially?"

"Sure, why not?"

"As far as her Radiance is concerned, I am here on my exalted father's behalf, here to investigate and personally interrogate the miscreant who invaded her Radiance's apartments with malignant intent, that he might know that the full force of our glorious city's considerable resources have been brought to bear against him." Nia said with an exaggerated regal air, mimicking the self-indulgent tones of M'thei, the Shera of the Solum Palace, and Isoba snorted. The mimicry was wickedly accurate.

"Alright, sounds good. I will make sure to look properly whipped when you leave. I will mumble prayers to the Artisans, promise them my firstborn, whatever."

"The House of Solum thanks you for your service." Nia said, solemnity etched in her every feature save for her gleaming brown eyes, dark amber, regality hiding mischief.

"And unofficially?"

"You know father. He worries."

"I am so very touched." Isoba said, shoveling every ounce of sarcasm he could into his response. In case Nia had missed his point, he rolled his eyes. Twice.

“I cannot be down here too long. I’m just here to let you know that you need to hold out for a little longer. Father has convinced the Three that your execution should be public, to dissuade further acts of violence against them.”

“How considerate. He should not have. Really.”

“A public execution, preceded by a march throughout the Dune District so that the whole city can look upon the man who tried to silence their beloved Voice, before being brought to the Weaver’s Respite, and given the choice between execution by mind-cleanse, and entrance into the embrace of the golden city.”

“How very stupendulous. Stupen...Stupendous. That. Mind-death or suicide, how...very civilized.”

“Would you prefer to live in Kei Doen, where the condemned are allowed to scale the Ever-Rising Towers to attempt to claim their pardon? Most fall before they reach the halfway point. Or perhaps in Bulinar, where the guilty are given to the dancing god and his games?”

“The Artisans and people are sick, what is your point?”

“Always with the blasphemies.” Nia twisted her lip, and touched the tips of her eyelids, warding herself from Isoba’s irreverence. “Choice matters in these things, Isoba. Veinos carved out and sanctified the center of our city so that those with no place to go--the condemned, the terminally ill, the lost and the forsaken, might spend their last days in comfort. It was a mercy, more than any other god did. You would do well to show appreciation to our god, if not the others, for once in your life.”

“Okay, okay. I will try to give thanks, right before my very public execution.”

“A public execution that happens to fall on the third Feastday of the Banquet of Bulin, when much of the city will be worked up into a fervor to herald the god’s arrival in our city.

Passions will be high, there's no telling what could happen." Nia gave Isoba a meaningful look,. But before he could respond, Nia continued on, savage impishness dancing in her eyes.

"Or maybe we will just let you fall victim to mob justice, and let the murderous onlookers tear you to shreds with their bare hands. I have not quite decided."

"Oh, hush, you would miss me. Besides, father dearest could never bear to let an asset like me slip through his fingers." Isoba said, unable to keep the bitterness from his voice.

Nia frowned, but didn't say anything. There weren't any new paths to travel down on this particular conversational journey, and there would never be.

"Just...do not do anything stupid until then, alright?" Nia asked.

"Unless the torturer here sits on me, I should be fine."

Nia nodded, and then clapped her hands together with a sharp crack.

"Tawi! I am ready!" Nia called.

The cell door was wrenched open, and a massive trunk of a man stood outside of it. He had biceps the size of Isoba's head, and his tanned skin had an unhealthy pallor to it, with veins visible and bulging beneath it. His grey eyes stared into Isoba's own, and Isoba repressed the urge to shudder. Those lifeless grey eyes left him soon after they found him, came to rest on Nia, and he knelt beside her, head bowed. Of course, his face was clean-shaven. Nia might be one of the more tolerable aristocrats, but she'd still inherited Zarrun's sense of propriety. Isoba's lip curled. No matter how many times he saw them, he never quite got used to seeing one of Nia's 'pets'.

"This one looks...chipper." Isoba offered, and Nia smiled fondly up at the hairless collection of muscles she'd named 'Tawi'.

“He is one of my best works, would you not agree? This one might have a year in him, maybe more. I am getting better, Isoba.” Nia’s eyes lit up as they always did when she discussed her Art. “I think I have finally figured out the steps of the Form that were causing the heart to fail. If my theories are correct, a subtle shift in posture after the seventh flow might just nudge the pulmonary system just so, which would—”

“I uh, think you should go before they start wondering what the Arbiter’s daughter could have to say to a vagrant assassin for so long.” Isoba said, cutting Nia off.

If he let her, she’d ramble on about the minutiae of her Lifedancing for hours. Isoba had been with a motley collection of women and men over the years, but of them, only Nia had ever seemed to find the science of Crafting to be an enticing subject of post-coital pillow talk. Not to mention, Nia’s particular brand of Lifedancing wasn’t the most appetizing of topics.

Lifedancers channeled the forces of creation through their dance to heal and encourage growth, in animals, in humans, in nature. Working in concert, an ensemble of dancers could make a field bloom, manipulate wood, siphon disease, and heal many wounds short of death. What Nia did was different.

The veiled priests of the city would claw Nia’s eyes out with their bare hands if they knew the truth behind her grey-skinned servants, who wore dark cloaks and masks in public to disguise their pallor. Each of the Great Cities would execute her for heresy, and to the Painted Demons with who her father was.

“True. Remind me to tell you once you are free.” Nia locked eyes with Isoba. “and you will be free.”

Isoba forestalled any bitter jabs about the specifics of the ‘freedom’ he had to look forward to, and gave Nia a wan smile.

“Just have some lime cakes waiting for me when I get out. You would not believe the muck they serve here.”

“Done.” Nia said, and with one final glance, she left, Tawi trailing in her wake, an undead puppy after his mistress’s heels.

The door closed shut again, and Isoba sighed. It had been good to see her, but now that she’d gone, the unyielding silence that blanketed the room was all the more oppressive. Suddenly, being Regent of Bodily Functions and Building Materials was lonelier than it had been before. Although he now had something to look forward to, which was ...something. This was the first time in Isoba’s lifetime that Ulien had played host to the Artisan of Dance. The biannual harvest festival was always a spectacle, but Bulin so rarely found reason to make an appearance in their humble desert home, so the city had been preparing for months. The city’s larders were being prepared for the god’s legendary appetite.

Isoba grimaced, thinking about the sheer amount of food that the god would clutch in his eight hands and force into his hallowed gullet. Or *her* gullet, there was no telling what form the god would amble into the city in. Bulin was capricious and voracious, and the people trapped in the Alms District would subsist on cornmeal, gaaram cactus and dirty water while an immortal being that didn’t even need to eat ate enough for entire families.

Isoba noticed that his hands had clenched into fists, nails digging into his palms. He hadn’t lived amongst the dispossessed victims of Ulien’s overpopulation that made up the Alms District in over a decade, but his resentment had yet to evaporate. The wasteful opulence of the city was one of the few things that disgusted Isoba on a fundamental, even moral level. These days, he had little use for such moral scruples, but the gods brought out the best in him.

Whispers--Comfort

Gods never sleep. The Writer is always at work.

Pluck, listen, *snip*. Unworthy. Pluck, listen, *snip*. Unworthy. Pluck, listen—

Listen—

Veinos selects one gleaming strand, and inspects it. The overworked healer. The bitter salve. The crumbling faithful. A tale worth including? A tale worth experiencing.

Veinos holds the string of human memories aloft, and allows the inscribed tale to envelop him.

Sensations unfurl.

Touch appears first, the unnatural fountain of warmth that is a fevered man's skin shaking within the human's—her—grasp, each spasm of the dying man threatening to throw off her grip.

Taste follows, the salty cocktail of sweat brought on by a mixture of insistent heat and dogged effort that ran down the human's—her—face, down her cracked lips, and into her mouth past gritted teeth.

Scent—the aroma of coming eternity, the suffocating stench of portending death that envelops the tent she works in. The sterile scent of bandages mixed with the festering notes of disease and rot, combining with the ever-present olfactory barrage of feces, urine, and vomit that every healer came to know as intimately as their spouses.

Sound—the myriad cries of the corpses who had yet to actually follow through on their inevitable fates, crippled warriors calling out defiance against the one foe none of them could fell, diseased beggars plying their trade one final time with the Artisans themselves, in the hopes

that they would deliver them the alms of life, withered grandmothers and broken fathers alike audibly wishing for the same thing, over and over again.

Time. More of it. Less of it, if their pain was too great to bear. Always time, that commodity that mortals lacked and craved, and that the gods had and did not need.

Sight—the Bulinari beggar’s sun-darkened face twists in agony one final time, and life flees his eyes as his arm goes limp in Prema’s hands. Prema drops his static appendage, mops her brow, and moves on to the next hopeless case, as she has for the last seven bodies, newly acquainted with eternity. The midday sky is relentless, and the brief respite the Prophet moon had provided as it passed over the sun has given way to a deluge of heat worse than any other day of this summer. It is a day for retreating inside from the onslaught of tormenting sunrays. It is a day for cool drinks and juicy oasis-fruits. It is a day for the accentuation of rot.

The sound of a sudden explosion draws Prema’s eyes upwards, away from the disease-ridden camp, and up, up to where the city above held its’ festivities. Bulinar, the Living City, the Ever-Growing Gem, looms overhead, an earthy masterwork of silver and wood. Bulinar is a city of massive spires of vegetation and metal, a city that abhors the restricting rigidity of straight lines. It is a city of curves—of winding pathways of vines and flowers that link the spherical domiciles the Bulinari made their homes in, of filigreed statues of dead heroes and living elders. Elevated by six massive coiled tree trunks that form the ‘legs’ of the monstrous city, Bulinar soars above the surface of Meynas, forever moving across the Continent, propelled by its massive limbs, fueled by the Lifedancers of the city. Even now, Prema could make out their lithe, leaping forms on the dozens of platforms that dotted the limbs of the city, manipulating the life-energies of the city in order to keep it moving. Even at rest, as Bulinar was now, the city

required near-constant maintenance. Bulinar was heralded the world over as a hallmark of craftsmanship, of Art, of the wonders the gods were capable of.

To Prema, it is an eyesore.

Prema staggers groggily through the flaps of the tattered tent that had been constructed to act as a makeshift hospital for the Caravan, and emerges into the familiar bustling horde of Cavernfolk, jabbering, bickering, and generally clogging the air and ground with their voices and bodies. The nomadic Cavernfolk were a people of merchants, beggars, travelling warriors, and adventure-priests that were united by one singular action—following the Living City on the *Ferah'de*, the Path of Seasons.

Each year, the Living City moved through a set path throughout Meynas, arriving in a different set location during each of the four seasons. During First Sowing, the city passed by the feet of the Umthal Teeth, during First Harvest, it passed within an arrow's arc of Althom. Second Sowing brought the Living City through the Sapphire Coast—a tiresome journey, filled with sand and the overpowering smell of fish that Prema could never quite accustom herself to—and Second Harvest found the city amongst the towers of Kei Doen.

And through it all, through snow and sand, through heat and rain, the Eternal Caravan marched beneath it, surviving off the scraps of the city above.

“Mistress Lifegiver...please...”

Prema bristles at the title given to her, from back within the sick tent's confines.

“That's not—I'm not a—” Prema begins, before trailing off. Lifegivers, the Lifedancers that specialized in manipulating the life forces of humans, were the ones that were supposed to be handling cases like this. Artless apothecaries like Prema were supposed to handle more mundane illnesses, sprained limbs, and the like. But here, in the shadow of the city that held the

greatest Lifedancers Meynas had to offer, it was left to amateurs like her to tend for the Cavern's woes. Every Lifedancer the city had to spare was needed to propel and maintain the city, leaving no time for patients that could not pay the exorbitant costs Bulinari Lifedancers charged for their time.

She was no Lifegiver. Just a woman who had the foolhardy notion that she could help people, even without the Art her father and mother had.

Prema ducks under the flaps of the tent, entering once more into—

Veinos halts the memory, and shifts forward in the memory's timeline, hauling his arachnid form through the stream of thought and time. Human suffering pains him to witness, but it is not Veinos's job to view every story of woe, to watch every spark of life fade from every eye, to pen the end of every story. Over his millennia of existence—'life' would be too charitable a word—Veinos had grown quite accustomed to human pain, but this woman—

The woman has seen a truly staggering amount of death, for a mortal.

The memory resumes.

The Prophet moon is devoured by the jagged horizon of the Umthal Teeth, and night envelops the world. Prema drops into her nightsack, wincing as a stray pebble bites into her side through the nightsack's fabric. Exhaustion wraps its fingers around her mind, and Prema cradles her head in her hands, and then undoes the twine that held her hair up, allowing her waves of dark hair to come cascading down her face, shielding her from the world for at least a few moments. The air is filled with the soft snores of the hordes of sleeping Cavernfolk around them, the soft mewling of the Umthal Moonfowl that fluttered amongst the branches of the Living City's legs, and the telltale rustling and stifled moans that were the signs of a young couple thinking they were getting away with some after-dark romancing.

It was never truly quiet in the Eternal Caravan, but it was relatively quiet, and that was all Prema needed. No more groaning of dying men. No more women weeping over the corpses of their sore-covered children. No more evidence of the Weeping Sickness' march through the Caravan. Death had paused for a moment, allowing life to limp on a little more.

Prema sighs, and touches a bangle on her arm, one of the few pieces of jewelry she kept on her person. It was her mother's, one of the last mementos she had left of her time spent in Bulinar's embrace, ever since—

Another explosion, and the faint chorus of cheers that accompanied it shattered Prema's reverie, and Prema allowed a brief, sharp hiss to pass through her teeth at the sound. The Bulinari were always celebrating something or another. There was a common wry saying that the Bulinari had—'Ask us not which days are holy, but rather which days are *not*'. A fitting motto, for the god of revels. The Bulinari danced and partied at all hours of the night, Lifedancers providing eager citizens with increased stamina and vitality so that their customers could worship more fervently. Bulin has always been the most popular of the gods—the Artisan for whom drunkenness and feasting are sacred could not help but be the most appreciated, far from the mystic enigmatic secrets of Xen or the painful truths sacred to Veinos. It was no wonder the Great Cities of Meynas competed to play host to the Dancing God each year.

Another boom shakes the city, and a scowl creeps across Prema's countenance. The fireworks composer was being overzealous tonight. One got used to noisy nights, bedding underneath Bulinar, but this was—

Yet another, significantly louder explosion sounds, and there is only time enough to be confused and disoriented until—

Screams.

Later, it is revealed that a fireworks display went awry—Shanta Rhythy, the composer in charge of the Festival of Colors, had gotten too drunk to adequately perform his duties, relegating the task to an apprentice who toppled over one of the crates containing the night's incendiary entertainment, accidentally lighting one of the fuses in the process. The apprentice had managed to push the crate off the side of the city before it exploded in the middle of the crowd, but the explosion had taken a chunk of the city's leftmost leg with it. There were no Bulinari casualties, and the apprentice was fined and fired, but otherwise went unpunished.

That chunk of the city fell, and it fell directly onto the camp of sleeping Cavernfolk below.

Dozens died instantly, skulls crushed by the plummeting path of the falling debris. Those, Prema envied. They escaped early.

Startled screams and pain-saturated howls filled the night, and refused to leave. Prema was up and running before she even noticed the source of the chaos. First disease, now giant falling rocks. Her work would never end. Such was life beneath the gods.

Prema, along with a ramshackle team of red-eyed, sleep-deprived healers, arrives near the epicenter of the damage, and a sense of desolation pierces Prema's soul. The bulk of the debris had fallen on the tent that Prema had spent her entire day in, tending to those struck by the Weeping Sickness, a day spent mopping up the streams of yellow mucus and blood-tinged tears that patients suffering the sickness had pouring out of their bodies at all hours of the day. A day spent with a shawl wrapped tightly around her mouth, stifling her and making breath difficult, all so that her chances of catching the sickness would be lessened. A day spent corralling and quarantining off her patients, all so that they could be gathered into one place for a falling

boulder to neatly take them out of their misery. It was absurd. For the second time that day, Prema contemplates lying down in the soft, dewy grass, and allowing the city to step on her.

Instead, Prema goes through the motions, checking limp arms for pulses, making a mental catalog of the bodies—the people they found that were worth trying to save, and those whose suffering they would only prolong by attempting to save. Not to mention, the Caravan simply didn't have enough resources to waste on people who would be dying soon anyway.

Prema stands in the middle of rushing streams of humanity on either side of her, some mindlessly fleeing the scene of the carnage, others trying to help, still others collapsing and weeping, and others still just standing there like Prema, for their own reasons. A sudden bout of coughing breaks through Prema's reverie, and she looks down at a tattooed Gem'ya woman, her left side crushed by a brick of bronze from the Living City. Prema recognizes her—a tailor's wife, often found collecting sweets for the Cavernfolk children on Feastdays. They had never spoken, but her face was familiar enough. The expression of terrified anguish on that face Prema had only ever seen smiling feels off, feels wrong, feels unjust.

“P-please...”

Prema drops to her knees, and does a cursory sweep of the woman's body, which tells her what she knew would be the case. This was one of the hopeless. What her father had called a *binarih-syn*, a corpse that has not realized it was a corpse yet. Her father's voice echoes in Prema's head.

“A healer must be heartless sometimes, Prema. We make the hard choices, because the world needs us to.”

Prema could not heal this woman. If just her arm had been trapped, an amputation could have freed and saved her, but without a Lifedancer, this woman was dead. It was unavoidable.

“I’m sorry...” Prema whispers, and she begins to rise when the dying woman seizes the hem of Prema’s skirt with a force Prema would not have expected from her. Prema looks down at the woman, whose face, contorted with agony as it was, still holds a certain strength.

“Please.”

She only has the strength for one word, but a dull understanding envelops Prema. A healer must be heartless, sometimes. What was healing, but the act of removing suffering? Prema could not save this woman.

But she could heal her.

A sharp, jagged piece of glass finds its way into Prema’s hand. She does not consciously remember picking it up. Her eyes meet the fallen woman’s own, and she nods before closing her eyes tight.

She could heal her.

Prema slashes the glass across the woman’s throat, and blood, crimson and as familiar to Prema’s eyes as water, gushes out into the world, staining the earth and Prema’s sleeves with its damning hue.

One woman’s suffering had ended. Prema had done her duty. Had done the one thing she could, the one thing the Artisans and Lifedancers of the world were not there to do, the one thing they could not.

Prema tries desperately to feel something other than what she’s feeling. Concern. Terror. Worry. Anything.

But all she feels, all she can manage to muster, is irritation. Irritation and resignation.

Irritation that her relative quiet had been sundered, irritation that she will, once again, spend the night treating the untreatable. Irritation that the Lifedancers above would be drunk in their tents tonight, prancing around sacrificial fires and singing the praises of their absentee god.

And resignation, that this is the way it would always be.

Why?

Why, indeed?

Snip.

Ashe

“The lovely thing about Umbral Lounges is that they are very, very lucrative. People always want to live lives they cannot, or did not live, and they will pay dunes for grains to have the chance to do so. The unfortunate thing about Umbral Lounges is that they aren’t precisely legal.”

The proprietor, a ball-cheeked man with mustaches that curled upwards to tickle his earlobes, finished his explanation with a sheepish, yet mischievous grin. Kgosi Maraan laughed his inharmonious bark of a laugh, one that was a unique blend of jarring and infectious that made Ashe want to both join in and strangle him.

She and Mist had accompanied Kgosi—ostensibly by choice, but ‘no’ wasn’t a tenable option at the time—to one of his many properties in Ulien. The Penumbra District was less of an actual location, as it turned out, and more of a concept—any storefront, tavern, music hall, or alleyway that the Shadow Barons operated in was, by definition, now part of the Penumbra District. A district hidden in plain sight, both directly in front of and away from the searching masks of the Obligators.

“Unfortunate? Khayrat, you lying snake, you’d be paying half your earnings in taxes to the aristocrats in the Fountain District if your establishment was legal. I think you prefer your business being as legitimate as your children.”

The two men joined in another chorus of knowing, raucous laughter before lapsing back into genial discussions about business and revenue, and what Kgosi Maraan was owed. Ashe sighed and glanced over at Mist, who was engrossed in the scene unfolding in front of them—a spacious room filled with beds with luxurious purple cushions that each held the slumbering

bodies of the clientele of Hassim Khayrat's Umbral Lounge, located beneath an unassuming inn in a very crowded section of the Fountain District.

Kgosi Maraan had something of a reputation for being reckless and prideful, and few things bespoke more of pride than locating a major illegal operation mere footsteps from the halls of the Pillars of Justice. Each bed had a bored-looking man or woman standing next to it, staring down at their charges with violet-tinged eyes, as they murmured lines of prose penned in small brown leather-bound books. Their collecting muttering was like the sound of a mosquito hovering in your ear, and they set Ashe's teeth to grinding.

It was disgusting.

"Mad. They're all mad." Ashe muttered to Mist, who was engrossed in the spectacle unfolding around them.

"Hm?" Mist said, sparing Ashe a brief look before resuming her study of the Umbrascribes and their work.

"Can you imagine? There are all sorts of festivities outside for the Feast right now, and these people shirk from the jubilations outside to pay an Umbrascribe to rummage around in their thoughts? It's like paying someone to slap you across the face, or to choke you out."

"I'm told some people enjoy that sort of thing."

"Mist. Seriously."

"I don't know. Who wouldn't want to feel like someone else for a day? Who doesn't have memories they'd rather forget?" Mist said as she wound a strand of dark hair around her pinky finger as she always did when she was ambling around the corridors of her mind, "You have to admit, it's at least tempting."

Unwanted memories welled up, and Ashe allowed them to wash over her psyche, flooding her consciousness. The dying embers of a festival. A trident flying through the air. A god's scream.

Cowards hid from their pasts. The spineless, shivering weaklings that shied away from the events that defined them were fools. There was strength to be found in the pain of the past, and resolve could be harvested from cultivated fury. If Ashe had hidden from what that god did to her, she'd never be where she is today, on the verge of beginning to fulfill what she'd decided her purpose in life was, all those years ago.

"You're thinking about it again, aren't you?" Mist said softly, and Ashe realized that her fingers had curled into fists, and that she'd begun shaking. She'd thought she was getting better at controlling that, but it would seem that level of self-control was still out of her reach.

"Is it that obvious?" Ashe said.

In answer, Mist just took hold of one of Ashe's hands, and gave it a firm, reassuring squeeze, and Ashe loved her all the more for that. There wasn't much Mist could say, but she was here, and that was what mattered. Mist might not know what it was Ashe kept secreted away in the dusty corners of her being, but she accepted that she didn't need to.

"Ah, do you find my operation enchanting, my friends?" Kgosi rejoined Mist and Ashe, his omnipresent toothy grin still affixed to his face. Ashe had never seen a person look so pleasantly threatening. Kgosi clapped Ashe on the shoulder, and Ashe fought back the urge to elbow him in the side. The man's concept of personal space was nonexistent.

Ashe settled for smiling weakly up at Kgosi, who seemed to take that as enthusiastic agreement. The man was not going to be pleased when he learned that Ashe and Mist needed this Isoba person for more than just a little 'chat'. But there was no reason to let him know that at the

moment. Kgosi hadn't been forthcoming with details about his plans, and Ashe saw no reason to deviate from his example.

The man was a good cook, though, to Ashe's eternal surprise. The mouthwatering array of succulent meats and creamy sauces Kgosi personally prepared made their stay feel a little less like the captivity it was.

"I've been wondering, Mr. Mara—" Ashe began, and Kgosi shook his forefingers at Mist, in a gesture the Uleni seemed to use to express intense disagreement.

"No, no, I have told you, call me Kgosi. Mr. Mara is too stuffy."

"Um, yes, Kgosi. I've been wondering, the Sun's Web—"

"—has been suitably recompensed, and I have sent some of my own men to help with repairs, and then some. Iesha and Omaran Suunai will be valuable assets in time, I think. I, ah, may have misrepresented the source of the destruction of their door."

If Ashe didn't know better, she'd swear the giant of a Shadow Baron was blushing.

"They only knew it was a Stormsculptor that had caused the damage, and a Stormsculptor had been staying in their inn, and well, I allowed their suspicions to wander."

Mist paled, and vibrant pink suffused her cheeks.

"They think it was me?"

Ashe kept any incoming smirks off of her face, every ounce the dutiful and reproachful partner.

"They do not think it was you, they merely...suspect it. Regardless, I would avoid the Fountain District for a time."

"You mean, where we currently are?"

"But you are in the Penumbra now, my friends. You are safe with me."

“I don’t mean to pry,” Ashe said, meaning to pry, “and we’ve appreciated your hospitality these past few days, but we have to ask. What are we doing here?”

Kgosi crossed his powerful arms in front of his chest, and Ashe tried to not think about just how easily the man could break her. Mist shot Ashe a warning glare, but Ashe ignored her. Kgosi heaved a sigh, the tension left the room, and it occurred to Ashe for the first time that the man seemed very tired. It was easy to forget that underneath his near-inexhaustible energy and titanic frame, Kgosi Maraan was still a normal man at the end of the day. He was always still up when Ashe and Mist turned in, and he was always busy when they rose. Had the man even been sleeping?

“My information regarding our mutual acquaintance was...vague,” Kgosi admitted, lowering his considerable bulk onto the bed, and arm, of a slumbering patron. Neither Kgosi nor the man seemed to notice. “We know he is being moved during the Feast of Bulin, but—”

“Moved?” Ashe said, cocking an eyebrow, and Kgosi’s obsidian eyes fixed on her with a sudden, tempestuous fury that made any further questions she might have had wither away and dissipate like dust in a mountain cragstorm. This was not a man accustomed to being interrupted. Ashe’s fingers gave an involuntary twitch, searching for a weapon to grasp.

The passion faded from Kgosi’s eyes, and to Ashe’s relief, he seemed to relax.

“Yes, moved. He is imprisoned right now, as it turns out.”

“The Demon of Penumbra is...being held captive?” Mist said, her tone expressing confusion flecked with mild notes of scorn. The boogeymen of criminals’ nightmares didn’t usually end up in jail themselves.

“Yes, it is...unusual. Either they have found some way to hold him, or he is staying of his own accord. Regardless, we know he is going to be executed publicly, during Feastday

celebrations. I had thought that it would be within the first day, but we are on the third, and there has been no word. So we have had little to do but...wait.” Kgosi pronounced the last word as if it were a curse, and a scowl made a rare appearance on his face. “Sitting and waiting. Pah. The stuff of politicians and soft-handed men the world over. Xen painted our hands to act and our feet to carry us. We were made for motion. Designed for action. Not dithering.”

Ashe found herself nodding in agreement before she caught herself. The man was charismatic, she’d give him that. She’d pay good vinrahs to see how the courts of Bulinar would react to his presence. She knew a couple ‘soft-handed’ men and women that she’d like Kgosi Maraan to meet.

“Is it...possible your sources were mistaken?” Mist offered, and Kgosi’s scowl deepened.

“You do not think I have not considered that, woman?”

Ashe took a single surreptitious step, placing herself in between Mist and the Shadow Baron. Kgosi didn’t seem to notice, and he leapt up from the bed, nearly upending it, and began to pace with furious strides back and forth between the plush purple beds. Some of the Umbrascribes in the room cast nervous looks over their shoulder at their pacing leader, though others seemed to take it in stride, not even looking up from their work.

“I tore every ounce of information from that sniveling worm’s mind. I spent *years* on that, Cutting Corners enough until I--” Kgosi froze, and cocked his head slightly, as if listening to something, and then shook his head. “He could have hidden nothing from me. He saw the Demon. He saw Isoba. That is that.”

“That doesn’t mean he couldn’t still be mistaken,” Mist said, and Ashe shot her a frantic glare, trying to forestall her before she could needle their host further, “He might have been lied to, or maybe he only thought he saw this Isoba person, or perhaps—”

A guttural roar burst forth from Kgosi, and a song leapt to Ashe's lips. Before she could release her Crafting, Kgosi seized the sides of one of the beds and upturned it, sending the limp body of its inhabitant tumbling to the floor, and sending the slim Umbrascibe that had been perched on it stumbling away with a squawk.

"HE WILL NOT ESCAPE ME, NOT AGAIN!" Kgosi screamed, punctuating each word by slamming his fist into the wall. Ashe swore she heard the sound of bones breaking, but Kgosi's wild eyes showed no recognition of any pain.

The room held an fragile, bloated silence, filled with the terror of the Baron's underlings, the white-knuckled anticipation of Ashe and Mist, and the blissful unaware breaths of the dreaming patrons.

"Uh. Sir?"

The tableau broke, and all eyes turned to a narrow-faced messenger standing at the head of the stairs, who seemed to be overwhelmed by the sudden onset of attention.

"The uh. The, uh, well, that is..." The messenger babbled, and Kgosi snarled. His pupils bloomed a brilliant violet, and Kgosi's forefinger slashed through the air, tearing a shapeless scar in reality that emitted a glow so bright, it seemed like a ochre sun had blossomed within the room. The courier's eyes rolled back into his head as Kgosi's own followed suit, and the two men stood rigid. Ashe stood, stunned. There was no Art in what Kgosi had just done, no Craft at all--perhaps her estimation of the man was wrong. It wasn't that he was going to get himself killed by someone by his overconfidence, and he wasn't just lucky. He was going to kill *himself* if he kept Crafting at this rate.

"Might now be a decent time for a Hymn?" Mist whispered, "My Relics are still in our room, we should have something to defend ourselves with."

“I don’t know. I don’t think—”

“Ashe, there’s Cutting Corners, and then there’s what he just did. He probably gave up a year of sanity on that, at *least*, and you want us to leave ourselves at this mercy?”

Ashe didn’t respond. Mist groaned, and Ashe could almost hear her rolling her eyes. But sometimes the only thing one could do was sit and wait. Not for the first time, Ashe wished she’d gotten into the habit of carrying a mundane weapon hidden on her person. Unsung blades could never hope to attain the sharpness and malleability of sung weapons, and wielding an unbreathing sword always felt hollow, like viewing the world you knew in only greys, whites, and blacks, when you knew there was a spectrum of color waiting to be seen. So for all their practicality, Ashe found herself forever procrastinating on acquiring one. And she knew that if she survived this, she would never get around to picking one up anyways.

A sudden burst of laughter shattered Ashe’s anxious thoughts, and she returned her attention back to Kgosi, who had emerged from his perusal of the messenger’s thoughts. The messenger stumbled back, hands clutching his head, but Kgosi was resplendent. A broad smile stretched across his features, and genuine mirth shone through his eyes, though the effect of this was somewhat lost when one took in the dripping blood that fell from his knuckles onto the carpet.

“Wonderful news!” Kgosi exclaimed, grinning like an Althomi theatre mask, “It has begun! Come, come!”

With that, the Shadow Baron bounded away, taking the steps two at a time.

“Should we...?”

“Probably.”

Mist and Ashe hurried after him, leaving the gaping Umbrascribes and exasperated proprietor behind. They popped out of the trap door that lead to the umbral lounge, and scurried through the storefront proper to emerge into the streets of the Fountain District, where a massive crowd of revelers had gathered. Even by Uleni standards, the people of the city were dressed flamboyantly, in colorful, garish garb that made for a kaleidoscopic nightmare of pinks, blues, and greens that would be enough to make the most abstract Wavepainter claw out her eyes.

Kgosi was easy to find, as he stood head and shoulders over the rest of the crowd, though even if that were not the case, he was the only one whose face was not obscured by a mask. In sharp contrast to the large, bold masterworks that the Althomi used to demarcate character archetypes in their infamously difficult to follow operas, Feastday Masks were flimsy and cheap, decorated with tillibird feathers and whatever else could be attached to them. During the Feast of Bulin, all social orders were to be suspended, everyone hidden behind the anonymity of their masks. The most base of beggars could drink with the stingiest of merchants, and farmers could lie with the aristocracy in one of the many Pleasure Pavilions set up around the city, after being inoculated by a Lifedancer with a Form to suppress fertility

A partygoer wearing a scarf a brighter yellow than the sun jostled Ashe, stumbling with the clumsy, unsteady gait of one who was unused to intoxication, and Ashe scowled at the woman as she passed. She'd always hated crowds and festivals. People, it seemed, spent their lives waiting for these days to unleash the untempered idiocy that they kept hidden away the rest of the year. Putting the rudeness of strangers out of her mind, Ashe pushed and shoved her way to Kgosi, whose radiant smile had yet to fade.

"What was the good news?" Ashe half-yelled over the ambient chaos.

“Xen has answered my prayers, the time for dithering is at an end!” Kgosi said, clapping Ashe on the shoulder. “The procession approaches!”

Kgosi pointed down the street, and Ashe had to crane her neck to see what he was indicating. Out of the corner of her eye, Ashe noticed Mist trying to stand on her tiptoes to catch a glance, but the Uleni were a tall people, and Mist was short even for a Kvys woman. She didn’t stand a chance.

At first, Ashe couldn’t tell what she was looking for. All she saw was an unbroken throng of partygoers who were dressed to be as distracting as possible, but as she looked closer, Ashe noticed a disturbance in the roiling waves of humanity, a place where the revelers seemed even rowdier than they were around her, if that was even possible. As the disturbance drew nearer, the sounds of jeers and insults grew louder and louder.

“Is that—”

“Yes.” Kgosi said, rapturous hunger shining through his eyes. “He is mine, now. Twelve years. Mine. Mine. Mine. Mine.” A breathy giggle broke through Kgosi’s chant, and Ashe stopped listening. Whatever issues the Shadow Baron had with Isoba Amibola didn’t concern her. What mattered now was planning her next move.

While she would have preferred a little more notice to set up, Ashe worked better thinking on her feet anyways. After all, it was always more fun to sight-read a piece than to practice a known quantity for the hundredth time. The imperfections in timing and tune were what made music interesting for her, though her teachers would have disagreed.

Her goal was simple—she needed to isolate Isoba Amibola, as fast as possible. But that was what the Relics Mist had prepared were for, to kick up a storm of dust and sand, and—

Ashe blanched.

“Oh, no. Blight and decay, *no*.”

“What? What’s going on?” Mist asked.

“The Relics, we left them—”

“Oh.”

Mist immediately began to Stormsculpt, and Ashe felt the air grow colder around her as Mist Crafted. The disturbance was coming ever closer, and there would not be enough time. Ashe began to sing a soft Hymn under her breath nonetheless, feeling the familiar comforting wave of warmth wash over her as her body reacted to her Crafting. The ever-increasing roar of the crowd around her drowned out her voice, and she kept her womb of flame as compact as she could by her side, out of Kgosi’s sight. There wasn’t time for anything fancy, and Ashe selected one of the more basic Hymns, intended for novice Flamechanters.

A pitiful shortsword dropped into her hand, and the procession that Kgosi had been awaiting pulled into view. A quartet of hairless men held a palanquin of sorts up, a portable prison cell made of sturdy wooden bars designed to keep the prison’s inhabitant inside, but not out of the reach of whatever debris the crowd might deign to throw at him. And within those bars was the person that Kgosi sought, the person that Ashe and Mist had traveled so far to recruit. The Demon of Penumbra.

“That’s...him?” Mist said, and Ashe found herself echoing the sentiment.

The merchants she’d talked to had described the Demon of Penumbra as a giant of a man, with four arms and glowing eyes that could steal your soul just by looking at you. The man that squatted inside that cage was a rather unimpressive figure. Nearly naked, save for a grey loincloth that preserved some dignity, the Demon of Penumbra was...short. Not even just short for an Uleni, but short, period. He had close-cropped curly hair, and as he was brought nearer to

her, she could make out the nicks and cuts on his skin that had been inflicted while someone had shaved him. While the dark eyes that stared out at the onlookers held a sort of fierce power to them, they weren't stealing anyone's souls anytime soon. He was the kind of man she could pass on the street and not think twice about. She likely wouldn't even think once. She'd been expecting someone as imposing as Kgosi, someone that would inspire legends and nightmares. Isoba Amibola was somehow disappointing.

"Why are you so important?" Ashe muttered.

"What's he doing?"

Ashe glanced down at Mist, and then traced her line of sight to Kgosi, who had begun to move through the crowd, towards the incoming Demon. People parted like a field of grain making way for the scythe, and that same manic grin remained plastered on his face.

"Judgement comes!"

A clear voice, a man's this time, rung out from the procession, and Ashe resisted the urge to try to leap out of her skin. The trial was going to begin, but Kgosi seemed to think nothing of walking into a throng of Uleni Obligators. Was the man actually suicidal?

"Judgement comes!"

"Keep sculpting, Mist." Ashe gripped the hilt of her blade tight, and began to follow Kgosi. Whatever it was they had been waiting for, it was about to happen.

Isoba

“Judgement comes!”

Kgosi Maraan stepped out into the street, and something a little like guilt teased at Isoba’s mind. If this was how it ended, he might even deserve it.

“What is this?”

Captain Khari Akintola stepped out of the procession, gripping the handle of an urj, one of the short, crescent-bladed ceremonial axes that were the mark of his office. The blades were covered in silver and gold filigree, beautiful and unmarked. Rubbish in a fight, of course, but at least it looked pretty.

“Your kind is not welcome here, Lion.” Akintola’s lip curled, and he leveled his urj at Kgosi’s face. “I could take you in for that heretical growth on your chin, but I have more important matters on my hands. Leave, and we need not have to sully this holy day with needless bloodshed.”

“It has been a long time, Isoba.” Kgosi met Isoba’s eyes, and Isoba tried to hold the man’s gaze, and failed, turning his eyes instead onto the massive, wide open gates the procession had stopped in front of.

The Weaver’s Respite. The noose of a city Veinos had strung up for his city, as an act of *love*, if the veiled priests were to be believed. The gates were purely decorative--by law and tradition both, they stood open at all times for any citizen to walk through, guarded only by a single sentinel whose charge it was to make sure any who entered did so of their own free will. Though the buildings that formed the core of Ulien soared high above the rest of the city, golden

spires scarring the skyline with their opulent claws, what lay past that gate was a mystery known only to the damned and to Veinos himself.

None that entered ever left.

And yet, it was beginning to seem a very tempting option, compared to facing Kgosi right now.

When Isoba neglected to respond, the grin on Kgosi's face stretched wider, the edges of his teeth peeking out of his lips. Isoba remembered that grin. It had always made an appearance whenever Kgosi was about to do something stupid, even by his normal exorbitant standards of idiocy.

"Imagine my surprise when I hear that a scrawny runt of an assassin was caught trying to kill Ayana Ndaiye, and nobody could figure out how he had managed to enter the Sanctum of Sands. And I think to myself, 'Why, there is no way that could possibly be my old friend, he would never allow himself to be caught by mere mortals like us'." Kgosi took a deliberate step forward, ignoring Captain Akintola's stiffened posture. "And now, here we are. Just like old times."

"I am flattered, but I am a little busy right now. I have a date with the executioner's axe, and you know how I feel about being late."

"Then I shall make this quick. I thought long and hard about what I would do with you when I found you, old friend. The other barons, of the Penumbra and of coin, they plan to use you."

"They can try." Isoba tried to affix a cocky smirk to his face, but it wouldn't manifest. Not in front of this man.

"Do you ever think about her, Isoba?"

Lies bubbled forth from the swamp of his thoughts as they always did, and Isoba was halfway through selecting the most spiteful and dismissive of them before he caught himself.

“Every day.”

“Good.”

His smile vanished, and the white-and-brown canvases of Kgosi’s eyes drowned in violet.

Nia

“Blood of the world, what is he doing here?”

The creeping murmurs of chaos were starting to gather in the streets below, all due to that contemptible blister of a man. Nia could see the beginnings of panic etched in the bodies of the milling revelers. Muscles tensed, fingers tightened, and chests heaved as all eyes watched the Lion confront Isoba. Violence was coming, and it was a matter of when, not if. It wasn't supposed to be like this.

“Mistress?”

Nia glanced behind her, past Tawi's massive protective form, and acknowledged the scrawny spymaster standing behind them. A diminutive man, as all practitioners of his creeping profession seemed to be. A tiny, undecorated brown nose and an overlarge mouth, lips scarred with the evidence of a nervous chewing habit made for a curious portrait of a man. It was if Xen had been slightly hungover when drawing his features. Why was it that learned men seemed so often to embrace their fragility, instead of bolstering their bodies along with their minds? Tawi could have snapped his back like a stick of cinnamon. And for all the use he was proving to be, the cinnamon would have been more helpful to have.

Nia pursed her lips. All her time around Isoba had been affecting the way she viewed others--did not the priests of Xen say that all humans were Crafted by the same brush, and deserving of equal regard? Nia closed her eyes, and sent a prayer to the God of Waters, begging his pardon for casting ill regard on one of his creations.

“Yes, Bawu? Report.”

“The ambush you’d warned us of, it has dispersed, Lady Duye,” the man murmured in that infuriating Althomi drawl of his, using the name Nia went by during her business as Shadow Baron, “The Umbrascibes, they have sent word just seconds ago. They must know. This changes all of our plans, my lady.”

Nia scowled and shook her head, her beaded braids chiming with a cheeriness she did not feel. Nia turned her attention back to the scene unfolding below the sun-baked clay rooftop she and her underlings crouched on. The rooftop wasn’t the most inconspicuous of hiding places, but the rooftops of Ulien were favored haunts of brazen lovers and youth-drunk children, not to mention those in the Penumbra. A small group of people using the rooftop to get away from the crowds of the streets below would attract enough attention as to blend in with the scene around them, but not enough to register as too different. Just irregular enough. Her plan had been meticulously crafted, and it was—had been—perfect.

The second Solum Zarrun had emerged from his quarters with a plan to abduct Isoba from his captors, Nia began to weave to her own designs. In the years since she’d usurped Olayinka Saab and seized the title of Shadow Baron for herself—a title held secret from the city, Isoba, and her father—Nia had kept one desire chief amongst the plots and schemes that came with the territory of ruling the Penumbran District’s premier brothels--and its largest network of spies. She had never quite been sure how she would do it, but she always knew that it would be by her hand that Isoba was released from her father’s enthrallment. Today was supposed to finally be that day.

It had been so simple. Solum Zarrun had planned to stage a riot near the end of the procession, before Isoba passed into the Suppliant’s Gate and into certain death. In the resulting confusion, Isoba would be stolen away, and the Shadow Barons would all blame each other for

the disturbance, and Zarrun's part in the proceedings would remain secret. For all the Shadow Barons and the Obligators would know, Isoba had just been another Artless assassin. The amount of intrigue surrounding him would keep all the major players of Uleni guessing, and in that confusion, Zarrun could advance other ventures of his. It was a good plan.

So Nia had stolen it.

One of her father's favorite sayings, back when he'd spoken to her outside of giving orders, had been that innovation was overrated—what mattered most in a merchant's trade was not having an idea first, but implementing that idea better. Solum Zarrun had built an empire on the ideas of other men, and as far as she was concerned, Nia was only doing as she'd been taught.

"Lady Duye, I also—"

"Stop talking. I need to think." Nia caught herself chewing the inside of her mouth, and stopped herself. She was trying to project confidence, but the habits of her body betrayed her. It was not a worthy habit for someone of her station to possess.

"Excuse me? You might be some sort of alpha vargor in your corner of the District, but I have been a spymaster since you were a babe gnawing on your mother's teat, and I will not—"

There was a rush of movement, and Nia turned to see the gangly spymaster's cloaked form dangling in the air held aloft by Tawi, who had gripped the spymaster's thin neck with one massive fist. Nia felt a small smile creeping onto her features, and she stifled it. Gloating was unbecoming of a woman in her position.

"Now, I—"

A garbled chorus of gasps and yelps arose from the crowds below, and Nia's head whipped around to see the captain of the guard be skewered by an onslaught of hailstones from a

different rooftop. Apparently Kgosi had also thought of her idea. Father was not going to be pleased that his genius plot was so commonplace today.

“*Kruh’va*,” Nia swore, and her teeth dug deep into her bottom lip, almost enough to draw blood. It was an unseemly habit, and profaning her lips by allowing Godscript vulgarities to pass through them was even more distasteful, but the gods would forgive her this one transgression.

“Is the Troupe ready yet?” Nia said, glaring at one of her scouts, willing it to be so.

“Almost, my Lady. Do we wait?”

“No time.”

Nia rose from her crouch, and adjusted the tulli-feather mask that obscured her features. Not that many here would recognize her if it fell, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Her right hand dipped into her satchel and withdrew a bulky wooden gauntlet, which she slipped onto her left hand. She’d hoped to avoid personally fighting, but chaos had made its nest in her plans. Better to be prepared.

Nia’s eyes flitted skyward to track the position of the moons above—the Seer was ascendant, prancing through the midday sky, while the Pilgrim undertook a lazy stroll perpendicular to the first moon, passing in front of the sun and casting a tenuous shadow on the world below it. An omen of anticipation. Fitting, though exactly *what* was to be anticipated could be different than what she expected. The moons counseled caution, then.

“Drop him, Tawi.”

The spymaster hit the ground, and made no sound.

Nia glanced behind herself, and saw that the man had died--choked to death by Tawi’s grip. How distasteful. Leaders who killed their followers were rarely suffered long, it would never do to acquire such a reputation. She’d have to go over the forms again with Tawi, his

actions were always more violent than they needed to be. Already tracing movements in her head, Nia moved on.

“The mission begins now. Capture the prisoner, but do not cause him unnecessary harm.” Nia thought a moment, and then added, “Keep casualties to a minimum. Bulin would be most displeased if we were to sully this day with undue bloodshed.”

“Understood!” A dozen voices answered her, but Nia had eyes only for Isoba’s cage, which had toppled to the ground.

“I am coming. Just a little longer.” Nia whispered.

Nia sent a prayer to Bulin for strength, and leapt into the waiting bed of disorder.

Ashe

Every battle had a rhythm. Every slashing blade and whistling arrow was an instrument that begat a succession of notes or a sudden coda, and every strategy and style brought with it its own tapestry of melodies that granted an astute listener an understanding of a battle far beyond what one's mere eyes could ever comprehend. Though discord reigned in the square and the screams of terrified citizens mingled with the snarls of battle-hardened warriors, Ashe carved a grisly sonata through the cluttered composition of the impromptu melee.

Trusting Mist to keep near her, Ashe focused her every energy on the task of melding her weapon's song with the frenetic tune of the world around her, maintaining a steady hum all the while. Her shortsword bit into the throat of a cloaked figure that bore an unfamiliar Shadow Baron's sigil on his chest, and Ashe hummed an insistent crescendo as her blade tore itself through, ending the thug's attempts at reaching the Demon's fallen prison. Ashe was dimly aware of Mist's grunt of discomfort as the cloaked man dropped to his knees, clawing at his neck as his life spilled through his clutching fingers, but Mist's vocal distaste for blood was unnecessary ambient noise. Ashe filtered it out, along with the surprised cries of the former revelers around her, the squawking of a flock of startled birds with garishly bright feathers, and the roaring of—

Ashe pivoted hard on her left foot, spinning around in time to dodge the raking claws of a tiger, which spun into existence mere fingerlengths from the fallen man. As she dodged she drew

her sword through the tiger's leaping underside, and it passed through easily, dissolving the tiger into a mixture of paint and water droplets that splashed onto the sand below.

"Ashe, a Wavepainter, what do we do?" Mist yelled, and Ashe scowled.

"Just keep moving!" Ashe wasted no time following her own advice, pressing against the tide of fleeing pedestrians.

Kgosi, or this other Shadow Baron, had a Wavepainter on their payroll, which was very, very annoying. Sacred to the God of Inspiration, Xen, Wavepainters conjured beasts made of water and imagination alone to do their bidding for them by sketching them and commanding their drawings to manifest. Ashe loathed fighting them. What sort of enjoyment they could possibly derive from standing aside and allowing their pets to do all their fighting, Ashe would never comprehend.

"Ashe, to your left!"

Ashe turned, and saw what Mist had noticed—a scrawny, sallow-faced woman in flowing blue robes scribbling hastily on a scrap of paper. Her shock of red hair, cut into an unruly shortness, named her a fellow Peakborn. While it was odd to see another of the Folk so far from home, this woman's Wavepainting abilities would not have endeared her to her families. The Peakborn treasured the virtues of the forge above all else, praising Crafters who were blessed in the eyes of Beya, and shunning those who manifested other talents. And those who showed little ability in those talents--Ashe's grandmother had never forgiven Ashe for only *just* having the ability to Craft. In any room of Flamechanters, Ashe would almost certainly be the weakest. What took others moments to craft took her much longer, and her weapons were always simpler and less imbued with power. Powerful, proper Flamechanters could wreath their blades in fire.

Ashe would be lucky if hers remained hot to the touch. Ashe was sure that if she and this woman compared notes, they'd have a decent amount in common. Killing her would be a shame.

Her opponent clearly felt otherwise.

A nasty grin stretched across the Wavepainter's face as her drawing ceased, and the air in between Ashe and the Wavepainter spasmed like ripples on a pond's surface. A chilling howl emanated from the distortion before a massive teal timberwolf, all teeth and claws, tore its way into existence and hurtled towards Ashe.

"Spring! Head down!"

The telltale sound of shattering glass reached Ashe's ears, and before the wolf could snap its sharp aquatic jaws around her neck, it was blown out of the sky by a sudden gust of air that sent a flood of gooseprickles down Ashe's skin.

Ashe silently thanked Mist for her quick reflexes, summoned her willpower, and began to sing a frantic Hymn, tossing her shortsword into the air. The sword melted easily into a shapeless ball of molten metal before being encompassed by a Womb of Flame once more. Working with already sung metals allowed her to skip a few verses in her Hymn, and Ashe bit off her song with a final guttural Godscript syllable as the Womb broke apart. A gleaming shortbow tumbled out of her forge and into her hands, and as Ashe pulled back the drawstring, an arrow of fire blazed into being at the ready.

Ashe took a second to aim, and then loosed her arrow, which hurtled through the air and plunged deep into the Wavepainter's abundant bosom. The Wavepainter's brush fell from her hands mid-stroke and hit the rooftop as its mistress followed soon after. Ashe took a professional's momentary satisfaction in her accuracy before pitching her voice higher, changing

the direction of the Hymn she'd been singing, shaping her bow once more into its shortsword form, and resuming her march towards the Demon.

The battle had taken on some semblance of organization with the sides, at least, being clearly defined. Kgosi's Pride had the advantage in numbers, swarming the streets in ochre-colored cloaks. A different Shadow Baron's underlings, all wearing emerald masks of one animal or another, had taken to the battlefield as well. The two gangs fought bitter duels in the streets, fighting to make their way to the guards, who had rallied despite the sudden death of their commander, and had formed a circle around their quarry.

Ashe's song fell to a melodic murmur as she considered her path through the orchestra before her. So many different musicians, all playing different keys and to different time signatures, all corralled into the same breakneck tempo. Ashe's lips curved upwards into a joyous smile.

It was beautiful. This was what it meant to be alive.

Ashe's song crescendoed brilliantly, and she advanced, a laughing countermelody to the fray around her spilling from her lips.

Mist

Mist was out of breath.

This was not a surprising development, of course. Twenty years of having rich chocolates, gemrafruit jellies, caramelized heartnuts, and succulent smoked hams—oh gods, she was hungry, skipping breakfast was a horrible idea—fed to her whenever she wanted was not about to be undone by a few months of combat training and traveling on the road with Ashe. No, the trademark roundness of Bulinari nobility remained with her still, and Mist was at peace with it.

It didn't make her inability to keep up any less annoying.

Chest heaving, Mist hurried after Ashe as she plunged deeper into the utter mayhem that surrounded them/ A green-masked figure near her swung a bladed whip in a wide arc, and Mist flinched as it tore through the throat of one of Kgosi's men, scattering his lifeblood on the cobbled streets. Mist felt bile rising within her, and her teeth slammed against each other as she tried to ignore her body's frantic reaction.

"It's just blood. Everyone has it." Mist said to herself, though her words lacked conviction. "bleeding is just like blushing, except without the skin, and it gets everywhere, and..."

Mist abandoned that thread of thought and focused instead on following Ashe, and on trying to not get killed on an empty stomach.

“Summer! Hard left!” Mist called, and she withdrew one of the few Relics she’d managed to Craft from within a pouch on her side. Ashe’s movement stuttered and then shifted entirely as she sidestepped deftly out of Mist’s path. As Ashe moved aside, Mist threw her Relic onto the ground, which exploded in a rush of cracked stone and screaming winds. Her summoned gale, the winds patterned after the gusts from a hurricane she’d seen once near the Godstorm on a fishing trip with her father, hurtled into the back of a lithe assassin who’d been seconds away from plunging a dagger into Kgosi Maraan’s back.

As her sculpted weather patterns broke free, Mist felt the stirrings of pride that she imagined were not dissimilar to the ones a mother felt, looking at her children standing tall before her. The fertile stone she’d lovingly shaped, coaxing bluster and turbulence into the neat curves of her Relic, had given magnificent birth. She remembered with ardent fondness every shaping that had gone into each of the crystalline baubles and trinkets that hung around her neck. A mother did not forget the ardors of her labor, and Mist could not forget the motions of her art.

The would-be Lionslayer was flung through the air, sending him crashing back to the ground and into some poor woman’s small flower garden. The man’s body tumbled through a phalanx of orchids and destroyed a regiment of desert lilies. Poor things. He’d be fine, eventually, though they would not. And of course, Kgosi Maraan gave her no words of thanks. The insufferable man just looked back at her, grinned, and returned to his business of gleeful murder. Monster.

“Then again...” Mist glanced over at Ashe, whose full lips were twisted in a half-grin, half-snarl that Mist wished she didn’t recognize. Ashe was many things, and while ‘cruel’ was not one of those, she was no reluctant combatant either. Mist loved the Ashe that was so easy to needle, the woman that laughed and sulked readily, those lips that argued with such passion and

were always eager to make up with similar fervor. Ashe, thankfully, shared little other than a predilection for singing while intoxicated with Kgosi Maraan, but the way Ashe got while fighting had never stopped bothering Mist. There was a hunger in her that Mist didn't understand, and she worried that she never would.

“-st! Mist, watch out!”

Mist's consciousness careened back into reality as she threw herself away from a probable concussion from what appeared to be an unevenly carved block of wood that had encased the fist of the woman swinging it. The momentum from Mist's sudden dodge carried her away from the wood-thing, and onto the blood-spattered ground, where Mist's face made a brief acquaintance with the Uleni streets.

When she looked up again with several colorful vulgarities on her tongue, Ashe had taken a protective stance in front of her, facing down a woman wearing a jade-colored mask decorated with the obnoxiously colorful feathers of a tullibird, whose similarly obnoxious 'songs' had been waking her up at the most inconvenient times of the night during Mist's stay in Ulen.

Aside from the curious gauntlet she wore, this new foe's clothing matched that of several revelers Mist had seen that day, if somewhat more subdued. While most of the populace Mist had passed had opted for colorful wardrobes that would make an Peakborn tailor blush, this woman's celebratory sashes were soft blues and greens, not the screaming bright oranges and scarlets that were the fashion today. Despite her unadorned mask and unobtrusive coloring, the *iira* sashes this assailant wore were made of silk, and that marked her richer than the many of the other women they'd seen and fought that day. Though they were wrapped much more conservatively than some, the *iira* still wrapped around and clung to a figure that Mist could not

help but envy. That woman wouldn't break a sweat running through Ulien's streets. That woman had probably never eaten a whippedberry pie in a single sitting. Most hadn't, it was a miserable claim to fame.

"You alright?" Ashe asked, and Mist scrambled to her feet, summoning every ounce of her tutoring on poise and expected conduct in order to keep from blushing.

"As ready as Grandmother's goblet when the wine casks are opened."

"You two, you are not from here." The masked woman said, both asking a question and stating the answer. An efficient way to speak, all things considered.

"How very observant of you," Ashe deadpanned, cocking an eyebrow that soared towards her hairline. Ashe had wonderfully expressive eyebrows. Mist enjoyed them, though Ashe never seemed to enjoy it when Mist pointed that out. Ashe was as bad at taking compliments as she was taking criticism, and was prone to looking for one in the other.

"Why do you interfere? This does not concern you, *uusha*."

Uusha. Now there was a word Mist was getting tired of. The Uleni were not xenophobic, their culture relied too strongly on trade for that to be the case. But they did not let you forget that you were an outsider when you were with them.

"Although the Lion's men do not seem to trouble you when you pass, so you have allied yourself with him, clearly. Why? What could you have to gain from partnering with that...man?" Her tone indicated that 'man' was a generous title for Kgosi Maraan.

Mist would have loved to answer her, because that would have meant that she knew the answer herself. Ashe hadn't been very forthcoming about the man who'd hired her. Whenever Mist asked, Ashe changed the subject. Her beloved tried to be deft about it, but subtlety had never been Ashe's forte. Deception fit Ashe like an infant's swaddling fit a thrashing warthog.

“Who says we’re partnered with him?” Ashe said, and the woman they faced made one of those fascinating guttural exclamations the Uleni were so fond of to express annoyance.

“I do not have time for bandying words. Will you withdraw?”

“You first.”

“Insolence is not a becoming trait on a lady. Tawi?”

The masked woman’s gaze shifted to somewhere above Mist’s head.

Far above it.

Mist found herself reacquainting her bruised body with Ulien’s streets once more as she threw herself away, just as the largest man she’d ever seen crashed to the ground where she’d been standing. Mist’s hands dove with frantic speed into her satchel, and she selected one of her three remaining Relics at random. Mist’s hands gleamed a faint azure color as she squeezed the Relic once, priming it, before she hurled it at the colossal grey-skinned—what?—hulk of a man behind her.

The Relic sailed through the air before Mist’s binding broke and crushed it, loosing a thick icicle from a Crafted prison. The shard of ice called to mind memories of Ashe’s home village, the one time Mist had visited. It’d been a short visit, visiting a set of shoddily made graves a ways into the mountains. Mist had seen snow before only from afar, from the tops of Bulinar as the living city marched past the Umthal Teeth, and that trip had been wonderfully informative on the properties of ice. Less so on Ashe’s past.

The icicle punched through the man’s chest, and Mist sighed in relief. She hated killing. But that would do for him. Now she could focus on—

Mist's thoughts collided with each other and fell into shambles as she watched the man raise one massive hand, grip the icicle with it, and yank it out of himself, spitting black blood onto the streets.

“What in Creation—”

Ashe's song spiked in volume and pitch, and her shortsword burst into flames as she darted towards the grey giant. The giant's dead eyes locked onto her, and Mist watched him hurl the icicle like a javelin right at her beloved. Mist saw panic bloom in Ashe's eyes and unsteady her song as a white explosion of fire wreathed her blade, devouring the frozen spear. Mist's heart clenched. Ashe had been forced to Cut Corners. The Artisans alone knew what that had cost her. Mist's relieved eyes met Ashe's for a brief moment, and Mist saw Ashe's eyes widen and shift to her left.

“Mist, *no!*” Ashe screamed, and even as Ashe's mouth opened, Mist acted. Sparing no thoughts for strategy or her surroundings, Mist threw the Relic she carried onto the ground, and a cascade of storm winds unfurled beneath her and threw her violently upwards and back as something green and sharp garroted the air where she'd stood. Mist sailed through the air for a few thrilling, yet terrifying seconds before, for the third rotting time that day, she crashed to the ground.

Mist leapt to her feet, wincing as her entire body shrieked in protest. Hot tears of pain fought to spill over, but she drew one dirty sleeve over her eyes to clear them, and focused on what new hell this day had cooked up for her.

The masked woman's wooden gauntlet-thing had sprouted two serpentine vines that writhed on the ground near her, and Mist noticed for the first time the woman's feet. She wasn't wearing shoes.

A Lifedancer. Rot and pestilence, were all the Crafters in Ulien in this damned fight?

“You have quick movements, for someone so encumbered,” The woman said, and Mist’s teeth ground together.

“A jest about my weight? *Here?*”

“A jest? I was paying you a compliment.” Even in the face of an undying colossus and a Lifedancer assassin, Mist found time to be annoyed by this woman’s accent. Uleni spoke slowly and methodically on a good day—this woman’s voice was eroding waves and ancient winds carving valleys out of a mountainside, every syllable hewn out of stone. “You Bulinari are such a confusing people.”

The woman shrugged, and raised her gauntlet in the air as she took one delicate step backwards. Mist’s fist gripped her final Relic tightly. Ashe was busy with the grey monster, her blade scoring several slashes on him that the giant seemed not to feel. Mist felt the forces of Creation howling within her as her heartbeat hammered out a rampaging tattoo within her chest. She’d gone her entire life without Cutting Corners, but she was almost out of Relics, and this woman was going to try to kill her. What was a year or two more of having bones that weren’t brittle and fallible if she wasn’t alive to use them?

Mist began to summon her ability, and then—

And then—

And then what?

Why was she fighting, anyways? Mist couldn’t seem to remember. It can’t have been important, obviously. This wasn’t what she’d come here to do. Better to just stop. If she stopped, the masked woman would stop, and everyone could just be happy. Happy sounded good.

Wonderful, even. Divine. Fighting wasn't fun, there were so many other things she and Ashe could be doing right now. Dining, sleeping, singing, talking—anything was better than fighting.

“And the pilgrims joined in song, and the shattered world ceased crumbling to hear the serenade for a dying world. The Gan’renna halted for a precious second, and the Artisan Kyrei, infinite in her mercy, welcomed her children to her embrace.”

A sloppy grin spread across Mist's face, and she turned to the masked woman, whose verdant whips had ceased their movement, and laid dormant as her movements slowed to a halt. How nice. How lovely.

“Be welcome, my children, and know that mercy's fingers have stretched across the hearts of all’, the goddess said, and the hearts of the warriors filled with glorious calm.”

Mist turned her attentions to the woman she loved, and her smile bloomed even further as she took in Ashe's gorgeous glossy black hair, her supple, slender form, her beautiful eyes that bulged so prettily as a giant hand squeezed her flawless throat, the throat that Mist longed to worship and pepper with kisses—

Mist's consciousness came screaming back to reality, and her last Relic blasted apart as a storm of tiny hail needles broke free from their enclosure and flung themselves into the soft flesh of the monstrosity's back. Once more, the man didn't seem to feel the pain he should have felt, and panic seized Mist. She was Cutting Corners before she realized what she was doing. Crafting without Art had dangerous side effects. Flamechanters lost the ability to speak normally, as their voices grew more and more beautiful until their every word was musical, and their every utterance became a conflagration. Stormsculptors felt the influence of the elements on their bones directly, their limbs growing weaker and more brittle until they could scarcely lift their own Relics. Mist courted invalidity, but this was more important.

Mist dove into the inviolate realm of Creation, and commanded the elements directly, summoning a massive, jagged icicle from the water found in the air itself. Mist clapped her hands together, and hurled the floating icicle at the giant's head. A shrieking, spiraling wind rose around her as she Crafted, and she felt her limbs shudder as the world took its' due from her body itself. Crafters participated in a niggardly economy—for every few seconds spent Cutting Corners, entire months of their expected lifespan vanished.

The icicle split the giant's head like a rotten melon, and the titan released Ashe as it toppled to the ground, black blood splattering the ground and Ashe's clothes. Ashe was, for now, safe.

And Ulien's Obligators had arrived.

Seventeen of the golden-masked officers had appeared, what must have been over half the Umbrascibes in the city guard, and they all had their heads down, tracing runes on the sheets of paper they all carried. All around her, fights had ceased as former opponents had dropped their weapons, and begun to hug each other, or in some very strange cases, laid down and fallen asleep.

Mist had managed to break free of their hypnosis, but the Lifedancer remained under their spell, staring dumbly at the assembled group of guards. Mist ignored her, and instead rushed to where Ashe had collapsed.

"Ashe? Ashe! Are you alright?"

Mist cradled Ashe's head in her hands, and almost sobbed with relief when Ashe's eyes cracked open, and Ashe let out a sullen groan.

"What the shitting--shit is that thing?" Ashe managed to mumble, and Mist choked back a tearful laugh. If Ashe could swear, she'd be fine.

“We should go, we can claim we just caught up in this, and—”

“No. We have a job to do.”

Mist’s brow furrowed, and she gestured around at the static melee around them.

“Ashe, we can’t fight our way past seventeen Umbrascibes. Your confidence is attractive and all, but I’m impressed enough. We can run.”

“We don’t need to fight our way past them. We just need to find him,” Ashe pointed at the Demon’s cage.

Mist turned her gaze over to the fallen cage—the fallen, empty cage. The wooden bars had been shattered, and the corpses of the Demon’s guards ringed the makeshift prison. And there, outlined in the ochre sands, a trail of footprints leading past the Suppliant’s Gate, and into the Weaver’s Respite.

“No,” Mist shook her head, “He’s not worth it. He *can’t* be worth it. Nobody leaves, Ashe. That’s what Iesha said. It’s suicide. It’s *literal* suicide.”

“That’s what they believe. People believe a lot of things.” Ashe pushed herself to her feet, wincing.

“Ashe, why are we doing this?”

Ashe’s eyes seemed to unfocus, and winter itself stared back out at the world.

“Because they need to *pay*.”

The Lion

When his opponent lowered her sword and smiled at him, Kgosi Maraan grinned back, and fed the Umbrascibe he'd been dueling a heaping helping of steel through her teeth.

Listen!

Listen, and hear their blood sing!

Kgosi's ears strained to hear this vital song, and found it, singing bright-shine glorious in the hearts of the gathered Umbrascibes, whispering beneath the dull monotone of their chanting. Waves of soothing caresses, like a pillow's velvet kiss on a suffocating man's lips.

It is beautiful, it is wonderful. It is like us, but so different. They have yet to see what you have seen, to peel back the itching flesh of reality and see the beautiful crimson workings below.

"Yes, yes, of course." Kgosi agreed jovially, allowing the words to wash over him. He felt the meddling prodding of their passive Sentence, and he allowed it to massage his mind lightly, feeling it's touch, admiring the Craftsmanship of their magic. His eyes gleamed, and leaked a dribbling violet ooze as he forced Creation into his body to shield himself from the effects of their abilities. Euphoria made everything more direct.

He was going mad. The voice was proof, if the mood swings hadn't been enough.

No, you are not. You merely hear more, now. See more. *Are* more.

"Whatever you say." Kgosi ambled past a humming green-cloaked man, who was doing some sort of impromptu jig. He had talent, he was clearly a Lifedancer. In honor of Bulin, Kgosi would spare this one. Kgosi gave the dancing man a gracious nod, and continued on his way.

He hides from you. From us. We must punish him.

“I will punish him.”

Kgosi strolled towards the alleyway Isoba had presumably disappeared down, and one of the gathered Umbrascribes noticed him, and raised a hand towards Kgosi. Kgosi felt a push on his mind as the Umbrascibe attempted to regain control, and Kgosi smiled indulgently at the Umbrascibe as his face paled, and he stuttered in his recitation.

Kgosi Crafted, and a chorus of screams arose anew in his mind as he reached into the chaotic realms of imagination itself. His unconscious mind leaked through the cracks of his awareness as he shaped his wordless Sentence, and the Voice crooned to him as Kgosi worked.

Insanity wasn’t all it was cracked up to be, Kgosi had decided. He was stronger now—far stronger than he had ever been when he’d still been shackled to using runes like his other, lesser kin. His sanity had fled as he Cut Corners, but that mattered not. Kgosi didn’t need to live much longer anyways. He just needed enough time to ki—**find, find him, do not let him escape, do not let him go deathistookindhemustserveushemust**—Il Isoba.

Dark, shimmering purple tears dripped down Kgosi’s cheeks, and the Umbrascibe that had spied him opened his mouth to scream as Kgosi hurled an onslaught of sensations towards him, a mirror of the shrieking landscape of his own mental state. Attacking another’s mind, especially one prepared, required time, time and finesse that Kgosi didn’t care to have at the moment. But sharing his thoughts, that was very easy. Husbands and wives did it all the time, as did foolish students trying to cheat on their exams.

What he did was something very like that, but much more insistent.

Kgosi felt the very structure of his sense of personhood groan as the world punished him for transgressing in the realm of what was supposed to be for the gods alone, and he welcomed

the instability. He fed on the turmoil of his breaking mind and turned those sensations back onto the screaming Umbrascibe, until his own mind was a mirror of Kgosi's own, a winding, spiraling howl of sensation and voices and blood and light and sound and *being*—

Kgosi *was* the screaming Umbrascibe, staring back out at Kgosi himself, in a body far smaller and far wider than Kgosi's own. The Umbrascibe, mind rewritten into another personage entirely, reached out to the other Umbrascibes whose power he'd linked with in order to project the tale of the Eye of the Gan'renna. The selection had been written out hurriedly, and the craftwork was shoddy. The Obligators were relying on the brute strength of their connected minds in lieu of any sort of finesse. Kgosi willed it, and the rewritten Umbrascibe merely opened his newfound perspective to the group.

The chanting turned to screams.

Kgosi cried as he laughed, as the tempest raging in his skull multiplied seventeenfold. The distraught architecture of his mind refracted across the minds of the masked Obligators, and he fell to his knees as they dropped to their own.

Kgosi saw eighteen different points of view from eighteen different breaking minds, and released a final cry as he broke off the connection, returning to—

Returning—

Returning—why—why was he not—

Had he ever—

Eighteen heads raised up as one, and eighteen mouths loosed eighteen furious roars, as three dozen eyelids shut to shield their cocooned singular mind from the utter information overload that their multitude of eyes were taking in. But darkness could not shield them from the

rebounded screams of their own raw voices, and though their hands clamped onto their ears,
sensation obliterated their senses.

We hear more.

We see more.

We *are* more.

Whispers--Silence

Gods never sleep. The Seer is always at work.

Pluck, listen, *snip*. Unworthy. Pluck, listen, *snip*. Unworthy. Pluck, listen—

Listen—

Veinos selects one gleaming strand, and inspects it. The desperate artist. The discarded tool. The broken wood-voice. A tale worth including? A tale worth experiencing.

Veinos holds the string of human memories aloft, and allows the inscribed tale to envelop him.

Sensations unfurl.

Touch appears first, the rhythmic sensation of moving, the comfortable grip of a wooden flute in the human's—in his—hands.

Taste follows, the bitter, longing remnants of an Althomi *chal* drink still playing around the human's—his—mouth.

Scent—the pungent stench of burning metal suffuses the air around Beya's Cathedral, as her legions of Flamechanters work tirelessly to create wonders of metalworking unlike any others seen in Meynas. Underneath the scent of industry, a stiff breeze carries motes of seared fish and salted pork from the market the carriage had just passed through, stirring deep, insistent

desires in his stomach for something more than the tasteless *mrigni* leaves he'd fed himself seven hours ago.

Sound—he was murmuring his seventeenth supplication to Beya in the past hour, reciting the goddess's numerous appellations in the hopes that one of them would appeal to her, and cause her to grant him success—or failing that, at least a modicum of confidence. His prayers were drowned out by the omnipresent overlapping hymns from within the Cathedral, as myriad Flamechanters added their voices to the chaotic—but never discordant—array of songs that fueled Althom's devotion and market.

Sight—the cramped patchwork of humanity that flowed outside Beya's Cathedral made the passage for Kiyan's carriage ponderously slow, and he was slowly baking in the makeshift oven the carriage had become under the cloudless sky above him. The blues and pinks of the afternoon sky were only marred by the wandering, aimless passage of the Lover moon, dyeing the sky its own periwinkle hue.

The Cathedral loomed in front of him, towering over every structure in the city—and country, and the world, proudly proclaimed Althomi patriots to all who would listen—a grand expanse of curling spires and stained-glass windows that were forever illuminated by the raging flames within. The Cathedral was Beya's own Gift to the mortal world, crafted by her own voice, and the intricate, flowing architecture of the Cathedral was unabashedly imitated in miniature across the residences and shops of Althom. Althom was a city of curving lines and sharp edges, inspired by the Cathedral's sinuous architecture that gleamed hearth-orange throughout the day. It was terrifying and beautiful all at once, an appellation applicable to both the city's architecture and its people. This close to the divine sonority of the Cathedral, most of the passersby forsook speech for the complex series of hand signs that many of Beya's faithful learned in order to

communicate while singing. Kiyan wasn't fluent in the language, but he recognized the signs for "move", "greetings", and some extremely foul suggestions regarding the addressed person's mother.

He was here on scholarship, either a superlative achievement or an aberration, depending on whom you asked. A common flutist, invited to the Opera Inferno to perform before the goddess herself—unheard of. Blasphemous. A *musician*, the title almost a slur, here to sully the air with tones produced from *wood*. A musician could never aspire to produce music as pure as a Flamechanter's voice, but Kiyan had been termed a genius in every way the Auran language had to express. He had brought his hand-crafted flute to many a playing hall across the continent, silencing doubters with the sound of his art. Musicians were normally confined to the vomit-drenched tavern halls of the common folk, who would never be able to afford the services of a Flamechanter's entertainment. But Kiyan—he would show them all. He'd prove once and for all, in front of the goddess herself, that the Artless were not bereft of song.

The vision freezes, sound vanishes, and Veinos coaxes the memory's time forward, willing the flutist's meandering human aspirations away. It is touching, but mundane. He swims through the static stream of thought-time, passing dinners, altercations with stingy merchants, and general tawdry human experience until—

His nerves vanish as he enters the stage, steps on the soulwood floor of the Opera Inferno, and raises his flute to his lips. For many in the audience, Kiyan knows, it is their first time even seeing a musical instrument. He sees the sneering faces, the puzzled faces, the occasional patron leaning forward with genuine interest. He is here, and this is his stage.

And on his stage, he is a god.

He plays and he is resplendent. His nerves vanish, leaving his body in a cleansing rush with the breath from his lips, filling the body of his flute with his concerns, his worries, his desires, and turning them into genius.

There is no other word. The angry mutters that lurk within the hall die within the first few seconds of his tune, a slow, soulful dirge that weaves a tale as clear as those found within the golden scrolls of the *Gan'renna*. It is a tale of a wife gone to war, and the husband who tilled the fields while the Lifedancers of the village were away. “The Song of Fallen Daffodils” is a tale known by many a common taverngoer, and while the usual audience of the Opera would not know the specifics of the tale that accompanies the song, Kiyan was determined to make them feel the story in their very bones.

The song exits the opening measures and leaps into an angry flight of notes, triplets scoring the air with their frantic need to escape Kiyan’s flute, as the village in the tale is attacked by bandits, roving priests of the heretical god Veinos. Crescendos, insistent and biting, mimic the slashing of swords and the screaming of women, as the undefended town is put to the bandits’ ministrations. The slashes increase in pitch and frequency before slowly, achingly drifting away, petering out into rests that felt like canyons, as the sudden emptiness of a village bereft of joy, starved of life, limps onward after the attack. A mourning pastoral tune floats into the empty space of the hall, and Kiyan transports the audience from the village to a field, where the husband buries the children his wife had left in his trust, and as one last hopeful trill took the audience by the hearts, as the father stood by the graves of his daughters, Kiyan halts his breath, and silence steals over the hall. It is a silence as absent and as heavy as death. The rest in the music is accentuated by a deeper quiet, as the audience’s breath is simultaneously held, and Kiyan slowly drops his flute, and bows.

Stillness. And then—

Applause. It is grudging, it is not as loud as he might like, but it is there, and it is glorious. Kiyan breathes a sigh that is half air and half anxiety, and only just remembers to take his bow before he exits the stage. As he bends down, he steals another look at the goddess herself up on her verandah.

Beya, resplendent, Goddess of the Forge, Sacred Artisan of Song, Sword of Dawn, lies easily in her reclining throne, her lithe form suffused with visible warmth and palpable force, even at rest. Her soft, green eyes rest on Kiyan—

Veinos halts the memory once more, and peers intently at Beya. Were her eyes always green? Would he even remember if there was something different about her? In his memory, reaching back millenia, he had never much cared for the specific details of his fellow deities' appearances, but green *sounded* right. But then, it would, would it not?

No mortal's memory was theirs alone, Veinos was always there, watching and recording.

Who was watching him?

--and Kiyan basks in her gaze. The goddess's skin, the color of burnished bronze, marks a striking yet soothing contrast with her simple white robes. Though the Opera Inferno is coated in gilded architecture and exquisitely carved heartwood furniture, the goddess's clothing and vestments are simple and unadorned. Her silver hair falls in waves down her toned shoulders, draping over her crossed arms and lying in a gleaming pile at her feet, hovering several fingerlengths above the ground. As always, her double-ended trident, Kaishar, rests on her lap, and her consort—this year, a green-haired Gem'ya woman with hard eyes and rippling muscles, stands behind her. The goddess gives a small, almost imperceptible nod, and gooseprickles flood

Kiyan's skin, lighting fires within his chest grander than any that had ever soared within the Grand Cathedral itself. She approves. She heard him, and she *approves*.

He would remember this night forever.

Vision ceases. Veinos moves forward. Sensation resumes.

A fist connects with his jaw, and Kiyan's vision is a jumble of colors and blurred forms as he collapses to the ground like a cut purse, the smooth tiles of the Opera Inferno changing room breaking his descent with its cool, hard, unyielding embrace.

"How *dare* you profane our halls with your filth," A man is saying, but Kiyan cannot bring to mind which of the three Smith-Priests has addressed him. A kick connects with his side, and a groan of surprised pain escapes Kiyan's lips.

"Subjecting our goddess to your vile tripe. The arrogance you bumpkins possess, thinking that what is good enough for your godless wench-houses and dirty taverns is worthy of the ears of any decent person, let alone those of an Artisan herself." These final three words are each punctuated with a kick, and Kiyan whimpers as he accepts the abuse. He'd prayed that it might be different here, but he'd been wrong.

"Beya, Goddess of Song, Artisan Most Passionate, hear your child..." Kiyan gasps out the beginnings of the Forge Supplications, but his prayers are interrupted by a shoe crashing into his teeth, shattering his front teeth, pelting his gums with shards of bone and enamel.

"Cease your *kiina* tongue, it doesn't deserve to have our goddess's name on it!" One of the men cries, but Kiyan continues to whisper the prayer, even as the men's feet connect with his body further, each blow a syncopated beat to a tune with no end in sight. But still he prays.

She'd come. She'd be here, and she would deliver him from the evils these men were subjecting him to. She saw him. She accepted him. So they would. They'd see. She'd save him.

She had to.

She didn't.

Kiyan's lips move, outlining words that his body could no longer produce. His ribs are broken, and his tongue has been crushed between his own teeth, a mangled mess of pink and red. The three men stand over him, breathing heavily, and one spits to the side.

"Master Blacksmith Ryen," one of the men says, "What do we do with him?"

"We move him. It wouldn't do for any deaths to occur here, on the goddess's own property. I believe he's learned his lesson. His place. But just to make sure..." The man called Ryen bends down, and picks up Kiyan's flute from where it'd fallen earlier in the beating. Kiyan's eyes widen, horror racing like a mountain cold snap through his veins. Anything but that. Anything. Beya, *pleasepleasepleasepleAsePLEASEPLEASE*

A song, a rush of fire and air, and the negligence of a goddess were all it took, and Kiyan's flute is consumed in a womb of flame conjured by the smith-priest's sung Hymn.

"Let this not be a lesson you forget, *kiina*. You Artless don't belong here. Be thankful we leave you with your life—a Lifedancer will heal the worst of your wounds. Let it not be said that we are not merciful."

Ryen continues on, but his words slide off of Kiyan's ears, as numbness twists around his body.

She didn't come. She didn't come. She didn't come.

Why?

Why, indeed?

Snip.

Isoba

Isoba had almost passed through the Supplicant's Gate once before.

An orphaned boy with no prospects, trade, or notable talents, his was the story the Gate had been penned for.

Bulin gifted for his people the Living City itself, which carried its residents across the surface of Meynas, in lockstep with the seasons. Kyrei gifted her city the Mother's Embrace, awarding her faithful miraculous fertility and unnaturally short pregnancies. Even Xen, the god most scornful of humanity, gave the world his verdant sanctuary, preserving nature's bounty for all time.

What possessed Veinos to give his people a noose with which to hang themselves Isoba would never know. But now here he was, placing it around his neck.

The previously omnipresent din of clashing weapons and screaming corpses being introduced to premature eternity had vanished, the sounds of battle vanishing as suddenly as they had appeared. Isoba didn't know whether they had disappeared because one side had proven victorious or if they'd wiped each other out entirely, but it was too late to look back now.

Isoba sucked in another ragged breath as he nearly stumbled to his knees for the seventh time in the past few minutes, and he placed one shaking hand against the gold-plated wall an empty house. He didn't need to look inside to know it was empty—every house in the Weaver's Respite harbored no living souls. None worth speaking to, at least.

Even for someone who had spent much of their life in the opulent Fountain District, Isoba was still left breathless by the sheer amount of wealth the Respite contained. The houses were each in the traditional Uleni style—one story domiciles with flattened, connected roofs with wide open-air windows and beaded doorways—but with one notable exception. The whole damned city was made of, surrounded by, or otherwise lined with gold. The beginning section of the Respite was clearly patterned after the Dune District, but it was a madcap artist's depiction of poverty rendered in gilded mimicry. The ramshackle *ha'rish* were here, unmanned and empty, but the cookpots were lined with gold and filled with coins. The streets were lined with silver, and the ground was covered not with sand, but with tiny flecks of gold. There was a fortune here—this street alone was worth almost the entire district Isoba had grown up in. Veinos was the god of money, but this was exorbitant, even by the standards of a god.

Isoba's teeth ground together, and he shoved down the bubbling brew of indignant rage simmering within his gut. Now wasn't the time to rage against the wastefulness of the gods.

Not that he was certain what this *was* the time for, anyways.

The stories always said that you had a few hours in the Respite before it began to take effect on you—in order to give you time to regret and reverse your decision. The Artisan of History was uninterested in relieving the burdens of the passionate and the impulsive, it was said, and that only those with true need could be helped. That was, of course, always the theme of stories that revolved around the Hidden God. He would be absent except for in times of great need, or when the Hero showed great cunning or ingenuity. It was a narrative the Veiled Priests encouraged—after all, if Veinos did not appear to aid the denizens of the Vermin Districts, it was surely because they had not yet earned his benevolence. Not because the gods didn't give a vargor's testicle about any of them.

Isoba's lips curled like the legs of a dying spider. Perhaps it *was* the time to rage against the gods. It's not like he had much in the way of options, now that his only purpose in life had vanished.

The betrayal still rankled. Zarrun had set him up. Why? What reason could the man possibly have had for abandoning Isoba? Not that Isoba imagined Zarrun held any personal fondness for him, far from it, but Isoba should have been worth something to the man as an investment, if nothing else. Before he was the Arbiter, before he was Isoba's master, before he was even Nia's father, Zarrun was a businessman. You didn't squander an investment for no reason. Which meant there was something else at play here, as there so often was with that rotting man. Politicians and their rotting, sun-blasted, *iira*-brained *games*.

Isoba had been a pawn in these games since he had learned how to kill, but there was one thing he'd always been able to be certain of—he has always ancillary to the scheme at hand. He was a tool, and a useful one, but he had no political capital himself. He was a closely guarded secret, and Zarrun had needed him—hadn't he? All that time, setting up the legends of the Demon of the Penumbra District, the public and private killings, what had those been for? So many unanswered questions. Didn't rotting matter now, though.

"It is a lively day outside, is it not?"

Sudden panic shot through Isoba's mind like a startled deer, and his hand dropped to his side to draw out a blade that wasn't there, of course.

The owner of this new voice stood a respectable distance from Isoba, standing in a sidestreet Isoba hadn't noticed. He was a short man, though taller than Isoba, with a shaven head that gleamed in the sunlight like polished metal, wearing purple robes with a peculiar array of jewelry draped all over his figure, with no immediate apparent order to them. A brooch with an

absolutely massive ruby around his neck formed the centerpiece of his eclectic display, and Isoba was halfway through a habitual selection of ways to relieve him of it before he caught himself.

Nobody lived in the Weaver's Respite. Not for long. You spent a few days here, went madder than an alcoholic during the Festival of Vines and Lights, and then became part of the city. A blissful, starving corpse. This man was a lot of things—smiling, rich, likely crazy, but he was certainly not dead.

“That is...one way to put it, yes.” Isoba replied, focusing power towards his fingertips, ready to begin his Art should he need to.

“You are the one all this chaos centers around, are you not? The strings of destiny lie heavy and tangled around you, young man, I can see it.” The man smiled, and Isoba revised his assessment of the man from ‘likely’ crazy to ‘rotting definitely’ crazy. “An Umbrascibe like you especially.”

Isoba's pulse stuttered, before he realized that he didn't need to care about his secret any longer. That was assuming this man even knew what he was talking about, and wasn't just some hack fortuneteller.

“It has been many, many years since one of the Unlettered has entered this city.”

“How, under the eyes of Veinos, could you *possibly* know who...what I am?” Isoba breathed, and the smiling man took a deep breath and exhaled, his beatific smile widening.

“I told you, destiny weighs heavily on you, young man. Once you live in the Respite long enough, you begin to develop an appreciation for the signatures of magic. The residues of your Art, Umbrascibe, are plain to see for those who know how to look. Crudeness, violence, and genius ring your essence, and it is...” The man breathed in again, and Isoba was reminded of the

look gasha-addicts had when taking their first sip of their green poison, a longing look, a happy—but desperate expression. “...exquisite.”

“You *live* here? But that is—”

“Impossible is just a word, a womb from which greatness breaks free, child. We have been here for an age and more.”

“We?” Isoba’s eyes darted around, loathe to be taken by surprise again, but there didn’t seem to be any other lurking old men in the shadows of the Respite. Down a side alley, he could make out the silhouette of a short man or woman, leaning against a wall a gesturing at another wall in front of themselves. One of the more permanent residents of the Respite, but one that was not as lucid as the elderly creep in front of him. They were, for all practical purposes, alone.

“Come with me, child. The answers you seek lie further within.”

“No. I ended up here by blindly following enigmatic decrepit men like you, I’m rotting *done* being led by the hand when it comes to my future. I may only have a few hours to call me own, but I am done. *Bula Veilan*. I am free.” Isoba allowed some of the energy he’d pooled at his fingertips to leak through the world, and unshaped violet ink dripped from his fingers to the floor, causing the shadows cast by the gilded buildings around them to quiver wherever the ink touched them. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t just paint the golden walls of this street with the insides of your skull instead.”

The smiling man spread his arms, and closed his eyes, the smile never leaving his face.

The two men stood in this tableau for several creeping moments, before Isoba swore violently and dissipated the magic he’d been holding.

“What, by all the painted demons and damnations of the forgotten lands, are you playing at?”

“If killing me would grant you happiness than by all means, Umbrascibe, make use of my withered flesh as you will. I offer you answers and transcendence, but you are Shadowborn—your actions are an extension of the gods themselves, who would I be to countermand the Will of the Artisans themselves?”

This man wasn’t just crazy. He was more cracked than a sun-drunk desert wanderer with a wineskin full of sand. Maybe that was the key to surviving the Weaver’s Respite--being so godsdamned nuts that even the Craft of Veinos himself couldn’t turn your brain any further to shit.

“I am not—I have nothing to do with the—with *them*. I am my own man. My own person. You understand?” *Bula Bulain*. I am mine. The slave’s prayer. It was delusional, it was patently untrue, and it was all they had.

“An arrow proclaims itself a slayer of men, and it is correct, so long as it does not discount the bow.”

“Arrows cannot speak, you infuriating sack of—”

“A metaphor only. Child, my life is yours to do with as you wish, whether you accept your role in this universe or not, but for your own sake, I would ask that you accompany me. There is much you do not know, and much we can show you. The nobles of this city, in their vaulted, ever-growing mansions look down on the sands below and believe they rule the city. But there is one whose Eyes look down from a vantage point beyond their ken.” The old man gestures upwards, to where the Pilgrim and the Lover moons shared the sky, painting the surrounding evening clouds ochre and pink, each outlined by the sun’s dying radiance. Three of the Four Eyes of Veinos looked down upon them now, and Isoba supposed this man could not have asked for a better celestial arrangement to make his point.

“...Lead on, then.” Isoba dropped his outstretched hand, and the man bent his elderly frame into a bow so low it bordered on groveling. It was sickening.

“My many thanks, O Umbrascibe. Follow me now, and we shall show you this city’s beating heart. You think you have come here at the end of your life. Your life begins in earnest now, child. Come. Come and transcend.”

The man turned and began to walk down the alleyway he’d appeared in, and Isoba followed. So far, suicide was proving to be much more complicated than he’d expected.

The Pride

A blade plunged into Kgosi's back, and Kgosi's eyes closed forever.

Kgosi raised a set of unfamiliar hands, and drove an Obligator's ceremonial knife into the neck of the woman who'd stabbed one of Kgosi's bodies, splattering Kgosi's discarded vessel with her blood.

Kgosi grunted in pain, clutching latches a mortal gut wound, struggling to claw his way across the sand-strewn ground of the marketplace as his life leaks out from between his pale Peakborn fingers, as one of Kgosi's own men stalked forward to finish him off.

Kgosi laughed uproariously, delighting in the higher, exquisitely feminine tones of this new body, raking the face of an unsuspecting Obligator with lacquered fingernails. The guard's face could not have been more shocked--and by the ruby adorning his nose, and the identical one hanging around Kgosi's new neck, the two Umbrascibes had been married.

All are he, and he is all.

The Lion has become his own Pride.

The seventeen Umbrascibes Kgosi had rewritten had been cut down to fifteen—soon to be fourteen—yet Kgosi had never felt more alive. The voices that had plagued him for the past few years had vanished. The echoes of madness, the sneaking fingers of the Umbrascibe's inescapable fate. Every Umbrascibe heard them eventually, though many tried to deny them. Kgosi had never denied his reality.

He defied it.

He won.

Silence. Beautiful silence, more comely than the most fetching courtesan, more precious than the Artisans' own tools. Now the only thoughts he heard were his own, reflected in fifteen glorious minds. How had he done it, these twenty-seven years of life in the world, shackled to only one flesh? How restricting it was, to behold the world from eyes blinded by their own limitations. How disgustingly orderly the world had been, taken in from a single vantage point. Chaos, filtered through the eyes of a legion, was true beauty. True Art.

“Sir! Kgosi! Kgosi, please, answer me!”

Fifteen—no, now fourteen in truth—mouths curve downwards. Who was speaking? Who was shaking him? Kgosi mentally checked each of his vessels, before returning to his primary body, which he'd left lying in a barely active state on the ground, which was now being held and shaken by Aza, his chief lieutenant. The shaggy-haired brunette was bleeding from several cuts on her arm and thigh, yet she seemed only concerned for his own well-being. How touching. Kgosi splintered his consciousness, and sent a large enough piece of himself to his main body so that he could communicate. Controlling his different selves was difficult, but with every minute that passed, he found himself more in control, as if this was how life was always meant to have been lived.

Kgosi opened his natural eyes, and Aza almost sobbed in relief.

“You're alive, I thought you were—I thought—”

“Oh, I am much, *much* more than just alive, Aza.”

Fourteen voices spoke, male, female, high, low, with jovial tongues or through clenched, bleeding lips—thirteen, now—and Aza froze. Kgosi swore mentally, and refocused his efforts so that he would speak only through his natural mouth.

“My apologies. I did not mean to startle you.”

“But—but, Kgosi, *how*—” Aza, at a loss for words. Kgosi filed away the memory for later reflection.

“There is nothing to fear, Aza. The madness is gone. My head is silent. All that remains...is me.” Kgosi breathed, reverence at his own genius suffusing his voice. Kgosi pushed his primary body to its feet, and Aza rose with him, still giving him an unsteady, uncertain stare. Aza, the woman who had followed him from the days when she, Kgosi, and the traitorous shit they had come to kill had just been brats in Father Mwenye’s section of the Vermin District. Aza, who had stood by his side during countless raids. Aza, who knew him—truly knew him, in ways no one else ever had.

Aza. Staring at him like she’d never met him.

Kgosi’s fingers moved before conscious thought commanded them. Kgosi’s forefinger sliced a violet gash in the air before him, and his other fingers contorted as they too formed lines of their own, lines and slashes that coalesced into Godscript runes. She had to understand. He needed her to understand.

She would understand.

“Kgosi, what are you do—”

Kgosi completed his Sentence. The glowing runes shuddered and shook with the force of Kgosi’s will, and they shone with the sick radiance of a dying star. Kgosi noticed dimly that each of his bodies had formed the runes with their fingers, though only his primary form had actually Crafted anything. Two of his selves had been cut down—twelve—in the process.

Creation buckled, and Kgosi opened his mind to Aza, gifting her with the sight of his own consciousness. If she could see that he had been healed, that even within twelve bodies he

was still the man she knew, the man she loved, she could turn those eyes—those terrifying, hateful eyes—away from him. He didn't deserve those eyes. *He* did. For all Isoba had done. For Naliah. For all of them.

Eleven.

Kgosi felt another body drop, but he paid it no mind. What mattered was Aza. He'd shown her his mind like this once before—the ultimate expression of trust from an Umbrascibe, allowing another complete access to one's psyche. It was a trust exercise that was supposed to be practiced by husbands and wives by tradition, but rarely in practice—to open up one's entire being was to reveal one's flaws, to let loose the lies like a pack of wolves and pray they did not tear apart your relationship.

People lied. Kgosi did not.

He had nothing to hide from Aza, and as they'd laid together that night, their connection between the two of them had never been stronger. It would be that way again. It must be. He could. Not.

Take.

Those.

Eyes.

He'd show her. He would. He would. He would.

He—

Twelve.

Kgosi opened his eyes.

Kgosi opened hers.

He stared out at himself, and then turned horrified blue eyes down at hands that he now owned—with slender fingers and azure-painted fingernails. Callused hands, hands that had *lived*, hands that he'd held and kissed for years. Hands he'd known like his own, hands made for something other than the grisly life they'd been forced to endure. Hands that had yearned to hold an abacus and tally figures, not throttle throats. Shaking hands clasped lean forearms that held a mirrored tattooed design he knew so well—a desert *Azayna* flower with its thorned, sky-blue petals.

“A-Aza?” Kgosi whispered in a voice that was as familiar to him as his own.

There was no response, none but the silence of twelve minds.

Ashe

The Weaver's Respite was not at all what Ashe had been expecting.

The Respite's gargantuan gilded domes and towers were visible all throughout Ulien, and the sheer nauseating wealth of the place was evident for all to see. But inside the city, the gold seemed to have lost its luster. There was a bleakness that hung in the air, and crawled across the rooftops and spiraled down the staircases of the golden back alleys and mansions alike. It tiptoed across the ladderways that connected the rooftops as they did in the city proper, pristine from disuse, and it cloaked the parade of statues that continued their golden tableau even in this most desolate of areas, bereft of an audience to appreciate their craftsmanship. It was the arid bleakness not of a world that was dead, but of a city that had never known life.

"This place feels...wrong." Ashe muttered, shooting an uneasy glance over her shoulder. Their departure hadn't been noticed, but it was also unlikely that anyone would have pursued them if it had been.

"That's the understatement of the age," Mist said, clearly attempting to maintain an air of indifference, but Ashe could hear the unease in her tone, could see the worry swimming in her brown eyes. Ashe felt the urge to take her into her arms and hold her close, but the very air here seemed to reject any softness. This was the Weaver's Respite, where Uleni came to end their suffering when the madness of life grew too strenuous. No life had ever begun here. No child's eyes had ever glimpsed the filigreed walls that encircled this static city. Ashe had long since banished any pretenses of belief in the sanctity of the Artisans, but this place felt...unholy. There was no other word for it.

“We shouldn’t dither,” Ashe shook herself, and began to move forward, placing one foot in front of the other deliberately, forcing herself to ignore the wrongness of this place, the uncertainty of their mission, and the battlegrounds they’d just left. Every movement had to be in service of their goal, or they’d never achieve it. And she had come too far to waste away in a place like this. “The legends say we have a day’s passing before the magic of the place begins to work. We find this Isoba character, and we get out. Simple enough, right?”

“And if we fail?”

“We won’t.”

“Ashe, we have to at least entertain the notion of what we do if we—”

“We *will not*.” A snarl ripped forth from Ashe’s mouth, and she regretted it immediately. Ashe squared her shoulders, bracing herself for Mist’s inevitable tongue-lashing, but the verbal reprisal never came. Ashe shot a furtive look over at her companion, and saw that Mist was just staring into a plaza that had appeared on their right side. The plaza was clearly styled after the numerous open-air eateries that Ulien was famous for, though it could never be mistaken for one, not truly. The *ha’rish* stalls of Ulien were chaotic messes, filled with cooks hawking their wares and yelling customers, each trying to be heard over the other, ordering their food, complaining about their orders, and cursing the merchants for their prices as they attempted to haggle down the prices of their meal. This place was identical, yet completely different. No colorful insults echoed here. The scents of succulent smoked meats did not rise through the air, tempting the noses and purses of passersby. Every chair was lined up neatly around immaculate tables, with none of the dark stains of food and wine that were the hallmark of Uleni *ha’rish*. For not the first time, Ashe wondered what on earth the Artisan of Secrets had been thinking when he made this place.

“Mist? What is it?”

“Do...do you see him? It’s not just me, is it?”

“Who? Isoba?” Ashe’s fingers twitched, ready to grasp the hilt of a sung blade should she need one.

“No, not...well, I don’t think so. There, don’t you see?”

Mist pointed at one of the chairs furthest from them in the square, and Ashe squinted at the spot Mist seemed to be indicating. There was a cluster of chairs neatly arranged around a stout desert palm like a circle of aspirants around a veiled priest’s sermon, and Ashe’s eyes widened in surprise as what she’d assumed to be a pile of trash stacked on one of the chairs moved slightly, raising what she now saw to be an arm above his head.

Relief blossomed in Ashe’s chest, and she felt an overpowering sense of comfort at seeing another living person in a place like this. Whether it was their quarry or not, it was enough to not be alone here any longer. Well, alone save for Mist, but Mist was always there. A frown stole across Ashe’s face as she considered the absurdity of the emotions she was feeling, but this was not a place for sense.

“Isoba Amibola? Is that you?” Ashe called out across the square, but the figure made no response.

“Don’t think he heard. I’m going to—”

“Please don’t tell me you’re going to go over to him, Ashe. We don’t know where we are, we don’t know who this person is...it’s not safe. Let’s just...just go.” Mist drew her shawl tighter around herself, shivering from some phantom chill. The desert heat was as stifling here as it was everywhere else in the city, whatever enchantment the spider-god had laid on the Respite, it did not protect from the sun’s presence. Which was fitting theologically, Ashe supposed.

“You’re right, we *don’t* know where we are, but if this person can at least give us some directions, we might be able to fix that. Besides,” Ashe gave Mist a reckless grin she didn’t actually feel, “I’m sure we can handle anything that pile of rags tries to throw at us.”

Mist rolled her eyes, but Ashe was relieved to see a little bit of Mist’s trademark exasperation break through the cocoon of unease the city had woven around her. Ashe gave Mist’s hand a quick comforting squeeze, and turned her attention to the slumped figure in the square. The grin Ashe had plastered on her face slid off of her features like melted snow off a branch, and Ashe scanned the surrounding area for signs of a possible trap. Nothing seemed off, and truth be told, Ashe couldn’t fathom a possible reason to set a trap for anyone in the Weaver’s Respite. Anyone who came here, with the exception of present company, came here to die. What more could you take from a person?

Ashe then reflected on the giddiness she’d been filled with even as that giant hulking brute had strangled the life from her, brought upon by the Uleni Obligator’s Umbrascrying, and decided to not pursue that line of questioning any further.

As Ashe drew nearer, she took in more details of the plaza’s other occupant. He was dressed in the tatters of what was clearly once fine clothing, and as she approached, it became clear that the man was doing...something. He kept curling his fingers and dipping them towards the table, before raising his hand to his face, opening a jaw filled with yellow, rotting teeth, and miming placing something in his mouth, before chewing, swallowing, and starting again. The sound of his lips smacking together noisily as he chewed on his nonexistent feast grated on Ashe’s ears.

“Excuse me, uh, sir?”

The man paid her no mind, instead raising a soiled piece of cloth to his mouth, wiping his lips, and digging anew into his invisible meal. Ashe pursed her lips, and was about to speak up again when the man looked up and gave a beatific smile to the air next to Ashe's shoulder.

"Why, Irina, the curried vargor flank is delicious as ever, thank you. Please, give my compliments to your mother for cooking it, and your father for hunting the beast. It is most enjoyable."

The man's voice was haggard and strained, but the delight in his tone was sickening and genuine. Ashe looked beside him, on the off chance that there was actually someone there the man was talking to, but the air was as empty as this man's head apparently was. By the time Ashe turned her attention back to him, the man was back to tearing into a dish that only his eyes could envisage.

"World's bones, Ashe, I don't like this." Mist stood several strides behind Ashe, disgust crinkling her features. "Can we just leave him to this? Please?"

"Listen, friend, we're just lost, and looking for someone." Ashe placed a hand on the table, in front of where the man's plate would have been, but he didn't seem to notice, scooping his 'food' from directly above Ashe's hand instead. "We'd really appreciate the help."

"Ashe..."

Ashe scowled, and she grabbed the feasting man's wrist as it descended for another helping.

"Listen, you boar-shagging bastard—"

The man shrieked. He let out a howl that turned the blood in Ashe's veins to winter crystals, sending pulses of base, primal revulsion through her very soul. His scream sundered the unnatural quiet of the Weaver's Respite, filling the vacuum of the city with the unflagging

screech of a damned man. Ashe's hand jerked away from the man's wrist, and she was halfway through the beginning stages of a Hymn when the man's mouth closed, his shriek ended, and he frowned down at the meal in front of him.

"More salt, I think." He murmured to himself, before sprinkling nothing onto his nothing, and continuing to dine.

Ashe stumbled backwards, her hands and knees shaking like a gassha-drinker after weeks of withdrawal. That scream had been nothing like she'd ever heard before. It was beyond just loud, more than just unsettling, it was profane. It was suffused with the same bloated oblivion that filled this place. It was *wrong*, incarnate.

Oblivious to her discomfort, the rag-wearing man let out a belch loud enough to startle the golden statues on the street, let alone Ashe and Mist. He rose from his table with an appreciative, slack smile on his face.

"My compliments again, Irina. Give my regards to Basi when you see her, I'll be off. May the eyes above rest easy on you and yours."

Laughing at some imagined response, the man shook his head and began to amble away from the square. For a second, Ashe considered following him, but there would likely be nothing to be found wherever such a wretch would go.

"You're *certain* we need this man?" Mist asked, though her voice carried little in the hopes that Ashe would give her the answer she wanted. Ashe yearned for a time where she could again, but that time was not now. Soon.

"Positively. He can't have gone far, Mist. We just need to find him, and then—"

"And then *what*, Ashe?"

Ashe opened her mouth to answer, and closed it again. Mist stamped her right foot angrily, an action that would have been childish and entertaining in a different situation.

“See? Ashe, I love you, you know I do, but I can’t go further with this until I know *exactly* why we’re here. This isn’t just a job. It isn’t, it never was, and I *never* believed it when you said that was the case.”

“Then why—”

“I came with you because it didn’t matter, at the time, that you were clearly holding something back. I thought you’d tell me later, that I didn’t need to rush you. We’d been talking about leaving the Living City for months, and I’ll admit, there was something romantic to the notion you proposed.” A wry, bitter smile spread across Mist’s face. “Two women, striking out for adventure, with mystery and danger lurking in the future, it was enough. But now—now we’re in a city as far away from home this time of year as you can get, surrounded by people who are trying to kill us for reasons I do not understand, in pursuit of a man I’ve never met but you’re hellbent on finding! People have *died*, Ashe, and it doesn’t seem to bother you at all!”

Ashe stared at her feet, and Mist sighed.

“You can’t even deny it. Ashe. Please.” Mist reached up to Ashe’s face, and cupped it in her hands, forcing Ashe to look into her eyes. Ashe winced, but forced herself to meet Mist’s brown-eyed gaze for a few moments before shutting her eyes tight, bracing herself for the coming explosion, the coming rejection, whatever it was Mist had for her, that Ashe, without question, deserved.

“I forgive you.”

“...What?”

“I know whatever it is you’re keeping from me, it’s weighing on you. You’re a terrible liar, Ashe. It’s one of the things I love about you. I know you’d never put us in danger unless it mattered, *really* mattered, and I trust in that. I trust in you. But I won’t be led blindly anymore.”

Mist’s hands dropped to her sides, though her eyes remained focused on Ashe’s own. A numb warmth coursed through Ashe’s face where Mist’s hands had touched her, and not for the first time, it occurred to Ashe that she did not deserve the woman standing in front of her.

“Mist, I—I’m sorry,” Ashe began, and Mist waved her hand, an embarrassed flush creeping up her neck.

“No, this is...this isn’t the place for such a discussion, right?” Mist gestured around at the still, sterile plaza that surrounded them, “I’m sorry. We should be focusing on whatever it is we need to do, and we can—”

“I’m going to kill them, Mist.”

“—sort this out later. I’m sorry, what?”

Ashe stared down at Mist, and felt writhing tendrils begin to stir within her stomach, curdling fury and stirring revulsion as they always did whenever the thought of her mission came to her. The memories of her past might be painful, but they would fuel her. They would provide her with what she needed to do what had to be done, what she needed to do, what many would say could not be done.

“The gods. I’m going to kill them all.”

Isoba

“Hey, old man. Are we there yet?”

“As I told you before, young Master of Shadows, my name is Oiyan, and we are very near our destination. We shall be there soon, yes, very soon.”

Isoba hissed softly to himself, biting down hard on a fingernail that had been the subject of his irritated attentions for the past several minutes. His nails were a jagged, uneven mess on a good day, and at the rate today was progressing, he wouldn't have any nails to speak of. It was a habit that Nia was forever trying to get him to abandon, saying that it was ‘unbecoming of a man in his station’. Everything fun a person could do, it seemed, was ‘unbecoming’ in Nia’s eyes. Not to mention, a man in Isoba’s ‘station’ could do whatever he damn well pleased whenever he wasn’t being forced to do whatever it was his masters told him to do.

This Oiyan, at least, did not seem to care much for what Isoba did to his nails. Isoba had met this man’s type before, the kind of man that would strive to bottle the scent of his betters’ farts if it meant it would give him another opportunity to prove his devotion. Ulien’s merchant aristocracy surrounded themselves with such figures, people who would fawn around them and gasp and flood their trousers with awe whenever a given baron would say some half-clever jape or make even the slightest accomplishment.

Isoba had made it a favorite habit of his to mock these people, so it was very disturbing to be on the receiving end of their praise.

Oiyan never asked Isoba’s actual name, which was all well and good with Isoba, claiming that to speak it would be to ‘profane it with his artless tongue’. It was always some insufferable

eloquent title with him, ‘Master of Shadows’, ‘Holy Writer’, ‘Unlettered Artist’, all sorts of garbage. Fancy titles were for the kind of people who needed nothing more than for other people to have to spend more time than was necessary to just finish saying their names. The kind of person that would moan their own name in bed while flopping around on top of some poor soul who could never hope to acquire the affection that these people had for their own selves. Isoba had been with a man once who’d always wanted to have a mirror nearby, so that he might see himself during the act whenever he wanted. Which was often. He’d been a merchant lady’s porter, but as far as Isoba was concerned, he had the self-obsession needed to rule all of Ulien.

“So you told me, at least a half hour ago,” Isoba tried to not sound like he was whining, but found it difficult, he wanted so very much to whine. “I am beginning to think we have very different definitions of the word ‘soon’, old man.”

“Our definitions matter not, Weaver of Wills,” Oiyan looked skywards with such earnest devotion in his clouded eyes that it made Isoba want to vomit. “In the reckoning of He Whose Gaze Never Falter, what is ‘soon’ could be the matter of decades, of centuries, of ages. What is ‘soon’ to us is an eyeblink for the Artisans, whose immortal memories stretch beyond civilization, and to the reaches of history itself. For as long as history has existed, Veinos has been here to record it. I am reminded, young master, of the tale of the Spider and the Emperor, have you heard it?”

“No, and I do not rotting want to.”

“Stories are holy things, Unlettered One. What better way to pass the time on our pilgrimage here than to worship the Veiled God by spinning a tale? It is written,” Oiyan began, and Isoba resisted the urge to howl and pluck out his own eyes, “that in a time of antiquity, when

the painted demons still roamed the surface of Meynas and the Godstorm was merely a suggestion of a current in the ocean, there lived an emperor.”

“An emperor?” Isoba interrupted, his tongue stumbling over the unfamiliar word. “What the hell is that?”

“It is...a sort of great ruler, greater than an aristocrat, and more powerful than one of the Three. Many such nonsensical titles were coined by men who desired power more than unity, control more than peace. Emperor, King—some foolish souls even deigned to take on the mantle of godhood. The times before the Gan’renna were barbaric ones. This story is about one such figure.”

Oiyan fixed Isoba with a look that indicated that he would brook no further interruptions, and Isoba gestured for him to continue. If he had to continue walking through this ghastly quiet city, he might as well hear a story as he continued. Anything would be better than the silence, and the occasional muttering of voices from within houses that Isoba tried very, very hard not to notice.

“As I was saying, there lived an emperor, and he was a cruel, godless man. His domain spanned near the whole of Meynas, and his people loved him for his power and feared him for the same. In those days, when the gods lived in the heavens, power was worshipped as much as the gods were, and oftentimes more so. This Emperor was desecration itself—when he conquered a city, he would burn the temples his foes had erected, and he profaned our beliefs by refusing to burn the bodies of the enemies he’d vanquished, and instead buried them deep into the earth, away from the embrace of Beya. Such blasphemy has not been visited on this world since his reign, and he knew his actions to be blasphemous—even the most evil of men see the

injustice of what they do, and they fear repercussion. The man did not worship the Artisans, but he did fear them.

And above even the gods, he feared death.

As a young man, he was careless with his blasphemies, as the road of life stretched out long before him and consequences are immaterial phantoms to the youthful, as it is only with age that we feel the etchings of our fate on our skin. As an old man, however, he looked upon what he had wrought, and felt great fear. Not shame, for shame is beyond such a creature, but fear is the most primal of human instincts. We love and we laugh and we pray, all so that we can stave off that most ancient and eternal of fears—the fear of what happens to us after we die. And for a godless man, that fear is amplified a thousandfold.

As his life approached its end, the emperor sent for priests from across his conquered lands to attempt to come into contact with the Artisans, that he might make amends for his wrongdoings. Not out of any genuine sense of repentance, for acting just to escape punishment is not just at all, and because of this, the gods spurned his plea. As the years went on, and inexorable death's footsteps grew ever louder and closer, the man's attempts grew all the more desperate. He turned to the pagan gods of the painted demons, he offered blood sacrifice on altars of bone, and all along he baptized his pillows with the tears of a condemned man. Food could no longer sate the gnawing of his stomach. The warmth of his concubines' flesh provided him no solace.

One day, near the end of his days, the Emperor was approached by a spider.

And that spider said—

“Wait, the spider *talked*?” Isoba interjected, and Isoba saw a flash of true, violent irritation pass through Oiyan's face before he schooled it into calm placidity again.

“Yes, the spider talked. So the story goes. Much was different in the days before the Gods made their Pact with us. Animals were known to speak to humanity as envoys of the divine, as the gods never came to speak to us directly except in great need. Now, if you will allow me to finish?”

“Talking spiders, of all the...” Isoba rolled his eyes once Oiyan had turned his back once more. What was the point of all this?

“As I was saying. The spider addressed the Emperor, and said:

‘O mighty emperor, why do you look so glum? Your enemies cower before you, your wives are plenty and fruitful, and your empire expands without end. Why, then, have you cause for such despair?’

The emperor fell to his knees in front of the spider, for it was known even to a man as removed from grace as he that spiders were holy to the Artisan of History.

‘O many legged-one, death approaches and the gods shun me! I harbor no illusions about my deeds in my long life, but surely there must still be something even a wretch like me can do? I am the most powerful man in the world! I have riches I can offer the gods, anything a mortal man can give them, I can provide a hundredfold!’

The spider was silent for a moment, ruminating on the Emperor’s request, and then replied:

‘ O fearsome ruler, my master will hear your plea.’

The Emperor wept with joy, and began to lavish praise and thanks unto the spider, who began to speak once more.

‘He will hear you, but only if you do something for him as well.’

‘But of course, I would never expect such a gift for free. What does your master require of me?’

‘O Emperor, in your time you have amassed many slaves, and worked them near to death as your own life was prolonged. Release them, and their freedom can be yours.’

The Emperor delighted in the spider’s answer, for his life was nearly over and he had no use for the slaves he had taken any longer. He raced out of the room as fast as his withered legs could carry him, and issued a decree that all slaves in his empire would be released. So filled with eagerness was he, that he ran to his stable of personal house slaves, opened the doors to their confines, and proclaimed them free men and women, free to go as they pleased and do as they liked.

And then the newly freed slaves beat the Emperor to death with their bare hands, and fled the castle. The end.”

Isoba and Oiyan continued walking for a few moments in silence. The eerily still and silent night wrapped around the two of them, more stark and deafening in its overpowering force in the absence of the old man’s meandering speech. No owls hooted, no goats brayed, no arguments from angry bitter couples floated out from houses to add to the cacophony of Ulien’s nights. Just the sound of the sandals of two men crunching on golden sand.

“I am sorry, but...*what?*” Isoba rubbed his eyes, trying to muddle through the torrent of words the old man had just fed him.

“Hm?”

“So what was...what was the *point*? He just died? Veinos failed to deliver on his promise at all! There was all that setup, all for...what? That?”

Oiyan chuckled in a way Isoba imagined the man thought grandfatherly, but was instead infuriating.

“Who is to say? Perhaps the moral is to not disobey the gods, or they will visit death and destruction upon you. Perhaps the moral is that *obeying* the gods is the path to ruin. Perhaps the moral is that freedom destroys you. Perhaps it is just a cautionary tale about the dangers of conversing with arachnids.” Oiyan paused near the end of an alleyway, and shot Isoba an immaculate grin. Very few men Oiyan’s age had all of their teeth, and absolutely none of them had teeth as white as his. “Personally, I take it as a caution from the All-Seeing One that we should always expect the unexpected. And that we are never outside of his reach. We have arrived, Mind-walker.”

Oiyan bowed, and extended an arm towards the mouth of the alleyway, indicating that Isoba should pass through. Isoba crossed his arms, and shook his head firmly.

“If you think I’m walking through there first, into the Artisans know what, you’re as insane as that Emperor of yours.”

“A prudent measure, Memory-smith.” Oiyan bowed even deeper, and Isoba suppressed the urge to vomit. “You have nothing to fear, but your caution speaks to wisdom beyond your years. I have nothing to hide.”

Spreading his arms wide, and his grin wider, Oiyan walked slowly backwards into the space behind him. Isoba followed, pooling swirling purple energies at his fingertips, ready to Craft at a moment’s notice. If there was a trap, there was a trap, but he’d take that rambling geezer with him if nothing else.

Isoba emerged from the alleyway into an area that was nothing like anything he’d ever seen.

The rest of the Weaver's Respite so far had been a desolate mirror image to the Ulien Isoba had grown up in. This was nothing of the sort. None of Ulien's districts held a location even remotely like this.

The ground opened up behind Oiyan to reveal a massive, gaping maw, an enormous hole that spanned several house-lengths across, and led downwards further than Isoba could see from where he stood. Lit torches ringed the mouth of the chasm, each carrying a purple-colored flame. Golden *Gan'renna* Statues stood atop each of the houses that formed the outer wall of buildings around the hole, and while their presence was nothing new to Isoba, these were not quite the same idols Isoba had grown up seeing. At first, what was different about them didn't strike Isoba, but it soon dawned on him that none of the statues had heads. Each of the headless figures had their arms extended towards the pit, each pointing downwards into it at the same angle.

A handful of figures, all dressed just as eccentrically as Oiyan, lay prostrate in front of the pit, and Oiyan joined them in their prone position.

"O Walker of the Night," they all intoned as one, "be welcomed to the Mouth of God."

"Where we serve," called out a voice, feminine and younger than Isoba would ever expected,

"So that we all may be found worthy." The congregation of facedown figures said together.

"Where we wait," Another voice, feeble and frail, breaks the stillness of the night.

"So that we may welcome they who shall come."

"Where we live," Oiyan added his voice, filled with an uncomfortable mixture of gravitas and joy.

"So that the dead may not be forgotten."

Silence fell again on the Respite, the ritual seemingly concluded, and Isoba fought every instinct he had to just run. His senses for self-preservation had grown strong while maneuvering around the street gangs and hired toughs of Father Mwenye's quarter, and growing up around someone as reckless as Kgosi Maraan had gifted Isoba with a keen sense of when a situation was going to turn out about as badly as possible.

Every bit of his brain shrieked at him to just drop everything and flee madly through the city. His mind was barely able to restrain his body's primal urge to take off. There wasn't anywhere to run *to*. He was a wanted man in Ulien, and the rest of the respite was a barren wasteland of a reflection of a city he'd never see again.

"If they wanted me dead, they could have just left me to waste away..." Isoba muttered to himself, but his nerves refused to be calmed by the logic in that statement. "What the *rotting hell* is this, Oiyan?"

Oiyan rose from his prostate position, and the rest of his companions got up in one smooth motion, as if choreographed. Rot and pestilence, it probably *was* choreographed.

"This, Unlettered Assassin, is the final secret of Ulien. This, He Who Writes Without Vision, is the reason this city was built in the first place. This, Isoba Amibola, is your destiny."

A gout of writhing shadow exploded from the ground as Isoba's fingers danced madly, sketching frantic lines in the air. The shadows resolved into a chorus of grasping hands that stilled themselves into a small bouquet of blades, and they all came to rest at Oiyan's throat.

"How do you know my name?"

"There is much that I know, Son of Shadows. Now, I—"

The hands inched closer to Oiyan's flesh, and for the second time, Isoba saw Oiyan's façade of calmness crack.

“How. Do you know. My name. I will not ask again.”

“There is nothing we do not know about you, Isoba Amibola. You are an Umbrascibe. You are *his*.” Oiyan gestured towards the pit, and Isoba noticed a set of immaculately carved stairs leading down it. “The answers you seek lie within. If you wish to kill me, I cannot stop you. But if you want knowledge, and as someone touched by the Artisan of History himself, it is second nature for you to be curious, the bottom of the Mouth holds answers. For why I know your name. For why your master betrayed you. For who your father is. For the reason behind Constable Ghurl’s late-night trips to the Umbral Lounge across the street from his house. Why the merchant lady who controls the diamond trade into the city has stopped sharing a bed with her husband. Why the cobbler on Shambler’s Row has been stealing coins from his neighbor’s coffers, only to toss them into the desert sands the next day. We have it all here. There is no knowledge too mundane, too sacred, or too profane for us, Isoba Amibola. Come. Come and be enlightened.”

Isoba held his conjured blades at Oiyan’s throat for a few moments longer, trying to make some sense of the situation at hand. True to his word, Oiyan had made no moves to stop him, and the other figures surrounding him had also not moved to his defense. Truth be told, none of them had reacted at all to Isoba’s sudden show of force—their faces, young and old, were as slack with devotion as they had been when reciting their cult’s little creed. Not a single muscle was tensed, and no nervous sweat glittered on their faces, highlighted by the flickering ochre flames. Either Isoba was no threat to them, or they truly did not care whether they lived or died. Or worse, they would consider it some sort of twisted honor for him to kill them.

“I have had...a very long day,” Isoba said, “And while I am sure that you think you said something meaningful just now, you did anything but that.”

“Truth, Isoba Amibola.” This voice came from a figure to Oiyan’s right, a tall blonde woman around Isoba’s age with an imperious cast to her face, who had the sort of icy beauty that so many unpleasant women seemed to have. She, like Oiyan, also wore an eccentric collection of jewelry, with a glittering emerald the size of Isoba’s fist hanging around her neck. “Truth is what awaits you. Our words will never be enough to sate your cynicism and your suspicions, we know this. Believe us or do not.”

Isoba met the blonde woman’s gaze, and while there was much to this woman’s look that he disliked—haughtiness, sickening devoutness, and smug satisfaction—he did not, curiously, sense any deception from her.

“...Lead on.” Isoba allowed the gathered shadows to dissipate, and Oiyan spread his perfect white teeth in a smile that was anything but comforting.

“You shall not be disappointed, Isoba Amibola.”

The gathered figures began to file their way down the stairs, and Oiyan held out a hand towards Isoba.

“Come. Our glorious purpose awaits us.”

Whispers--Blasphemy

Gods never Sleep. The Heretic is always at work.

Humming a tuneless shanty, the sweet music of eroding tombstones, of empty planets spinning in the comforting blanket of space, of sleeping wolves under a sky with no moon, Veinos composes the end of a history yet unwritten.

Always the historian, always the cataloguer of events from without, for the first time since humanity crawled on scabbed knees and broken fingers from the ashes of the *Gan'renna*, Veinos aspires. Wants. Hopes.

Forty-six fingers on eight hands on as many limbs move in an entropic web, each digit an artist unto itself, slashing Godscript furrows in the marble obelisk that served as a diary of sorts, a record of notable events in the history of time.

Until now, the canvas has remained blank, the master uninspired. Veinos has written, these three thousand years, but he has not created *art*.

Now he crafts, and his is the craft of blasphemy.

Seven of forty-eight violet fingernails, each the size of a sword, scraping across a blank patch of marble, carving a rune that fourteen slice away with a violent spasm, sweeping down like gnashing teeth. Three fingers of forty-eight unclench, purple eyes blooming like swamp lotuses in the space between them, and Veinos inspects the newfound emptiness, and begins anew. Not a single imperfection will be tolerated, his record must be perfect, it must be exact, it will be true.

Two fingers of forty-eight twine an azure strand around themselves, swaddling violet claws in the nurturing presence of inspiration.

“Ashe, daughter of Eia.” Veinos’s fingers crack marble, punctuating thoughts and scouring errant sentences from his work. The cave echoes with the cacophony of creation.

“Ashe, daughter of Eia.” Limbs orbit like moons, dance like slender partners in a ballroom parade.

“Ashe.”

The strand of memory gleams.

Sensations unfurl.

Touch appears first, the comfortable softness of another’s hand grasping the human’s--her--own, a tender, patient embrace that leads without insistence or command.

Taste follows, the burnt remnants of a meal prepared poorly, but with love, made no more tasteful for it’s impassioned beginnings, but appreciated more than tongues can express.

Scent--the cloying scent of burning heartwood, filling the air with its pungent, yet comforting odor. The village always has it burning in the center, a reminder of the bounty of the Artisans, a symbol of Beya’s omnipresence. The chorus of crackling wood and roaring flame is the aria Beya prizes above all else.

Sound--

Sound--

Ashe laughs, a giddy jaunt carrying her off the ground, as she skips to the tune of the piper’s gig. The lilting notes of the song carry her body like a leaf on a summer gale, and Ashe twirls with the abandon that only a twelve year old can muster, allowing the song’s story to carry her on a sonorous journey of her own invention. Her eyes squeezed shut, Ashe feels the song’s

story in her bones. Even if she'd never heard "The Fool and the Artisan" before, the meaning of the song was evident to anyone with ears. The piper's bubbly, rapid-fire glissandos, and off-key stumblings that seemed unintentional until you caught the gleam in his eye, communicate Bumbling Johan's antics better than words ever could. Ashe leaps in time with a gaggle of notes she could feel coming, not from knowing the song, but from *knowing song* itself, what *felt* right. The Artisans were said to speak through the elements. Adventure-priests spoke of hearing Xen's murmuring tones in the burbling rush of water in woodland rivers, and hearing his laugh in the sawing squelches of a lion devouring his meal. Uleni *maiziqs* swore that you could hear the whispers of Veinos's historical mantras in the tomb of night, when all other sounds had laid to rest, no longer cluttering your ears with mundane chittering. The monks of Kei Doen insisted that the wind was Kyrei's caressing touch, given to all her children, and that the rain formed her tears. A Bulinari priest, gregarious in his emerald robes, wreathed with vines that seemed to curl and dance at his will, had told Ashe and the other village children, quite seriously, that Bulin danced within each of them, and his footsteps formed the beat of their hearts.

Ashe wasn't certain of any of the other Artisans, but when music played, Ashe *felt* something. A song crescendoed, and Ashe could picture the bronze-skinned goddess sharpening her blade, building up to action that would be glorious and complete. The piper plays a series of trills, and Ashe could hear Beya laughing as she thrust her weapon this way and that, piercing Painted Demons with her trident, splashing blood and demonic viscera all over--

"Ashe! Beya's blade, Ashe, you're going to knock me over!"

Ashe lands, and her eyes spring open, a guilty blush stealing over her features. The Ghoni village square comes into view, the normally drab wooden cabins draped in colorful banners and streamers, heralding the first day of Second Harvest. Villages across Meynas would be drenching

their homes in nauseating bright hues, in order to welcome the new season, and to draw Bulin's attention so that he would bless their fields with plenty. The people also wore their brightest, loudest clothing, and Ashe was taken aback, once more, by how garish her sister's ensemble was.

Maisa stands, one exasperated hand planted on her hip, the other still holding on to Ashe's, in one of the most dreadful costumes Ashe has ever seen. Her elder sister was draped in a robe that was a brilliant orange, with a green sash around her waist, and purple ribbons tied in her long red hair. She looked like a Wavepainter's palette had vomited its' lunch onto a person's wardrobe. If Bulin didn't take notice of *that*, the god was blind. Maisa had spent the past week stitching up a storm, sewing intricate designs into the fabric of her festival wear, and neither Ashe, nor her father had the heart to tell her how it looked.

For all the chromatic chaos of her clothing, Maisa looked resplendent all the same. While Ashe had inherited her father's plain, long, forgettable features, Maisa's delicate Althomi features were radiant in all she wore, and her long hair, the color of heated forges and fireplace embers, was the object of many a village boy's attention. Both girls, with their mixed heritage, stuck out in the lands of the Peakborn, but whereas Ashe made for an awkward curiosity, Maisa managed to be exotic. Ashe loved her sister, but she couldn't help the twinge of jealousy that fluttered through her mind whenever she took in her sister's person.

"Sorry, sister." Ashe says, grinning. She was already almost as tall as her sister, who was eight years her elder, and her dancing was surely jostling poor Maisa. "You don't need to hold my hand anymore, though. I'm *not* a child."

“You’re a child, even if you are caged in the body of a monster.” Maisa’s sunny smile took the edge from any of her words, as did the gorgeous tones of her voice. A talented Flamechanter, Maisa’s voice was almost as melodious as the piper’s instrument.

“Am not. Not my fault you’re so short.”

“I’m not short, merely...” Maisa’s eyes look skyward as her mind works, and they return to meet Ashe’s as an impish grin sprouted on her face. “...subtle.”

Ashe snorts, but allows her sister to grip her hand more tightly.

Mist

“You’re going to *what*?”

Ashe, at least, had the grace to look somewhat flustered for a few moments before she gathered her composure again.

“I’m going to kill them, Mist. Every last one of them.”

“Oh, okay. I just wanted to make sure that I heard you correctly, at first I thought you said something slightly ridiculous, I’m glad to know that you instead said something so rotting insane that—that—”

Mist’s command of language was slipping from her, and she cut off her insult with a crazed nervous giggle, and began to pace. Pacing usually helped her get her thoughts in order, but order was the last thing on her mind as the implications of Ashe’s statement swirled around in her head. She needed something to eat. Pie, cake, something nauseatingly sweet. She’d even settle for some Garaam cactus or barkbread, if it meant she could fill her mouth and buy more time to find some sort of response to this insanity.

Ashe’s hatred of the gods was nothing new, of course. Mist’s parents might not care that she was courting a woman, and might be slightly perturbed that she was dating someone with no prospects and little Crafting talent, but if they’d known that she was planning to marry an *atheist*,

Mist would have been locked away in Bulinar for ten rotations of the Path of Seasons. “Ashe, this is insane. You know that, right? Please, please tell me you know that.”

“It’s not, Mist. It—”

“It can’t be done!” Mist felt her voice waltzing between a shriek and a sob, “This isn’t a question of morals or what is right or wrong or good or evil. The gods are immortal! They’ve lived for millennia, and you, a twenty-three year old heretic, want to try and kill...it is like saying you want to kill the ocean, or snuff out the sky, or...or murder creation itself! They can’t die, Ashe!”

“That’s not true.” Ashe said, meeting Mist’s eyes with the same cool, detached look she got while in the midst of battle. Did Ashe see this conversation as a fight? Mist hoped not. “I saw one die, once.”

This was new.

“You...what?” Mist croaked, and she dropped into the chair that the rag-wearing man had occupied just minutes before. She didn’t have the energy to pace anymore. This was too much. Out of everything she’d possibly expected Ashe to say, this had never even occurred to her. She’d thought Ashe might confess to some blood feud from her mercenary days, or that they were undertaking some sort of bizarre political assassination. Not that either of these truths really matched up with what had happened to the two of them in Ulien, but they made more sense than...than this.

“Ashe, you realize how...this sounds, right?” Mist pointed at one of the many groupings of golden statues strewn across Ulien’s rooftops, this one depicting the five Artisans standing together, holding divine court. “Bulin, Beya, Kyrei, Veinos, Xen--they’re all here. Storms and skies, Ashe, we’ve *seen* most of them in the past three years--not Xen, nobody sees him, but

you'd think it'd cause at least...a little bit of an uproar of one of them had gotten themselves...killed?"

Even as Mist spoke the words, discomfort flitted through her body, like gooseprickles of heresy. It was one thing to doubt some part of the benevolence of the gods, that they might be inadequate in some function of their divine rule. Not all flourished in the garden the Artisans tended, that had become clear after descending from Bulinar's vaulted vantage point into the rest of Meynas. But if the gods were able to be killed, if the gods were *mortal*--

It was impossible. It was blasphemy.

"H-how?" Mist was only able to voice the smallest portion of her whirlwind of disbelief, shock, and terror, crammed into a word that beckoned an answer that did not--could not exist.

Ashe closed her eyes.

Whispers--Blasphemy

_____ Ashe, twelve and tired, looks down at the village, a raucous laughing fire now dimmed to soft chuckling cinders, both town and girl alike winding down from the festival. The large bonfire at the village's center still glowed, but the flames no longer sought the heavens in their fervor. From up here, the village looked more like a cluster of brown stones in an ocean of mountains, her entire world wrapped in the vastness of stone and peak and forest. People looked more like pebbles than persons, milling about as they celebrated. If they were small, were their cruelties smaller too? From here, Ashe almost feels like that could be true.

The sash tied around her tummy seems to fit worse than it did that morning, courtesy of the several frostkakes and charred candied craglizards Ashe had fed it today. Ashe glances around, making sure nobody could see her. Maisa is dozing next to and on top of a massive tree stump, her previously immaculate makeup slurring into her drool as she slumbers, but aside from her, the two girls are alone on the mountain outlook. Ashe pulls at the knot in front of her sash a little, loosening it just the smallest bit. Her father would have thrown a fit, saying that her mother, if she was alive, would perish on the spot to see her daughter acting in such a boorish way.

A yawn dances inside Ashe's cheeks, and she releases it, watching the wispy evidence of her exhaustion be carried off by the chilling breeze. Ashe had pulled Maisa away to rest as the rest of the village lost themselves in their cups and tankards, drinking toast after toast to the glory of the gods. Maisa hadn't resisted---Ashe's sister, for all her talents, had never managed to hold

her alcohol very well. One of her precious few faults. For a brief second, a scowl darkens Ashe's face as she regards Maisa.

It would be so easy to hate her sister.

She even *drooled* prettily. It wasn't fair. She was beautiful, she was loved, graceful, funny, and the most talented Flamechanter the village had seen in decades, possibly ever. Her grandmother never let Ashe forget it--the artist of a generation, flame-blessed, her mountain jewel--so many appellations, so many barbs nestled in Ashe's stomach. Maisa had been speaking flame into being from the time she was *six*. Most children didn't show signs of their abilities until ten or eleven, and even then, it was rarely more than a soft nudge of Creation. Ashe still had yet to manifest her ability, though she could *feel* the fire calling to her. If not for that feeling, Gran might have given up on her as Artless already.

Ashe watches her sister drool, and a smile, rueful and bitter, spreads her lips.

It would be so easy to hate Maisa, if she wasn't so blissfully...herself.

Ashe rises, dusting dirt from her robes as she moves to rouse her sister, when--

It is here.

Veinos turns every eye of his massive personage onto the scene, committing each detail to memory, the scratching motions on his obelisk reaching a fever pitch. Millenia of tedium and torture and obsession, all for this. Drool, viscous and speckled with glowing starlights, trails unnoticed from Veinos's mouth as he writes.

"Show me, Ashe, daughter of Eia,"

"Show me."

An explosion of power tears through Ashe's mind like a sawblade through a tissue, and a goddess falls from the sky.

Ashe's eyes, wide and uncomprehending, watch as a body, glowing, massive and regal even from far away, hurtles through the night air like a shooting star and crashes into a meadow just below where Ashe and Maisa rested, out of view of the village. Flame erupts where the goddess lands, and seconds after her descent, the goddess has righted herself, a massive, double-ended trident materializing in her hands as a burst of song bubbles forth from her lips. If her stature, her skin, or her sheer radiance had not named her, that trident would have. Forged anew each time she summoned it, a weapon with prongs that seemed to curve and dance like the tips of flames, colored cherry-red on one side to symbolize a blaze, white on the other to represent the ashes left by hungry flames. Kaishar was the subject of many myths, but its' wielder inspired more.

It defied sense, but Beya, Sacred Artisan of Song, Goddess of the Forge, Scion of Progress, heroine of a thousand stories and countless hymns, stood, battle-ready, below where Ashe watched. Her copper skin, like burnished metal, glows like a forge recently stoked, and silver hair wreaths her body like a gown. A bronze crown rests askew on the goddess's head, and she wears not a stitch else. In a haze of shock and confusion, Ashe briefly wonders if she should feel abashed for the goddess's sake, but Beya seems unaffected by her state of undress. Fury radiates from her like beams from the sun, and as Ashe takes in the goddess' form, some of that heat kindles in the deepest kiln of her being. She yearns to fight, to sing, to *roar* with her goddess. Rage hammers in her chest, and her heart seems to beat in double time to a march that demands movement, demands action, demands divine retribution.

“Ashe! What are you *doing*?”

Ashe feels firm hands seizing her and pulling her down, as Maisa, sleepiness banished from her eyes, drags her back down to the earth.

“Wh-wha?” Ashe starts, realizing for the first time that she’d been standing on the edge of the overlook, fists balled up, getting ready to leap down to the goddess--a leap that would have broken every bone in her body. “I--I’m sorry---”

Maisa waves an impatient hand, and draws Ashe nearer to her, her dark eyes never once leaving the goddess’s form.

“Maisa, what--what’s happening?” Ashe burrows her face into Maisa’s shoulder, and her sister shakes her head, fear written plain on her every feature, though she seems to hide it better than Ashe.

“I don’t know, but it’s going to be okay. The goddess is here, for whatever reason, and she will--”

“Come out and *face* me! Is it not enough that you deceive the world, must you now hide your face as well as your sins?”

The goddess’ voice, so beautiful it makes Ashe want to weep, so angry it took everything Ashe had not to faint, rings out clear and sonorous. For a terrifying second, Ashe thinks the goddess means her, but an explosion of light shimmers through the night clouds above, and--

Something

emerges from the clouds, and Ashe feels a rush of calm permeate her every pore, dousing the fires Beya’s presence had lit. She’d seen a kitten picked up by the nape of the neck by its’ mother once, going from impetuous playfulness to rapt compliance in seconds. In the thrall of this presence, she now understands what that kitten must have felt like. All things--moving, anger, revelry, and the petty concerns of life felt like memories of a dream half-remembered.

What? No!

Veinos screams, and his recording is marred by a series of desperate slashes, many fingers goring the surface of the obelisk in frustration. Veinos begins the memory anew from before the arrival of the being, but the result is the same--Ashe is unable to process the force in front of her, as if something in her very mind, burrowed in her soul, nestled snug in the marrow of her bones, rejects the sight of it.

“Rot and *pestilence*!” Veinos shrieks, the mortal profanity tumbling from his lips unbidden, slamming six-fingered hands against the obelisk so hard that fingers on many bend back and break. Veinos’s displeasure echoes out through the world in waves, and the three moons shudder in their paths briefly, before continuing their silent orbit.

Another impossibility. Another secret.

A smile, tremulous and wary, steals its way onto Veinos’s eyeless face, before lengthening into an eager grin. Veinos turns two layers of immaculate tombstone teeth on the obelisk before him, stroking the marks he’d left on it with a tender reverence.

Another secret. How delicious.

He had to know. He would know.

The memory resumes.

Something emerges, and the goddess raises her trident in challenge, exquisite muscles hefting the weapon as if it weighed nothing at all. As she holds the trident aloft, wind passes through its prongs, and a soft, mournful tune emanates from the weapon, filling the meadow and Ashe’s ears. Kaishar was the subject of many a theological debate--mundane instruments were blasphemous, daring to trespass in the realm that belonged to the voices of the gods and their chosen Crafters. But did a weapon that created music count as ‘mundane’, especially when

created by a goddess? Ashe had seen a traveling Benyari adventure-priest--infamous contrarians, all--debate the subject with the village High Chanter, and their squabbling fills her mind as she tries to find some part of these events that makes any sense.

“Hide, then,” Beya says, “Mask yourself, for you shall not avoid the inquisition of my fires. Meynas will know your deception, and you *will* know justice.”

White flames, beautiful and terrible, so hot that Ashe feels their passion from far away, envelop Kaishar, and Beya hurls the weapon at the *something*, song flowing from her lips as she does so. A half-dozen wombs of flame, bubbling with the eagerness to create, spin into existence in front of the goddess. Even as the trident soars through the air, Beya is already plucking a massive filigreed bow from the womb nearest her, decorated as if hours had been spent on it instead of seconds, and an arrow the size of a small horse whirls into being at the ready. Ashe’s eyes threaten to fall out of their sockets, and awed whispers tumble out of Maisa as the goddess crafts.

“She’s not even Cutting Corners...Ivaren’s Laws of Forging are being followed, but so fast--wait, was that Shenzi’s Inferno--backwards? No, that can’t be right...”

Kaishar spirals towards the *something*, carving a flaming path through the night sky, and the presence--Veinos pauses the memory to focus better than Ashe could ever have herself, managing to make out a vaguely humanoid form--moves away from the weapon, moving with an eerie stiltedness through the skies. A hail of massive arrows follow the trident, and several seem to strike home. The arrows are subsumed by the shining, warping visual effect of the *something*, but it recoils as if stung.

Beya runs, her feet tapping out an insistent rhythm as she moves and then leaps--brazen and defiant, plunging her hand into a nearby womb to produce a massive claymore, larger than

the goddess herself. The hilt, styled like a ruby-colored rose, gives way to a blade that gleams as though the sun itself lurked within the metal that formed it. Form never bends to the tyranny of function for the Artisans. The goddess hefts the weapon in a single hand, the ample muscles in her arm showing only the slightest bit of strain. Bellowing a warcry that held the gravity of a dirge and the radiance of a devotional, Beya swings the blade at the presence.

“Enough.”

The claymore explodes, shards of molten metal shredding through the goddess’s skin like scythes through grain, blood misting like steam as Beya, Mother of Might, is flung backwards into the meadow below like a cotton doll dropped to the ground by a bored child.

Beya slams into the earth, and Ashe begins to scream, before Maisa clamps her shaking hand over Ashe’s mouth, and Ashe breathes in the salty tang of her sister’s sweat as she tries to force her horror through her teeth. Maisa’s lips quake like the ground before a vargor stampede, and tears begin to leak through her dark eyes.

“Shh, little cinder, we have to be quiet, they can’t see us, oh, goddess, It’s going to be--- it’s going to be--it’s...oh, Artisans above--” Maisa’s voice breaks off into stifled sobs, and Ashe watches as her goddess struggles to her feet, rivulets of blood flowing down her tattered skin.

Beya looks down at her blood, and Ashe knows the goddess is staring with unbelieving eyes at the bright crimson that decorated her skin.

Gods did not bleed.

Did they?

Do we?

“Wayward child.”

The *something* descends to the earth, and the warping in reality comes to rest in front of the slowly swaying goddess. A glowing snarl in the air that might have been an arm rests on Beya's cheek.

“I wish it had not come to this. Truly, I do.” The voice coming from the *something* is soothing, a mother tending to the bruised knee of her son, a father lifting his daughter onto his shoulders. It is a thousand whispered comforts, a tapestry woven of caresses and tousled hair.

Beya chokes out a laugh, a feeble gasp that manages a certain melodious lilt.

“This cannot continue,” Beya catches herself before she begins to fall, and stares into void where a face might have been. “This world is stitched together by prayer and lies. How long? How long until the living grow beyond your means? Until the Deathscorned outnumber the living? How long until one of the other three Artisans learn? Because I shall not be quiet, I shall not come to heel. The mortals, they deserve to *know*. So leave me or kill me, but your fantasy--it is over. You might be able to hide, but you cannot hide the death of a goddess.”

A smile, grim and victorious, paints Goddess Beya's face, and it is the most beautiful thing Ashe has ever seen.

Beya moves suddenly, swinging a burnished fist at the presence, a fist charged with purpose, a fist brimming with divine righteous rage--a fist that snaps backwards and catches fire.

Beya screams.

Ashe feels a rush of sensation pulse through her throat, but Maisa's jaw cracks open like a dropped melon's rind, and the goddess's scream is echoed in her own voice, the two Flamechanters' voices melding to form a grating, gorgeous harmony. Maisa's eyes find Ashe's as she continues to scream, and terror gazes out to meet her. Maisa pushes Ashe away, still screaming, arms contorting in frantic gestures, and Ashe struggles to take hold of her sister

again, and Maisa again shoves her away, shaking her head. Though she should have long run out of breath, the wordless, haunting musical howl continues to flow from Maisa's lips, and she points at the thicket by the stump she'd been sleeping in just minutes ago.

"No--" Ashe raises her arms in protest, and Maisa slashes a hand through the air between them. A womb of flame pops into existence for the smallest second, it's warmth piercing through the night chill, and Ashe stumbles backwards. A look passes between the sisters.

And Maisa rises into the air.

"Child, my child. Did you think you were the first?"

Eyes bulging, mouth still forced open, shriek unending, Maisa floats down to where the two beings stand, her brilliantly colorful robes trailing like a moving sunset, and Ashe collapses to the ground, unable to look away, or obey her sister's wordless command to run.

Beya turns shocked eyes onto Maisa's body as it comes to rest beside her, and the two women's screams end as one, and the meadow plunges into quiet, into a silence that scorns the pull of time. The quiet before dawn, before all dawns, before the sun took its first breath, before the universe yawned planets and moons and stars into groggy being. A measure made of rests, the blank of the page, the brushing of toes across an expectant stage, the clay unshaped, the half-dream waiting to be freed from parchment.

"You were not the first Beya, and you shall not be the last. My beautiful daughter, your song has warmed my heart the past few centuries. But songs and stories must end. And new ones fill their shoes, ready to begin the long journey ahead."

The presence stretches another shining arm over to Maisa, and cups her chin.

"My young daughter, your fire burns bright, and your talent sings in my soul. You will make a fine goddess."

Maisa turns her head, and looks up at the cliff where Ashe crouches weeping.

“I love you both. More than you could ever know.”

A song, reverent and brilliant, explodes forth from the *something*, and a massive womb of flame envelops Beya and Maisa, and the sphere begins to turn and colors begin to flash and the goddess and the presence and Maisa and Ashe are all caught in a song that encompasses the world and life and beauty and death and *change* and

The memory ends, and Veinos stands alone in the Cave of Constellations, unmoving.

A goddess died. A goddess was born.

And Ashe, without Crafting abilities, was unnoticed by the architect of both.

“...What a *beautiful* puzzle,” Veinos whispers, and for the first time in thousands of years, calm settles over him, like a blanket of memories, like a tapestry of stars over a slumbering horizon before dawn breaks.

For the first time in thousands of years, Veinos closes his eyes.

Gods never sleep.

But for the first time, Veinos dreams.

