

The Stone of Meku

The Saga of Meku

Dillingham Jacobs

First Edition

Meow/Squish Publications

<http://meowsquish.webs.com>

Georgia

NOTE: If you purchased this book without a cover you should be aware that this book is stolen property. It was reported as “unsold and destroyed” to the publisher, and neither the author nor the publisher has received any payment for this “stripped book.”

This is a work of fiction. All the characters and events portrayed in the book are fictitious or used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real people or events is purely coincidental. The names of places and cities are used fictitiously and in no way represent their real counterparts.

The Stone of Meku 1st Edition

Copyright © 2010 by meow/squish publications

All rights reserved, including the right to reproduce this book, or portion thereof, in any form.

A Meow/Squish Book
Printed via Lulu.com.

First Edition: August 2003

Printed in the United States of America

<http://meowsquish.webs.com/>

www.lulu.com/content/8498318

Dedicated to all the unpublished writers out there.

The Saga of Meku

Available **The Stone of Meku**

Planned
The Tides of Meku
The Flames of Meku
The Breath of Meku
The Eye of Meku

Prologue

*Zim meku, barem col ju. Cul barem, zamu col: Ilem qom zamu meku?
There is a god. We doubt this not. What we doubt, is this: Do we know
who is god?
---Neriyān Saying*

In the vast darkness of the plane, He was. Every ripple and fiber of existence bowed before him. The darkness of infinity parted, gave way to his will, and became that which was. He was Meku, and the universe was his to form and command. Out of the darkness he drew forth an incarnation of substance and strength. The being was strong and powerful, having great resolve, but it did not bend or adapt easily. It was male: a son of meku. His dark body rippled with muscles, and his face was rigid and expressionless. Meku looked upon his first creation.

“I will call you Earth,” he said, “because you are the foundation that I will lay.”

Earth replied, “Father, there is no place for me to stand.”

“How little you know of yourself,” replied the god, “You need no place to stand, for you are that upon which all my creation will rest.”

Meku placed Earth in the midst of the plane and stretched him forth to all three corners of the world, and indeed Earth needed no place to stand.

After this, Meku called, out of the darkness, another incarnation before him, having His same mind and emotions. She, for this one was female, was slender and lean, having a quick mind and a pure heart. Her beauty radiated outward, pleasing Meku and captivating Earth.

“I will call you Water,” Meku explained, “because you are pure and beautiful.”

Earth called out to Meku, “Father, I love her.” And it was true, for her beauty had ensnared him completely.

Water looked past Meku and, as their eyes met, Meku knew they would have it no other way.

“Very well,” Meku conceded, “Water, since you have no place to stand, lay upon Earth.” And even as he said these words Water and Earth embraced, never to be parted. As the two mingled, the seed of Earth created life within Water and so all the races of the world were born: the Humans, who took to the planes, the Dwarves who claimed the mountains, and the Suniyim who dwelt beneath the ocean’s surface. From these also came the lesser races: trolls, ogres, gnomes, taraks, and fay.

Meku left his first son to his play and called forth his second. Within this incarnation he placed his light and his power. His second son shone with a brilliance that was too glorious to behold and burned with power too awful to comprehend.

“Because you have power and glory,” Meku said, “I will call you Fire.”

Because he could not stand alone, Fire stood upon Earth, but as the flames mixed with Water, she cried out in pain. The creatures upon Earth and within Water began to die, scorched by the awesome power of Fire. This was the first cataclysm.

Meku acted quickly and brought forth his second daughter. Within her he bestowed his spirit and mercy. She was lithe and graceful, full of joy and contentment.

“I will call you Air,” Meku said, “because you bear my spirit.”

Meku placed Air between Earth and Fire, protecting them, and this was the end of the first cataclysm.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” a voice bellowed from the darkness.

Meku turned. A horrible vision of disorder and pain emerged from the depths of infinity.

“Chaos,” Meku said, “You have no place in my creation. Be gone and work your evils elsewhere!”

“But dear brother,” Chaos replied, “You have yet to meet my children. These are my sons: Corruption and Destruction, and my daughters: Deception, and Decay.”

Chaos gestured to the four figures behind him. The four wraiths advanced towards the world that Meku had created. Before Meku could protect his creation Chaos seized him and the two gods began to struggle.

Corruption touched Fire and deposited his poison. The incarnation became jealous of his brother's love.

"Why should you and Water be so happy when I have no other?" he cried. Then seeing Air, he seized her and, though she screamed and fought, their essence mixed.

Decay reached towards Water, but Earth, fearing for his love, rose up to protect her. As soon as the wraith's hand met with Earth's, the earth began to crumble and fail. Trees and plants began to wither and die. All creatures began to die of old age mere decades after they were born. Some began to fail from disease and infection. This was the second cataclysm.

"What have you done to my love?" Water cried, paralyzed with fear as Destruction reached to claim her.

Earth tried to interpose himself yet again, but the effort was too much for his now weakened state. Destruction's black hand grazed Water's shoulder and she cried out, not in pain, but in dismay. Wherever she touched Earth, her fierce waves pounded upon him and crushed his stones to sand and mud. Even though she was destroying him, she could not bring herself to let go. Earth, knowing that the damage she was doing was involuntary, bore the agony with staunch silence, but the damage was done. They were, the two, each doomed: Water to cause her true love pain, and Earth to endure that pain. Earthquakes shook the entire world and tempests swept over the face of the seas. This was the third cataclysm.

Air, knowing the touch of Deception was inevitable and being the most powerful of the four, rose up to meet her foe. Her fierce gaze bit into the wraith's eyes as it reached for her. As it touched her she felt the biting sting and she fought back. She felt the power of the being and, saw all of its pain and malice, and drew upon it. She engulfed all of the evil spirit into itself and with a great thundering crash it exploded, flinging itself to the ends of the earth. Deception still poisoned the tongues of the mortals, but the damage was much less than it would have been otherwise.

Chaos, perplexed, shouted, "What did you do to my daughter?" and during this one moment of distraction Meku seized his brother and bound him. The raging powers of Chaos, however are not easily bound. Quickly he drew out portions of the dark god's spirit and tied Chaos into the middle of his creation. Meku then banished the three remaining wraiths to stay trapped in forms that greatly limited their

powers. He scattered these umajinn across the world that he created with hopes that they would never again be able to aid their father.

“How are we to hold him back?” cried Earth, he and his siblings struggling to contain Chaos.

“I will make it easier in a moment. Keep him trapped for now so that I may work,” Meku replied.

Reaching forth, Meku drew out a single stone from the body of Earth. Earth felt his powers diminish slightly and had to struggle even more to keep Chaos from breaking free. Meku drew out a portion of Chaos and locked it within the stone. Earth’s powers against Chaos surged and the rival god was fought back.

“You did nicely, my son,” commended Meku.

“What did you do?” Water asked.

“I have trapped some of his power inside Earth. I will do the same with each of you. So long as at least one of the objects created by this process is kept away from Chaos, he will remain too weak to break free from his prison.”

And this Meku did. He created a pearl from the depths of Water: having dominion over the climates and weather of the lands, a flame from the heart of Fire: infused with the powers of light and heat, and an incantation upon the breath of Air: able to control the minds of all creatures. After they were all created he looked upon his world and sadness fell heavy upon his heart. Upon the face of the land war, disease, famine, and all sorts of other evils afflicted the nations. And this was the end of the fourth cataclysm and so began the age of men.

“The power of Chaos now infects my creation, and I fear that the sons and daughters of Earth and Water are ill equipped to resist him. My gift to them will be these four artifacts of power. With them they may bring peace and prosperity once again to the world, and yet, the choice is theirs to make.”

Meku now descended into the world that he created and, while disguised, met with the creatures. There he found mortals worthy of being keepers of the four artifacts. These *Daminats* were pure of heart, quick of mind, and slow to act. The Stone he gave to a human: Abdul, Sensei of Ral. He entrusted the flame to a Tarak: Molrog, Tyrant of Syn. At Water’s behest, Meku gave the Pearl to the one race that lived under her waters: the Suniyim. Lynisysis, Emperess of Her-Landel, promised to use the Pearl to keep the waters safe for all races.

Despite Meku's diligent search, however, he returned to his throne having found no one worthy to take the most powerful of the four artifacts.

As he was contemplating what to do with the Incantation, a new problem arose.

"Father! It hurts!"

Meku was aghast to find that Air was in labor, preparing to birth the offspring of Fire. She screamed, tossing fitfully in agony. Her spasms sent up huge tempests and storms onto the face of the land. The skies darkened and floods rose up on each continent as Water tried to calm Air.

"Be strong my love, it will be over soon." Earth urged.

Looking around, Meku noticed that Fire was missing. After a brief search, Meku found him, cowering on a small island, buffeted by waves.

"Fire, why do you run from the tragedy that you, yourself, caused?" Meku cried when he saw his youngest son from a distance.

Fire replied, "You know that I never meant to do this. Those creatures of Chaos affected me."

"You would not have been affected unless there was something inside you that already felt that way. You have brought this upon yourself. I hereby banish you from the heavens each night, you will abide with us only during the day."

Fire winced at his father's words but could not refuse him. He sat in silence as Meku returned to his other children.

When Meku returned, Water and Air were locked in combat. Air was screaming.

"Give me my baby! My Child! Let me see my child!"

Water tried to console her but any words that she might have said were simply drowned out by Air's cries.

Earth was holding a small bundle. Meku approached him.

"May I see my Grand-daughter?" he asked.

Earth glanced up at him, the look in his eyes a mixture of horror and concern.

"There were twins, and it's not good," he said, handing the bundle to Meku.

Meku unwrapped the cloth. The children were horribly disfigured, creatures of Chaos. There were open sores all over their bodies, dripping puss and thick, black blood. One of the things

gnashed at him with ugly fangs. It made a terrible wheezing sound as it tried to breathe, coughing up mucus after every breath. The other was dead.

“The second was still-born, should we destroy the other?” Earth whispered, mindful that Air might overhear.

Meku looked down at it again, this time with compassion in his eyes.

“No, my daughter wants children. I will give her as much.”

He waved his hand over the creature and the poison of Chaos was undone. The children became beautiful and fair-skinned. Their hair grew into beautiful ebony strands. Their fingers were long and gracefully slender. Their skin healed and their bodies mended. Bright intelligence shone in their eyes and the second coughed as life returned to it. After his work was done Meku smiled with pride.

Air still cried out, “Why won’t you let me see my child?”

Meku turned and said, “My dear, they simply wanted me to have the pleasure of seeing your daughter’s beautiful face and your son’s handsome eyes. I will name your children Neriya and Neriyo, and they will be this first of the greatest race in the world.”

Air reached out, took her daughter and son, and looked lovingly upon them both.

Neriya and Neriyo were raised in the plane until they were old enough to take care of themselves. Each of the Elements, even Fire, along with Meku had a hand in their upbringing. When finally the day came to send them into the world, they were proficient with commanding all measure of power, just as the Elements themselves. Meku decided that the Neriya, alone, were worthy to have the most powerful artifact: the Incantation and so taught them the words that, if spoken, could control the very minds of all mortals. They promised never to use it unless absolutely necessary, since their natural power was sufficient. He dearly hoped that they would never have need of it.

The two bid their good-byes to the gods and set off on the island, looking for a good place to build a home.

Na kevida l'arkim shekomu d'vats kedim nu resh l'zomim Kemeku shezamu kevodesh.

And in those days the darkness will overtake the lands of the south so that the sight of Meku will not be on them.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,
Book of Flames

Crouched upon the hard dirt floor, the kaioasu leaned against the oaken outer wall of the inn. Night's chill wind blew against his back, prompting him to pull his dokai closer around his shoulders. Footsteps sounded on the street, and he slunk further into the shadows. As he held his breath he saw the feet of the local Amayin Warrior Guards plod past the alleyway. He breathed out, and a prayer of thanks to Meku escaped his lips. The Amayin were lazy. The Royal Guard would have checked the alley. He shook his head. Luck: his couldn't be this good for much longer. His right hand dipped into the folds of his dokai, and the sleeve moved to reveal the unmistakable tattoo that labeled him as a kaioasu. Etched in black ink, the tattoo was of gray tongues of flame wrapped around coils of black thorns.

"The thorns of your life will be consumed in the flames of Meku." Those words Chancellor Kane had said at the ceremony still tormented his ears. He shook his head and shivered, causing the sleeve to fall back into place. He tried to push the memory of recent events out of his mind. As he drew his hand out of his dokai his knuckles were gripped tightly around the black handle of a glistening, sinister blade. Curved like a slithering serpent and double bladed, the dagger was a forearm's length of steel-forged death. The scant light of a nearby lamp-post glittered off the cold and unforgiving metal. He ran his finger along the blade but made certain that he did not so much as graze the point. A pinpoint hole on the tip would have passed unnoticed had he not already known that it was there. The hole led to a hollow within the blade that was filled with the worst poison imaginable: *Abor*. He had seen the dagger long ago, but had never imagined that he would ever wield it. He grinned darkly, morbidly.

Footsteps fell once more upon the path so the kaiousu: robe, dagger, and all, shrank back into the shadows again. His ears perked up beneath his hood and caught a wisp of sound from the street. Someone, or someones, were talking in hushed tones around the corner at the front of the local house of prostitution. The kaiousu, hunched on his knees, crept closer and pushed back his hood to eavesdrop on two voices: one feminine and the other strangely hoarse and grating.

He caught only the last of the female's reply. "...in the house," she said.

The second voice spoke with the same annunciation as a snake chewing on coarse tree-bark. The voice hissed and gurgled in a seemingly inhuman fashion.

"Butz I am ssurezz thees ez ger plaze." it choked.

"Sir, I assure you that no kaiousu have entered my establishment." she said, her irritation unhidden despite her formal tone, "I know the laws."

"Iz meant notz to krk-krk-krause insulch to miz ladyss. Iz must finderz him..." the voice gurgled. It was then interrupted by a fit of coughing.

So the man was another one of the seekers sent after him, thought the kaiousu. Well, he would find him soon enough. The man finally stopped coughing and was breathing harshly.

The feminine voice sounded disgusted. "Good evening sir," she remarked curtly, and seemed to hesitate before she added the customary salutation of the land. "May Meku guide your feet."

The kaiousu detected more than a hint of sarcasm and condescension in her voice. He waited for the slam of the door, clenching the handle of his dagger: his only friend and ally. He was out of the alley and back in as quickly and as silently as any student of the Sacred School. Perhaps, he thought, his abilities had risen to be greater than those of Sensei Gno himself. He now held a small impish man dressed in filthy rags by the throat. As he pressed the curved blade to the creature's neck it let out a high squeak of terror and surprise.

"Speak only when I tell you," the kaiousu hissed into its ear.

He drew them both farther into the shadows. The thing saw the wrist and arm of the hand that held the dagger and the kaiousu noticed his jerk of shock and horror.

“Yes,” the kaiousu said, “you know me. I am he whom you seek. Speak now.” here he pressed dagger closer to the man’s neck, “Who are you?”

The thing sputtered some meaningless blather and its eyes rolled back into its head. It went limp in the kaiousu’s arms and became dead weight. The kaiousu sheathed his dagger and let the creature drop to the ground. Bending down beside the crumpled figure he pushed up one of its eyelids. He feared that the man had swallowed a suicide capsule. No, only unconscious with fear. The kaiousu sighed. His hands searched the thing’s pockets almost by instinct. It was insulting that they sent a creature such as this to capture one of the greatest warriors in the land. If they had wanted to insult him, then it had worked. Yet, he would not get angry. That is what they would want. He cleared his mind of the issue and paid attention to the task at hand. He tried to wake the man, to get more information, but he was out cold. Thoughts of mercy could not have been farther from the kaiousu’s mind. This thing, despite being just a tool of the real enemy, was dangerous. It knew where the kaiousu was and therefore must die. Thoughts of kidnapping did skirt along the fringe of his brain but the difficulty of traversing the city with an unconscious body negated that idea. He mustn’t do anything stupid. He regretted what he had to do, but he tried not to think about it. He cursed and drew his dagger.

The blade seemed to have a desire for blood and a lust for death as it glimmered in the night’s darkness. He detested it. He longed for the day that he would regain his honor and could once again fight with a true weapon of Meku. Still, he had grown to see the usefulness of this blade in the passing weeks since he had procured it from the first assassin who had attacked him. But why did that assassin have this blade, this blade that he had only seen once before? Again his thoughts were running wild. He needed sleep and food, for he had had none in almost three days now.

The kaiousu muttered under his breath, “Against Meku I must again take a life.”

He lifted his left sleeve to reveal a progression of fresh scars across the length of his arm. Some of the cuts were only starting to scab over. Holding the blade at a slight angle he drew the dagger across his arm slowly. The pain shot through him, blocking out all other thoughts, and he felt its cleansing power flow into his veins like the blood that flowed out. If only death would be so kind, he would

welcome it. He watched the blood well out of the open wound. He grimaced with pleasure, and gladly bled onto the dark alley floor. It was not his blood that was spilling out so much as the last few drops of sanity that had been struggling for control inside him.

Clenching his teeth, now not in pain but in hatred, he growled, "Once again necessity has consumed my honor. Fate has darkened my soul. By Meku! Damn me!"

He thrust the bloody dagger into the unconscious man's chest, just below the sternum, and up into the heart. He twisted. The death spasms were sudden and short and, in a matter of seconds, it was over. He had no time to reflect on what he had done, nor did he want to. After cleaning and sheathing his blade he heaved the body up and tossed it behind some crates in the alley. He turned to flee this place: the scene of his horror, but something caught his eye. With a double-take glance he saw a small piece of parchment on the ground where the man had lain. In one movement the paper was in his possession and he was running silently through the shadows of the town. He wrapped his sleeve tightly around his arm to staunch the bleeding. Near the end of the ally, he leapt and, with his good arm, grabbed the low balcony of one of the many townhouses in the city. From there he climbed to the roof of the house and sat, virtually invisible, in a niche between two chimneys. He needed a place to stay and lay low for a while. He needed a new dokai to change into. And he needed someone who would neither ask for money or identification. The geisha never asked questions and wouldn't require money unless he made use of their services. They weren't like that high-dollar, licensed prostitute to whom the old man had talked. They would understand. Some may even have the tattoo of the kaio-su, since it was being given so freely in these recent months. He made his way on the rooftops at first, but as the guards became less and less and the muggers and vandals became more and more, he moved to walk on the streets. He looked for the signs that pointed to the various black market businesses, signs that said one thing but meant another, signs that he knew and could follow. His quest in the darkness of this moonless night and through the shadows of the hate-filled streets finally took him to a door at the back of a licensed and legitimate opium den. The door had a large pad lock securing it on the left side. Secret doors were common to him and he knew how to open this particular kind.

After only a moment he stepped inside the front room of the geisha house and surveyed the interior.

It was dimly lit by torches on each wall and a candelabrum of scented, perfume candles in the center. A stairwell on the right wall was so rotten and decrepit that a large bronze statue of the former emperor propped it up. The stairs led to the second floor rooms where the geisha's business was conducted. In the middle of the room, positioned around the low table that supported the candelabra, were several couches in various states of disrepair. Apparently the rooms upstairs were not the only places where business was conducted; a geisha girl was entertaining one of her customers on one of the tattered couches. At the back of the room was a bar that was left unattended, he assumed, for lack of a bartender. The door next to the bar was closed but certainly led to the kitchen. A piano was all that occupied the left wall of the front room, and a lavishly garbed, elderly woman was playing slow melodies that filled the room with a pleasant, if monotone, disparity. One breath explained the presence of perfume candles. Despite their odor, the kaioyu could catch the strong fumes of the hard opium smoke that came from the more legitimate part of the building. The only other person in the room, one of the geisha, approached him as he stood at the entrance. He judged her to be about seventeen and was wearing only a kimono.

"Are you here to see a specific girl," she asked, cleverly leaning forward and allowing her kimono to fall open, "or would I be to your liking?"

She was of a light build, muscular from the regular workout that her employment provided, but also delicate and lithe. Her body was definitely designed for her work. Her straight black hair framed, exquisitely, her beautifully youthful face, and her eyes were soft and gentle: not the kind of eyes that one expected to see on a geisha. She had a small nose that turned up slightly and a dimple on her chin. If a man wanted the young look in a girl, then this girl would be much to that man's liking.

The kaioyu ignored her offers. Despite the rest of her, her ears were what caught his attention. She was, like him, a Neriyu. He tossed back the hood of his dokai to reveal ears, tall and pointed, like hers.

"I am wounded, I need food and..." he trailed off as he began to lose his balance.

Startled, she began to speak, but before she could say a word the kaioasu's weakness for lack of sleep and food overcame him and, collapsing to the floor, he slipped into a dark sleep.

*

*

*

The figure was there. He couldn't make it out. His dream was a jumble of flame and smoke. He could almost see faces and screams echoed around him. The figure again was in front of him, but had no shape. The dream was nothing but fear and hate, and then was gone.

*

*

*

Consciousness brought with it the combined pains of the wounds to his physical body and the remembrance of his regretted and accursed past, both recent and almost forgotten. Sleep was no sweet escape, nightmares haunted him each night. But the terrors of his dreams were outweighed by the burdens of reality. It was despite his own desire that he awoke to see the young geisha girl mopping his forehead with a sponge. He noticed that he was naked except for the bandages that covered his left arm. She would know what the kaioasu-nat meant. The tattoo was an unmistakable sign in the world. She would realize how and why his arm had been injured. She would know that he had killed, killed in cold blood, many times. What made her stay by his side? Someone else surely could have been assigned to the job. From the feel of the bandages, she was not well trained in the healing arts. She must have volunteered. Then he remembered the ears. She was a Neriya, like him. She could not forsake one of her own. The code of the Neriya was higher than all the laws of the land. Brotherhood was higher, even, than honor. He knew, for the first time in his life, that he had found someone whom he could trust. He groaned in pain, and consciousness again let go its icy grip upon him and gave way to a restless slumber.

*

*

*

Again he was surrounded by smoke and fire. This time the shape of a man stood before him. "Who are you?" he asked. Various faces appeared on the head. Cackling laughter echoed around him, then the dream was gone.

*

*

*

When the kaioasu awoke to the piercing sun that bore down upon him through the open window the girl was not in the room. A bowl of murky soup and a glass of water were on the floor next to his cot and, to him nothing else existed at this moment. He drank the soup

and water ravenously then took note of his surroundings. It seemed that a wounded, non-paying visitor did not warrant a room of his own, for this was surely the room of the geisha girl who had ministered to his wounds. It was barely large enough for the cot and a dresser, but the walls were adorned with fans, dolls, and little oddities. Perhaps they were gifts from some of the girl's more affectionate customers. There was one window in the room, providing light, and a mirror over the dresser gave the room the illusion of additional size.

The kaiozu removed the bandage from his left arm and examined his self-inflicted wound. It was no different from any of the others that together began an incomplete tapestry of pain and death. It was fresher, but no different. He didn't want to count them. He didn't need to. He had counted them before. He knew, already, how many men he had killed. Still, he counted them. He counted each and every one, stopping to study and to memorize their many contours and unique attributes. He could get lost among them. There were seventeen. He had killed seventeen honorable men and he still saw no hope of restoring honor to his name. Those scars alone were enough to put him to death. They could be used as proof of his resistance to the Council. The tattoo made him an open target. Any adult bearer of the kaiozu-nat was to be killed on sight or captured and brought to the Council for execution. It was the mark of dishonor. He had killed the honorable to save the dishonored. Even in self defense that was murder. His ears augmented the severity of his plight. He, as a Neriya, was a member of the most hated race in all of Amaya, and now he had lost the protection of the Council. No one was his friend. Enemies were all too easy to find. Everyone else just didn't care. He laid his head back against the pillow, closed his eyes, and rested.

Soon the door opened and the geisha girl slipped in. She was naked, with her kimono bundled under her arm. She quietly closed the door behind her and turned. When she saw him looking at her she jumped and gave a startled cry. She had a nice form, but before he could make an adequate assessment she held the kimono in front of her to block her nakedness. He was surprised to find such modesty in a woman of her profession.

"Oh," she said, blushing, "you're awake." She paused to pull the kimono around herself and continued. "You had such dreadful nightmares last night," she said, "I was worried that you might hurt yourself, thrashing about as you did."

He winced inwardly at the remembrance of his thoughts during the night but he was careful not to let his expression change. What was he thinking when he felt as if he could trust this girl simply because she was the same race as he? He must have been delirious. Here, his expression came through and the girl mistook it as a sign of pain.

“Are you okay?” she asked, kneeling down beside the cot.

Being deep in his thoughts, he ignored her. He could trust no one. Everyone was either his enemy or in the way. This was the thinking that had kept him alive, and anything else would be folly. The only ally he could trust was—He jumped to his feet and the sheet over him fell to the floor. The girl, startled, leapt back, afraid of the maniacal expression on his face. He grabbed her by the throat, and her hands instinctively came up to claw at his wrist.

“Where is it?” he demanded.

“Help!” she screamed. Fear shook her body.

“Where?” he yelled again, squeezing her neck tighter.

Footsteps sounded outside, and the girl managed to point to the corner of the room.

“What?” he asked only slightly more calmly, lessening his hold upon her.

She whimpered, “Your things,” and pointed again to the corner of the room.

He turned and saw a cloth bag. As he let her go, she fell to the floor crying. He crossed the small room and picked up the sack. When the door opened, the girl was standing, crying in fear with her face in her hands, and the kaiozu was standing naked across the room angrily emptying his things onto the dresser.

The elderly woman entered and the kaiozu recognized her as the one who had been playing the piano in the front room the night before. It was as if she had been decorated she was so adorned with jewelry about her neck and shoulders and bearing a ring or two upon each finger. She was certainly the owner of this establishment. Bright feathers lined the hem of her flowing robes. A glance was all she needed. The wizened woman took the young geisha’s arm and gently led her out into the hall. The kaiozu continued looking through his things. He didn’t care about the two women. The important thing: the dagger was still in its sheath. He slung the strap over his head and turned to position the knife under his left arm as usual. His gaze met

the mirror. He looked at himself with amazement at what he had become over the last few weeks. The tattoo of flames and thorns, the kaiousu-nat, covered his entire right arm from wrist to shoulder and was a dark contrast to the pale luster of his overexerted flesh. His muscular form, now lightened from the effects of hunger, was covered with scars from battles best left unremembered. His left arm was freshly cut from his escapades the night before, but a line of sixteen other scars accompanied the wound. The oldest scar was across his wrist and they progressed, side by side, up his arm toward his elbow. The newest one was almost exactly in the middle of his forearm.

He lifted his gaze and met the eyes of his mirrored self. The eyes were dark and fierce. They seemed to view with clarity the innermost of his soul. They were set looking over a sharp, hawk-like nose, and his chin almost came to a point. His long black hair framed his light face and two tall pointed ears rose from the blackness on either side of his head. His mouth was set to such an expression of distrust and loathing that a smile would have been no small accomplishment.

He shook his head and cleared his mind, once again studying the contents of the bag. A fresh dokai was folded and tied on the counter. The old man's letter and the money could be accounted for. He wrapped the fresh dokai about his shoulders and thrust his arms through the sleeves. He tied the belt around his waist and pulled the hood over his head. His face nearly disappeared into the darkness of the hood. After pocketing the money, he unfolded the letter and glanced at it.

The figure in his dreams assaulted his mind for a moment but in an instant the memory was gone. Absent mindedly, he stuffed the letter into one of his pockets without reading it. But something was missing. He looked around the room for his old dokai.

"Curse that woman!" He hissed through clenched teeth. He slammed his fist upon the dresser, shaking the mirror.

Just then, the door opened and the old woman entered, followed by a young boy. The kaiousu noticed that the boy's right arm also bore the kaiousu-nat, identifying him as the son of a man who had dishonored his name. The boy would live as a eunuch slave until he came of age, when he would be killed so that the man's dishonor could not pass on. The boy carried with him a bloodstained black dokai, and

he set it at the kaiousu's feet. He turned and ran quietly out the door. The old woman spoke.

"I am Elsie," she said, "owner of this establishment. Here is the rest of what you came with. Stay if you must. Leave if you like. Just don't get in the way."

She did not wait for a response but instead turned on her heel and left, slamming the door behind her.

"I, too, like to keep my options open," the kaiousu hissed through clenched teeth at the closing door.

He picked up his old dokai and rifled through the secret pockets. Soon his fingers felt the glass cylinders that he sought. He lifted the vials in front of his face and grinned as he looked at the clear liquid inside. He heard footsteps and quickly deposited the vials in a secret fold of his cloak. The young geisha entered.

"This is my room," she said defiantly.

He shrugged his shoulders and started to walk past her toward the door.

"Wait," she said, putting a hand on his shoulder to stop him, "I didn't mean it that way."

He looked at her face, into her eyes, and snarled, "What is your name?"

She took a step back and turned from his gaze. "Anya," she said and added, "What is yours?"

He paused. As soon as she looked up to him again he asked, "Your real name?"

Her look of defiance blazed like a fire until her eyes met his again, and then fear overtook her. She looked down towards the floor. His stare was harsh and cruel.

"I have none." She finally whispered with a tone of dejection.

He laughed. "Neither do I."

Suddenly she looked up at him as if remembering something that had been hidden in the recesses of her mind. She began to speak but he interrupted her.

"Yes," he said, anticipating her thoughts "I am a kaiousu. Nameless, dishonored, sentenced to death, I am to be hunted for the rest of my life."

He continued in almost a singsong fashion, recounting his plight, "A kaiousu seeking to restore his name to honor may fight for his life if, with each kill, he makes an incision on his left arm."

His speech changed to a growl, "You have seen the seventeen wounds upon my arm. You know how many I have killed. I received the kaiousu-nat less than two weeks ago."

She looked timid but did not move out of his way, "What did you do?"

"Nothing," he screamed, enraged by the accusation, "I did not dishonor my name. Had I done so, I would have accepted the removal of my own head by my own katana. I was set up. I must prove the dishonor of my accuser in order to restore honor to my name. Ask me no more of this."

Anya shifted her weight from one foot to another nervously. She wrung her hands together and asked, "So, do you have a name that you are called by?"

"Child, when each person you meet," he explained with a smirk, "tries to kill you and the only friend you have is the darkness of the alleys, you do not encounter many people who wish to engage in idle chatter about names. A man with no friends has no need of a name," he finished condescendingly.

Anya stared at the floor; his comments, tones, and belittling gaze making her more and more uneasy, but she persisted. "Well, what would you like to be called?"

The kaiousu shook his head and stepped to move past her and to the door. Her hand came up to rest upon his shoulder again in an attempt to calm his anger.

"This is ridiculous," he said, still with his back to her, "I have no name. I need no name. I want no name without honor. Leave me alone."

Anya look flustered and her anger overtook her fear. "Well fine," she yelled at his back, "I will call you whatever name I wish."

The kaiousu spun around to face her. He meant to make his point and put this nonsense to rest. Flatly, staring into her eyes, he said, "Dead men have no names, only regrets."

With this he turned to leave, but she cried after him, "Fine, your name is *Lokun*!"

He stopped but did not turn around. "My ancient Neriya is not perfect. It slips my mind. What does Lokun mean?" he asked coldly.

She answered bitterly, "The Dead Soul."

He left without a word, her voice echoing against the back of his dokai. He would have left. He should have left. He wanted to

leave. He wanted to leave the geisha house, the city, the land, the world. He stayed. He needed to lay low and make some money. The geisha had been more than amiable to his presence and he didn't want to risk travel without some silver. That night he slept on a couch in the front room. He gave credit for his dreams to the unique odor of opium and perfume that mingled in the stale air of the house.

*

*

*

He woke up, but his wakefulness was perched unsteadily upon his grasp of the world and the moderate high that the residual opium had given him. His tottering sanity, bombarded by the memories of death and famine, fell in shambles upon the oaken floors.

Suddenly, he was in an endless blackness. On his knees he begged forgiveness from the dark, ironclad, warrior that held him in eternal damnation. His universe wept and a single tear fell upon the kaiousu's brow. The figure held before him a severed arm, pale and dead. Darkness spiraled over that arm and the circling patter of thorns that was so familiar to the kaiousu ensnared the tattered limb. The kaiousu-nat: the mark of dishonor. The hand of the arm was clasped around the handle of a broken katana. Blood stained what was left of the sword's blade. The hand opened and let it fall into the awaiting abyss. Flame leapt up from the dark warrior's fingertips and engulfed the arm. Blue flames over orange fire sent up an acrid smoke that enveloped any humanity left in the beast of a man who now called himself Lokun, The Dead Soul.

*Na Meku miliru le rav na sham le rav mikomu le mash ke xan
ake d'vats.*

And Meku made the four and with them he bound the power of chaos
into the world.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,
Book of Flames

Lokun awoke early the next day, having no memory of his nightmares. The couch had offered what comfort it could but his back ached with the stress of the past week. He looked down at his arm. That girl had done a decent enough job. He considered thanking her. The room was mysteriously quiet. He heard no sounds from the kitchen or upstairs. In one fluid movement he stood and cast about with his eyes. One man, human or mostly human, slept, lounging in a chair. He had slept through the morning and the sun's tilt through the window told him that it was early afternoon. Soft footfalls sounded upstairs. Lokun's ears picked up the sound easily. A very small and light person tiptoed down the hall above him. He heard a door creak open slowly and close again. Another door upstairs opened, this time even non-Neriyu ears could hear it. The pounding thud of boots sounded on the floorboards above and soon a large human man came down the stairway. Lokun took an interest in the man and looked him over. The girl, Anya he thought was her name, had good taste in men. Her latest customer was of moderately large build and, though rough looking, could be considered handsome. The man made his way across the front room, passing by Lokun, and exited through the door that led into the opium den. Lokun watched him leave and his thoughts turned somewhat sympathetic. Poor girl, he thought, forced to become a woman before she is barely done being a girl. Lokun's own mother had been forced to give him up when he was a young child for similar reasons. He decided to pay this girl, Anya a visit. Perhaps he could bring some comfort to her life, though he could bring none to his own. One of the geisha passed him on the stairs as he ascended. There was adequate room for two people to walk but she

made a show of squeezing by him. As she did she pressed herself against him and gave him a smile. The girls here knew how to do their jobs well, he must admit. It was over in a moment but Lokun felt more welcome than he had before. He appreciated her effort to be nice to him and continued up the stairs in a better mood.

The outside of Anya's door, like the inside of her room, was decorated with small trinkets and various things, many of which he did not recognize. He reached for the handle but caught himself at the last minute. He had upset her before, and now he desired to show her that he was sorry for frightening her. He moved his hand from the handle to the center of the door and rapped on it three quick times with one knuckle. After a moment he heard her voice from within.

"It's open, come in," she said.

Now, with her permission, he turned the handle and pushed the door open. Anya stood at the window with her back to him, looking out at the city. She glanced over into the mirror and saw him standing in the open doorway.

"Come in, close the door."

Her voice was high and soft, as if she was afraid of something. Or ashamed. Her arms pulled her kimono tight to her body and the wind tossed her hair back towards him.

"I am sorry for what I said," she started, turning towards him.

Lokun suddenly saw the child inside. She looked now to be younger than he had first imagined and as she turned he saw her quivering lips and a small tear at the side of her eye. Her voice broke and she put one hand onto the windowsill as she began to sink to the ground. Lokun went to her and put out his arms to hold her. In the movement something happened.

It started as pity. After that came a righteous indignation for the plight that this beautiful creature had suffered so early in her life. It grew into a need, a desire, to help this young girl that seemed so lost and alone. Finally he recognized the emotion. He had thought that he had lost it. The vague dark figure now haunted his dreams whenever he slept, and Lokun's lust for vengeance had nearly blocked out all other thoughts that came upon his mind. His strong arms folded around Anya's light form, and for the first time in what seemed like forever, Lokun began to love. He had been told stories of this among the Neriya but had never believed it. Some Neriya, it has been said, are brought together and joined by Meku even before they are born.

They are destined and will find each other no matter what the cost. He didn't want it to be this way, but who was he to defy the will of the creator? He saw it in her eyes as she clung to him, silently sobbing into his chest. He lowered her to the cot and sat, holding her to his chest like a treasured prize. How could he have even been so cruelly cold to this beautiful gem? What had come over him? His actions recently had been so unlike him... Seconds passed, then minutes; she cried for almost an hour. He let her cry and let his thoughts wonder. He now noticed that he had been changing, but could not fathom why. Whenever he tried to think about anything very deeply... He lost his train of thought, suddenly angry. Finally, she wiped her tears on his dokai and looked up. Looking into her eyes caused him to forget everything else.

Lokun knew that he couldn't let her talk about her job or the men that she sold herself to. He tried to think of something different to talk about or to ask her about. His mind went blank. All he could think about was how he never wanted this girl to be hurt ever again. He was still searching for a solution when Anya began to tell him of her life. After his initial surprise, he sat and listened to her tell her story.

She was born to poor parents who could not afford a child. Like so many in their position they had sold her into slavery for the money when she was young, so Anya had only vague memories of her mother and none of her father. She lived first in Darkvale, a seaport town to the west, and was a maid for a former Council Member. He had been kind to her, only asking her for her body once, and reneging on the idea when he saw the fear in her eyes. She took care of the kitchen and showed herself to be a reliable cook. Over the years she grew into a teenage girl and he eventually became like a father to her. Then he was murdered. The assassins captured most of his staff and sold them, but much worse was what they did to Anya. She could no longer remember how long she stayed, naked, tied to the floor. The horrible men took turns. She passed out and awoke more than once before it was over, each time waking to a hot, sweaty body on top of her. At last she awoke to find herself alone. She assumed that they had left her to die. Elsie had been there only by a strange coincidence, and Anya loved her for that. She had taken Anya in and taught her how to block out the pain and sorrow. She had taught her the only profession that she knew and gave her an opportunity to save enough

money until she could leave the land of Amaya forever. She planned to go to her home town of Darkvale, and charter a ship to anywhere. That had been months ago, and she still had almost no money with which to travel. Her last statement, however, was the most powerful.

She said, "When I saw you at the door, the first thing I thought was that you were my long lost brother and had come to rescue me."

She began to cry into Lokun's dokai once again, as she had been doing periodically the whole time.

He pulled her tighter to him and spoke softly into her ear.

"Don't be sad, my love. Everything is all right now. Perhaps you will feel better if I tell you about myself."

Her head wiggled against him. He took that as a nod and continued.

"I was once one of the foremost pupils of the great Sensei Gno. I have mastered the art of the katana and the bo. My class was slated to take the final test on this next moon. Two weeks ago Chancellor Kane came to the school with his royal guards as we were practicing. He talked with Gno for a moment and the guards approached my sparring group."

Lokun looked into Anya's crystal eyes and continued, his voice almost breaking as he, too fought to hold back tears. "They asked for me, by the name I can no longer claim, and I stepped forward, identifying myself. I heard Gno yell something as the two guards came for me but before I could stop my own reflexes they were dead, their blood on my hands."

Anya squeezed him lightly, comforting him as best she could.

He went on, "I never meant to kill them. They tried to grab me and I was confused. If it had been just one then I wouldn't have killed him, but fighting two enemies at once is different. We are trained to reduce the number of opponents as quickly as possible. After the first fell, the second became enraged. I would never have been able to stop him without doing what I did."

"How does it feel?"

His eyes met hers again. "How does what feel?"

"Killing someone. What is it like?" her chin quivered. Lokun pulled her tighter against himself and she rested her head on his chest.

"It hurts right here," he said, patting the front of his chest in front of her face, "and if it ever gets easy, then I don't know when." He lied. It had felt easy the last time. It had been so strange. What

had come over him?

Anya didn't answer, but waited, confused by his silence. After a moment Lokun continued his story. "After the fight, I was stunned. I couldn't believe what had happened. I barely remembered where I was. Kane and Gno ran over but, like I said before, the guards never had a chance. They died before they hit the floor. Gno told me that I was under arrest for..." he trailed off, not wanting to tell Anya the horrible crime of which he had been accused.

A moment passed and Anya asked the question he knew was coming, "What did they accuse you of doing?"

Lokun closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He spoke slowly and calmly, masking the feelings inside himself.

"They accused me of forcibly taking to bed one of the Council's harem girls."

"Rape?" Anya's breath caught in her throat as the monosyllable escaped her lips. She unconsciously drew back from Lokun.

"Yes," he said, "I didn't do it. I believe that Kane wanted me out of the way for some other reasons. You see, before I was dishonored, I was heir to... something important."

He feared that telling her that he was heir to the School would reveal his previous name, and that would be a greater sin than all the deaths he had caused.

She saw him pause, "What happened? Why weren't you executed?"

"I was supposed to be," he replied, "They took me to the High Court and sentenced me in front of the Council. They all believed Kane's lies against me. They used the ancient ways to mark me with the kaio-su-nat and then ordered that I be executed on the spot. Gno objected, but his vote holds almost no sway now that Kane has become Chancellor."

"Kane just accused you of this without any proof? And they believed him?" she asked.

Lokun shook his head. "It doesn't work like that. Kane would never lose face by making such a claim. One of the council members was my accuser, but I can see that he was just a pawn. The real enemy is Kane."

"But, as Chancellor, Kane has done so much for all of Amaya. We are much better off than in the old days of the emperors."

“Are we?” Lokun asked, “And by ‘we’ I mean the Neriyu. Instead of knowing where we stand we are now given lies and falsehoods. They say that they are helping us, but those are mere words. Before, we were hunted and despised, but at least we existed. Now we are ‘protected,’ but where are we?” He slammed his fist into his hand. “For all we know we are the last two Neriyu left alive. Our race has been slowly and silently weeded out through the years. And, it’s all Kane’s doing. I just know it.”

Fire raged in Lokun’s eyes and his gaze was distant. For a moment nothing existed except him and the dark warrior. The black armor was cold and ominous. Two piercing eyes shone from the helmet, feasting on his mind.

“Lokun,” Anya’s call brought him back to the real world. It had been only a moment. “What’s wrong?” she asked.

He took a breath, shivering. “Nothing,” he said, “I just lost track of my thoughts for a moment.” Inwardly he trembled. What was happening?

“Want to know something?” Anya’s voice sounded playful and she seemed to have forgotten his mental lapse.

“What?” he asked halfheartedly, his mind still on his vision, trying to grasp it and remember it before it faded.

“They say that the age is passing. One of my... customers...” she looked away, paused, then continued, “One of my customers said that there were reports of *maj* in Darkvale.”

Lokun’s mind lost the vision completely as his attention snapped to Anya. He wanted to know if he had heard her correctly.

“What did you say?” He almost shouted without intending to.

“I said there were reports of *maj* in Darkvale.”

“Magic!”

“Shhhhhh!” she urged him, “Not so loud. Use the Neriyu word so that anyone who overhears won’t know. Anyway, isn’t it exciting?”

“Exciting? It is horrible!”

Anya looked at him, her grin now a pout.

“Don’t you see,” he continued, “According to all the legends I’ve studied, *Maj* can only be used by the Neriyu. The fear of our power is what caused the emperors to exile our people and then eventually to begin slaughtering us. If Neriyu are able to use it once again, we will be worse off than we are now. None of us will be left. Our race will be a thing of stories and fairy-tales.”

Anya protested, “But if we have magic... *maj*,” she corrected herself, “then won’t we will be able to protect ourselves.”

“Only if it’s true. What if we don’t have it but they only think we do? They will slaughter us just the same, and we will be powerless. And even if it is true, and we do have it, we won’t survive long enough for it to grow into power. We have no such power. If it is returning then where are these neriyu who can use it? And, there’s something else.”

“What’s that?”

“According to one legend, in order for magic to come back into the land, one or more of the Four Artifacts has to be recovered. The legends speak of the recovery of the four artifacts in the worst way possible. In many texts, it’s even described as the end of the world.”

“Oh no!”, she squeaked.

Anya cuddled closer to him, and she buried her face in his chest like a scared kitten. He could barely hear her question. “What are we going to do?”

He held her, stroking the soft locks of her hair. “There is a city, beyond the Great Sea, beyond the Eye. This city is supposed to be inhabited completely by our race.”

“Neriya? Do you think it’s real? Can we go there?”

“I don’t know, but I hope so. We can leave tomorrow.”

“Then we have time.”

Lokun looked puzzled. “Time for what?”

She did not speak again, but in this case one touch was worth a thousand words. Her dokai fell to the floor beside them and she stretched her body out against him. Her breath was warm on his face as their lips met and locked together. He brought his arms up around her, enfolding her as if he would never let her go. They embraced passionately, vigorously, for too long to remember but too short to satisfy. As they parted a low moan of desire escaped Anya’s lips and she rushed to remove his dokai. Lokun felt that she couldn’t do it soon enough. They passed the hours of the night engrossed in the most basic of mortal pastimes, thanking Meku that He had created them male and female.

*

*

*

The covers moved up and feet fell upon the hardwood floor. Eyes darted about, and a hand fell upon Anya’s shoulder.

“Sleep well, my love.”

A hand pulled the dokai from the floor and tossed it around heavy shoulders. His feet padded softly across the room and the door creaked as it opened. Hands closed it as gently as possible, slowly inching the door into its frame until it met with a soft click.

Through the hall and down the stairs his footfalls echoed in the night. Low moans and cries came from some of the rooms. Here and there came the sounds of squeaking beds. Each stair cried out in its own unique voice as he shifted his weight walking. The wood was cold to his feet and a few shivers trailed up his spine. Was it fear? Or something else? Lokun couldn't tell. A dense, acrid opium smoke filled the front room with a light fog. Sensation danced on his nostrils and tongue with each breath. His throat and lungs tingled each time, expelling the foul odor. He sat and stretched out on a large tattered couch, his head now below the fog. He lay back and closed his eyes, hoping for sleep to come and release him from the agonizing memories.

Impatiently he toyed with the dagger. The dagger. It had called to him then. Even as the assassin had held it at his throat it had called to him. Lokun's memory was unclear on the events of that day. He knew that the man had pressed and sliced but the dagger had not cut. He brought his hands up to his throat rubbing the spot that should have been sliced from ear to ear. As he turned the blade over again and again in his hands the dagger called to him once again. He felt it: the power, the hate. It sang in his mind like a lullaby, ringing with fear and loathing. He let his mind go to it, becoming entranced completely in the darkness of its blade. It was the only way he could get to sleep. Sleep came. Terrible, horrible sleep.

*

*

*

He sat upon a crystal throne, adorned with jewels. The dagger was gone. He was wearing white robes. This was much different than his other dreams, if that, was what it really was. He saw the figure again. The ironclad warrior, tall, muscular, mysterious. The man approached the foot of Lokun's throne and kneeled, his eyes towards the floor.

"My liege," he said.

Lokun didn't know what to make of this. "Who are you?"

"Your servant."

"You are the dagger?"

"In a way," the warrior looked up and grinned, "yes."

“What do you mean by that?” Lokun asked.

The man rose to his feet and bowed. “I am the one who created the dagger.”

“Then what are you doing here? Am I dreaming? What is this?”

“You are dreaming. Otherwise I would not be able to converse with you.”

“Why? What are you?” Lokun was getting annoyed.

“I am simply one like yourself, seeking a better way.”

Lokun recalled stories of his youth. There had been one particular tale that had sparked his interest. The umajinn were legendary powerful demons who had the power to imbue items with the essence of their souls, thereby linking them and the item forever. Tales of them were dark and grim. The weapons that were blessed with this boon were more powerful than any mortal could produce, but to fall into the umajinn’s clutches was supposed to be certain death. The thought intrigued Lokun.

“So, umajinn, do you have a name?”

The man smiled, “Clever, are we? We can’t have that.”

Suddenly Lokun’s world exploded in terror and torment. Fitfully he tossed about in his sleep but could not release himself from the power of the dream. Tendrils of pain caressed every inch of his body and soul. He felt a grip, as if some sinister force was tearing at his brain. His mind cast about fervently as memory and knowledge were torn from him more painfully than had his arm been ripped from its socket. Darkness swirled with blinding light and Lokun tumbled and twirled into the abyss of dark slumber. The torment and pain changed to a low, moaning, throbbing ache that massaged his entire being as he slept. The memory of the dream faltered and disappeared and Lokun forgot the dream as completely as if it had never happened.

*Na sham l'arkozin veshomu shekomu kevod l'okunim na kevodesh
sherimu kevod d'mash.*

And when the dark one comes he will take to him the dead souls and
they will give him power.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,

Book of Flames

Lokun did not open his eyes when finally the terror of sleep released its grasp upon his mind. He didn't move. He was standing against the wall in the corner of the front room with arms and feet crossed. His right hand rested upon the hilt of his dagger. In this way he had slept for the latter half of the night. He faintly remembered a dream but as he reached to recall it, so did it escape his memory as the night's sleep left his thoughts. He listened for the sounds of the activities of the morning and took a breath. Neither the sounds nor the smell was what he had expected. The idle chatter of friendship filled the room. A delight of eggs and bacon danced through his nostrils and a realization came to him. Except for the meager meal two days before, he had not eaten since his dishonormment. Ten or more days had passed without a meal, and most days he had not been able to get a drink of water. He opened his eyes.

Morning and night at Elsie's were two different worlds. The front room was filled with patrons and geisha who were chatting and eating merrily. The door at the back of the front room was open and people bustled in and out of the kitchen carrying plates of food and mugs of drink.

Lokun was in no mood to socialize, however neither was he in any mood to turn down a good meal. He crossed the room to the kitchen, stepping over a sleeping couple on the floor. He entered the kitchen. Elsie was standing at the stove stirring scrambled eggs in a skillet and ordering geisha around the kitchen. She reminded him of an aunt that he had stayed with a few times as a child. Fat because she tasted everything she cooked, and happy for the same reason. Lokun approached the girl who was serving food to anyone who dropped money into the box next to her.

“Good morning Lokun.”

He stopped and stared at her. He had been thinking of himself as that name all yesterday and this morning. He hadn't even noticed the transition until now. How had she known? He was suddenly at a loss for how to react. The girl realized that she had said something wrong and tried to explain. “Anya told everyone your name,” She said, “I hope that she did not give you offense for doing so.”

He didn't respond. He regained his composure. Let them call him what they will. The name did suit him, after all. He tossed the three silver coins that comprised his wealth into the box beside her. The geisha, unsurprised at his attitude and lack of response, piled eggs and bacon onto a plate and handed it to him. She also added a sweet pastry to his plate and winked at him.

“The yokasura is free, for you.” She said. She filled a large mug with some fruit juice and his breakfast was complete.

Lokun could be a picky eater at times. “What type of juice is this?”

The girl smiled and replied, “Basu fruit. Elsie has an orchard out in the country in the south. As a matter of fact she—“

“Get to work Lilly,” Elsie shouted from across the kitchen, “Keep the line moving and don't bother people with your mindless talk.”

Lokun could live with basu. It was the most common fruit that grew in the hard soil around Amaya and, though boring, didn't taste too bad. With plate and mug in hand, Lokun left the kitchen to find a place to eat. All the couches and chairs were taken and many people were sitting on the floor. He returned to the corner next to the entrance where he had slept and sat upon the wood flooring. In a matter of minutes his plate was empty except for the yokasura and his cup was drained. He leaned back against the wall, munching on the pastry, and thanked Meku for his full belly. Elsie crossed the room from the kitchen to the piano and sat down to play. Strangely he thought that he might never again be more content nor feel as happy. He glanced around to see if he could find Anya, but she wasn't in the common room.

Lokun let the music distract him from his mental fatigue and a light began to shine within the murky void of his soul. He had not had another vision and his mind seemed clear. There was hope, he thought.

Perhaps this distraction was why he did not hear the footfalls outside or the telltale clank of Royal splintmail. But what could he have done even then? Later he would not be able to remember if an explosion was used to break down the door or if the door had been bashed open. The door flew inward and chaos filled the room. The guards tossed something into the room and another explosion splattered Lokun with blood from some poor geisha who had been on one of the couches. There were so many guards, he couldn't count them. They rushed in. Royal and Amayin guards began the most inhuman slaughter he had ever witnessed. Geisha and customers who had not been killed in the blast were impaled or cut down like animals. Elsie was the first to go after the blast. An arrow pierced her skull and she dropped, limp, upon the piano. The notes rang out in the air as bells tolling a funeral march.

Lokun did not stand by and idly watch this. As quickly as it began he reacted. When the first guards began to enter he grabbed one from behind and thrust his dagger deep into his side. The guards had evidently expected this raid to offer no resistance and did not realize right away that someone was fighting back. Smoke from the explosion and from the subsequent fire poured into the room and obscured view for more than a few feet. Lokun deftly slid through the fog towards the guards. He saw one guard towering over Anya. Hadn't she been upstairs? No time to think about that. The guard lifted his katana to strike at her head. Lokun subconsciously wondered what the hell he was doing as he dove over one of the flaming couches and steel met steel. Lokun crouched between the guard and Anya, attacking the guard viciously. This was a Royal Guard and the soldier lost no time in yelling to his comrades that a kaiozu was in the building. In that instant however, Lokun nicked the guards hand with the tip of his dagger. A scratch at best, but it was all that was needed. The guard's hand went into spasms as the poison pumped through the blood. The man's arm jerked and he dropped the katana. Lokun slipped his dagger into the guard's stomach as he fell. The guard was dead, however he had done his damage: the other troops knew that they had opposition. Where was Anya? Lokun turned to look at the small, young, frightened geisha girl who had nowhere to go. Compassion and mercy were not on the top of Lokun's priority list. He should leave her. He should let her die. Why had he even bothered to save her? He should

forget about her. His mind reeled. His brain ached as some dark evil struggled with his true self. What was he thinking? He loved her.

“Come on,” he whispered to her under the smoke, “we have to get out of here.”

She looked paralyzed with fear and glanced towards the piano. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. “Elsie is dead. Come with me if you don’t want to join her!” he hissed. She clung to him like a child and quickly he realized that that is what she truly was. One of the guards spotted them through the smoke and charged. Lokun pushed Anya towards the kitchen door and met the guard’s blade with his own.

“Go,” he yelled after her, “I’ll be right behind you.”

Something in what he said made the perilous journey from her ears to her brain and, somehow, a message managed to reach her feet. She disappeared through the kitchen door. The guard took advantage of Lokun’s preoccupation with Anya and swung his blade. Lokun dodged, but too late. He had given in to the weakness of love and now he was paying the price for it. He swore. The blade tore into his side. He heard his own ribs crack and pain shot through his chest. Lokun grabbed the back of the guard’s head with his free hand and smashed his fist, clenched around the hilt of the dagger, into the guard’s face. Had Lokun been in the best of health, the guard’s face would have caved in. Instead, the guard was only knocked unconscious. A quick movement of Lokun’s dagger, however changed the guard’s living status. He had no time to lose. Lokun turned and fled into the kitchen. The smoke was not as thick here and, weaving past the pantry and through the counters, he found the back door. It was open. The door led out into a sunlit alleyway. Where was Anya? A busy market was at the end of the alley to his right. On his left the alley led down into the underground portion of the city, a rat infested sewer and hideout for criminals of the worst kind. It was not hard to figure out which way Anya would take. He ran to the crowded market and peered over the heads of the citizens of the city. Where was she? Someone raised the cry of fire. Everyone’s attention was now on the old opium den that had served as Elsie’s brothel. He looked too conspicuous. He waded into the crowd and tried to look interested in the fire. Instead, he was interested in moving down the street. He kept his hand to his side. He didn’t know how bad the wound was, but he knew it was bad. He felt the warm, wet blood trail down his leg.

A tiny voice had been nagging him, telling him to forget Anya and that she could take care of herself. He didn't care what happened to her. He didn't need her. She would be trouble. Part of him seemed to step back and give way. He gave in the voice, giving up his search for Anya and turned to walk down the street toward the west. This road would eventually lead him to the town gates. They had a guard posted, but he was confident that he could get past them. He quickened his pace. He reached into the inner pocket of his dokai and pulled out a small money purse. He had liberated it from the first guard that he had killed. He looked around the street. This was the business sector of the bad part of town. Small stalls were on the sides of the dirt road. Tradesmen of every kind were pawing off their wares upon gullible citizens and tourists. He stopped by a cloth merchant's tent and stepped inside.

A tall thin man was sitting at a chair measuring cloth and cutting it to precise lengths. He wore a bright satin dobak and had a long, curled mustache. He looked up from his work as Lokun entered.

"Good morning to you sir. By Meku, is the day not beautiful?" he said.

Lokun did not want to talk. "I need some thick cloth: one piece six feet long and one foot wide; a second piece two feet long and 4 inches wide."

"Color?" the man asked.

"Red."

The man cut the required cloth and charged Lokun an outrageously high fee. Lokun also purchased another dokai. Lokun paid with the guard's money and left. Outside he slipped into one of the side alleys and sat down. He opened his dokai. Blood caked the inside and ran down his leg. Blood was still welling out of the wound in his side. He wrapped the larger cloth around his torso and tied it off. It would bleed, but not as much. He would have time to find a place to rest and get proper medical attention later, maybe. He then pushed up his sleeve and drew his dagger. Two more lives. How he hated it all, or so he told himself. Had he really enjoyed the death that much? He shivered. With his blade he made two more deep incisions in the flesh of his arm next to the bandage of the seventeenth. Blood and pain came again.

"Against Meku have I taken two lives." He growled, "Life without honor is life without peace. By Meku, damn me!"

He tied the other cloth around his arm to stop the bleeding. He leaned back against the wall as the rush of adrenaline that had kept him going died away. Fatigue sought to overcome his body. Sounds of activity drifted in from the street, and Lokun pulled himself to his feet. He changed, emptied the pockets of his old dokai, and threw the bloody bundle of cloth behind some crates in the alley. He propped himself against the wall and gripped his side, closing his eyes and trying to block out the pain as he made his way to the edge of the alley. He must not let himself rest. He had to find somewhere safe to stay. He peered out into the street to see if he had been followed.

The townspeople had started a riot against the royal guard. Rocks sailed through the air and cries of rebellion and freedom went up from the crowd. Lokun's attention was drawn to a man who was standing above the crowd upon one of the shop counters. He shouted out over the crowd, commanding and directing what he constantly referred to as the revolution. Lokun's eye recognized the unique movement for which he was ever vigilant. He had no time to cry out even if he had wanted to save the man. The rabble-rouser was oblivious as the arrow sailed through the air toward him. The man had his fist hefted in the air and Lokun expected to watch the man fall dead.

Something happened. Had he really just seen that? Lokun blinked to clear his eyes. The man's hands had been so fast. They had dropped to catch the arrow and just as quickly—Had he spun around? Lokun was sure of it, but it had all happened in less than an instant. The movement of the man's cloak around him was the only evidence of his feat, except for the arrow that the man now held. A gasp rose from those who had seen that arrow on its deadly path, and the man raised his fist, closed around the shaft of the arrow, high into the air. The rioting crowd cheered and surged forward to attack the guardsmen. The Royal Guard, dismayed at this embarrassment, retreated further down the street. Lokun watched the man hop from the counter and sneak through the throng of rioters. As the man crossed the street towards the alley that Lokun occupied, Lokun dropped to the ground and tried his best to seem inconspicuous.

The man passed by Lokun without giving him a second glance. Lokun was on his feet and silently following the man in the blink of an eye. The man was in a hurry; therefore it was not difficult to follow unnoticed. It was difficult, however, for Lokun to follow quickly due

to his wounded side. They progressed down and through the many pathways and side-roads of the city.

Lokun tailed the man undetected for close to an hour of creeping and crawling past guards and through gutters. A few times the man had paused to look behind him, but Lokun had been able to slip deftly out of sight each time. During the last such occurrence he had feared that he had been detected. The man had whirled around with lightening speed and walked towards Lokun's hiding spot behind a stack of crates. The man leapt upon the crates and bounded from there to a window of the building next to them. Lokun had followed him in much the same manner, however he had had much more difficulty in catching the window. After traversing the rooftops they were now back on the ground in the political section of town. Lokun judged that he was a mere half a mile from Sensei Gno's school of Komakayin. Lokun was loosing too much blood and he had been feeling the effects of his wounds more and more. The only thing that kept him going was the adrenaline of the chase, and now he was starting to slow down. The stranger rounded the corner at the end of the alley. Lokun quietly peered around to make certain that he could continue without being seen.

Light and pain shot through his skull as he took the full force of the man's fist in his face. He fell backwards, but by instinct grabbed the arm of his assailant and, shifting his weight to his hips, executed a perfect alansay. His attacker sailed over him across the alley. He heard a satisfying thud against the wall and paused to let his mind recover from the neso-kan strike that probably had broken his nose. That proved to be a big mistake. He fell to the ground on his face, forced down by the weight of the man. Lokun took a strike to the back of the head and then an arm was around his neck. After an instant of twirling reality he lost consciousness and slipped again into blackness. He later would recall faint memories of being carried, drifting in and out of sleep, upon someone's back.

*

*

*

The figure returned to his dreams. The ironclad warrior held before him in his hands the same pale arm. The black void around him cleared and faded. In its place appeared the circle of the Council. The members of the Council sat on their respective thrones around the black figure. Sensei Gno was on the end of the right side. His long pointed ears contrasted his bright white hair. The Chancellor Kane, sat

directly behind the dark one. Smoke flowed up from the floor and dark flakes of ash drifted down from the ceiling. The members of the Council, except for Sensei Gno, pointed their fingers towards the figure in judgement. Gno sat with his face in his hands, weeping. A long dagger appeared before the warrior and hovered before the arm. Sensei Gno rose from his seat, turned, and sunk to his knees facing away from the warrior. The knife moved on its own. It made one incision, long and deep, slowly across the arm. Blood dripped and then flowed like a river into the darkness below. The dagger cut again with the same result and again. Over and over it sliced the life from the arm until nineteen rivers poured out of the severed limb. After the last cut the knife disappeared and the blood slowed to a trickle, then stopped. Sensei Gno fell backwards and lay in front of his throne, the dagger imbedded in his heart. Father Kane signaled the warrior with a wave of his hand and flames leapt in front of the Council. The warrior let the arm drop into the fire. The scene disappeared and the smell of burning sulfur and the icy grip of awareness tore him from the prison of his nightmares once again.

*

*

*

“Don’t move, be still,” a gruff voice said as Lokun awoke. He tried to talk, but as he took a breath the pain from his side was so intense that he only managed a few guttural grunts.

“I told you not to move,” the voice repeated, “The stitches on your side need to heal more before you will be able to get around.”

Lokun opened his left eye but his right was swollen shut. The cool night air blew through the window and into the dim room. He lay naked on a hard medical bed in the middle of the chamber and a tall, brown-skinned Tarak stood over him holding a rag and a water basin. It had been quite a while since Lokun had seen a Tarak. Stories had been told of their origins. They had been created by some powerful wizard or something ages ago. Or they were a race of humans who had mutated themselves to become more powerful. Or still that they had been cursed by the gods and were now punished as the servant race. Even that they were Meku’s fallen angels. Lokun had trouble believing any of these stories. He thought the reason for these creatures would certainly be less fantastic than most assume. They were humanoid, but the resemblance stopped there. Brown and green were their usual colors but they could be any in the spectrum. They had snouts like lizards and were usually taller than most humans.

They were generally muscular and this one was no exception. He easily could have torn Lokun in half without breaking a sweat. They were unbelievably skilled in trades that required dexterity and careful attention to detail, so it was no surprise that this one was a doctor.

“I am Grall,” the tarak said, “Master says that you tracked him all the way from the riot.” Here a sly grin crossed his elongated snout. “Quite an accomplishment,” he continued, “even for a Neriyu. As you can see, you are still alive. Kaiosu don’t have as many enemies as they have had in the past.”

He wet the towel in the basin and brushed it over the wound in Lokun’s side. The pain was bearable so Lokun ignored it and listened to Grall’s ramblings. The tarak, like most, was always eager to share what was on his mind.

“Father Kane has made many enemies during his reign as chancellor. Even one of the Council opposes his tyranny.”

Here Lokun fought out the breath to utter at least half a word. “Gno,” he said.

“Ah,” said Grall, startled, “the boy knows his politics.” Grall went about his work, talking more to himself than to Lokun. “That’s right. Why, it was just today that Gno removed the support of the school from the Chancellor’s army.” This was pleasing news to Lokun.

Grall walked over to the fire to sterilize his medical tools. “Most of the guardsmen who graduated from the school have either retired or taken leaves of absence. That’s why we were able to rise the riot today. Master says that a revolution is coming.” He returned to Lokun’s side and, leaning on the bedside, looked down at him. “You are going to be on our side, right? I mean, everyone who is against us already wants to kill you, so we are your only friends.” He shrugged. “You’ll be able to talk in the morning. Drink this so you can go to sleep.”

He took a glass from a nearby shelf and touched it to Lokun’s mouth. Lokun drank in forced sips but managed to finish the glass. Thoughts of robbery and escape danced upon his mind as he let the sedative overtake him. He drifted into a dreamless slumber, thankful that the sedatives would prevent his nightmares.

He awoke during the evening of what he assumed was the next day and concluded that the sedative must have been stronger than he had thought. As he sat up he felt only a slight discomfort on his side.

Grall was proficient at his work. Across the room he saw the man whom he had been following. He was lounging in a chair with his foot propped on his knee. He leaned forward with his elbows on his leg.

“Grall had said that you were impressive,” the man said, “but I have to admit that your arms tell a story that surprises even me. I can see that you were a pupil of Gno. I’ll bet his training has been invaluable to you in these past weeks.”

He looked at Lokun with a contented smirk across his face. Lokun took the silence as a cue to speak, “Who are you?”

The man raised his eyebrows. “The question,” he said standing up, “is ‘Who are you?’ ” He crossed the room to stand next to Lokun.

“A kaiousu tracks me across the city despite my best efforts to shake any followers. He then puts up a fight against me even after he takes my neso-kan directly to the face. In addition to this, the kaiousu also has a near-fatal wound in his side while doing these things. By Meku...” the man trailed off, shaking his head in disbelief.

Lokun thought. He had taken the name, he might as well use it. He only hoped that this man would prove to be of some use to him. He studied the man.

“I am Lokun,” he said.

The man looked up and laughed, taking the meaning literally, not as a name. “Not yet boy,” he said, “You’re not a dead soul yet. If you mean that to be your name then that is what I’ll call you. My name isn’t important. Everyone down here just calls me Master. I don’t know how it got started but the name has grown on me, so we both are called something that we are not.”

A faint smirk played on Lokun’s lips, “But something that we will soon become, no doubt.”

Master raised an eyebrow at his remark. “You certainly have a dark way of looking at things, Lokun.” He shrugged, “Well, do you think that you have enough energy to take a look around the compound?”

Lokun didn’t know if a refusal would cause offence, and therefore decided to go along with his suggestion. “I do,” he said.

Master helped him up and supported him by the arm as they walked out the door into a dimly lit corridor. Doors lined the walls to either side and distantly spaced wall torches provided light to their path. The two men moved down the hallway at a slow pace because of Lokun’s injuries while Master talked idly about his rebellion.

“We are only a few who truly seek for a political change. Most of the others are criminals or have no choice but to help us, like you. You are the first kaioasu that has entered our walls. Our custom is to require a test to make sure of a supporter’s loyalty, but considering your situation we are confident that you will help us, seeing that you have no other choice.”

Lokun wheezed, “What if I don’t help?”

Master whirled, caught off guard. “What?”

Lokun took a breath to talk. “What if I want to leave the country? I have heard legends of a city across the sea populated by Neriya. I have nothing here. My race is hated, despised even. With the kaioasu-nat, I will never be able to live here without fearing for my life. It was my plan to go west, to the ocean, and stow away on one of the trade ships. What if I don’t want to help you?”

Master’s expression had been changing from puzzled to angry as Lokun spoke. “Well, you should have thought about that before you decided to follow me. You will help us.” He turned from Lokun. “You have no other choice. You will stay here, by force or by choice. It would be easier on us all if you stayed by choice.”

Lokun was now coming to realize his true position. Master could easily have him turned over to the Council if he didn’t help. What was it he had heard about a frying pan and a fire? He had not been saved from death and treated by a doctor. He had been captured for slavery and, since he was useful merchandise, had been restored to a useful state of health. Master was just another would-be tyrant. Nothing would change if he took Chancellor Kane’s place. Lokun was disgusted.

“I see. I will help you,” he lied. He would escape after he got as much as he needed. And, if Master did succeed in his coup, he would treat him with the same hatred that he did Chancellor Kane.

“I am glad that you can see reason. You’ll thank me for this some day.”

Lokun doubted it. They arrived at a large doorway at the end of a passage and Master unlocked it with his key ring. They stepped into a large training room. Mats covered the floor and various weapons, some real, some for sparring, lined the walls. The sharp raps of wood on wood came from a pair of men practicing with their two-sticks at the far end of the room.

“This is where you will spend ten hours of every day.” Master said. A coldness rose up inside Lokun.

“I have completed my training under Sensei Gno,” Lokun said, “What more can you teach me now?”

Master moved. Lokun struggled to force his eyes to follow the movement, but he failed. He heard Master’s now familiar chuckle from over his head. He gazed up into the rafters that supported the ceiling. It was at least fifteen feet. He thought it might have been more. Master stood on one of the large wooden support beams. That near-ridiculous grin was still on his face.

“Everything,” he said.

No, zama anya kekronim, ashaim Kemeku sherizu l'osh qom shegru l'ed kel'kayin.

But, like a rose from a dungheap, a daughter of Meku will bear the father who will begin the line of the hero.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,

Book of Flames.

Anya sat perfectly still, crouched on the floor behind the entrance to the city underground and watched the kitchen exit. Lokun didn't come out. She had heard his cry behind her. She buried her face in her hands and began to weep. Her tears wet her palms as she sobbed feeling more alone than she ever had. He had given his life to save her. She deserved to be the corpse burning inside the flaming building. She hated herself for distracting him. She should have been more courageous instead of whimpering there like a pathetic child. But what was she doing now? Exactly that! Well, no more! She must be strong from now on so that no one else would have to die because of her. She wiped the tears from her face and took a breath. She knew she could make it on her own. She would have to be strong. She clenched her fists, determined. She stood and turned, walking farther into the underground. Behind her, Lokun ran out of the back door, paused, then headed into the street.

The underground was not designed as a sewer system for the city, but over the years it had come to be used as such. Muck and grime coated the walls and Anya was careful to step in the shallow portions of the walkway. When she turned a corner and lost sight of the entrance all was blackness around her. She closed her eyes and waited. After a minute passed she opened them. Humans would have been lost in the void, but Neriya had sharper sight and better night vision. Even so, she was forced to rely mainly on shadows and faint glimmers.

Huge spider webs stretched across the corners but none covered the center of the tunnel. That was evidence enough that this route was well traveled. Not for the first time that day, Anya was scared. Her footsteps echoed on the hard stone floor or splashed in the

shallow puddles. Drips played a steady beat. Plop. Plop. Plop. Anya kept moving down the corridor but was careful to be as silent as possible. The emotional pain of what had happened back in the inn swept over her and she fought to control her tears. There would be time enough to mourn once she was safe. For Lokun, for Elsie, for all the girls... She would be strong for them. So resolved, she continued her way through the darkness. She had never been down here and was relying on stories that she had overheard from the men at Elsie's. They had talked of safehouses and underground armies. Anya didn't romanticize the idea. She was expecting to find a group of cutthroats or villains to whom she could prostitute herself in exchange for their hospitality. It was just as likely that she would be raped and killed on sight, but she had no where else to go. Besides, death wasn't so bad. She could be with Lokun then. No. Don't think like that. He gave his life for her to live, she must do her best to survive.

As she walked through the ever-unchanging tunnels of grime and stench, her thoughts focused on the warrior that had so easily won her heart and so quickly left from her life. She had been in awe of his physical build as she had ministered to his wounds. His fatigue and hunger had been the worst of it. The incisions on the arm were done with surgical precision so as to cause maximum pain with minimum damage. Men had such stupid ways. She shook her head. The trouble that they went through for concepts such as honor and justice escaped Anya. She had fed him soup periodically as he slept, both to keep him asleep with sedatives and to add the vital nutrients that he had needed. She had not expected his attitude when he awoke. He was thankless and thoughtless towards her. He had cared only for his precious belongings, but she had sensed a need to be loved behind his terrible façade. She had pitied him, but at the same time identified with him. They were the same in more than just their race. But he had seemed to have two sides. First he had been cruel, but later gentle. But how gentle he had been! She wish she could feel his arms around her again. Tears started to flow freely now and she let them. She kept thinking of him in the wrong tense. They had been the same. Now he was dead.

She turned the corner and noticed through her tears a light at the end of this corridor. She stopped to wipe them away and adjust her kimono. She would take her chances. If she died at least she would join the only man she had ever loved. She walked down the corridor,

now not silencing the tapping of her footsteps. A figure stepped out to intercept her and was silhouetted with the light to his back. He held a large broadsword in one hand.

“Hey Koluk, there’s some girl down here,” he said to someone in the room behind him.

“A girl?” came the reply.

“Yeah, come see.”

Anya had expected to be asked or addressed. This display caught her off guard and she only then managed to say what she came to say. “I am a geisha from a local house that was just raided. I have nothing to trade, but what I do have I will gladly give for food and a place to stay.”

“She says she wants to shack up with us. In exchange she says she’ll give us a good time.”

The voice from behind said, “Well damn, Bourm, check her for weapons and show her in.”

“Yes sir.” The man approached Anya and as he came out of the entrance she recognized the long snout and dark color.

“A tarak!” she exclaimed.

“You got a problem with what I am, missy?” The creature hissed, offended.

Anya regained her composure. “No, sorry sir, I just had thought that you were human.”

“So you still interested in riding my little lizard, eh?” the creature laughed at his own clever wit.

Elsie had trained Anya to be more comfortable around these types. She quickly changed to take control of the situation, in her own way. “Any time, big boy,” she said, stepping closer to him and stroking his biceps.

“Hey, not so fast, Boss says I have to check you for weapons.”

“How about a strip search?” she said, letting her kimono fall (but keeping it off the floor and out of the muck) revealing her well formed, if young, naked body. She might as well put her plan into action as soon as possible.

The tarak grinned and reached for her. He grabbed her by the waist and started to undo his trousers.

“What are you doing, Bourm?” the voice behind him asked. He turned and Anya saw a huge beast clad in chainmail standing at the doorway.

Bourm stuttered and stammered, "Well Koluk, er um..."

Koluk strode forward, his armor clinking together and the walls reverberating with each step. He filled the corridor almost completely. He rapped his knuckles on the back of Bourm's head. "Er um' is right. Get her back into her kimono and bring her inside, stupid."

Bourm nodded and mumbled, "Yes boss." He fastened his pants. "Sorry miss," he said, still staring at her naked body.

"Turn around while the lady dresses, you pervert," commanded Koluk.

Bourm spun around but Anya noticed that Koluk watched her every move. She pulled her kimono over her shoulders and tied the belt. Koluk turned when she was done and beckoned for her to follow him into a small antechamber. Chairs were positioned around a table occupied by a go board. Here in the light she noticed that Bourm was a typical brown Tarak, but Koluk was a dark black color. Something about him, however, did not make sense. He had the typical build and leathery skin of a Tarak, but his face was more human and he had long silver hair. He had hands instead of claws. Almost as if he were an oversized, mutated human. Koluk offered her a seat and she took it and thanked him. Koluk, whatever he was, seemed nice. Bourm was a typical stupid flunky.

"I have to be surprised, miss, when a Neriya girl of no more than fourteen comes and offers to whore herself off to me and my men for no more than room and board. What has caused you to commit yourself to such a position?" He asked.

"I am seventeen," Anya corrected. "And I will commit myself to whatever I please."

"Well, young is young. Oh, excuse me, I failed to introduce myself. I am Koluk Half-Tarak and this festering hunk of stupidity is one of my soldiers. You are?"

"Anya."

"Ah, nice to meet you Anya. Now you may answer my question. What are you really here for?"

"Like I said before, I am a geisha, currently unemployed. I am looking for food and a place to stay. I will trade what I can for it."

"By 'what you can' you mean your body."

"Yes, it is all I have."

Koluk shook his head. "I will have nothing of the sort. The humans may enslave my people and hunt yours to extinction, but I will

curse Meku before I see a beautiful young Neriya girl prostitute herself to an entire army. You will be given room and board free of charge and I will place you under my protection. Sleep with whom ever you choose or sleep with no one, but realize that you will always have a room here regardless.”

Anya could not believe it. Despite her joy and relief, she looked the gift-horse in the mouth. “But I have no way to pay you.”

Koluk held up his hand. “No need. I have more than enough to give away. And this is for a noble cause.”

Bourm looked disappointed. Koluk turned to him. “Go announce a gathering in the main room. I have an announcement.”

Bourm left out of a side door and Koluk turned to Anya.

“Do you wish to be left alone or do you wish to be free to give your affections to whomever you chose?”

“The one I would give my affections to is dead. I would like to be left alone sexually.”

“Dead? And not long cold by the look on your face,” the big man observed. “I am sorry for your loss.”

“Thank you, kind sir. You have done more than I could ever ask.”

“Well, there is still more to do, but I will see to it. Come.” Koluk offered his hand and she took it. He led her out the side door, and they stood in a large vaulted chamber filled with many warriors. Most of them were tarak but some were of the rare races from the south. Anya saw one ogre and a couple trolls near the back. Anya estimated that there were over a hundred men sitting or standing, waiting for Koluk to speak. Koluk approached another tarak soldier and had a short, whispered conversation. The soldier quickly left back to the room Koluk and Anya had been before.

Koluk led Anya in front of the men and spoke, “This is our new guest, Anya. Anya of Koluk.”

Anya almost choked in surprise. What?

He continued, “I have taken her as my woman. She is not to be touched or abused. Treat her with respect as you would me. If she is ever harmed in any way I will kill whomever I deem to be responsible. Is this clear?” His message echoed across the room. Soldiers started nodding and some mumbled, “Yes sir.”

“I said, ‘Is this clear?’ ” he bellowed.

This time there was a chorus of “Yes sir” and everyone nodded.

“Good, dismissed,” he said and then turned to Anya, “Come with me, I will show you my room.”

“But I...” she started, beginning to explain that he had misunderstood.

“Be quiet, we can talk in my chambers.”

She followed, not knowing what else to do. Perhaps her good fortune was not as good as she had expected. But she had been willing before. Nothing to do but go along with it, it was preferable to death. When they arrived in his chambers he let her in and locked the door. Anya, despite her resolve, felt terrified. She didn’t want to be raped again.

“Before you die of fright, little girl, let me explain,” Koluk said. “I know my men. I know that you would not be safe in the manner that you wish to be unless they thought that you were absolutely out of bounds. I had to make them believe that doing anything to you would result in the most horrible consequences possible. Now you are safe to roam the base unmolested. Don’t worry; the men won’t even consider you as a romantic or sexual prospect. I have some on-base girls that do that work for me. I could never command an army of sex-starved soldiers. They would always be looking for excuses to go to the surface and visit the houses.”

Anya felt as if a great weight had been lifted off her shoulders, “I didn’t mean to lie to them, though,” she protested.

“You didn’t lie, I did, and in a way, I told the truth. I have taken you as my woman, just not in the way that they think. I will treat you as mine and you will be seated beside me at the dinner table. It is a small price to pay for a free room and free food. Smaller than what you were willing to pay when you came, no?”

“I was desperate...” she trailed off.

“I know. A Neriya girl your age, alone in the world: What choice do you have? That’s what the humans want you to think. They are trying to destroy our two races like they did the ogres and trolls. They and their stupid empire are destroying this world.”

A knock sounded at the door. “Come in,” Koluk yelled. Bourm stepped in holding an arm full of cloth.

“I borrowed some kimonos from the other whores like you said, sir.”

“Don’t talk like that around a lady, Bourm.”

“Yes, boss.”

“Set them on that chair.”

“Yes, boss.”

Bourm left. “He’s not too bright, but he works hard, and one hell of a warrior,” pointed out Koluk. “Well, you can get settled in. Have you eaten? We had just finished breakfast when you came in.”

Anya nodded.

“You have,” he continued. “That’s good. Lunch is in a few hours. Someone will ring a bell when it starts. The, um, er,” he blushed, his dark skin turning a deep mahogany, “the privacy pot is in that room on the right. I have to go now, but if you want a tour, get Bourm to show you around. He’ll be very nice after that show you gave him.” He smiled at her with his large bronze lips.

“Thanks for everything,” she said, at a loss for anything else to say. As he was about to leave a thought came to her. “Koluk?”

“Yes?” he said, looking back.

“Your name, it means something in the ancient language of my people.”

“I wasn’t aware. What is that?”

“He who brings the morning.”

“Interesting. I thank you for that information. Now get some sleep.”

He left and she stretched out on his large featherbed. She marveled. How had everything come out so completely good for her? She then thought of Lokun’s dead body roasting in the ashes of Elsie’s house, and of Elsie’s terrified look as the arrow had killed her. She rolled over and put her face in the pillow. She didn’t know how long she cried, she just cried.

Dong, dong, dong, a bell sounded. Anya rolled over in bed. It was lunchtime, but she decided that she was more tired than hungry. When had she gotten under the covers? She shrugged. With a stretch and a yawn she went back to sleep. She thought of how nice Koluk was being to her. That night she dreamed that she was offering herself to a large tarak warrior. The warrior turned and had long pointed ears and dark black hair. The face was Lokun’s. She enjoyed the dream, not caring that it was ridiculous. Maybe she would remember it. She never did.

Anya awoke to heavy breathing. It took her a moment to realize that she was not back in her room at Elsie's. She was snuggled against the large, muscular form of a tarak: Koluk. She corrected herself; he was a half-Tarak. His skin was slightly rough, but not as much as she had expected. His breathing was low and regular and Anya thought that she would have no trouble falling asleep again. She was still in her kimono. Half asleep, a naughty thought crossed her mind. In an instant her kimono dropped to the floor next to the bed. She pressed her naked body against his warm body and closed her eyes. Even though she had already had almost eight hours of sleep, Anya slept like a baby.

The next morning the bed was empty. Anya sat up and stretched, yawning.

"You slept well," Koluk's voice came from across the room. She jumped and pulled the sheets up over her naked torso.

Koluk laughed.

Anya scowled. "Don't do that to me," she said. She looked over the side of the bed onto the floor.

"Looking for this?" He asked, holding up her kimono.

"Give that back!" she demanded.

"As I recall," Koluk reflected, casually looking at the ceiling, "someone left this on my floor. That makes it mine. You really should be more careful when you lie naked in bed with a complete stranger."

Anya blushed and looked down, forlorn. "I was uncomfortable. It was hot."

"Ah, I understand completely now. I had thought that a beautiful, naked girl had slept cuddled against my side last night. Now I realize that that was not the case at all. It was hot." He smiled and tossed the kimono onto the bed.

"Thank you," Anya said, not trying to sound flirtatious. Some of Koluk's mannerisms vaguely reminded her of Lokun.

"It is time for breakfast. I know you must be hungry. Get dressed and we can go to the mess hall."

Anya looked at him.

"What?" he asked.

"Turn around."

Koluk almost collapsed with laughter. His loud, deep, guffaws resonated in the chambers. He calmed down enough to turn towards

the wall, but he still braced his hands on his knees, doubled over, chortling.

Anya, somewhat offended, got dressed. "Okay," she said, "you can turn around now."

He turned. "Very well, shall we be off to breakfast?" He offered his arm to her.

She took his arm and walked next to him, dwarfed by his massive form. She was half his height and barely a fourth of his weight. They walked down the halls together, passing soldiers and servants. The men saluted Koluk and bid him many good mornings. They were all careful not to so much as look at Anya. Anya liked it, she felt important.

They entered the mess hall filled with warriors. The din of slurping and crunching filled the air. The smells of food mixed with the strong body odor of a hundred unpleasant creatures. Anya almost gagged. She tugged at Koluk's arm.

"Can we take our breakfast back to your room?" she asked.

Koluk looked down at her, confused. "I always eat with my men. I want them to see me as a friend, not some far off, stuck up tyrant."

"But," she tried to be polite, "the smell..."

Koluk seemed to be in his best of humor today, because for the second time this morning he almost exploded with laughter. The mess hall became silent as he finished. His soldiers were all looking at him.

"Men," he said chuckling, "my dear lady Anya here has informed me that you sorry lot of ruffians stink to high heaven, and she cannot eat here for fear of losing not only her breakfast but last night's dinner as well!"

The entire room shook with the force of his entire army laughing and slapping each other's backs. A warm camaraderie swept across the crowd. Anya forced a smile. Was she being laughed at?

Koluk whispered to her, "Now I can leave with you to eat in my chambers and they will understand. I will not, however, do this all the time. Once our honeymoon is over, you must get used to the idea of eating in here with them. Otherwise, you may lose their respect." She started at his use of words before she remembered the relationship the men assumed she and Koluk had.

He spoke again to the crowd. "My lady and I will eat in our chambers today." A cheer rose up from the men. Anya heard various vulgarities and encouragements directed to Koluk. She blushed.

"Come, Anya, my servants will bring the food to my chamber."

They left and returned, through the halls, to his room. She sat down on the bed.

"You didn't have to come and eat with me," she told him.

"We have to keep up appearances."

"But I wasn't at lunch or dinner yesterday."

"At lunch they knew that you were asleep, tired from your trip here. As for dinner, they thought that I had tired you out." He grinned.

She blushed again. It was infuriating. How could she get so embarrassed? Shouldn't she be used to the ways of men by now?

"Anya," Koluk began, changing his tone to a more serious one, "I have other reasons for offering you my protection in this manner. You are beautiful. You are young but not innocent. And, somehow, that all appeals to me. Since my kind is used as a race of slaves in the mines, the humans have no need for female taraks. There are none in the country. I am the result of that state of affairs. My mother was half-neriyu. My men do not care for romantic love. The human wenches that I hire are enough for them. I, however, have always longed for a woman whom I could love.

"Anya, I have protected you from my men so that I could have an opportunity to court you. Would you allow me that privilege?"

Anya was listening to Koluk but at the same time she was thinking of Lokun. Now she was realizing that though she had loved and lost, she could not allow herself to throw away her dreams of reaching Neriya. The guilt that she had for getting him killed boiled up within her. She had loved Lokun, and he would want her to find a way to get to the legendary city. She had flirted with the notion, and, had things been different, she probably would have married him, but he was gone, and she needed to get on with her life. She considered Koluk's words.

She was a Neriya. She had thought that the only romantic prospects she would ever have lay with a member of her own race. It was certain that she would never love a human. Their kind was unlovable as far as she could tell. She had never considered a tarak. To be true, he was actually a crossbreed, but in her mind that was how she labeled him. They had always seemed ugly and monster-like.

Koluk was sweet and kind. She admitted to herself that she was physically attracted to him. His strong form next to her made her feel safe and secure. She wondered.

Koluk misunderstood her silence. "I am sorry for doing this to you," he said, "I know that a wonderful creature like yourself could never love a monstrosity like me, and I do understand that you have recently lost someone close to you..."

"No," she protested. "It's not like that, Koluk."

"It isn't?" he asked, an expression of hope crossing his face.

"Koluk, I have to get things straightened out in my own mind. I have never really had a chance to think about what I want in life. I must do what I can to get to Neriya as soon as possible. You have my permission to court me, but for now, that is all."

Koluk smiled, his large mouth curling up to his earholes. Anya, for the first time, thought he looked cute. "Thank you, M'lady," he said, "but what's this about Neriya?"

"It's a city in a land across the ocean to the north," she explained and would have continued, but a knock sounded at the door.

Koluk, forgetting himself, yelled, "Go away, we do not want to be disturbed!"

Anya interjected, putting her hand on his knee. "I think its breakfast, and I'm hungry."

"Oh, right." He crossed the room and opened the door. He took the tray from the servant and closed the door again.

Anya was amazed by the quality of the food. She wasted no time in getting her fill. She didn't care if she seemed lady-like or not. She ate. Koluk ate too, but Anya noticed that it was half-heartedly. An expression of complete joy and elation was on his leathery black face. She wondered, could he be in love with her? She didn't know how she felt about it if he was. She had much to think about.

Months passed. After the first week she had become acclimated to the particulars of the men and was able to eat in the mess hall. Koluk had been a sweetheart like always. She continued to share his bed and, since it was more comfortable and he didn't complain, she still slept naked. She had never been so close to anyone before. She thought she might have been with Lokun, but that had been cut short. Thoughts of him still brought tears to her eyes, but they soon came less quickly. Koluk never once tried to take advantage of her in any way.

He always listened whenever she talked to him, and he treated her with the utmost respect and concern. Once, while she had been wandering the compound, she had stumbled upon one of the quarters of one of the local girls, prostitutes that Koluk had hired for his men. The girl was busy plying her trade to one of the ogres and Anya had gotten an eyeful. She had run back to Koluk's room. The men had laughed at her and she had been crying by the time she got there. He was in there, going over some training exercises and had been very careful to get the whole story out of her. He had ordered the men to lock the doors from then on whenever they were engaged with one of the girls. He had allowed her to stay in his room, away from the men, until she felt comfortable again.

Anya smiled. How long had she been staying with him now? Four and a half months? Her night with Lokun seemed eternities away. She was looking at an old dusty tome that she had found in one of his dresser drawers. Koluk came in, clanking in his full armor, tired from a day of training and testing new recruits. She never asked him about his work. He had offered to tell her, but she had said that she just wasn't interested. The truth was that she did not care to think about the part of his life that could lead to its end. She, over this time, had come to love him, and could not bear to think of the possibility that he could die in some battle. He saw her looking at the tome.

"Interesting reading?" he asked.

"Oh, I can't read," she said, "I'm looking at the pictures."

"You can't read?" he asked, "Well, I'll have to teach you then."

"Would you? Oh, I would love to be able to read!"

He smiled and began removing his battlegear. She had eaten dinner without him because he had been busy all day. She hoped that he had gotten something to eat during the day. She asked.

"I ate with Reshif around lunchtime, I think," he answered.

"Oh, you poor thing," she said, "Call Bourm and have him bring in some food for you."

"You don't want anything?"

"No thanks, I ate with Gorbash and Xavier."

"I still can't believe that you made friends with an ogre and a troll yesterday."

"Oh, they're nice, all you have to do is ask them to lift something heavy and they're happy to help."

“About that, what gave you the idea that you could rearrange the furniture in my room while I was away?” He had been gone yesterday trying to make an alliance with the leader of some other underground army. She didn’t care to know more.

“Well, it looks nicer now, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it looks very nice, you did a great job.”

“You’re just saying that because you want me to fall in love with you.”

“That’s one reason.”

She threw a pillow at him. “You animal!”

He made as if to duck but made sure that he was too late. The pillow hit him in the face. “Ow! What did you do that for?”

“Because it worked!” she exclaimed. She was tired of flirting. She loved him and she wasn’t going to hide it anymore. She had made her decision.

“What worked?” He had been caught off guard and didn’t understand the implications of her reply.

She looked at him and suddenly he realized what she was saying.

“Suddenly I am not as hungry...” he said.

“Come to bed, my love,” she urged.

Koluk finished stripping his clothes off and obliged. Anya had the best night of her life. She was in love. She felt so good in his strong arms. He was so gentle. She could not have been happier.

Dom l'maj kel'gashi l'arkozin shearku d'mash kel'ohodim.
Through the magic of the throne, the dark one will corrupt the power
of the ancients.
--Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,
Book of Flames

Master ducked and let the bo staff whistle over his head. He shot an end of his staff out and hooked it under Lokun's leg. Bracing, he heaved his weight to one side. Lokun's feet swept out from under the kaiozu and Master brought his staff about to crush him out of mid-air. Lokun had improved over the past months and was not defeated so easily, for, in the middle of his backflip he brought his staff across and parried Master's thrust. Lokun landed on his feet a couple yards away in his standard ready position. Master had known of this Neriya's reputation since before Lokun had come to be dishonored, and had since then longed to procure his services for his own cause. Master had trained him well in the past two months. Soon Lokun would be ready. Ready to take on the task that Master had been planning for the past few years.

"What's on your mind, slowpoke?" Lokun jeered and feinted with his staff. "Getting too old? Need a nap?"

Master smiled, he had grown to like Lokun in this time and enjoyed sparing with him, though the Neriya had regular mood swings that caused him to be violent and temperamental. It almost pained him to have to use Lokun like this.

"Time enough to rest when you're dead," he said and advanced on Lokun, striking rapidly with either end of his bo-staff.

Lokun blocked and parried expertly but was still forced to retreat and move closer to the edge of the circle. It pleased Master to know that he was still the best. He had worried lately that Lokun had become better than he was. Of course, that was what he had wanted, right? He feinted and moved to make the finishing strike to knock Lokun out of the circle. In an instant it was over.

“Well old man, how did I do?” Lokun asked, standing triumphantly in the circle holding two bo-staffs, twirling them to either side.

Master blinked. He was lying, sprawled, upon the matted floor outside the sparring circle. Lokun had suckered him in and made him over confident. He could hardly believe it.

“Damn.” Master swore. Lokun offered him a hand to help him stand up.

Lokun slapped him on the back, “Come on, we’re late for dinner. Don’t let my lucky shot keep us from a full belly now.”

They entered the cafeteria and Lokun ordered two meals from one of the servants. Lokun was becoming a true leader and Master liked the way that he took charge of every situation. Perhaps he had been wrong to force him to stay, in some ways a prisoner, but Master felt it was a necessary evil. He needed Lokun. The artifacts would remain lost without him, the world would remain in this dark age. Maybe one day he would apologize, or perhaps there would be no need to. Lokun didn’t seem to harbor him any ill feelings. In fact, they might soon become friends. Master shrugged it off. Lokun had said something.

“Master, are you listening to me?”

“What? Oh, sorry,” he replied.

“Still a little knocked about, are ya?” Lokun joked. He noticed Master’s worried look and became more serious. “What’s been on your mind this past week?”

“Lokun, sit down,” Master said, sitting and offering Lokun a seat. “I have something important to tell you.”

“I’m all ears, sir,” Lokun sat down across from Master.

“I began this army to end the tyrannical rule of Chancellor Kane. I now have many men, of which you are my best. Better than I, even. No, don’t protest,” he held up his hand, “We both know it. Soon, a full-scale war is to take place between the Royal Guard and my forces. It will be a bloody battle, but we will win, by a small margin.

He continued, “Your mission, however, will be to carry out the most important part of my plan. This is a job that I would do myself if I were able, but, alas, it requires the abilities of a Neriyu. Before I go on I must ask you a question. Do you believe in magic?”

Lokun stared at master blankly for a moment. Master hoped that this would be easy. Lokun said, "You mean the mystical black arts?" He was now speaking in a hushed tone and leaning forward. "What the ancient tomes refer to as maj?"

"I know that it sounds crazy, but I have been studying it for a couple of years now. For centuries our world has been devoid of magic and its knowledge has been lost for so long that many think of it as a fairy tale. I tell you. It is real."

"But, how?" Lokun asked, playing dumb.

"Never mind that, the point is this: Chancellor Kane has the most powerful magical artifact our world has ever known: the Stone of Souls. This stone has properties beyond any of our wildest dreams. Only one thing keeps Kane from using its full power.

Master seemed to change the subject, "I know that you have noticed the persecution of the Neriya. Your kind is being systematically exterminated in such a way so that there is no way for you to fight back. The reason is this: The Neriya are the first race of magic. They created it. Listen to me Lokun." He leaned forward. "The Stone of Souls can only be fully used by a Neriya. Kane knows this and is scared to death that one of you will get your hands on it. Once a Neriya invokes the stone on the peak of the Mountain of Sorrow all magic will return to the Neriya people. Your race will have unimaginable power."

Lokun looked thoughtful. Master hoped he was buying these lies. If Lokun ever found out the real reason he wanted that stone, then everything he had worked for would fail.

After a pause Lokun said, "Where is this stone, and how do I get it?"

Master noticed a look of power-lust in his eyes. Good. Perfect.

"It will be hard to get, but I know that you can do it. Kane keeps it in the palace tower. I don't know exactly where but I can assume it would be in the top room. The Stone of Souls is only useful to him as a way to channel the other dark forces that he has mastered. He uses it like a beacon to transmit his powers, so he will want it as high as possible to get the greatest range of influence." This part, at least was mostly true. Master did know that Kane used the stone for scrying: seemingly the last magic art left.

Lokun shook his head. "I have never seen or gone up against magic. How can you be so sure that I will succeed?"

"I can't. You are simply the most likely to succeed. I am not certain, but I would guess that you have about a half a chance of coming back alive. Less of coming back with the stone. It's a gamble."

"Why do you want the Neriya to have such magical powers? Wouldn't they retaliate on the humans that have oppressed them for so long?"

"The stone gives the greatest power to the one who takes it to the Mountain of Sorrow. You would rule the world. I trust that you would repay me by being a kind ruler, and of course, giving me a position of authority. Advisor, perhaps."

Lokun nodded. "I see," he said.

Master had barely managed to dodge that bullet. He hated having to lie to such a promising warrior, but the ends had to justify the means.

"I'll need some things, some things that will be very difficult to find," Lokun told him.

Master nodded. "Give me a list. I will get them for you. You can study the layout of the palace for the next few days."

"When do I leave?" Lokun asked.

"The end of the week."

*

*

*

Master's dreams haunted him. Now they came every night. He could never remember them when he awoke. Only brief visions of horror and fear played upon his mind the mornings after. He now lay thrashing in his bed, unable to escape his own private tormenter. It could have been the nightmares that troubled him during his waking hours, or it could have been his heavy conscience. Either way, he had changed drastically. His personality had become more introverted, and he more frequently retreated to his den to pour over the ancient tomes that he had collected over the years.

That night he awoke in his bed in a pale sweat, and hurriedly arose. It wasn't his fault, was it? He had done what he had to do. His hand had been forced. He paced the room angrily. Stop it, he told himself. If he wanted to make a yokasura, he needed to break some eggs. He found the page that he had been looking at earlier in the tome. After a few minutes he had concocted a potion from a few herbs

that he had collected over the years. He went to the door and called one of his servants.

“You know what to do with this,” he said in a hushed tone.

He handed the vial to the shrouded figure. The man nodded.

Master returned to his room, the worst of his tasks finished. He went back to bed. His mind was not at ease, but he had passed the point of no return. The decision was made. He would trade his honor for the unimaginable power of the ancients.

*

*

*

Master awoke the next morning. He was late for breakfast and the mess hall was almost empty. As he sat and munched on his food he couldn't help thinking that he had forgotten about something. He felt the floor vibrate and looked up. The huge form of a muscular half-Tarak shadowed the door. Master's plate shook as the warrior strode across the room. He stood as Koluk reached his table.

“I had almost forgotten our appointment. Welcome to my great demesnes,” he said. He swept his hand out towards the rest of the room.

“I have heard wonderful things about you, Master,” said Koluk, offering his hand.

“I can say the same.” Master said, shaking his hand. “Here, let us sit and do business.”

The two leaders sat across from each other. Koluk towered over Master even as they sat. Master tried not to look intimidated. It barely worked.

“Would you like something to eat?” he asked.

“No, I'm not hungry. Let us talk. You have offered me a position of great power if I aid you in your coup. Council member is a title that I have, as of yet, never dreamed of attaining. Tell me more.”

Master smiled. “As you have heard, I have an army of over a thousand capable men. My assault on the Royal Guard is set to take place next month. My only problem is the Amayin guard. I need a large force to prevent them from attacking my men from the rear during my assault.”

Koluk caught on, “So you need my army to distract them with an assault on the opposite side of the town until you have taken complete control?”

“Exactly. In exchange I offer you a seat at the High Council once I am officially named Chancellor.”

“Your offer sounds promising, but there are almost five hundred Amayin soldiers in the Amayin guard. I have three legions of fifty. Do you expect me to send my troops into certain death?”

“By no means, I am prepared to match your hundred and fifty with a hundred and fifty of my own. I cannot, however, spare more.”

“I understand, the main assault must succeed. I assume that you will signal us at some point in the battle so that we can aid you in the fortification of the palace.”

“Yes, I hope to take the palace quickly in order to minimize your losses. Once we have the palace, then all we must do is defend it.”

“I have heard stories of strange occurrences around the palace tower. Many of my men are superstitious of it. I am not sure that I am certain that its power is a mere myth.”

“I have taken care of it,” Master assured him, “I have started the wheels of my plan. Within the month our dear Chancellor Kane will be powerless to oppose us. A new age is starting, Koluk, an age where your kind will no longer be slaves.”

“Yes, I have awaited this for many years. I am glad to see even the possibility of its fulfillment.”

“My dear boy,” urged Master, “It is not just the possibility, it is the certainty of our own fruition. The yoke of oppression is heavy on our shoulders, but we will soon throw it off, together.”

“Together.” Koluk agreed and shook Master’s hand. For the next few hours they studied maps and palace layouts. By the end of the morning Master was confident that Koluk could handle his end of the bargain. Now there were only two loose ends that stood in his way.

*

*

*

Sensei Gno Seotukin, leader of Gno’s school of Komakayin, and third seat of the high council woke early in the morning to do his daily calisthenics. He let his mind drift as he flexed and focused. The Council had to see reason. They had been ignoring the persecution of his people for too long, almost as if they did not care, or wanted it to happen. He had removed the support of the school in an outward show of his objection to their leadership. The last seven votes that had been taken had been won by near unanimous decisions. Gno had been the only naysayer on each occasion. Kane was trying to help, but had to work slowly, and everything had changed when the new member had taken office. He shook his head as he finished his workout. Time for

his morning tea. He crossed over to his bedtable to where his servant set his tea each morning. His servant was so quite, he never noticed him enter during his exercises anymore. He was used to him though. Had anyone else decided to come in, he would have been alert and on guard. He enjoyed having someone that he could trust so implicitly. He sat down and smelled the warm aroma of the tea. He looked out the window. Today would be another beautiful day. They had had a string of those recently. Gno watched a bluejay flitter about. This was what all his years had taught him. Beauty was always just out the window. He smiled. Despite all his political problems, Gno managed to somehow remain the only uncorrupted politician. He corrected himself, Kane was not corrupt, only incapable. He wished that the others would not fall so easily to visions of power and wealth. He sipped his tea. Oh well, he was certain that everything would work out. Meku never let too many bad things happen to his creation. Gno shook his head, and his vision blurred. He tried to breathe but only gagged and wheezed. The teacup fell from his hand and shattered on the floor. Realizing only too late that he had been too trusting and too naïve, he collapsed forward onto the desk. His chest flaring with pain and his mouth gasping for air, the greatest leader, teacher, and warrior in the land gave up his soul to Meku's waiting arms. Gno was dead.

*

*

*

Master heard the news. Excellent. Once Lokun brought the Stone of Souls back to him then nothing would be able to stand in his path. Koluk had been pitifully easy to trick. Master wished that he could see the look in his eyes when the Royal guard and the Amayin Guard were waiting for him in ambush outside of town. Oh, it was all so perfect. Lokun was to leave on his mission tomorrow. Master needed to talk with him.

“Lokun, a word please.”

Lokun looked up from his studies. He had been focusing for the past week on the layout of the palace and the statistics that Master had given him. “Sir?”

“Lokun, I have a slight change of plan. I am going to be on the Mountain of Sorrows. I will wait for you there. If you do not show up with the stone in a week then I will assume that you have died. Is that clear?”

“Abundantly sir. Is everything prepared for me to leave tomorrow?”

“Of course, leave tomorrow as planned, I must leave today in order to prepare the ceremony at the mountain.”

“I understand sir. May Meku guide your feet, truly.”

“I bid you the same Lokun. Remember, without that stone, we are lost.”

Master set out that night on his journey to the Mountain of Sorrow, but first he stopped by the Amayin Guard Headquarters to conduct some business. At length he was on his way again. As he rode his horse he congratulated himself. Everything was so perfect. The wretched taraks and their kin would perish in an impossible battle trying to help a cause that didn't exist. He prided himself on how he had fooled the great Koluk Half-Tarak into thinking that he had over a thousand men. Lokun he had kept isolated so that he had had no chance to realize that about twenty servants and a hundred men were all that lived in the compound. Lokun was the key though. Master needed that stone. Only a Neriya could touch it while it was separated from its staff. It had been a difficult task, creating a story to convince Lokun that the stone was the source of Kane's power. In truth it was one of Gno's artifacts, on loan to Kane. Mostly useless unless brought to the mountain to which Master now traveled and connected with the staff that was hidden there. Gno had been the most difficult to dispatch. Master had spent most of his family fortune to bribe Gno's loyal servant first to learn the location of that stone and later to kill Gno. His men gave the underground more respect than it deserved. It was sheer luck to find Koluk's army. He had thought that it would be more difficult to kill off all the able-bodied Tarak warriors. Having them all attack the city was a last minute addition to his plan. His thoughts trailed again to Gno. That fool had almost succeeded in convincing Kane to step down as Chancellor. Gno had been an expert politician and would have brought peace to the land had he been allowed to live longer. No, Master couldn't have that, could he. That would get in his way. The true road to Amaya's glory could only come with him as it's ruler. He came to the base of the Mountain of Sorrows. He would make camp here and scale the mountain the next day. Yes. It was all so perfect.

*

*

*

Master didn't recognize the dark, black, ironclad figure that stood before him. Master looked around to either side. Where was he? Had he been kidnapped? The figure stood, unmoving, eerie,

foreboding. Master approached it and suddenly a swirl of fire enveloped the figure's head. When the smoke cleared the helmet was gone and the figure's face was that of Gno. Master retreated.

"What trickery is this?" He mouthed, not being able to speak. His hands came up to his throat.

"No. No. You are dead. I made sure of it," he tried to scream.

The figure held out its hand. A large scorpion occupied the entire palm. The scorpion's tail came up and it stung itself in the center of its own back. Master watched the vile creature disintegrate into the air. A putrid mist swirled up and the dark figure swept his hand about it. A vial of clear liquid appeared in Master's hand. He stared at his palm, not knowing what anything meant anymore. He looked back to the figure. A flash of light danced around Master and the dark-clad warrior vanished. The world swirled around in a misty haze as Master tumbled, downward, outward, and onward. Before the dream ended he heard a voice call to him.

"He is coming, beware!"

*

*

*

Master awoke, shivering in his bedroll. His hand clutched the katana beside him. What was that sound? The flaps of his tent waved in the slight breeze of the night. He crawled forward to the entrance and peered out into the night. Somewhere an owl sounded its cry. The moon was a crescent overhead. Master's eyes darted to the edge of the woods. Had he seen something? He was sure he had. He crouched just inside his tent and unsheathed his sword. Someone passed his tent on the other side. He heard the soft footfalls of bare feet on moss. Silently, Master moved undetected across the clearing in front of his tent and to the edge of the woods. Here he watched his own tent. A lithe form slunk out of the woods towards the back, where Master's head would be lying had he not awoken. The assassin drew a katana. Master noticed the quality of the blade even from this distance. That was a dwarven blade: supposedly unbreakable and permanently sharp. The figure thrust the blade through the tent and impaled Master's pillow. Master charged from the edge of the woods, hoping to take him by surprise.

Master swept his katana through the air, aiming to decapitate his enemy before the fight began. He was unbelievably fast. The sword did not move in an arc toward its target, but it instead seemed to hit before it ever began in its swing. Steel met steel. The assassin's

sword rested on his shoulder, both blades inches from his neck. Before time could take control of the situation the two men, experts of the weapon, began the battle. The assassin struck at Master's knees, but Master jumped and at the same instant sliced at his assailant's midsection. The assassin brought his sword across and stopped the blade. He then brought his arm down to pin the sword. He slammed his palm on the hilt of Master's sword and the force of the blow wrenched them both around. Master would not give up his weapon so easily. His left hand thrust a palm strike into the man's chest and time stopped. The two men stood, only for half of a moment, in a fixed pose. The assassin had stood firm to take the full force. Master felt his wrist crack awkwardly and he knew that one or more bones and tendons had been snapped. The force traveled up his arm and reverberated through his muscles and nerves. His arm went limp and fell to his side.

The assassin, still pinning both swords, pulled a short dagger with his free hand and brought it to bear, intending to finish the fight. His eyes opened wide and a look of terror and surprise crossed his face. The assassin's feet lifted off of the ground and he sailed backwards through the air. The two swords fell to the ground and the man crashed into a large oak tree at the edge of the woods. The force of the impact threw bark and wood chips to the side. The assassin spat blood and his chest was crunched inward. Master thought that the man's wounds were fatal but the assassin raised himself to his feet. Again, he spat more blood and charged. The two combatants traded blows. Fists and arms flew at faces and abdomens. Master pounded at the weakened torso, but the assassin, like some sort of unstoppable juggernaut, took the punishment and kept coming. After taking a few good hits to the face Master lessened his assault. The contest became a standoff. The assassin could not compete with Master's speed and Master, despite his best efforts, could not manage to damage his opponent enough to stop him due to his dead arm. Master waited for his opportunity, but none came. He took a chance and rolled to recover his fallen blade from the ground. He came up with the sword, but his gambit had cost him. The assassin cut deep into his leg with the dagger that he had used before. Lame, Master brought the katana to bear and luck was with him. The assassin had not noticed the sword until it was too late. The blade plunged into his stomach and, as he fell to the ground Master removed sword from his gut. Master could not

let his opponent lay on the ground bleeding to death. With one chop the assassin's head rolled away from his lifeless body. He dragged the body into the woods after searching it. He found nothing. He left his sword with the corpse, claiming the assassin's dwarven blade as spoils of victory. After cleaning and dressing his own wound, he packed up his tent and limped down the road. He had to assume that there would be more of the same. He started up the slope of the forbidding Mountain of Sorrow. He smiled. Nothing could keep him from the summit. It was his destiny. He anticipated the sweet taste of power.

*Koluk she'oshimu ashaim k'anya no l'arkozin shehomimu kevod na
l'okun koma ludi kel'gashin.*

The one who brings the dawn will father the daughter of the rose but the dark one will use him and the dead soul to take the stone to the throne.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,
Book of Flames

As Koluk entered the conference room the eyes of his entire army followed him. He strode across the platform and stood before them. His critical eye pierced into the crowd of trolls, taraks, and ogres. He had raised his army painstakingly through the work of several years and now they would be instrumental in throwing off the yolk of the human oppression. The sides of his mouth curled upward in a satisfied grin. He had confidence in his men. They would be victorious. He raised his hand to silence the dull roar of the troops' conversations. The room fell into a cold silence.

"As each of you know, we go to war tomorrow." He paused for the cheers to die down. Once they did, he continued, "Many of you will die in the epic battle, but we will prevail against the oppressive human forces. I urge you, eat, drink, be merry, for tomorrow we may die!"

Koluk exited the room amidst the cries of victory and camaraderie. He stepped into the hall and started towards his chamber, but his heart was heavy with the knowledge that many good friends would be buried within the week. Anya rushed to his side and grabbed him by the arm.

"Stop this," she begged. "Why can't we just leave this country behind? We could move away from Amaya, across the sea to live with my people."

"We don't even know if this legendary land of Neriya exists," he interrupted, "and even if we did, no one has ever crossed the great ocean and returned."

"That's because they don't want to return," she tried to reason with him.

Koluk continued down the corridor, his thoughts bouncing in his skull. This revolution was important to his warriors and all the citizens that felt the oppression of the empire. Anya had asked him to leave his command several times during their relationship. He wanted to. Oh, how he wanted to. Since she had come into his life he had lost his love for the battle and the politics that his position involved. He wished nothing more than to retire and live with her somewhere, either in the Lowlands or, if they could brave the Great Sea, among the Neriya in the land of the Ancients. He had lied to her so far as to his knowledge of the legendary Neriya City. He had been there. Once. He had been aboard the slave ship for so many months, lying among his dying brothers, that he could hardly remember his homeland. He had no memory of his parents, only of the dock and of that beautiful cityscape as he boarded the ship that had served to suddenly educate him in the ways of life. He didn't remember all of the details of how he survived the trip. The only clear memory that stayed with him was of this large ogre tearing open the carcass of one of the other slaves who had died. The beast had eaten heartily, feasting on the blood and entrails. Koluk had struggled between hunger and disgust but, as always, nature prevailed over his humanity, and he crawled close enough to tear off a piece for himself when the ogre was not looking. This memory had haunted him since. He had never again set foot upon any seafaring vessel. Seasickness was not nearly a strong enough term for the stomach wrenching feelings that he associated with the rocking of a boat on the waves. He dreaded the day that he would have to tell Anya the truth. His thought of Anya brought his consciousness back to the present. He had just arrived at his door. He had some faint memory of Anya trying to persuade him of things that could never be. She still clung to his arm, her lithe frame pressed delicately against him.

"Oh, Koluk, have you even been listening to me? Why can't we leave? You could give command of the army over to Darut. He can handle it. I know that you don't want to fight anymore. I can see it in your eyes. At night I hear you dream of a life away from all the blood and death. Koluk? Why haven't you said anything?"

He picked her up with his large hands by the waist and lifted her against him. Surprised by this sudden movement she kicked her feet and let out a soft cry.

"Eeeek!" she giggled.

"Anya," he said, "I have made commitments that I cannot break. I must lead my men to victory tomorrow. After that we will see what fate allows. I assure you that one day we will live together just as you envision it, but for now you must trust me. Once I have helped Master to take his place as emperor then we won't have to worry about anything."

She wrapped her arms around his thick neck and cried on his shoulder. "Oh I know, but it's so hard thinking that you might die, and it will be harder still to sleep without you tonight."

His thick hand stroked the silky waves of her hair as he held her tight in his arms. At length he set her down and she dried her eyes with a fold of her kimono.

"What if you don't come back?" she asked.

Koluk frowned, "Don't you say such things, my love. I will return. Now, you get some sleep while I see to a few things. Some time in the morning I will come to bid you goodbye."

"You get some sleep to, love," she urged with half a smile.

"Sleep is not among the luxuries that I can afford, sweet Anya," he replied. He opened the door to his chambers and ushered her in with a loving pat on her bottom. She turned as he closed the door.

"I love you," she said.

"And I you," he replied.

Koluk marched down the corridor back to the gathering hall. He shook his head. He did not really trust Master and was afraid that some of the information that he had gathered about the man was true. Could he really have killed Gno? Koluk didn't like any of this. He had thought that the man was a great leader and would make a benevolent emperor. Now he doubted that Master was truly what he seemed to be. He reached the gathering hall and found his way through his troops to a table where his four most trusted advisors sat. Darut the Tarak polished and oiled the two-handed broad sword that made him the most formidable opponent that Koluk had ever encountered. Gorbash the Ogre sharpened the spikes on his massive steel club that could pulp the heaviest armor like paper. Xaviar the Troll munched heartily on a large turkey leg, but the thirty-pound morning star that hung from his belt was glistening with a seemingly supernatural glimmer of death. Koluk's eyes finally came to Reshif the Half-Neriyu. Reshif wielded the twin katanas strapped to his back.

Koluk had never seen the man use his swords, but his skill with the practice swords showed that he was not a man to be taken lightly. Koluk was fortunate to have these men as his lieutenants.

Reshif was the first to notice him as Koluk approached and said in his usual wispy voice, "Welcome, M'lord;" then to the others, "It seems that it is now time to get to business."

Koluk nodded and sat down at the head of the table. He marveled at the specialties of each of his officers, not only in weaponry but also in strategy. Darut wasn't bright, but he could command twenty good soldiers so well that they could take down a force of fifty with minimal losses. Gorbash was in charge of besieging and there wasn't a fortress or castle that he couldn't overcome given enough time and an adequate force. Xaviar laughed whenever confronted with cavalry and he knew how to set up a defensive position that was virtually impossible to take. Reshif was in charge of special ops. He had never failed to succeed in any mission that Koluk gave him, however he did have two rules: Koluk never asked how he accomplished them and he got to keep any spoils he took from the mission. In addition to those mysterious talents, Reshif was also brutal in combat strategy.

"You are good men," said Koluk. "I am proud and fortunate to have you on my side."

"When do we bash some heads?" asked Gorbash, fingering his club.

Koluk said, "Tomorrow," and rolled out a map of the city.

The four looked at the map a moment and then looked to Koluk. He cleared his throat and began doing what he used to love about his position.

"We have a hundred and twenty men under our command. Each of you will take twenty-four for the jobs that I have assigned to you. Darut, you have the hard job. You make a full frontal assault on the Amayin Guard Headquarters at the south of the town. I want you to slaughter them. Is that clear?"

"Yes boss," Darut agreed.

Reshif interrupted. "I thought that that was all we were doing. Aren't we just distracting them so that Master's troops won't get caught between two forces of guards?"

Koluk shook his head. "I am not counting on Master to even show up. I think this is some sort of set up. We are going to take this city ourselves."

Gorbash pounded the table. "What," he demanded in his grinding voice, "That's not even possible! The Amayin guard have a force of at least two hundred and the Royal Guard have more and are better trained."

Koluk grinned. "I know."

Xaviar leaned forward and rested his elbows on the table. The troll's even, smooth voice drifted across the table, "I think that I know what Koluk is going to do, and I like it. Let him finish."

After Koluk thanked Xaviar, the others sat back to listen, expecting the worst.

"Darut will take the full force of the Amayin Guard when he charges into their headquarters at dawn. Reshif, this is where you come in. You will take your men through the sewers and come up inside the Amayin Guard headquarters tonight before dawn. You will take Amayin uniforms and hide there until Darut attacks. Your men will open the gate and prevent the archers from shooting from the walls, and then both of you will destroy the Amayin guard."

He paused to make sure that they understood, and then continued. "Reshif, after your men are set up to help Darut, I want you personally to infiltrate the chamber of General Tanik, head of the guard. Kill him and his second so that the guard will be confused and without leadership."

"Sure thing, sir."

"Ok, now the good part. Gorbash, Xaviar, and I will take our troops and storm the palace. This is what Master promised to do but, if I am correct, instead of his forces attacking the palace, the Royal Guard will be ready to ambush whoever attacks the Amayin Headquarters. What we are going to do is this: Before dawn we are going to come up behind them at the only good place to hide outside of town. I've scouted it out and my sources tell me that the Royals are going to have half of their force ready to hit Darut from behind. They will never have the chance. After we take care of them we will set up our attack on the palace at the north end of the town. Got it."

"Shitfire and Brimstone from Meku himself, Koluk," exclaimed Reshif, "You are going to take down two forces of trained

warriors totaling over four hundred with just over a hundred mercenaries. The scribes will make a legend out of you."

"We haven't done it yet, Reshif. Calm down." Koluk surveyed his lieutenants. "No mistakes. Don't get yourselves killed. You know what your job is. I have made lists of the men that you will have under you. Take these and go get them ready. Darut goes to battle at dawn. Reshif, take your men as soon as possible and get set up. Send a man back to confirm that all is set. Gorbash and Xaviar, we go to battle an hour before Darut." He handed them the lists.

His men nodded and all four stood up as he did. The four turned and left to find the men that would make this battle possible. Koluk had already gathered his men and decided to take advantage of his free time. He exited the Gathering Hall and made his way back to his chambers. Anya awoke easily and was overjoyed to see him. They shared their love and then as the hour grew near he bade her goodbye.

"Promise me something, dear," she pleaded.

"I promise I will return," he complied.

"No," she protested, "Promise me that you will live to help me raise our child."

Koluk's eyes widened Anya placed his hand upon her stomach.

"But, how do you know?" he asked.

"A woman knows. Just promise."

He kissed her, more passionately than he had ever before. "I promise, my love, I promise," he said after their lips separated.

She lay back down to sleep and he left. He found himself once again thinking as he made his way to the Gathering Hall. He must not let this cloud his mind as he prepared for battle.

*

*

*

Reshif took point as he led his men through the sewer systems that he knew so well. Koluk had chosen the perfect group for this job. Many were half-Taraks or half-Neriyu and so could pass for humans with minimal disguise. Reshif was the only one not in an Amayin guard uniform. He wore his usual black dokai and bandana mask. At length the group of men came to the bottom of a tall shaft that led into the shower house of the Amayin Headquarters. The shaft was only wide enough for the largest of his men to barely get through. There was no ladder, but Reshif had counted on that. He shimmied up the narrow shaft and finally came to the grate at the top. After a few

minutes he had loosened the bolts and moved the grates aside. He heard footsteps. Quickly, he moved the grate back into place. A naked Amayin guard walked into the shower room and began to shower at the far wall. His back was turned to Reshif. Reshif carefully slid the grate to the side and eased out of the hole. The sound of water made it easy to sneak up on the man. He drew one of his katanas, a magnificent work of art, and severed the man's head from his body: a clean kill. Reshif stowed the body in a locker and dropped a rope down to his troops. After finding something suitable to tie it off to and waiting for his men to climb up, his men were inside the compound. He sent one of them back to resume the post of the guard he had slain. Reshif had made certain to know the posts and times of all the guards. His plan was to slowly replace the guards with his own disguised men as they came to shower. It worked.

It was a little over an hour before dawn when Reshif's last man took his post. Reshif made his way in the darkness of the shadows to the chamber of General Tanik. Only one guard had discovered him and the man had not had a chance to scream before Reshif had killed him. He now stood before the door to Tanik's room. Light poured out from inside the room. Koluk, Gorbash, and Xaviar should be making their assault on the Royal ambush right about now. He tried to listen for sounds of a battle outside but heard nothing. He hoped that the messenger he had sent back made it before they had left. Reshif peeked through the keyhole of the door. Tanik was sitting at his desk on the other side of the room, pouring over papers and documents. Reshif pondered his choices and didn't like them. He decided that he would count on the man's pride. Reshif opened the door noisily and stepped in. Tanik failed to look up in surprise, as Reshif had planned.

"I have come to kill you," Reshif proclaimed, drawing both of his masterfully crafted blades.

Tanik, looking up from his work, kept a cold, calculating manner as he asked, "How did you get in here?"

Reshif advanced across the room. He hoped to reach the man before he could bring his weapons to bear, but did not want to make the mistake of charging. Behind Tanik hung two ebony double-bladed hand axes. The general stood, turned, and removed them from the pegs that had supported them.

"I will find this amusing. I need a workout this morning," he said with his back still turned to Reshif. For half a moment Reshif considered attacking the man while his back was turned, but a hint of common sense begged against it. That would be just what the man wanted. Reshif, instead, let the man turn and come out from behind his desk.

"You are a man of honor," observed Tanik.

Reshif replied, "When it suits me, I am."

He had barely finished speaking when he found himself dodging two axe blades that whirled around him, slicing through the air like hawks. Reshif parried fervently but was put on the defensive by the general's blinding speed and alacrity.

With an amused tone the general spoke as he buffeted Reshif's blades with the heavy weight of the combat axes.

"Do you like my axes?" he asked with a smirk, pinning one of Reshif's blades to the wall. "They are Black Iron, stronger than the silver that the Dwarven smiths crafted into your blade."

Reshif was hard pressed to be able to reply. His lithe body was backed against the wall and his free arm tired under the relentless hammering of Tanik's blows. The brute of a man let up enough for Reshif to roll to the side and stumble away. He spun and brought his guard up, but Tanik did not advance.

"You think that you have a chance?" Tanik asked, feigning surprise.

The sun began to rise and a shaft of light beamed through the window to the floor between them. Reshif twirled his blades expertly.

"That dawn will be the last you ever see," he growled.

Tanik smirked confidently. "I doubt that." He threw one of his black axes with a fluid and smooth gesture, but it came at Reshif with blinding speed.

Reshif saw his life flash before him and time seemed to stop. The axe flew on its deadly path, twirling end over end. It made a low whirl as it sliced through the air. Reshif stared. He had no time to react or move. He had to act. He had to move.

The black blade met the silver steel and Reshif's blade shattered, sending shards all over the room, but it deflected the axe enough. Reshif charged with his other blade and Tanik didn't have a chance. The shrapnel from the shattered blade had been sprayed into his face, and he fell as Reshif sliced into his chest with his remaining

sword. The big man was dead before the loud thump of his impact with the floor resonated through the room. Reshif discarded the handle of his broken blade and cleaned the other. After he sheathed his weapon he went to the desk and riffled through the man's papers. He found what he was looking for: a letter in beautiful ancient script.

My Honorable General Tanik,

Though I despise the necessity of writing to you, due to our past experiences, I cannot stand idly by as other members of our great nation seek to overthrow our glorious Emperor Kane. On this next night there will be an uprising of non-human warriors in rebellion against the present order. They will attack in two waves. First, they will assault the headquarters of the Amayin Guard, your base. They expect to have support from another army but it will not come. They will attack from the south. I hope that this will do much to lighten your thoughts towards me and to prove where my true allegiances lie. As per your request, I am exiling myself from your great city. I will be on the Mountain of Sorrows meditating on the Great Truth. I anticipate the day when I once again find favor in the eyes of the Throne. Give Emperor Kane my most sincere regards.

Your Servant,

'Master' Tsenoku

Hoyin Omad

He would find that traitor: the one they call 'Master'. The Mountain of Sorrows was to the southeast. Master would almost be there if he had left yesterday. Reshif figured that he could catch up with him during the next night. He leapt out the window, slid down the wall, and raced into the woods. Behind him he heard the sounds of battle. His men and the men of the other lieutenants had almost taken the Amayin headquarters. This morning they would lay siege to the undermanned palace. Reshif regretted that he would not be there for that great battle. He hoped that Koluk would not consider him a traitor. When he brought back Master's head, the General would understand.

*

*

*

It was before dawn and Koluk and his men were only a hundred yards away from the waiting contingent of Royal Guards.

Koluk could see them. How typical. The bastards didn't even have any lookouts in this direction. They were sloppy. That meant that none of the council members had been sent to oversee the battle. That was fortunate. Koluk studied his battle tactics. He had sent Gorbash and Xaviar to different sides of the guard. He was going to come up directly behind them. He listened for their birdcall signals that would tell him his lieutenants were ready for battle. As soon as they were ready, he would signal them and the slaughter would commence. If he was lucky then he would end up taking minimal loses, but if Meku was not with him, it could be hell.

"Whooo, whooo." The call came from Gorbash's side.

Koluk waited. It shouldn't be long. He motioned for his troops to be ready.

"Whippoorwill..." came Xaviar's call.

Koluk let loose the coarse cry of a crow. Nothing happened for half a second. Suddenly, fire leapt up from within the ranks of the Royal Guard as Koluk's trap exploded. That was the signal. Koluk felt proud of himself as he led the charge into the midst of battle. With any luck Xaviar's pyrotechnics would have killed or wounded a large number of men. As it was, the distraction and confusion it caused was all that Koluk's men needed. He lost count of the number of guards that he personally killed. Guards and warriors were falling, slain all around him, but he knew that the guards were falling more and that victory was his. He hated having to deal with the death of his men. That was why he tried to win his battles with cunning and tactics rather than brute force. He cleaved the head from an attacking guard and turned to meet his next opponent. There were none. The battlefield was strewn with well over two hundred corpses but most of them were not his men. Groans and cries came up and he saw Xaviar already gathering the wounded together for treatment. Koluk wiped off his blade on his bloodstained tunic and began the tedious task of finding and killing the wounded of his enemy. When all was said and done, Koluk's army had lost twenty men and another thirty were hurt too badly to continue fighting. Reshif had done his job, but no one could find him now. Darut and his men had obliterated the Amayin Guard. Koluk met with his generals, minus Reshif.

"Well done men. The battle went about as well as it could ever have been expected to. Thank Meku for that; he is with us," he said. "Xaviar, what is the total count of able bodied soldiers now?"

"We have sixty-two, sir, but we must send some back with the wounded to the base."

"Send six back to the base with the wounded and you go with them. Get Anya, and bring her back here." Koluk commanded.

"Yes, sir. I will be back within two hours," Xaviar said.

"Meet us outside the palace at our siege camp."

Xaviar nodded and left.

Koluk looked at Darut and Gorbash. "Gather all the rest of the men. We march to the palace to prepare our siege."

The two men nodded and left to do as he commanded. Koluk sat down on the large trunk of a fallen tree to think. Xaviar was the best choice to take over his command. He was the most reliable and intelligent. Why not put him in charge and leave with Anya? They could retire to some far away place, it didn't matter where, and raise a family together. He wondered if there had ever been an offspring of a Neriya-Tarak and a Neriya before. Darut was a problem, though. He thought that he should succeed Koluk. Darut was a great warrior but his mind was not geared for the political. Koluk hoped that Reshif would return soon, and that he hadn't gotten himself killed somehow. The half-Neriya's humor and friendly manner always helped. There would be jealousy and tension if Koluk left now. He had to stay until the job was done and the empire was overthrown. Then he would leave, and he and Anya could raise their child together. He stood and commanded his men to follow him to the palace. As he walked his thoughts drifted to and fro. He had always wanted a family and a life apart from death and war.

No one noticed, but if anyone had been inclined to watch Koluk closely, they would have noticed that his steps were lighter and his smile broader. Something that might have been referred to as a sparkle was in his eye. He couldn't wait to see Anya again.

*Sham l'okun shekomu l'ohat kevishnu, koluk shizomu kemai
l'arkim na Meku sheku mizon ekto d'vats*

When the dead soul takes the hope of the nation, the one who brings the dawn will fall before the darkness and Meku will remove himself from the world.

--Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,
Book of Flames

Lokun stood, shrouded by the darkness of the forest, outside the walls of the palace. He watched the two guards patrol, one on the ground outside and one on top of the wall. He might be able to get past them without their notice, but if he had to kill them both that would work too. He waited, watching the two guards, and looking for his chance. The one on the ground had a larger area to patrol so Lokun hoped that he would be able to scale the east tower when both were at the west. He looked them over, assessing how much difficulty he would have if it came to a fight. The lower one had a longsword at his side and Lokun didn't see expect any trouble from him. The one on the wall, however, had a crossbow, and Lokun knew that he would be in trouble if he were detected before he scaled the wall. He surveyed the towers on each side of the wall. They were more like huts on the corners of the walls than real towers. He suspected that supplies and extra weapons for the guards would be kept there.

The two guards had been heading to the far end of the palace wall, and Lokun saw a small window of chance. The kaio su darted across the thin clearing and pressed against the moss covered stone surface of the west tower. He took the climbing claws from his dokai and felt the grip of them in his hands. He looped the metal cords that hung from them around his feet, so that he could stand in them as he scaled the wall. He hoped these worked as well on this wall as they had on the city walls on which he had practiced. He turned and punched the claw into the wall at about head height. He had to lift his foot because of the metal cord, but he had practiced this many times. He put all his weight on that foot and stepped up. It held. He thanked Meku. He slammed his left fist into the wall and shifted his weight to

the other foot. In this manner he scaled the wall. All was going according to his plan, except one thing. The stone and concrete wall had been harder to climb than he had expected, and as he was near the top the guards had returned on their patrol. He hoped that the guard below wouldn't look up. He lay against the stone motionless and prayed to Meku that they wouldn't notice. The seconds passed like hours until the lower guard turned and started down the wall back the other way. Lokun thought for a moment that he had just avoided detection, but then he heard a gasp from above. The upper guard had seen him. Lokun put all his weight on the cords and flipped over the rampart wrenching the claws from the wall. He landed in front of the guard and before he was able to raise a cry of alarm the sharp tips of the claws thrust into his chest as Lokun delivered a flurry of punches. The corpse dropped to the ground.

After Lokun had stowed the body in a relatively dark corner he took stock of his situation. Soon the other guards would notice this one's absence and be alerted to Lokun's presence. No way to avoid it now. He had hoped that he would be able to avoid discovery for longer. Now he would have to get into and out of the palace faster. He looked over the edge of the wall into the inner courtyard. The yard didn't have any guards, only the palace gates, and he wouldn't be going in that way. He swung over the side of the rampart and dropped down. He stooped in the dark corner and looked for his way in. The palace had been designed for maximum security, so there were no windows below the third floor. He looked along the side of the wall for what he knew was there, running silently across the yard when he was sure that no one would see him.

After following the wall of the palace for a while, he came to a small access grate. After all this security, the designers had had the nerve to make basement windows. Idiots. Lokun reached into his dokai and withdrew a small pry bar. He noticed that the air coming from inside was abnormally hot. He shrugged. Due to the age of the palace and the rusting of the grate the job took only a token amount of work. Soon the grate fell to the ground and Lokun entered the palace basement.

He stood in some sort of furnace room with large boilers all around him. That explained the heat. The room was filled with the low rumble of the sound of fire and steam. Water dripped somewhere in a steady rhythm. The din of the basement was low but all

encompassing, and Lokun struggled to keep his thoughts straight. He moved through the machinery and clutter scanning the ceilings. He assumed that the access to the upper levels would be some sort of ladder instead of stairs because the blueprints of the first level showed no stairwell leading down. For a moment he considered that there might be no access into the upper levels. He swore. Perhaps the designers had not been as irresponsible as Lokun had thought. He was considering looking for a different entrance into the palace when something caught his eye. He hesitated to get his hopes up as he crossed the room.

"Thank Meku," he said.

Before him was an old, rusty ladder that led up to a round metal manhole cover. He climbed up the ladder and inspected the locking mechanism. The door was obviously designed to keep unauthorized individuals from coming into the furnace room and was locked from this side. He assumed that this was a safety precaution so that no maintenance workers could become trapped inside. Lokun marveled at his good fortune. If this kept up then he was sure that he would be able to slay Emperor Kane. That wasn't his only goal. He knew that the documents that proved his honor were locked away in this palace somewhere, perhaps near the Stone of Souls. After he restored himself to honor before Meku, he would take the stone to the mountain and take this power for himself. Master was a fool to think that Lokun would give any power to him. He undid the latch and, after peeking through to make sure that no one was around, he went through.

He had thought that the ladder had led to a dark room, but now realized that he was standing in the inner courtyard of the palace. He was not inside yet. Around him was a garden in splendor with the blossoms and blooms of the summer. The colors were dull in the darkness of night, but Lokun was certain that the beauty of this glade was unmatched in the day. Fortunately the flora provided him with ample cover from sight. He did not notice any watchmen, but he knew he couldn't be certain. There was only one door into the glade, but many balconies looked out over it. He debated between climbing to a balcony and going through the door. On the one hand he risked entering an occupied room and on the other he risked running into guards. More guards would be on the lower levels than above and he would eventually have to go upstairs anyway because Kane lived on

the fifth floor and above that was the treasure room. Having made up his mind, he deftly sprung to the closest balcony and landed in a catlike crouch. Master had taught him well, and the twenty-foot leap was less than difficult.

Thick, red curtains blocked the passageway from the balcony to the room. A low candlelight pierced through the slit where the cloth hung above the stone floor. Someone was awake in that room. For a moment he thought of ways to get through the room undetected, but then, as his mind cleared, he felt ridiculous.

Lokun surveyed the balconies to each side of this one and neither of them had lights. Lokun simply propelled his lithe form across the night air onto one of those. No use in taking unnecessary risks. This balcony seemed fairly safe, so he took some time to gather his thoughts and make a few preparations. As his hand reached into his dokai, his eyes looked over the kaio-su-nat. Kane would pay. A vision of the dark warrior that haunted his dreams flashed upon his eyes for a moment. He almost felt the heat of the fire that came to his dreams each night. Within him something broke. He no longer cared about his honor. He only wanted revenge. He brought out the dagger that had become his soul mate. The instrument was as sharp and deadly as ever, and it gleamed forebodingly as it was prone to do from time to time. Lokun twisted the end of the hilt and it unscrewed with only token resistance. Inside was a long hollow chamber that terminated in a pinprick hole at the tip of the dagger. He placed the cap gingerly on the floor and his hand dipped into the folds of cloth once again. This time he brought out one of the vials of clear liquid that he valued so highly. No honorable man would ever have stooped to use such an underhanded tactic.

The poison of the scorpions of Aborath was fabled across the land. Many believed them to be the creatures of legend: some obscure fairy tale told to children to make them behave, or to young schoolgirls by young schoolboys who liked to watch them run and scream. Lokun had never been there. Aborath, that is. He had come upon the vials in the same manner that he had come upon the dagger. The assassin had sought to kill the kaio-su as he slept, but Lokun had been much too crafty for that. He had surprised him from behind and had had enough time to torture the poor ninja at his leisure. That is how he found out that Kane was behind everything. Lokun shivered. Yes. Kane would pay dearly.

Lokun finished pouring the poison into the dagger and closed the hilt once again. Dagger in hand, he waved aside the curtain and entered the room.

On the bed lay the most radiantly beautiful human maiden that he had ever set his eyes upon. She slept deeply, halfway under the covers, with one side of her chest bare to the still night air. The nipple stood erect in the cool breeze. Her flowing golden hair lay on the pillow but the ends were blown about gently in the wind. The glorious creature let a low moan as if dreaming. Lokun watched from the shadows. This was surely one of Kane's many concubines. The thought of such a union caused the bile to rise in Lokun's throat. That that beast of a man had caressed her was akin to the fairest blossom being tread by swine. To Lokun it seemed that all that was pure and good had been pounded out of her, leaving an empty shell of disgust.

As Lokun stepped out of the bedroom and into the dark hallway, he drew his dagger through a rag of white cloth in his left hand. Behind him echoed a soft dripping as that of a leak in a roof on a rainy day. Outside there was not a cloud in the sky. He discarded the now red cloth and continued to the next room.

Lokun never stopped to question why there were no guards in the halls as he passed from bedroom to bedroom. His mind, warped as it was, would have been unable to comprehend the suspicion. Outside the walls of the palace there raged the battle between Koluk and the Royal Guard. All the regular posts had been transferred to the outer walls. Regardless, Lokun didn't care. He continued methodically, room by room.

There were no screams or struggles. He went about his work with frighteningly swift and calculated precision. In each room he left the same scene. In each room he left any hope of redemption that he had ever had. With the poison of the scorpions of Aborath he dealt wrath and vengeance upon each lovely face until the Emperor's harem lay in pools of blood, breathless.

At length he came to a flight of stairs. The guard was elderly and half-asleep and Lokun dispatched him quickly. He let the corpse drop to the floor and felt satisfaction at the crunching thud of flesh on wood. If he had the notion to consider his arm, he did not give in to it. The scars there were meaningless now. He had no need of some ancient code that required self-mutilation as a way of atoning for some action that weak-minded fools called dishonorable. Soon he would

have the Stone of Souls, and with that all the power that he would need.

Lokun ascended the stairs to the next level. Torches lit these halls and several guards stood watch, pacing up and down the corridors. This level held the members of the Council and therefore security would be tight. Lokun had expected less guards but the battle that raged outside unbeknownst to him, had caused the Council to request extra protection. Lokun was not about to spend his time sneaking about in the darkness. He was a greater fighter than Master, Sensei Gno, or even Meku's greatest warrior: the legendary Senko Tosuji.

Out of the darkness of the stairwell, Lokun stepped into the full view of three Royal Guards. His dagger flashed menacingly before them as he took a casual fighting stance. He was treating them like a master instructor treats his pupils on the first day. His disdain for them was such that he knew he was invincible to their touch. The guards, even if they had not been about to attack as soon as they saw him, were now insulted, and all three drew their katanas. The hallway was too thin for all three to attack him at once, and even two would have been difficult. The Royals knew better than to interfere with each other, and so they attacked him one at a time. Lokun didn't care one way or the other. He could dispatch these pathetic humans at his leisure.

The first guard charged. Against any other foe this tactic would have been perfect, but Lokun was not any other foe. As the katana whipped through the air toward Lokun's head the kaiozu simply raised his free hand and caught it. Steel met flesh and the blade cut deep into his hand. If the guard had lived long enough, he might have been puzzled as to why the expertly crafted and sharpened edge did not cleave through Lokun's fingers. As it was, Lokun pulled on the sword, wrenching the guard toward him and onto the quivering tip of the curved instrument of death. The tip pierced into his belly and the guard collapsed to the floor, writhing like the discarded portion of a lizard's tail. Lokun, still standing calmly, inspected his hand. The blade had stopped halfway through, and blood welled out from the wound. He blocked out the pain and looked to his next attacker. The man was standing, hesitant, before him.

"Come and die or stand there and die, you choose." Lokun said. His dark eyes stared into the gaze of the guard, and he saw something he liked and was becoming to love: fear.

The guard hesitated but Lokun did not. The kaiousu's foot snapped and kicked something towards the guard. The guard blinked and clutched at his stomach. His hand was wrapped around the hilt of his fallen comrade's katana. The blade protruded out of his back, having been propelled through him by Lokun's foot. The man fell to his knees in disbelief and made a disgusting gurgle as he slumped to the floor.

Lokun shifted his gaze to the third guard. He looked into the man's eyes to find that fear he knew was there. The guard stood almost petrified, but Lokun caught a hint of something else that for a moment overrode the fear and terror. It was a glimmer of a reflection, but it was enough. Lokun spun and sidestepped out of the way of the fourth guard that had been coming upon him from behind. The curved dagger cut through the air, flesh, bone, and tendons and finally exited. The guard fell forward past Lokun with his katana still raised and landed at the feet of the remaining guard. The legs of the man stood, bodiless for a moment, and then slumped to the ground. The man had been sliced neatly in half. The last guard only half-heartedly swung his katana at Lokun and soon joined his companions in the afterlife. The kaiousu stood ankle-deep in blood.

This floor was now empty of living guards, and he surveyed the twelve doors and the stairway that led to Kane's private rooms. Each door had the ancient symbols over it, marking the Council Member's rank and position. Lokun had heard of Sensei Gno's death. The other members must have conspired against him to kill him. They must pay. The doors were locked, but he would have no trouble in picking the simple locking mechanisms if he had the right tools. A token search of one of the guards lent him a couple large needles and soon Lokun was inside the room of Council Member Zra's room.

The room was well furnished with all the luxuries that even the richest of the townspeople could never dream of affording. On the bed was a large, rotund man flanked by lithe female forms on each side. All three were sleeping deeply. When Lokun left, the room was occupied by two headless corpses on either side of a corpse that was missing a part substantially more vital to men than a head. The

amputated parts he had put upon the mantle over the fireplace, the heads looking down over the room.

Lokun made his way leisurely from room to room, and by the time all of the Council, except Kane were dead, the sun was beginning to rise. For the first time Lokun could here the sounds of a battle escalating outside, but, intent on his task, he failed to register the sounds. He started up the stairs with the worst of intentions and the peek of his wrath saved for the Emperor himself.

Kane had haunted his dreams for too long now. He must be free of him. He was free of the council, but the dreams, he knew, would not stop until Kane was punished. He was the cause of all of this. At the top of the stairs were two large double doors. He no longer bothered to be silent or unseen. He stood before them, braced himself, and slammed his palm-heel strike into the wood. As the doors crashed from their hinges, Kane, having recently risen from bed, whirled to face him, dressed only in his night robe.

"What is the meaning of this?" he demanded.

Lokun faced the man upon which he had longed to exact his revenge for what seemed like eternity. He pulled up his sleeve and stood before the emperor, waiting for Kane take stock of the situation. At length it seemed, though it had been only a few moments, Kane spoke.

"Ah, the kaiousu, or should you want me to call you Soyetsu Daki, since we both know that is your name?" He looked unconcerned as he spoke but Lokun knew better than that. "What brings you here, Daki?"

"You will die," Lokun replied, more as a statement of fact than in answering the question.

"Of course. I must, you know. We all must. Time is like that." Kane managed to wax philosophical as he stood, prone, before the kaiousu.

Lokun did not reply, so Kane took the initiative, "Let me get my katana and I will see to your challenge."

"No." Lokun's prohibition was undeniable and Kane, who had been about to move, froze. Kane shot a look of query toward him.

Lokun feasted on every word that came from his own mouth, tasting the sweet nectar of each one.

"You will die a traitor's death. Weaponless and defenseless you will rise to meet the demons of hell that will forever consume you

and all that you are. I will send you into the afterlife without the protection of steel so that you may forever be able to fight your tormenters only with the rotting, burning nubs of your feeble wrists. The beasts and monsters and terrors that you have set upon others will be set upon you as the justice of Meku. Damn you. Damn YOU!"

Lokun threw the dagger at Kane and the Emperor stood frozen, a politician, not a fighter. Surprisingly the dagger stuck point first into the wood of the wall behind him.

"Ah, dear pupil, you have acted in anger and have missed your mark it seems. You only succeeded in a pathetic scratch." Kane smirked.

Lokun began to walk forward. "I think not," he said. Kane began to stiffen and shake.

"What manner of sorcery is this?" Kane asked, falling to the floor to the side of his desk.

"What you are experiencing is a fraction of the sting of one of the legendary scorpions of Aborath," Lokun explained. "It is a very small amount and therefore it will not harm you unduly. It will only serve to paralyze you completely. You will recover feeling and movement in about three hours. Unfortunately, you will not be looking forward to that moment with much happy expectation."

Lokun crossed the room to the back wall. On the wall were many weapons of varied kinds and uses. From this wall he took a rare sacrificial knife. Testing concluded that the blade was sharp and suited to his purpose. He returned to Kane's side and removed the emperor's robes. Fear danced in his eyes but his mouth was unable to form the words that Lokun knew were on his lips. "What are you going to do to me?" his face seemed to cry out.

"Dear emperor," said Lokun, "I am going to take from you your last protection from the flames of Meku, so that your torment in the life to come may be fulfilled to the same extent that you have caused torment in the lives of those whom you rule. I am going to take your skin."

If it had been possible, Kane would have passed out right then, but a property of the scorpions of Aborath is that they thrive on the fear of their victims, therefore their poison prevents the victim from going unconscious. Lokun used the sacrificial knife to make key incisions in Kane's flesh. Devoid of pain Kane was forced to watch, to his own horror, the removal of his own flesh. It was a tedious task

because Lokun was careful to leave a thin membrane that kept the insides together and therefore kept the body alive. Lokun wanted Kane to be alive when his feeling returned. The siege on the palace was taking a turn for the worse as Lokun finished his terrible task. Finally Kane, the emperor of the land and the most powerful person in the world, lay as naked as possible in a pool of blood next to a pile of fleshy epidermis. Lokun left, going to the stairs to retrieve the thing that had brought him here: the Stone of Souls.

The Stone was on a pedestal in the middle of the upper chamber. Thousands of other artifacts littered the walls and floor, but great care had been taken for this one. It did not sit on the pedestal but instead it floated, spinning, about a foot above it. Lokun gazed into it and seemed to lose himself in its many swirls and eddies. Each time he looked at it, he had a distinct impression of a certain color, but as he tried to describe that color or if he took his eyes off the stone, and the memory faded, leaving him feeling somewhat empty. Regardless of any possibility for ultimate power, he had to have this stone if only for its incomparable beauty and splendor. His hand reached out and the world seemed to slow to a crawl and then stopped. Each instant that he went without that stone in his possession felt like an eternity, and for an eternity he seemed to reach for it.

Stone in hand he raced down the stairs. As he got to the first level of the palace, he heard the ear splitting wail of Kane as the poison lost its effect. The screams echoed through the palace and across the morning horizon. Ultimate pain and suffering were summarized in a single syllable and, as if Meku had found mercy on him, the sound ended with Kane's death. Lokun threw open the front doors, raced across the courtyard, scaled the wall, and dropped down the other side, intending to make a break for the woods. Instead he landed in a raging battlefield. He had been preoccupied before, but now noticed the siege on the palace. That explained why he had met so little resistance in the palace. Taraks and ogres were setting ladders against the walls and it was all the defenders could do to keep them from getting over and opening the gates for the rest of the army.

Lokun darted past invaders hoping not to be noticed. As it was, luck was with him and he made it to the attacker's camp without incident. He found a hiding place behind a tent and contemplated how to make his way from here to the Mountain of Sorrows.

*

*

*

Anya felt out of place in the midst of the warrior encampment. Koluk was always off directing the siege so she rarely had time to see him. That, however, wasn't completely fair. It was only the morning after their primary assault so there was much to be done. He had assured her that as the fighting settled they would have more time to be together. She had demanded that she be allowed to at least be able to go outside.

"Never," he had said. "I don't want you getting hurt."

"I can take care of myself. I don't want to be stuck in some tent worrying about you all day!" She had raised her voice more than she had intended.

She saw the look of hurt in his eyes and was instantly sorry as he replied. "Very well, my love, but you may not venture more than a stone's throw from our tent."

She normally would have demanded more, but wanted to do something to make up for snapping at him. She had assented to the restriction and he had excused himself to go look over the preparations for some sort of assault. At present she was roaming her allotted amount of space to the very limit of what would be considered a stone's throw, thrown by an ogre. Most of the men of the camp were at the castle forming some assault that Gorbash had devised. Anya was as close to the fighting as she was allowed to be, which meant that she could barely see the little figures of the warriors. She leaned forward and peered from behind a large oak to watch the battle. Her maidenly curiosity had overridden her general detest for violence and carnage. Something caught her eye. A figure dressed, not as a warrior, but in the standard garb of the samurai, was making his way through the tents. He seemed to be taking careful pains to keep from being seen by the soldiers on the battlefield. Anya's first instinct was to cry out the alarm and declare that an invader was in the camp, but something made her hold her tongue. The figure was coming closer, obviously intending to pass by the area she occupied. She could not imagine that he had seen her. The figure's sleeve moved to bare his right arm and for a moment Anya could not believe her eyes. She blinked and the sleeve was back in place. Could it be? Was she just imagining things? Her mind raced as he came closer and his features came into view: that tall and confident way that he carried himself, the long pointed nose, the majestically beautiful ears, and finally those dark, piercing eyes. It was he!

Anya threw herself out from behind the tree and began to run towards him.

"Lokun!" she yelled.

He jolted, surprised at being discovered, and was instantly on his guard. It took him a moment to recognize her as she raced towards him.

"Anya?" he replied, but she didn't hear him. As she ran forward her foot snagged on one of the nails that held down a tent and she tumbled to the ground. He jogged over to her to see if she was injured.

As he helped her to her feet, she assessed the damage. Fortunately she was not hurt, but her kimono was torn terribly and she had to hold it to keep it from falling off. She spoke again before he could think of anything to say.

"Oh, Lokun, I thought that you were dead! I..." here she burst into tears and fell into his arms. She clutched at him sobbing and crying.

"Oh, I have betrayed you and my race." she wailed, tears streaming down her cheeks. "I am in love with another."

"Calm down, Anya," he said, trying to comfort her enough to get some semblance of a coherent thought from her.

She continued to moan and cry, but suddenly Lokun felt that he had a much more serious problem.

"What are you doing? Get your hands off her, you son of a bitch!" Koluk yelled. Lokun turned to the side and saw the largest man he had ever laid eyes upon. The half-Tarak strode forward, sword in hand. Now Lokun was in a situation that he knew how to handle. Women he did not understand. Combat, he did. Anya slumped to the ground, and when Koluk saw the tear in her clothes he burst into an enraged charge. Lokun braced himself for the worst.

*Na l'arkozin shekojyru d'mash ohodim na per lemash sh'ukomu
d'vats.*

And the dark one will be given the ancient power and with the power he will rule the world.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,
Book of Flames

Koluk marched with the remnant of his army out of the forest. It was dawn. As the golden rays of sunlight shot through the green pines above he and his men set out on their way to storm the palace. His mind was fully occupied with the anticipation that Xaviar would bring Anya to him and he failed to hear the young Tarak soldier's question the first time. The soldier did not want to offend the general and so a while passed before he asked again. A few birds of the early morning called out their pleasant songs. The soldier's name was Wyrn and he had joined Koluk's army just two weeks before.

"Sir," Wyrn finally said.

Koluk looked toward the young Tarak, ripping his attention from some deep inward thoughts about a far away island that he now dreamt about during the nights.

"Yes, Wyrn?" His soldiers found it incredible that Koluk was able to remember the names of each soldier that fought with him.

Wyrn paused to gather the thoughts that had been on his mind since he had noticed the general's great discomfort. When he spoke he had Koluk's full attention.

"You aren't going to be our King, are you?"

Koluk shook his head. "I am not the same man that I once was, Wyrn. I have grown weary of the battles and fights. I want to settle down with my wife and retire."

"Darut wants to be king then."

"Yes. Anya thinks he deserves it, but his mind is not right for it. He is a fighter, not a leader."

"Xaviar will take it."

"Darut won't like it. They have never been on friendly terms."

Wyrn smiled. "Reshif keeps them from killing each other."

“He is the mortar of the stones.” Koluk sighed.

“You know the only solution.”

Koluk was interested in hearing the soldier’s thoughts. He motioned him to continue.

“Make Gorbash king. He wouldn’t want it, but he would take it. Xaviar, Reshif and Darut would be his councilors.”

Koluk walked awhile in thought and, after a distance, replied, “I believe I shall do that, but I might add something to your plan.”

“What’s that?”

“I’ll make you a councilor also.”

Wyrn was so stunned from the reply that he fell into a deep silence, and they continued their walk to the camp. At length they arrived at the palace gates.

Xaviar arrived shortly thereafter with Anya, and Koluk retired with her to his commander’s tent while his generals oversaw the preparations for the assault. Koluk’s weariness overcame him and he slept, his loving wife cradled against his chest, her head on his shoulder.

*

*

*

Air sat upon her father’s throne in the Heavens. Before her, like a small globe, the universe that Meku had formed floated, glowing with the intense power that it took to sustain it. The power was nothing to the god: who had caused his creation out of nothing, and it served as a functional repast from the infinite boredom. Meku sometimes played with the contraption but most of the time he sat passively, watching his beloved people. Many of the people claimed to know who he was. He let the fools live in their folly. No use in disillusioning them. Meku, however, was not here. Fire was also missing. Air worried that the forces of Chaos had done something awful. Earth and Water were kept busy tending to their children’s wars and other insanities. Air watched the Neriya with love, but also with sorrow at their plight in the world.

She was furious that her father’s chosen ones had been persecuted. He had placed the Neriya there to keep order to the mystical forces that he had made to govern the world. They were now free only on a secluded island close to the heavens, and the use of the elements was lost to almost all of them. The deity shook her head. They had chosen the wrong path, but he would soon make it right. She surveyed the lands of creation. Currently there were few things

happening that were critical to the movement and order of the universe. The Neriya on Neriya were celebrating the Day of Becoming, and Meku was to appear before the Great Mage in the midst of the ceremony. A war was taking place in Amaya. The lesser races would kill each other off. Earth and Water would be there to nurse them back to health afterwards, like always. The Dark One was on his path towards the summit of the Mountain of Sorrows. Meku had foreseen it all and made appropriate plans. He had given Lokun a chance. His plan would now be interrupted, but it would not be stopped. To Air's grief, there was nothing she could do to help Lokun now. His path was set. With a sigh she sent her presence down into the Spectral Hall in the center of the city of Neriya. It was time to speak to the Mage. In his absence she must carry out her father's plan.

*

*

*

Koluk wrenched his sword out of the enemy guard's gut and turned to engage a second foe. His lieutenants barked orders, commanding the men to continue pressing forward. The muddy footing on the battlefield caused by the short, early-morning rain made fighting more treacherous in this environment. He blocked and parried the next soldier's attacks but was pressed to retreat, more by the slick ground than the assault. His back pressed up against another soldier's and he braced his weight to fend off his attacker.

"Good to have you at my back, General." The voice sounded familiar.

"And to have you at mine, Wyrn." The two were now surrounded on the battlefield. The Royal guard had made one last desperate surge to overtake the attackers, and someone had recognized Koluk and ordered the men to attack him heavily. Koluk cursed under his breath. How could he have been so careless? No use in regretting it now.

"Wyrn, I don't like this situation. Let's get ourselves out of it," he said back to his newly found comrade.

Wyrn failed at disarming one of his enemies and parried, almost too late, the counter attack. "I am open to suggestions, General. What do you have in mind?"

Koluk's mind was racing as he deflected the increasing number of blows that came towards him. He couldn't think of anything. He glanced around for something useful but nothing caught his attention. His army was being forced to retreat and he and Wyrn would soon be

trapped in the enemy ranks. The dark rain clouds overhead added an ominous air to the battlefield, but nothing offered an escape. Koluk parried one sword, another glanced off his armor, but the third sliced his side. It was only a flesh wound, but he knew there were going to be more to come. Somewhere deep within Koluk a heat began to rise. Rage churned up from inside him and boiled over in a wild berserk. His pupils dilated and his skin steamed red. He raised his sword to charge and yelled a wild and incoherent scream. His blade flew left and right about him and the blood that flew through the air blinded him. He felt a blade dig into his thigh. He took the head off of the man who wielded it. Drenched in blood, both his own and that of his enemies, the Tarak general plowed through the throng towards his camp.

The pain was prevalent in his consciousness as his brutal taskmaster. It forced him on, disregarding the various injuries that pockmarked his colossal form. From somewhere behind the veil of agony and rage a light voice called to him. He looked at the dark beast that he was engaged with and his vision began to shake and waver.

“Koluk, stop, ‘tis I.” He shook his head and his eyes focused for a moment. His beloved stood before him and his men compassed about him. Knowing that he had fought his way free, he collapsed, exhausted by his wild berserk.

*

*

*

It was the high point of celebration at mid-day of the Day of Becoming. The priest washed his hands in the small basin on the side of inner temple. This was the last of the many preparations that he had to make before he entered the Great Room to speak with Meku. His robes were freshly cleaned and prepared. The water had been shipped in from the Throne in the sea and he had not eaten for a moon’s season. His only nourishment had been the distilled seawater from the waters that fell into the Eye, and he had bathed daily in the red waters from the Sea of Blood. He took the lump of raw gold, harvested from the southern mountains of Amaya, which would serve as the offering to the god. When he had prayed and meditated, clearing his mind of all but purity and honor, he entered the Great Room.

The altar was made of the finest gold and precious stones, and had never been touched by mortal hands. It had been made at the behest of Meku during the first generation of Neriya. The artwork on it was that of a master craftsman and was awe inspiring to look at. The

Mage, the name he took only when he was to speak with Meku, now began to chant. *“Per lemash sh’ukomu d’vats. Per lemash sh’ukomu d’vats.”*

Calling the plethora of light and sensation any color or definable description would fail to do justice to the true presence of what was in the room. A majesty of unknowable vision stood upon the golden altar as if a portion of infinity possessed this space for all eternity, infinitely into the past and future but never actually in the present. Meku was here. The Mage fell to his knees.

The voice was not a voice, but neither was it a thought. It was simply the message that the god portrayed, devoid of any medium through which he communicated.

THE PROPHECY IS FULFILLED

The Mage contemplated this revelation. The prophecy of Shem’kem’ku was confused on many accounts and widely studied among the Neriya. It spoke of the destruction of the world through a man who was to come to power over the lesser races: the humans, ogres, taraks, trolls, and dwarves. The Mage had studied the scriptures and, as far as he could determine, the many other minor prophecies had already been fulfilled. He feared the worst for his people and hoped that he could find the child of promise that the prophecy foretold. He worried that the scriptures indicated a sufficiently long span of time in which the Dark One would rule. The topic was left open to consideration, however, as the prophecy never set an exact date. He would prepare for the worst and hope for the best. “My Lord, What must we do?”

HE WILL ARRIVE

The Mage bowed before the altar. “Thank you, Lord.”

I WILL RETURN WHEN HE CALLS

Finished, Air left the room as quickly as she had arrived, and the Mage was left with what little information he had gained. They were now on their own until the child arrived and called Meku back. He stayed in the room for a while in deep meditation. The church must begin its preparations for receiving, raising, and training the child in the Craft. The Craft had not been practiced in many thousands of years, and only the child would be able to make use of it. After Meku’s return the prophecies spoke of cities ruled by benevolent Neriya Magi and ten thousand years of peace and prosperity. The prophecy did not guarantee His return, however. It was conditional.

The prophecy spoke of four who could defeat the Dark One. One was the Emperor. The Mage could only assume that it meant the current Amayin despot. Another was the Sensei. The Mage thought that that might mean one of the Great Teachers of the Art of Komakayin, but could not be sure. The third was only described as the one who is called and could be anyone. The last was the promised child. The prophecy said that if all four die then would the world be lost to the dark one's power. The Mage rose from his meditation and prepared himself to meet his followers. There was much work to be done.

*

*

*

Koluk's thoughts and worries wracked his brain as he slept fitfully. Anya tried to cool his fever, but he had been unconscious since his berserk and seemed to be tormented by the worst dreams. Now the battle was going badly because the troops had been demoralized through Koluk's condition. As she mopped his forehead with a damp cloth she remembered doing the same thing to Lokun months before. Her eyes squinted as a few tears came to her eyes. She did not bother to fight them back. She didn't know now if she had truly loved him or not, but she still mourned over his death and knew that Koluk was the saving light that had restored her thereafter. Koluk's form moved, shivering, and Anya thrust her feelings back into her mind. She caressed his neck and hoped that he would soon wake.

"Koluk, love," she whispered.

His eyelids fluttered and air rushed from his lips in a low groan. His breath was hot with his fever but not as hot as it once had been. Xaviar had been able to restore him somewhat and was now scouting out in the woods for some *Yunlaku* flowers. The first batch of tea had cooled his fever considerably but it had depleted Xaviar's stash. He had told her that it would certainly get worse unless Koluk got another dose soon. The half-Tarak had such a massive build that he wouldn't die, but there was a possibility that he could remain unconscious indefinitely. Anya swirled the rag around in the waterpot next to her absentmindedly. Meanwhile, Koluk was struggling, not to stay alive, but to remain sane.

He knew that he was dreaming. He sensed that nothing he saw was real but he didn't have the power to awaken. He was surrounded in a swirling vortex to light and color. Sights mixed with sounds and smells to create a room that, while being the size of a small sitting room, held eternity within its walls. The throne glowed with such

splendor that Koluk did not notice the man sitting upon it until he spoke.

“You are quite the fighter, Koluk.” The man was thin, like a reed in the wind, and was clothed only in a white robe. His face was featureless and he was bald with no beard or mustache. As he spoke his lips curled in a wry grin. Koluk noticed that he was himself, clothed in the same manner. The man raised his voice quizzically. “Are you aware of the significance of your name, Koluk?”

Koluk was dumbfounded and, though he tried to respond, was unable to. The man continued after a slight pause. “*Luka* is the Neriya word for To Call but *Lekua* is the word for sunrise. Koluk either means ‘the one who is called’ or ‘he who brings the dawn’. Why would a half-Tarak have a Neriyan Name? Your father was an uncaring slave trader. Your mother died in labor on a slave ship after he sold her. The boat arrived in Neriya and you were already an orphan.”

Koluk tried to talk again but could not form the words. He was also paralyzed, unable to move his arms or legs.

“How do I know so much about you, you ask?” The man continued to have that same expression, as if he knew so much more than Koluk could ever dream of knowing. “Perhaps it is because I helped created you. Please, allow me to introduce myself: I am Earth, The foundation of your world.”

Had he been able to move his mouth, Koluk’s jaw would have dropped. This was a god. His next impulse was to bow but he stood still, immobile as before.

“You seems surprised. Perhaps it would be better if—“

I TALKED LIKE THIS.

The voice pounded in his head with all the power and glory and splendor of the Most High.

“No?” Earth continued, “Well, I prefer this and I try to leave the other for special occasions. You are either the one who is called or the one who brings the dawn. There are prophecies about you, Koluk, but it is you who will decide which prophecy comes true. It says that you may be the third in line to stop Chaos from destroying the world. I know, I told the prophet to write it. The first two are dead, and the last has not yet been born. Listen carefully. The Dark One is collecting the Artifacts that contain the essence of Chaos. These artifacts hold great power. He is going to the Mountain of Sorrow to

place the Stone of Souls onto the Staff of Earth. If you do not stop him then he will use the Stone's power to enslave all of Amaya. He will use that power to find the Flames of Meku, the Tides of Meku, and the Breath of Meku. With these he will be unstoppable, but the essence of Chaos will take control over his mind and bring destruction to the world. In order to stop all of this you must do one thing."

"What one thing is that?" Koluk asked.

"When the time comes, chose love over anger, mercy over hate, compassion over vengeance."

Earth rose from the throne and approached Koluk. He reached out his hand and the brightness of a thousand stars flashed before Koluk's eyes. Suddenly he awoke from his fever.

Xaviar was kneeling by his side. Koluk was glad to see his lovely wife hovering over him looking concerned and worried. Koluk felt better than he had in weeks and dismissed Xaviar. Anya was more than willing to fulfill her own desires while addressing his. After a few hours they had become reacquainted. He said nothing of his vision.

That afternoon was a fierce day in battle. He and Anya had had a slight argument over her staying inside away from danger. He knew that she was disobeying his orders and sneaking out on occasion to talk with some of the soldier or just to take walks within the camp. He was worried about her, but she would do whatever she wanted. There was a break in the fighting and Koluk returned to his tent, chastising himself for neglecting his wife while she was with child.

Whether it was the man or Anya that caught his attention first he could not be certain. The man had long dark hair and pointed ears, a Neriya, like Anya. He wore black dokai. These features were not what caused Koluk to be alarmed. The man towered over Anya, her clothes partially ripped. They were struggling and she had a look of such pain on her face that Koluk was instantly enraged. He drew his sword and charged them. As he charged he yelled for the man to unhand his wife.

"What are you doing? Get your hands off her, you son of a bitch!" Koluk yelled.

Lokun looked startled but gained his footing and drew his dagger, bracing for the worst. He leapt away from Anya so that this brute, whoever he was, would not hurt her when they fought. They met in a flurry of expert swordplay, Lokun's speed pitted against

Koluk's strength. To the combatants the fight lasted for ages, each swing and parry taking place in slow motion as they danced around each other's blades. To the few who saw the battle, it was a few moments of blinding speed. One of the spectators stood, leaning against a tree in the distance, and congratulated himself for a job well done. His hair was a bright crimson and his eyes glowed like fire from within their sockets. A crow cawed somewhere overhead and with a morbid smile Fire turned to leave. Unnoticed by Fire a nearby rock formed eyes and tracked his movement. As Fire advanced back to his demesnes, Earth followed, angry that his brother had trespassed into his Realm. Behind them the battle had ended. Lokun dashed off to the east, towards the Mountain of Sorrow, the Stone of Meku tucked into his dokai. Anya clutched the still form of her husband, weeping as his blood poured out over the ground.

*

*

*

In front of Meku's throne sat a chessboard, or rather, it was the deity's equivalent of a chessboard. The position on the board would matter little to any mortal, but several pieces had been taken off of it. Four white pieces and one black piece were removed. One white was tall and as powerful as a queen was in the game. It was Emperor Kane. One was a rook: Sensei Gno. The third was a knight: Lokun. The last two were both Kings: Meku and Chaos themselves. Air reached down and picked Koluk off of the board, placing him with the others. The white Lokun figure hovered and turned black before placing itself back on the board. She did not like this position, but her father could not lose so long as Chaos remained captive in the Eye. His gaze fell to the once piece on the board that kept Chaos in check: a lowly pawn. Here eyes also drifted to the white king. She had no idea where Meku was, or what could have made him abandon his creation like this.

*

*

*

Not for the first time in her life Anya was thrown into a state of hopeless depression. She was considering many options, including both following Lokun and seppuku. Knowing that there would be no future in the first and no honor in the second, she had no idea of what to do. Meku intervened. Light flashed within her brain and, as if a father had told her what to do, she decided to continue on her quest to Darkvale and try to charter a ride to Neriya. She hurried back to her tent to get her things. As she was packing she heard the first shouts

that meant that Koluk's body had been discovered. In the confusion it was easy enough to escape unnoticed, running off to the west. She was leaving. Leaving Koluk. Leaving Lokun. Leaving Amaya. Leaving all of the earthly races and people. She longed for her own and their beautiful city. She wanted to go to a place where her child would be able to grow up and become something more than a peasant.

Anya followed her heart to the sea. Lokun followed Master to the Mountain. Earth followed Fire to the border. And Koluk followed Kane and Gno into the afterlife.

Xaviar looked down at the peaceful calm on his fallen leader's face. Sorrow, pain, and rage flowed through him, burning like a knife in his side. Most of the army had now disbanded, some leaving with Darut, others going home, but many fleeing to the southern mountains for fear of the human's response to the uprising. Darut had offered him and Gorbash places in his new army: the remnant of Koluk's faithful. Gorbash had simply grunted and stomped off into the woods. Xaviar looked to the sky overhead. Already birds were circling in the air. Vultures come to dispose of the corpse. The thought of such vermin picking at his leader's flesh... He held back a retch. That would not do. Xaviar's slender, but strong, trollish muscles rippled as his clutched his shovel and began to dig. Something caught his eye. It was square, yellow, and about a man's length from Koluk's body, towards the trees. Letting the shovel drop to the ground the leaderless troll captain picked up the letter.

The entire meaning of this letter is only evident in conjunction with its history. It was divided into two sections. The first was written by Sensei Gno and the second by a dear friend of his. Gno had given the letter first to one of his servants, a servant who had a speech impediment. The servant had been stopped by Gno's friend and given an urgent message to deliver to Gno. The servant wrote the message on his only piece of paper: the note. The paper read as follows.

Soyetsu Daki,

Kane is not the evil man that you thought him to be. I have learned more since last we spoke and the Council has been responsible for the oppressions against our people. Kane tells me that he will soon invoke Dom Nomnu and take seat as Emperor in order to take away the Council's power. I fear that another in the Council was the one who framed you. They fear us because of what we are. Daki,

you are in the line of the priesthood of the Neriya. Meku's will runs through you and his Children might someday obey you. I urge you, if you wish to prove your honor, come to the school as soon as you receive this.

May Meku guide your fee,

Sensei Gno

The rest of the letter was in a different hand and written hastily.

Gno,

Master has infiltrated your home and your life is in danger. Trust no one and beware. I only hope this reaches you in time.

E.

K.

Xaviar's quick mind began to throw the scenario together and the magnitude of the letter began to fall into place. Xaviar had heard news of Gno's death and knew that it could have been prevented. He looked off into the woods in the direction that Koluk's killer had gone. Anya's voice still rang in his ears. "LOKUN!" He had thought that she had been lamenting over Koluk's "dead soul" but he now suspected it to be the name of Koluk's killer. Who else could have dropped this letter? She had been calling after him. He had dropped this letter that he, apparently, had never read. Xaviar dropped to his knees and wept over Koluk's death. After an hour passed, his weeping had turned to digging. Koluk's grave was done by nightfall.

*Na sham levishnu zomu ak'arkim letuyi sheyori k'arkim.
Korimu mash n'maj na rimu ohod kelebruam.*

And when the nation falls into darkness the child will live in darkness. He will be given power and magic and he will give hope to the people.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,

Book of Flames

With a crash of thunder, rain started to fall over the land of Amaya. The clouds spread out towards the horizon as the last rays of dusk's sun shot across the hills. A bolt of lightening, slung from one cloud to another, streaked across the sky, and another wave of thunder vibrated through the air warning the sons of earth of the evil to come. Everywhere creatures of the land scattered to their homes. Holes filled with frogs, snakes, or gophers. Dead trunks housed lizards and squirrels. Birds fled to hollowed trees or sturdy nests protected by thick foliage. Cattle and sheep raced to the cover of barns. Mothers called children, human and otherwise, away from the mud-puddles they made and into the protection of a sturdy farmhouse or humble cottage. The few remaining Royal guards cared for their dead in the barracks of the palace, the doors to the fortress barred against what small remnant remained of Koluk's forces. Far and wide farmers talked of damage to their crops not yet harvested, increased profits for crops already harvested, and salvation for crops planted much too late. At Darkvale harbor a captain and his first mate argued about setting sail despite the storm.

"Marcus, How long have you been my first mate? Twenty years?" the large sea captain asked.

The small, wiry form of a Neriya, wrinkled with years, nodded his head and added, "And I served your father for more than ten before he was lost at sea."

"That you did!" the captain affirmed, pointing to Marcus. "And you taught me almost everything that I know about captaining. But I just don't understand what you are trying to tell me here." He pounded his fist upon the oak table and looked across the small building that served as a gathering place for sailors and pirates alike.

His face was scared with the wear and tear of ferrying millions of silvers' worth of cargo to each end of the Great Sea. His neck bulged with muscles as he spoke, and there was a flare to the way the annunciated that gave him an accent like no other. He spoke as a man speaks when he has seen every culture and has taken some from each. Marcus had long before come to know when to keep quiet and when to speak up. This was a time to keep quiet. Captain Leo the Quick was, like his father, long winded when trying to decide between two alternatives of seemingly equal value. He leaned forward and folded his long, aged hands in front of him on the table, lightly tapping his fingernails on the woodwork.

"You tell me that this storm is going to last for the better part of a week and I have over twenty thousand silvers worth of merchandise in my cargo hold that is already past due for delivery. How can you ask me to postpone our departure until the winds die down?" His demeanor could have been mistaken for rage, but Marcus had rarely seen the captain angry. Leo paused, now expecting a response.

Marcus leaned forward some more, having rehearsed this speech over and over in his mind hours before. His tongue darted out from under the gray mustache that identified him as a halfbreed and wet his lips. He spoke low and softly, his words sliding out of his mouth. The rumble of activity and conversation from the other tables in the room echoed around them, but Leo's keen ears heard every word.

"Leo, I am old, but that is not why I won't live to serve your son in this same manner. This storm is not naturally made. Do you know the story of the creation of this world?" Leo nodded so Marcus continued, "In an age long ago, just after the world was created, there was a force that was able to be used by people all over the four realms. This was maj, called by your people, magic. Its powers stemmed from the four artifacts that Meku gave to the four Keepers of the world. To the Neriyu, he gave his breath: a powerful incantation that could read peoples thoughts and control their emotions. To the humans he gave a stone that controlled the forces of nature. To the giants of Aborath he gave a flame, master over fire, light, and heat. To the Suniyim he gave a pearl that could bring storms or calm, cause draught or flood. These four artifacts imbued their owner's race with magical powers and the races were equalized. Long ago the artifacts were lost in time and

history. They came to be things of legends and myth. The stone was kept but the secret to its power was lost. The breath was intentionally forgotten and sealed away by the Neriyu because it was deemed too powerful and dangerous. The giants of Aborath were taken by their own greed for power and wealth. They mined their nation, looking for silver and the key to some rumored power. Instead they found a curse. The land of Aborath is now a thing told to scare children into eating their vegetables and doing their chores. The Suniyim, so engrossed in their own petty civil wars, lost the pearl in the depths of the Great Sea. With the artifacts gone and forgotten, soon magic itself was forgotten and people looked to other things. The humans gained dominance slowly and eventually enslaved all the other races of Amaya.”

Captain Leo looked impatient despite being interested in what his old friend and mentor had to say. “What are you getting at, Marcus? Out with it.”

Marcus nodded and smiled. This was just like Leo, never content to wait. He continued, “What I am saying is this: someone has recovered the Pearl of Power and is using its power to make this storm. We don’t know how bad it could get.”

Leo raised an eyebrow. “How do you know that for certain?”

Marcus reached out a hand and touched a bony fingertip to one of the rippling muscles along Leo’s arm. “Because, I can feel the maj.”

Leo jumped as his skin tingled from his first mate’s touch. He instinctively jerked his hand away. “What the hell was that?”

Marcus smiled again, obviously liking the mystic nature of it all. “We Neriyu are a magical race. We can sense the power when it is used and I think we may be able to use it. We have some magic even if none of our race has an artifact, so long as someone is using one of the four.”

Leo leaned back in the chair, not sharing the dark and shifty mood that his companion was in. “Well Marcus, you never let me down before. If you say don’t set sail yet, then we’ll stay at port ‘till you say otherwise, whether it be weeks or years.” He tossed his gaze around the room to the other patrons. Most were eating and talking, but there were some that had fallen asleep on the benches against the walls. Leo shook his head. Any man who could sleep on dry land wasn’t a fit sailor. Mainland beds were for one thing and one thing only. With this in mind he bid Marcus a good night and left the table. Marcus lounged back in his seat fingering the glassy white orb in his

pocket almost lovingly. The Pearl was smooth and cold to the touch. Through the window he watched his captain step out into this crashing rain and commanded the rain to let up a little until Leo entered the inn across the street. As the rain pounded the docks, the wind howled, rocking the ships in Blood Harbor back and forth on the waves.

*

*

*

Mud caked on the legs of Lokun's dokai as his feet splattered through the rain-drenched ground. Branches snapped, and leaves fell as he sprinted through the woods. He now had one purpose, one goal: a driving force that burned within him. This goal was powered by what he was and by what he had become. He ran with one hand in the folds of his dokai, gripping the smooth, even stone. Its surface was pleasant to the touch and he could feel the power within it. With this, he told himself, he would destroy his enemies. With this, he would right the wrongs against him.

He no longer followed the dirt path, but instead took the straightest route towards the mountain. By his best estimate, he would arrive by dawn. The dagger at his side felt cold against his skin. The curved blade was searching, burning, asking to be thrust into flesh. Black clouds spread out overhead blocking out all view of the moon or the stars. The rain fell harder now upon the ground, causing water to splash onto the legs of his dokai, spattering the black cloth with brown mud at every step. He ran, charged. Leaping over fallen logs and dashing around the trees, he deftly made his way towards his goal. His mind raced with thoughts of revenge, vengeance, hate, and death. The black figure was no longer only a vision in his dreams. The ironclad warrior came to him often now, intruding into his thoughts and emotions. He was there when Lokun closed his eyes, even if only to blink, and to open them was no escape. In his mind Lokun knew that the dark one was just beyond his vision, out of sight, watching and waiting. Fear drove Lokun: fear of himself, fear of the figure, fear of death. His mind was a torrent of confusion and rage. He no longer thought of honor or the Order. Memories of a past life were buried forever under the weight of guilt and pain. The *Kaiosunat* covered most of his body now, having spread like a plague with every kill that he had left unmarked. He was deep within his thoughts when blinding agony tossed him to the ground on his face.

The thing slammed him to the ground over a tree that had fallen in the path. Its weight bore down upon him, pinning his dagger

against his ribcage. Claws raked into his back, and as he clenched his eyes shut, his palms groped reflexively at the ground searching for some defense against his unknown attacker. Lokun brought his feet under him and braced, putting all his force into heaving the monster backwards. A whiplike tail caught both his feet at the ankles and yanked them backward with unbelievable force. The tree below him snapped under the pressure and Lokun sprawled on the ground. Pain came in his side now as his dagger cut into his own flesh but a second pain made him forget that wound only a moment after it was inflicted. Teeth, long and sharp, sunk into the base of his neck and cut deep, probing down into his chest. He could feel the venom pump into him and with a last surge of strength he heaved himself to his feet, bringing the beast with him. As he lost consciousness he once again saw the form of the dark warrior before him, seemingly before his eyes closed.

A large armored figure approached the anger standing over Lokun's body. The beast stood on its back legs and had small upper arms with large, catlike claws. It was covered in black scales and had two long, whip-like tails with poison barbs on each end. Long wings were set awkwardly on the thing's back, as if its creator had put them there as an afterthought. Its head was devoid of features except for three beady eyes surrounding a small mouth. Out of the mouth protruded two thin, foot-long, hollow fangs. The creature was called an anger because it induced rage in whomever it bit. The beast snarled as the armored man approached it.

"Be still, my child, your work is done." Chaos stepped over Lokun's still form and placed his gauntleted hand on the anger's head. It's cowed softly at its master's touch and pawed its back legs near Lokun.

"No, he is not yours to feed upon. Go back to the underworld; you will find food there."

The creature looked disappointed, as a dog that has been refused the scraps of its master's table. Chaos waved a hand and the anger took flight and disappeared into the night sky. Chaos removed his helmet and turned to look at the Dead Soul. He smiled. He had been doing that often of late.

Chaos was large but somewhat nondescript. His features were dark enough so that he was feared by friends and foes alike. Yet they were also kind enough so that men, even children, tended to trust him. With one swift movement he tore the black steel helm in half and

tossed it to the ground. He removed a gauntlet and threw it into the woods. He could make more armor at his convenience. He flipped Lokun over and pressed his fingers to his neck. Blood stopped spurting from the tooth wounds. He checked his pulse. Alive, barely. Chaos drew his sword. The blade was the darkest black and seemed to absorb the night itself. Compared to the sword, the darkness of the rainy night in the midst of the forest was bright enough to see. Not that the Lord of Disorder needed to see. With a sweep of his blade he ran it across his own chest, tearing the black iron and cutting his own flesh deep. There was no pain. He returned his sword to his side and bent his knees to work. The venom would take hold soon and then he would have no trouble with the Neriya samurai. With a thought bandages appeared on Lokun's wounds. He passed his ungauntleted hand, the left one, over Lokun's face and then slapped him.

"By the stars," he said in a concerned voice, "are you alive?"

*

*

*

Lokun rubbed his shoulder as he ate the stew that the large warrior had prepared. The fang marks hurt, but whatever the man had done had helped more than he could imagine. He lifted the bowl to his lips and drank, not remembering when he had last had a meal. The large man came back; he had left right after Lokun awoke, telling him to help himself to the stew. He now saw the large tear in the man's armor and the cut on his face.

"Thank you for saving me, but who are you and what was that thing?" he asked.

Chaos held back a grin and formed his face to look serious and grim. His voice matched it. "My name is Damien. I am a hunter, and that was an anger. They are beasts of the underworld. I don't know how it got out or why it was here. You were lucky that I came when I did."

Lokun shook his head. "How did I survive? I mean, what happened?"

Chaos molded his expression to be most sincere. The same sincere that he had used when he had convinced Kane that Lokun had betrayed his order. "I feared that I had come too late. I was aware of the beast's presence in our world. I hunt them and send them back. This was the strongest I have encountered so far. He had started feeding when I came. They use long fangs to drain the life force out and they feed on the souls of their victims." Here he looked at the

ground and appeared regretful. "I was careless. They are prone while they feed and I thought to kill it then. I let it hear me as I approached. It withdrew and attacked. I got it, but at a price." He gestured to the tear in his armor.

Lokun looked at the bandage beneath. Blood was caked on the inside of the armor and the bandage was red in some places. "Damien, what day is it?" He was trying to get handle on reality. He did not remember most of the past few weeks.

"It is the fourth day of *Ambjas Habri*."

Lokun was surprised. He had thought this man to be a human. "You know the Neriya holy seasons?"

At this Chaos made a broad grin. "Of course, everyone needs to know something of his roots, even if it is only a fourth of your blood." He lied. "My grandmother, fates be kind to her, was of your most revered race."

Lokun thought for a moment. Chaos watched him, his face saying one thing but his mind focused on another. Lokun was his, he was sure. Lokun spoke. "It is still the fourth? So I have time to get to the Mountain of Sorrow."

Chaos feigned surprise. "Why would you be on your way to such a destitute place?" He sat down on a log across from Lokun and pretended to warm himself on the fire between them. Light smoke wafted up from it. Lokun seemed unconcerned that the rain had stopped in this general area.

He started to remove the stone from his pocket, surprised that his hand had been caressing it this entire time, then he stopped, thinking better of it. Instead, he explained, "There is a man there who wishes to enslave my people. He has found an ancient power on the mountain. He tried to trick me into helping him, but I saw through his deception. I am going to the mountain to kill him while he thinks that I am his ally."

Chaos made his expression look serious and pained. "If what you say is true, then we are all in danger. The ancient power that is held there is one of the four Great artifacts."

Lokun looked up, "You know of them?"

Chaos nodded. "As far as I am concerned, the world is a better place without them. They should all be cast into the underworld. They hold too much power that corrupts men too easily. The one at the Mountain of Sorrows is supposed to control the forces of nature,

but I am not sure. I have only heard stories and rumors during my travels.” Chaos looked off into the woods.

Lokun gripped the stone in his pocket tighter at the thought of such power being destroyed in such a way. Chaos noticed but did not allow Lokun to know that he noticed.

Lokun nodded and said, “I have heard more than rumors about the power that this man, he calls himself Master, wishes to possess. I do not, however, know how reliable that information is.”

Chaos nodded. “Well, I can help you as well as I am able, but I do have duties elsewhere that I cannot ignore. I will aid you in your journey to the mountain but I must leave then. The angers have been coming in more frequently, and I must protect the people of Amaya from them.”

Lokun nodded, silently praising Meku for this help, and his mind swirled for a moment in disarray.

Chaos sensed a presence for a moment and then it was gone. So the dead soul was not so dead after all. He looked at Lokun, who was momentarily shaken from Chaos’ touch on his mind. “Are you well? Perhaps you need some more stew. Take mine.” He offered Lokun a bowl of stew that had not existed seconds ago. Lokun nodded his head and took the stew, “Thank you Damien, I am recovering quickly. I am just glad that the anger’s fangs were not poisonous.”

Truth was fun, sometimes. Chaos corrected him, “Oh, but they were. That is what the stew is made to neutralize. It also counters the venom on the anger’s claws.”

Lokun brought up his hand and rubbed his shoulder again. A memory of the pain shooting all the way down into his chest came back to him. He was lucky to be alive, he thought. Chaos chuckled to himself while keeping a solemn face. Not lucky, my boy, not lucky at all.

Lokun wiped it from his mind and stood. He focused back on the urgency of getting to the mountain. “I must stop Master before it is too late. Come, we must hurry.”

Chaos called his personal *graven* from the nether realms and summoned it to the road. “I have a mount. We could both ride; it would be faster than walking or running the entire way. She stays on the road when I go hunting. She isn’t far from here.”

“Very well, we ride,” Lokun assented. He appreciated Damien’s help and hoped to be able to return the favor someday. The

mare was jet black and large enough for the two men to ride at a decent clip. As they rode he held onto Damien's waist for support with one arm and clutched the Stone of Meku with the other.

Lokun marveled at how smooth the trip to the Mountain felt. A horse running full with a double burden should have bounced them both painfully. The mare was as sure-footed and swift as if she were running wild with no rider. Lokun assumed that Damien controlled her with knee pressure or some other directive because the mare had no reigns or bit. Trees flew by and Lokun tried to calculate their speed. After arriving at the same impossible answer twice in a row he gave it up. They were traveling faster than he had ever ridden before.

The graven hated to run almost as much as he hated taking the form of a mare. Physical movement was so slow. He could make the trip much faster if his master would only allow him to use his powers. He was even holding the graven back, not letting him run even half of his possible speed. The master had insulted him by requiring him to take this pathetically weak form. His claws and teeth were much more effective in his true form. He ran on, forced by Chaos' will. He could not deny Him. He could not even dislike Chaos' influence unless He allowed it. The graven ran, pathetically slow in a disgustingly weak body, because he had no other choice.

Chaos made effective use of his time as they rode to the Mountain. First he distracted Lokun, focusing his mind on the ride, the speed, the horse. A single touch was all he needed. The graven leapt over a fallen tree that blocked the road, and Lokun's hand came out of the fold in the hip of his dokai for a moment. Chaos' hand was there and tapped the stone once, lightly. A small flash of darkness surrounded them, as if the sun stopped shining for a moment, but it went unnoticed by Lokun. It had taken less than an instant and caught the attention of only one other in the entire plane.

In front of Meku's throne the chessboard sat. A black piece moved towards the tallest piece: the white queen. Air sat and thought about this new development. Her gaze flicked over to the single white pawn that was his offence. She drew her attention back to the problem at hand. She caressed the white queen with a single, long, gaunt finger. She was running short on safe places to go. The world was safe so long as Chaos remained tied inside his prison, but he still had many avenues of attack open to him. For a moment the god had a worried expression on her face. She longed for Meku to return soon.

Air reached for the figure that represented Earth.

Lokun dismounted at the base of the Mountain. The rain had started once again and was buffeting them both in torrents. Muddy water shot up as his feet landed in the soft ground. Lightning struck somewhere near the peak and the horse whinnied, turning nervously. He could hardly hear himself as he spoke.

“Thank you for the ride, Damien.”

“Its always good to help someone, even kaiousu,” Chaos’ large form replied.

Lokun stepped back, his eyes wide. He had thought that the man didn’t know. His hand went for the inside of his cloak. Damien continued, “Don’t worry yourself, the mark doesn’t mean what it used to anymore. The reward would be nothing to me, and I know that all too often the nat is given hastily. I won’t fight beside you, but I have no qualms helping you. Go; kill Master. Save the world. If anyone can do it, you can.”

He turned the horse around in one fluid motion and urged it on. Lokun watched Damien disappear into the waves of the dark rain, the sleek tail of the mare flicking out behind him. He pulled the hood of the dokai closer around him to keep out what rain he could and turned to face the mountain. His thoughts bounced around in his head and he couldn’t quite get a handle on any of them. He felt as if his mind had been disorganized, as if someone had been rearranging his thoughts. The sky flashed and the air shook as lightning flicked between the clouds and the mountainside. In between these flashes the visibility was zero and Lokun was forced to rely on the lightning. Cold rain sliced into him. His clothes were drenched and the fabric clung to his skin.

The Mountain of Sorrows was mostly bare rock, pockmarked with sparse shrubs and trees. The base was sheer and offered few cracks and hand holds. He removed his climbing gear from inside his dokai and strapped it to his hands and feet. Because of the rain the claws’ purchase on the rock was imperfect and his first hold slipped as he braced his weight upon it. Two more tries proved that the gear would not aid him in this climb. He removed the claws and threw them to the side, discarding them. He looked up at the stone wall in front of him. A flash of lightning revealed that the wall was at least a hundred feet up. Lokun closed his eyes and focused his thoughts. The energy flowed through his legs and feet. He directed it, just as master

had taught him, and channeled it into his muscles and tendons. For less than an instant all of his muscles and tendons were ridged and tense. He let go. He sailed strait up through the torrents of rain along the face of the wall. At the peak of his jump he floated for a moment, still, weightless. His hands shot out and grabbed the wall, instinctively knowing where handholds would be in the surface of the rock. His body started to fall and his hands caught on the wall. His feet came up and pressed against it, keeping his body out away from the rock surface. He clung to the stone, twenty feet above the ground. He began to three-point climb, keeping three holds on the wall where possible. He checked each hand and foothold to make certain that it was secure.

The rain flowed down over the rock and around his fingers. Sometimes a hold was no more than one finger on a sliver of rock or the toe of his shoe jammed into a crack. He climbed. Nothing existed except for the wall and him. He ignored the rain and the storm. Once a bolt of lightening dislodged a rock above him and he pressed himself close to the mountain to avoid it. Other than that the climb was slow and tedious but uneventful. Soon he would reach the top. Soon he would find Master. Soon Master would die. He climbed.

Na inferin shesorumu l'udin. Col shegru l'zomin kemekurin.

Peshom! Peshom!

And fire will cover the earth. This will begin the fall of the elements.

Beware! Beware!

---Prophecy of

Shem'kem'ku, Book of Tides

Lokun looked around the summit of the mountain. The rain fell harder now on the slick stone and the howls of the stormy wind pierced the air. He glanced back the way he had come up the mountain. A shiver of vertigo shot up his spine, and he stepped back from the edge of the cliff reflexively. He shook off the fear and turned, looking for Master. His urge to kill was almost overpowering now and he yearned for release. His dokai whipped about him and rain spattered his face. As he started to walk towards the center of the mountain, a bolt of lightening caressed a boulder not five feet away and the clap of thunder threw him to the ground. He rose, seeking some shelter from the storm. His hand played with the cool, smooth stone in his pocket. He again moved toward the center of the mountain. He wondered where Master was. The old fool thought that he was going to give him the stone. Lokun laughed to himself. He would use the stone to destroy Master and then take whatever it was that he was looking for on this mountain. A flash of lightening showed the silhouette of something off to his right. It had been large against the sky and was a sharp contrast to the flat nothing of the rest of the summit. He turned and approached it. It was a rise in the stone about ten feet high, smooth, with no overhangs. Lokun circled it, looking to see if it would provide any type of shelter from the rain. To his surprise, on the opposite side he found a large oaken door. Freshly carved on the outside of the door was a message.

It read, "Lokun, wait for me here. I will return and then we can invoke the stone, and you and I will have unimaginable power. — Master"

Like hell he would wait! Lokun seized the handle to the door and flung it open. Icy wind from the caves below combined with the wind of the storm and sent chills through his spine. He stepped inside and, after some struggle against the wind, managed to close the door. Once the door was closed the wind settled. The air was cold, but this environment was favorable to that of the outside. Despite his Neriyu night-vision the cave was pitch black even after he allowed his eyes to adjust to the darkness. For a moment he worried, not having anything with which to make a torch, but he noticed something. From his pocket a strange, eerie green glow emanated. He pulled the Stone of Meku from his pocket and it bathed the room in a healthy radiance. He was finally able to see where he was.

The cave appeared unnatural with an almost flat path leading down into darkness. The ceiling was high enough for him to walk upright with a foot to spare. He saw no cave formations and surmised that this was a mine of some kind. It could not be one of the Halls of the Dwarves because the ceilings were too high, and humans dug only for wealth. Regardless of what purpose it had had before, it was now going to be Master's grave. Lokun started down the hall, descending into darkness, with only a faint green glow to guide him.

Master cast about in the catacombs below. He could see the entire map of the caves as he had memorized them, but this was unlike anything he had seen on paper. The only maps that he had been able to find of the caves were hopelessly outdated. He had hoped that they would be good enough, but now his hope dwindled. Darkness shrouded everything except for the scant glow around him provided by his torch, and it made his searching much more difficult. He remembered where his mental map had started disagreeing with the reality. Not far back the hall had turned a sharp right where it should have gradually bent to the left. From there nothing appeared as it should have. Perhaps there had been some sort of cave in or other such change caused by earthquakes or erosion. Or, he could have missed another turn or misremembered the map. He had to accede to those possibilities. He turned, crouching because of the low ceiling, and began to retrace his steps.

Don't go.

Master stopped dead in his tracks and took a full second to ascertain what exactly it was that he had heard or felt. It had not been

an audible voice, and yet he would have been hard pressed to claim that it had not been a voice. He closed his eyes and focused. All his being, all that he was, became his ears. He listened so intently that he was the sound that he heard. Whoever had caused that, voice, or whatever it was, was fourteen feet behind him behind an outcropping of rock. Master could tell, could sense it from the movement of the air in the room. He focused harder and cleared his mind. The man was over six feet tall and wore a conventional dokai. He had similar build to that of Lokun but had a decidedly different form. In the moment that it took Master to ascertain this, the man began to approach silently. Master spun and faced the unknown adversary, katana in hand. He looked upon the face of this newcomer for a moment, wondering what he was doing down here.

Drop it.

Master's katana fell from his hand and clattered to the floor. His entire body was shaking uncontrollably as the Incarnation of Earth approached him. The incarnation's body was the form of a normal human, except that he was made completely of stone. Where his feet touched the floor they molded with the rock, and as he moved he seemed so slog through it as if through mud.

Earth opened his mouth and spoke normally, electing to do so lest he destroy the feeble mortal's mind. His voice was like two smooth stones scraping together. "Welcome, Omad. Do you know who I am?" He used Master's true name, his pride not allowing the conventional nickname.

Master barely managed to angle his head slightly forward in a nod of affirmation.

"Why have you come to my demesnes, Omad?" The question was rhetorical.

This cave was the resting-place of the ancient Human king that had last used the Stone of Meku to rule Amaya with an iron fist. After that, the other Daminats who kept the sacred artifacts, devised a plan to limit the stone's power. They implored that Earth break it in half and form the second half into a staff. Only when the two halves were combined did the stone have true power. The staff was buried with the king, and the stone was passed down as an heirloom.

Earth continued, "The staff will stay where it rests. The likes of you have no claim upon it or any of the other four. Depart and never return or be destroyed."

Master finally found his tongue and addressed the demigod that stood before him. "You... you changed the passage?"

Earth nodded. "Are you going to leave, or die?"

All at once Master's surprise and disbelief changed to anger and resolve. How dare this mere demigod challenge him! He fell back in a tight stance, his katana ready.

Earth tilted his head and said, "It seems a bit too roomy for a fight, don't you think? Perhaps we need less room."

In the blink of an eye Master was in a now narrow passageway. He was having trouble breathing. Earth had constricted the walls around him, being able to command the very rock and soil with a whim.

"No?" Earth teased, "how about more room? Master found himself in a magnificent antechamber, the walls and ceilings all more than fifty feet away. The incarnation stood, smiling, a few feet in front of him.

Master lunged, swinging with his katana, but the blade never found its target. Instead he found himself face down on the floor. He looked down to figure out what had stopped him. His feet, up to the ankles, were imbedded in the granite floor. He lay, prone and humiliated, at the Element's feet.

"You don't give up easily, do you?" Earth mused. "Tsk, ts, I didn't have to do that, you know. Your blade can never harm me. Perhaps—"

Earth's next statement was cut off by a blinding flash that illuminated the cave in a bright orange for a moment, and then dulled to a crimson red. With the glow came a cacophony of sizzling and cracking as if a forest were burning to the ground right within this very cave.

A voice as of burning gunpowder resounded through the cave. "Earth, how cowardly to toy with one who could not possibly stand a chance against you."

Earth spun and saw a raging inferno, the Incarnation of Fire, standing at the opposite end of the room.

"Fire!" he bellowed with the din of an avalanche, "What is the meaning of this? You are strictly prohibited from my demesnes. I saw you before and deigned to overlook it; I will not do so again."

Fire glowed more brightly. He bellowed so loudly that the mountain shook. "Curse you and your demesnes! I have lived in pitied exile too long! Step away from the mortal."

Earth was taken aback at his younger brother's boldness. "This mortal must be stopped. He is a danger to Meku's perfect creation."

"Curse His creation as well. He always favored you. Now all of you will pay for the disrespect that you have shown me."

"You can not mean that, Brother. He—"

Fire cut him off. "You are not my brother. I have forsaken you all. I have a new brother now, and he is greater than you, and greater than Meku himself."

Earth paused, not believing what he heard. He wouldn't. Chaos would destroy them all if he were released. Fire had to know that. No creature of creation would knowingly help the Dark One.

Fire continued, seeing that Earth had nothing to say. "Chaos has promised me a place in the world that he will form after he has enslaved your Father and His children. He has already given me more than you ever have!"

Earth drew himself up and hardened his resolve. "Brother, I have no choice but to destroy your outward form, but do not worry. I am sure that Father will restore you anew after he has removed the hate that has twisted your mind."

Fire laughed. It was a raucous cackle that filled the room with the sizzles and pops of burning flesh. "Nay brother," he said condescendingly, "'Tis I who will destroy you!"

Master remained, sunken into the cave floor, as the two gods began their battle. Earth was the master of this realm. Fire would be severely weakened without the power of the sun to draw upon. Earth had his power all around him, and could call upon it at his leisure. Truly this was His demesnes and Fire would not stand a chance. Earth, with remorse, called the rock of the cave to engulf his brother.

A pillar of solid stone appeared where fire had been and the cavern, in contrast to its previous fiery glow, became dark as pitch. Earth, not hindered by lack of vision, approached the pillar.

"I am sorry, my brother. Would that I had not had to do that." Earth lowered his head and reached forth a hand to touch the pillar. He sighed, his mind heavy with regret. Suddenly his head popped up and he stepped back. The pillar was hot to the touch, unlike the cold

stone that it should have been. He watched, bemused, as the column of stone turned a bright red and began to droop to the floor.

Master watched with trepidation as lava flowed out from the pillar. That flow would reach him soon, and he was ankle-deep in solid stone! He flailed about, but Earth took no notice of him. The lava retracted itself and formed around where Fire had been standing. It now bubbled with heat as flames leapt from it towards the ceiling. When the lava finished and solidified as liquid fire, it stood in the likeness of the Incarnation of Fire.

It was laughing.

Earth stood agape, disbelieving. His granite should have snuffed Fire with not much more than a slight dissipation of heat.

Fire, in his new form, looked down at Earth.

“Surprised?” he asked. “My new master has given me more power than you could ever imagine.” He spread his arms and threw his head back in a raucous cackle that made the entire mountain shake.

Earth took an unnecessary breath. He didn’t need to breathe, but when he was nervous he would sometimes revert to humanly mannerisms when in crisis.

Earth gritted his teeth. “You will not come out of this alive, Fire. I will teach you of honor.”

“Nay,” Fire boomed. “’Tis I who will teach you, Earth. Of humility!”

*

*

*

Lokun stretched out a hand and braced against the wall to keep himself from falling. Had he stepped on a loose rock? He checked his footing. The floor seemed secure. It happened again. This time he was sure of it. The entire mountain, or at least a good portion of it, has shaken as if under the sudden weight of a massive blow. The second was followed closely by another and that one closer still by a fourth. This became so frequent that in a matter of moments the mountain was trembling and quaking back and forth. He continued down the corridor. He could tell that he was getting closer to the source of the earthquakes, but that was exactly where he wanted to be. Master had brought him here for a purpose. Something in this mountain contained the key to the stone’s magic and Master wanted Lokun to help him get it. Well, Lokun had a surprise for him. He was going to be the one with the power of the stone, not Master. The going was slower because of the trembling, but after a while it seemed to fall almost into

a rhythm and he was able to match his pace with the beats. With a sudden inspiration he stooped and picked up a rock similar in size and shape to the Stone of Meku. It would not have passed for it under any close scrutiny, but here it was dark. Lokun thought that this decoy might give him some precious needed time in the right circumstances. As he approached the source of the tremors, the air in the cave began to grow warm and stale. He ignored any side passages, following the obvious trail that Master had inadvertently left.

When at last Lokun felt that the air in the cavern was on the verge of being unbreatheable due to the heat, the corridor took an unnatural right turn. The stone work along the walls and floor indicated that the natural path was for the floor to continue its present course. He also noticed that the corridor was brighter, as if an unnatural light was in the caverns beyond. The sounds and reverberations that Lokun had now identified as those coming from a battle were around this mysterious right turn. Lokun rounded the corner and observed much more than he had ever expected.

If he had not studied the ancient myths and legends he still would have recognized the two foes who locked themselves in deadly combat. Lokun noticed the Incarnation of Fire first because he was over twenty feet tall and glowing the same brilliant red with which steel glows when in a smithy's forge. Lokun saw Earth as he flew through the air, thrown by one gigantic arm of the behemoth of flame. The Incarnation landed not far from him, about five feet, but did not connect with the ground. Instead, Earth fused with the stone and disappeared into it. He reformed above Fire and dropped onto those hulking shoulders of lava. Fire clawed at him but could not reach him because of his bulky form. He dug into the giant but again fire managed to seize him. This time Earth impacted the stone, crushing a wall with the force of his impact. He was losing strength and his fatigue was showing.

Lokun watched, hoping to remain unnoticed. Fire approached the form of Earth that had fallen onto the floor at the opposite end of the chamber. He appeared to be talking, but Lokun failed to make out the words. As Fire moved Lokun saw, for the first time, the form of a man in the center of the chamber.

Master!

He seemed to be unable to move, trapped no doubt by one the gods. Lokun suppressed his urge to go and dispatch the traitor. He

would be a fool to get himself killed now, when he was so close to having everything. He ignored Master and focused on the two incarnations. He now realized that he could make out their conversation. It had been difficult before because their mode of speech was similar to the sounds of their elements.

Fire was talking to Earth, “Ah, you weak fool. If you had served Lord Chaos then he would have given you the kind of power that I now possess. You see, before, sand could smother fire, water could quench coals, and air could blow out my flame. Now? Ah...”

Fire took a breath, as if savoring a sweet aroma.

“Now, Fire melts sand. Fire boils water. Fire consumes the air. Chaos has granted me power over you, my brother, and my sisters as well. Trust me. I take great pleasure in destroying you.”

Fire raised his tremendous foot to step upon Earth’s prone form. Earth smiled.

Earth cried out, “Where one may fail, two shall succeed.” The foot came down but Earth had already phased into the rock and disappeared.

Fire cast about in rage. “Earth, show yourself and accept your fate, coward!” He pounded on the walls of the cavern, splattering molten magma over the rock, but no answer came. Finally he screamed in anger and the tower of liquid rock lost its cohesion and began to flow across the floor. Lokun returned his attention to Master, but—

He wasn’t there. Lokun ran to the center of the room. Two foot-shaped holes were sunk into the rock but Master was gone. He thought to inspect the area further but the flow of lava reached him and he was forced to retreat. A token search of the room found an offshoot going back to where the normal caverns should continue. Lokun found Master’s trail more easily now. All he had to do was follow the drops of blood, evidently left by master’s tearing his flesh to get free of the rock. He noticed, by the tracks, that Master was limping. Lokun followed cautiously. The most dangerous of enemies is the one that you underestimate.

Master half-limped, half-ran along the subterranean passageway, his strength renewed by the sight of Lokun’s face under the glow of the stone. He had broken an ankle while getting free and now pain reverberated through his body with every step. Fear drove him now. He searched his mind for ideas of how to gain control of the

Stone. He knew now, from Lokun's expression, that he meant to kill Master and take the power for himself. The staff. The staff was the key. Master recalled how he had heard of the Staff of Earth. His studies had taken him to the house of an old hermit. They had talked at length about the four Ancient Artifacts.

Long ago, when human kings had abused the powers of the Stone of Meku, a prince was to inherit the throne. The prince's father, a kind and just king, knew that his son would quickly be corrupted by the power and could not be trusted with such a powerful tool. The king decided that he must find a way to keep the stone out of mortal hands until there came a time when it was needed. The incarnations had more to do with the things of men in those days, and the king begged the services of Earth, he being the only one with power sufficient to affect the stone. Earth agreed with the king and decided to divide the stone into two equal parts. Half, he left a stone shape and pulled the magic around it so that it channeled the power according to the will of the user. The other half he stretched out and formed into a small rod. The rod contained the powers of the magic. Separate from the rod, the stone was useful only to channel the powers of the human who possessed it. Separate from the stone, the rod was a Pandora's Box of power, unable to be directed or stopped once opened unless the Stone was set in it. The stone was left with the king to pass on to his descendants. The staff, because of its uncontrollable power, was deemed far too dangerous to leave in mortal hands. It was buried with the king when he died.

Master came out of his thoughts as he hobbled around a bend and entered small antechamber. There it was. Across the room, lying on a marble coffin, was a thin marble rod. Master strode purposefully across the room and his hand came down upon it. At last!

"Stop right there, coward." Lokun's voice resounded through the chamber. Master winced, regained his composure, and turned to face his enemy.

"Lokun, how good to see you. I, ah, didn't see a need for you to endanger yourself by coming down here. Did you get my note that I left at the door? Well, no matter, do you have the stone?"

"Yes." Lokun's fierce eyes seemed to cut through him.

Master looked around the room, nervously avoiding that stabbing gaze. "Well, give it here."

“Ok.” Lokun’s hand dipped into his pocket and pulled out the Stone. He tossed it casually through the air. Master’s hand came up and caught it. He stared at it for a moment. He could not believe his eyes.

Master’s fist closed around the Stone and looked at Lokun with renewed vigor. He set the Stone in the headpiece of the Staff.

“Fool, now you will bow to me. I have the absolute power that I have always deserved.” Master cackled and willed the power of the Stone to form a cage around Lokun.

Suddenly he knew something was wrong. As the energy came from the Staff the stone that Lokun had given him shattered and fell to the floor. Around them the walls trembled and flexed as if brought to life.

“Looking for this?” Lokun asked, holding the real Stone of Souls before him.

“No!” Master screamed as the ceiling began to collapse. All was dark.

*

*

*

Lokun woke up, pinned beneath the rubble. He had broken his left leg and several ribs and his right hand was severed at the wrist. Blood was everywhere. He felt lightheaded. Dust was still settling around him, telling him that he had not been unconscious for very long. He began to lose consciousness again. As he slipped into darkness he thought that he could hear voices close by.

*

*

*

Chaos looked at the rubble strewn about the floor of the tomb. Master was completely crushed under a large chunk of slate. Chaos shook his head. He shattered the slate with a brush of his hand and inspected master’s corpse. It was almost beyond repair. Almost.

“Get up, servant.” He commanded. Bringing life wasn’t exactly Chaos’ idiom, but he had his means. Master came back to life and his body restored itself. Chaos scooped up the Stone of Souls and tossed it onto him.

“Go. Rule the world.”

Master set the Stone in the Staff and stood up. “As you command, Dark One.” He turned and was gone.

Chaos rooted through the rubble and found Lokun, unconscious and dying. Chaos probed Lokun’s mind, looking for any hint of the honor or conviction that he had once had. He found none.

Chaos smiled. His plan had worked perfectly. He took the dagger from inside Lokun's dokai. He stroked it like a pet. As he did the blade began to move from side to side. The dagger shimmered and in its place was a small adder. It hissed, crawled up Chaos' armored hand, and wrapped itself around his arm.

"You have done well, my friend." Chaos told it.

Chaos turned his attention back to Lokun, who was on the verge of death. He dug him out of the rubble and held him up with one hand. The chamber became darker with Chaos' intent and a low roar reverberated through the wall. The kaio-su-nat now covered all of Lokun's body except for his face. Chaos placed one gauntleted hand on Lokun's chest.

Lokun floated in the air, held up by the infernal forces that coursed through him. His body spasmed and twitched as Chaos drew his hand back from his chest. A bright energy arced between Lokun's chest and Chaos' hand as if something were being pulled out of Lokun. As it came out, it coursed like electricity, but as it connected with Chaos's hand it was a dark, undefined shadow. Chaos pulled and shaped Lokun's spirit like so much clay and soon held the handle of a katana. To say that the katana was black would be to give it some visible aspect. A more accurate description would be to say that looking at the katana was like looking at nothing. It was an endless void shaped like a sword. It was Lokun's soul and spirit, blackened with the wrongs of his life, tempered in his fear and sharpened with his hate.

Chaos healed the body before him. The body was no longer the man it had been. The sword was.

"Go, find and kill the one who bears the son that the prophecies speak of." Chaos commanded him. "Destroy her and her son. Kill any who get in your way, including the Elements."

Chaos handed it the sword and the body became Lokun once again. Lokun turned and strode out of the chamber.

Aam qom veshomu ka meka, aam qom veshomu ka berin, aam qom veshomu tura arka pas pagerin.

One who comes as lord, one who comes as king, one who comes to kill, corrupting everything.

---Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku,
Book of Flames

Anya couldn't think. Her mind raced back and forth between images of Koluk and Lokun. Confused and alone she sobbed silently and ran west, where her only hope lay. She would find a ship and with go far away from the land of Amaya. She no longer cared if she made it to Neriya; she simply wanted to be as far from her previous life as possible. Her kimono flapped violently in the harsh wind and, though she held it fast around her with both hands, the chilling cold bit into her flesh. Her feet pounded the dry ground as she raced down the old, weather-beaten path. The sky was dark, overcast with large and ominously foreboding clouds, but Anya's eyes were on the path ahead of her.

She focused only on the dull falls of her bare feet upon the ground and her belabored breathing that came from the exertion.

THUD. THUD. THUD. THUD. BREATHE. THUD. THUD. BREATHE...

Already she had put almost a mile between herself and the palace and she was beginning to tire. She slowed from a full sprint to a fast run and tried to control her breathing.

The Neriya people have a peculiar metabolism than allows for a quick pace to be maintained almost indefinitely. Their light bone structure and specialized joints make them adept at running very fast for very long distances. The same bone structure, however, results in a relatively low lifting capacity. After the Neriya people were stripped of their magic, in the early days of the empire, they had been used as messengers between kingdoms and peoples. However, so many of them either disappeared on their first journey or gave inaccurate messages that they were deemed, as a race, useless and expendable. They lived as outcasts for many years until Gno, in his wisdom, started his school. Once trained in the discipline the Neriya people were

much more difficult to ignore.

As Anya continued to run down the dusty road she felt a few drops of water splash on her face. Around her on the road small pockmarks of rain began to appear, and above the sky flashed and later roared with thunder. Soon the rain was falling in torrents and Anya's feet and ankles became caked with mud. Her kimono, not designed to function in the capacity of a heavy coat, soon became soaked through and sagged heavily upon her body as she ran. As the sky darkened and the rain increased, she was able to see less and less of the path before her. Still she ran on, not knowing what else to do. The once dusty ground was now ankle deep mud and the footing was in no way ideal for running. Her lightweight sandals became so covered in mud that she was forced to abandon them and continue barefoot. She stayed on the path now only because the trees lining the road were almost imperceptibly darker than it was. Lightning flashed again, and this time the thunder rolled almost immediately afterward. Anya had a nagging sensation that this storm was not at all normal and that something was terribly wrong. She was paying particular attention of this sensation when she fell headlong into the mud. With a resounding crack her head hit a large stone hidden under the layer of mud, and Anya's consciousness gave way to the realm of dreams and visions.

*

*

*

Before her, lay five objects and five pictures on a marble table. White light surrounded her in all directions and nothing seemed to exist but this curious display. She approached it tentatively inspecting it, hoping to be able to make some sense of the dream she knew she was in.

The first object was a rock about the size of her fist. The second was a short, thick candle burning slowly. The next was a bowl filled with clear, still water. The fourth and fifth she could not adequately describe. Once seemed to be an assortment of colors dancing above the table, and the last was a round darkness that dropped away into infinity despite the angle from which she looked. The objects were puzzling to her, but the pictures were even more so.

Each picture lay across from an object, and she guessed that they must somehow correspond. The first picture lay on the table across from the stone and depicted a large dragon flinging boulders against the walls of a huge castle. The second, corresponding with the candle, depicted a small bald man sitting in lotus position in front of a

crowd of what appeared to be students. The third showed a majestic jewel-encrusted golden crown. The fourth picture, like its object, was difficult to describe. It seemed to show the upper half of a man clad in silver armor protruding out of the torso of a woman dressed in white. The man was hoisting a great shining sword over his head, and men in the background seemed either to be dead or bowing in reverence. The fifth picture was of a man holding a katana. It was Lokun.

*

*

*

Face down in the mud during a supernaturally occurring rainstorm is not the best place to take a nap. In fact, some may argue that it would be hard pressed even to rank among the top ten. The figure that found Anya's unconscious and drowning form knew this and, assuming that the young child may wish to sleep in a bed next to a fire, hoisted her up onto his shoulder and carried her into the woods.

The anger watched the figure take the girl with him. Slowly, carefully, and silently the beast stalked after the man and his encumbrance. It salivated at the thought of tearing their tender flesh from their fragile bones and feasting on their souls. Little by little the beast crept closer, closing the ground between them more each passing moment.

Altazar stepped lightly so as not to hurt the young girl slung over his shoulder, but also tried to maintain a quick pace, for he didn't know if she was injured and, if so, how badly. She had been fortunate that he had heard her fall while returning home. He had been out checking some of his animal traps when the rainstorm had caught him unexpectedly. He needed a warm fire and some hot food as much as she did. He thankfully patted the sack at his waist. It was only two thin rabbits and a squirrel, but his larder was stocked with fresh vegetable and herbs and he could whip up a quick stew in a pinch. He had had to resort to trapping because his bow had succumbed to the effects of age and had broken a few weeks earlier.

Altazar continued on and thought to himself. He had begun surmising about why such a young and helpless girl was so far out in the wildness all alone when he topped the last hill and caught sight of his house below. It was made of clay brick and set into the hill on which he now stood. A light burned orange in the window and smoke rose from the squat chimney. Good, he thought, Gimmel has made it back with the firewood and is keeping the house warm for my return. He had no sooner thought this than a low screeching sound warned

him of his own immediate demise.

“Gimmel!” he shouted, “Angers are here. Help, I found a gi—“

He was cut off by a crushing force slamming into him from behind. He slung the girl down the hill toward his house as he fell under the weight of the demon beast.

*

*

*

After Anya had inspected the items she sensed a change in the atmosphere. She drew back from the table and watched in awe. The scene was changing. The stone crumbled into dust and the picture of the dragon became the picture of a dragon corpse, decayed and rotten. The candle quickly melted down to a puddle of wax and extinguished itself as its picture was consumed as if by fire and disappeared. The bowl of water tipped itself over and spilled to the floor. As crown rusted through, its jewels falling and shattering. The fourth and fifth items did not change but the pictures did. The figure climbed out of the stomach of the woman and stood glowing in his radiance. The man with the katana: Lokun turned suddenly black, becoming a silhouette. His katana warped and twisted and, to Anya, it seemed as if the sword had come alive. She had barely taken in all of her vision before it disintegrated in a haze of light and she found herself coming awake.

*

*

*

Gimmel was an old man. He had just celebrated his seventieth birthday and was feeling good about the aptitude of the apprentice that he had taken almost twenty years before. He had sent the lad (Altazar was hardly a lad anymore but old habits die hard) out to get food for dinner and had set out himself to find more firewood. When the rain began to come in torrents, he had been surprised that the boy had not returned. He never did have the sense to come in out of the rain, he thought. Gimmel had just sat back for a warm cup of tea when he heard his apprentice’s voice pierce through the clamor of rain and wind. He heard him call for help but the rest of it was too muffled to make out. Grabbing his *naga-nata*, a long staff with a blade on one end, he rushed out the door and shouted.

“Where are you!” he yelled, but could barely hear himself over the noise of the storm. Nothing was visible more than a few feet in front of his face, and he had no idea where Altazar’s scream had come from. He cast about feeling helpless and decided, at random, to go up the hill behind the house. He had barely taken two steps before he

almost stepped on the form of a lithe young girl. He stooped down to see if she was alive and was surprised to find that she seemed to just be coming awake. His surprise was further intensified by his recognition that she was not a human, but a Neriya. Quickly he decided to rescue this girl, in the hopes that Altazar could take care of himself. He placed his hands under the girl and started to pick her up.

“Fwiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii.” Came she screeching call of the anger as it dove toward the seemingly prone old man.

Gimmel threw himself flat on the ground and brought up his naga-nata like a spear into the beast’s gut. The momentum carried the creature over both man and girl, and the anger soared into the blackness, taking the blade that impaled it along. Gimmel, in one swift motion, rose to his feet carrying Anya. He staggered around the corner of the house and through the front door. Just as he bolted the door, the anger slammed into it with its full weight. The force knocked Gimmel backwards and he landed sitting on the floor, but the door held. The creature stood outside banging on the door for a moment, but after a while the banging stopped. Angers do not have a very long attention span. He thanked Meku that Altazar had insisted that they put bars on the windows, but closed the shutters just in case. At last they were safe and sound in the quaint little cottage. He picked up the dazed girl from where she had fallen, removed her disheveled clothes, and helped her to the closest bed, which happened to be Altazar’s. The girl sat for a moment confused and then slumped over and lay down. Gimmel saw that she did not sleep, but he was happy to have some time to gather his thoughts and recuperate from the ordeal. He dearly hoped that Altazar had been able to escape. He had trained the boy to be able to handle himself, but an anger was not a thing to be trifled with. There was only one sure way to escape an anger: kill yourself before they began feeding. Otherwise, they would take your soul. It would be folly to hope that Altazar had escaped death. Gimmel would, most likely, be digging a grave in the morning. He shook his head and forced himself to forget it. There would be time for mourning later. His eye wandered to the girl’s clothes and lit up. Underneath them, on the floor, was Altazar’s belt-pouch. He looked inside it and found dinner. Soon a stew was boiling in a black pot over the fire.

Anya tried to take in her surroundings. Between not knowing where she was or what was happening and the aching throb in her

head, she had a large amount of difficulty piecing the world back together again. She was in what appeared to be a small, two-room cottage, sparsely furnished and crying out for a woman's touch. The head of the ill-kept bed she was lying on was next to the front door of the house, and the foot of the bed was near the fireplace. The bed was more like a cot and barely came off of the floor. A fire danced in the fireplace below a fair-sized black kettle, and the contents of the kettle sent pleasant aromas through Anya's nostrils. On the other side of the fireplace, in the corner of the room, was what appeared to be a kitchen. It contained a cupboard, a short counter top, and a few various pots and pans scattered about the floor. Next to this, on the far side of the room, was a door leading into the next room. The door was cracked open, but the room was dark and Anya could tell nothing of what lay beyond. A small table was set in the corner to the left of the door and in-between the door and the table sat a wizened old man swaying back and forth in a rocking chair. He was bald except for a few gray tufts over his ears, and he sported a long moustache and beard which both matched the color of his hair. His bushy gray eyebrows halfway obscured his warm, tender eyes. He was dressed smartly, in a robe that would have looked suitable only on an emperor or nobleman. His feet peeked out of the folds of the blanket that covered his legs. The man was entertaining himself by balancing small Go stones on top of each other, and had gotten as high as six at this particular moment. Anya would have to roll over or sit up to be able to see the remainder of the room. As she did, the old man took notice of her. She saw a vast array of training equipment and weapons propped against the wall, and she was in awe as the voice startled her.

"How do you feel," he asked in a low, soothing tone. His voice sounded calming and reassuring, like that of a priest or doctor.

Anya's eyes darted back from the corner of the room that she had strained to look at and her gaze landed on the man. After a moment she found her voice and answered.

"Fine, I guess. Where am I? How did I get here? Who are you?"

Gimmel laughed. It was a silent laugh, an almost imperceptible chuckle beneath his mustache.

"Well," he said at last, "so many questions! I shall answer them in the reverse that they were asked. I am Gimmel, Guru of the Wood. You were brought here, rescued from something I should suspect, by

my Apprentice, Altazar. As for where you are, this is our house in the Woods of *Pas-pagerin*.”

Anya recognized the Neriyan name. “Pas-pagerin, the Woods of Everything?” she inquired, tilting her head.

Gimmel looked surprised. “Oh yes, I had forgotten. Of course a Neriya girl would know her own language. Yes, The Woods of Everything, however I am sure that the name is meaningless. Most names are I’m afraid.”

“Where is your apprentice, what was his name... Azaltar?” she asked.

“Altazar,” Gimmel corrected, “and I don’t know. He brought you and then was attacked by... by something horrible. Though I have trained him well I do still fear for his safety.” A pained expression crossed the old man’s face.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Anya looked down.

“Well,” continued Gimmel, regaining his composure, “you know my name; may I have the honor of knowing yours?”

Anya looked back up, feeling renewed by this new friendship. “My name is Anya,” she said.

“Ah,” chimed Gimmel, nodding. “Rose. How fitting a name for such a pretty thing.”

Almost at once tears began to flow down Anya’s cheeks. She sobbed into her hands.

“Oh, but I am not beautiful,” she said between sobs, “I am horrible and terrible and wretched.” She collapsed back onto the bed, weeping into the pillow.

After his initial surprise Gimmel wasted no time. He rushed across the room and placed a hand reassuringly upon the child’s head.

“There, there,” he cooed in his warm, reassuring baritone, “you are not at all any of those things you said. You are a lovely girl.”

But Anya would not be comforted. She lay, face down, and cried. For a while Gimmel stayed with her, cooing and stroking her head, but after a while other matters had to be seen to. The stew was ready and he had filled a bowl for himself and one for Anya. He moved the pot to the side of the fire so that it would keep warm without burning. Gimmel retired to the table to eat his soup and resume playing with the Go stones. Hours passed with Gimmel doing nothing more than playing with the stones and, on occasion, picking up Anya’s uneaten bowl, pouring it back in with the rest of the stew,

and refilling the bowl anew with another steaming helping. He would place the bowl on the floor next to the bed each time and return to his chair. Anya, after she had cried as much as she possibly could, simply lay on the bed sobbing silently and wrestling with the pain inside her.

At length the hunger within her, combined with the aroma of the stew, won out over her sorrow. Anya rolled over to face the stew on the floor and, taking the small wooden spoon, began to eat. It was delicious and in a few moments she had consumed the meat and vegetables and slurped down the steamy broth. Feeling relaxed, renewed, and full, she lay back and stared at the ceiling.

"I'm sorry," she said at last.

Gimmel's hand jumped and the tower of stones before him tumbled down and scattered across the table. One made it to the edge and, as if with a mind of its own, leapt to the floor. Gimmel blushed a light pink, embarrassed by his own surprise. A moment of paused silence passed between them until the old man found his voice.

"Ah, uh, dear child, you startled me..." he began, "Do you want some more stew?" The last part he had added for lack of anything better to say. He did not wish to upset the girl again.

Anya sat up, turning to face him. "I said that I'm sorry," she said, and when the look on Gimmel's face told her that he didn't understand, she clarified. "I'm sorry for crying. I have been through much. My life is beginning to change." She looked down.

"Change?" the old man asked.

"Yes, I have begged Meku for it for so long, but I did not notice it when it began to happen. Change can be hard, even when it is for the best."

Gimmel nodded, not sure what to make of the change in the girl's demeanor.

She continued, "You used the word guru to describe yourself, Gimmel."

"That I did," he confirmed.

"Does your wisdom extend into the realms of the interpretation of dreams?"

"Yes," Gimmel raised an eyebrow. "Why?"

Anya began to recount the nocturnal vision that she had had and Gimmel sat in stunned silence letting the story unfold. Only after Anya had described every detail of the dream that she could remember did Gimmel sit back in his chair.

“Amazing,” he breathed.

“What does it mean?” Anya urged.

Gimmel stroked his beard thoughtfully and his eyes gazed into nothing. “I shall have to meditate upon it.”

His eyes closed and he sat motionless. Anya tried to ask him a few questions but he would not be disturbed. Silence.

When it was obvious that the old man could not be roused, Anya decided to make the most of her situation. She ate another bowl of stew and drank some rum. The rum she had found after a good five-minute search for something strong to drink. It was not to her taste but she needed something to put the color back into her cheeks.

She examined the Go board on the table and picked up the fallen Go stone. She sat across from the old man and began to arrange the stones into groups of differing colors. She had only finished dividing the stones when the Guru’s hand shot out, seized a stone, and placed it on the board.

Anya looked up at the now grinning face of Gimmel. His nose was crooked and pointed a little to the left when he smiled. This had an oddly reassuring feeling.

She asked, “Do you know what my dream may be about?”

The old man nodded, still grinning ear to ear.

“Well?” she probed.

“After a quick game,” he said and gestured to the pieces on the board.

Anya, hesitantly, placed one of her black stones on the board and the game began. The game ended with white winning, but that was to be expected, because Anya had played very rarely in her lifetime.

Afterward, Gimmel spoke.

“A great battle is being fought in this world. The forces of creation and uncreation have begun anew their war for domination. Each force has five key figures that help them in their battle. Each of the five forces represents one of the five elements. You dream, obviously, has to do with these five elements. I will tell you what your dream means, but you will not find it reassuring. It is most troublesome. Would you like to know?”

Anya nodded, “Yes, I must know.”

Gimmel spread his hands. “Very well then. In your dream you saw five items and five images. The five items: a rock, a candle, a

bowl of water, a gust of wind, and ball of nothing, represent the five elements: Earth, Fire, Water, Air, and Void. These are markers, telling you what the pictures correspond with. The pictures are of the warriors of Meku. The pictures represent the people who are in key positions to thwart the devises of Chaos. The first picture is the traditional symbol of the Tarak people. We can assume that the first of Meku's warriors is a Tarak that goes against the present empire. Do you know anyone who fits that description?"

Briefly Anya told of her relationship with Koluk and its brutal end.

"Ah, then he was one and now the forces loyal to Meku are down by one. That is the meaning of the change of the picture. Let us continue. The second, the balding man, is Sensei Gno of the School. I received word of his death recently as your vision shows. We are down two now. The third is the Crown of the Emperor. Emperor Kane, if my information is correct, was alive and well when last I heard, but your vision shows that he has either met his end already or will soon. The fourth, I have to admit, puzzled me, but I was finally able to discern its meaning. It is a warrior that is not yet born and may succeed where the others failed. It is the child of a powerful Neriyu sorceress and a skilled Neriyu samurai. The change in the picture tells me that it applies closely to you, Anya. I fear that you may be the mother of this warrior."

Anya looked startled, afraid, and puzzled all at the same time. "Yes, I have known that I was pregnant for some time now, but I am sure that Koluk is the father, not a Neriyu."

Gimmel's soft eyes conveyed the message before he said it. "You are mistaken, young one. Koluk is not the father. Your son will be a full Neriyu, and he will be a hero to our world."

Anya fell back into the chair, thinking of Lokun. "This is a bit much to take. What does the fifth picture mean? What is that?"

Gimmel sighed. "Alas, poor child, I can not see. The pictures tell of a warrior of Meku that becomes something evil and twisted; he becomes a servant of Chaos, but he may not remain so. I can see nothing more of him. We only know that his decisions will greatly affect the future of our world. I fear he is fighting a battle that we will never be able to understand."

Anya looked down, disappointed, "Oh... tell me more of my child."

“As you wish, do you have any idea who the father may be?” Gimmel asked and immediately wished that he had not.

A look of sadness crossed her face. Visions of the one night with Lokun and then countless with Koluk ran through her mind. Even if she had gotten pregnant by Lokun. Was it two months ago? More? She still would not show for another five months and would not have the baby until a year later.

“Yes,” she said. “He was the great Neriya samurai, the one in the fifth picture.”

“Oh dear,” Gimmel said thoughtfully.

*Sham'a yoru lewavin dom man qiz kemash l'umbin sheyoimum
ke mazomim.*

When she touches the stars with her hand of power the skies part under
her command.
-- Ancient Neriya
Prayer

When Anya came awake once again she heard the heavy, uneven snoring of her aged and wizened new companion. She rose from the bed and looked around, feeling awake and sensing that she had a task to perform. As she rose a movement caught her eye and she barely managed to catch the book that she had very nearly knocked off of the bed. Presumably Gimmel had placed the leather-bound dust magnet there because he felt that she would be interested in it. Anya investigated this curiosity with trepidation, not knowing what to expect from the world now that it had so blithely thrown her into such an astounding new life. Holding the tome lightly between two fingers, she brought it into the moonlight provided by the heavily barred window. As the light hit the cover, words sparkled an iridescent blue for a moment and then twinkled away like shooting stars. Anya adjusted the book in the light more until she could make out the words. They were written in a Neriyan script that most people could not recognize as writing, much less learn to read. The cover read, "*Lemaj Kem'ku*." Anya gasped.

She tried to say, "The Magic of Meku," but the words only escaped her lips as a soundless breath. This was one of the legendary books. One of the books in which the Neriya had recorded all the secrets of magic and spirit before they had been enslaved by the humans. The humans supposedly had burned all of the sacred texts that were still in Amaya, but it had been rumored that some had escaped. Gently, ever so gently, Anya lifted the cover of the book and read the first page. A rough translation would read as follows:

"Mortals can access the Magic of body and spirit through three avenues. One way is to possess and utilize any of the four ancient

artifacts that Meku created when He defeated Chaos during the creation of the world. The second is to be of the same race as anyone who is using one of the aforementioned artifacts (though this power is weak and only accessible by the very strong willed through years of study.) The third use, and the only proper one, is to be a Neriya while any mortal possesses any of the four artifacts. The Neriya's power will grow in direct relation with the number of artifacts that are in use. If you are looking at this book then you are a Neriya, for any other who looks upon these pages will see nothing. This book is an introduction of how to use your spirit to focus the magic of the realm. Use the wisdom contained herein with great discretion. May Meku be a guide to you in the darkest and lightest of times."

Anya stopped reading and stared blankly at the book in wonder. The page ended there and she was too terrified to turn the page. She noticed that the heavy breathing of Gimmel's sleep has stopped. She looked over to his chair and saw him looking at her, intently, as if studying a painting or sculpture. His expression did not change, but he inclined his head slightly in a small nod.

"You can read it then?" he asked only to be sure that his assumption was correct. Not being able to read the magical pages, Gimmel had only guessed at the tome's nature.

"Where?" Anya's throat choked and she could say no more. She looked down at the book and caressed it lightly with one hand.

Gimmel answered her half-spoken question. "It has been in the family for many years. When I found it I thought that it had been a blank journal or something. I tried to write in it but I could make no mark. This aroused my interest, and I have since studied about the ancient magical books and artifacts."

"How much do you know about this book?" She asked.

"Nothing, I'm afraid. I only guessed at what it was until you confirmed it just now. I have met many who would have been able to read it, but none whom I would ever trust with such power."

Anya paused, then said slowly, "You trust me with it?"

Gimmel let out a long sigh.

"My dear," he said after a pause, "it is not a question of trust. It is a question of need. Your dreams tell a story of a future that will be hard and grim. I believe you to be the last possible hope of bringing our world out of the darkness into which it has fallen. If we are to have peace and joy over this world ever again, I must help you

in any way I can. You may not be the best candidate to receive this book, but you are here and in need; I can give it to no one more suitable to receive it.” He spread his hands toward her and made a small bow.

“Thank you kindly, dear friend, thank you most kindly,” said Anya. “I will try my best to handle the book in a manner that will not break your trust.”

Gimmel gestured towards the tome. “Well,” he said, “read it.”

Anya began to turn the page of the book.

With a thunderous crash, splinters: large hunks of fragmented wood, shards of oak, and other miscellaneous pieces of the heavyset front door sprayed into the room. A four-legged beast crashed through it and into the center of the small house. The figure was black and leathery with a large, misshapen back and torso that caused it to stumble and fall to its gross and malformed knees. Anya would have guessed that the creature’s legs were much too small for the much larger body that sat upon it and she would have been right.

Gimmel yelled, “Altazar!” and instantly Anya reinterpreted the scene before her.

Altazar was clinging to the back of a hugely grotesque creature. Gimmel had told her about angers but none of his descriptions had prepared her for the sight of one this close. It was easily the most disgusting thing she had ever seen. Her head swam dizzily as the room swirled around her and the floor rushed up towards her face. As she hit her knees and threw her hands out to catch herself, her fresh vomit cascaded onto the cold oak floor. Even as she was collapsing, the anger was thrashing about the room, trying to dislodge Altazar from its back. He had a chokehold around the creature’s squat throat, but was only hampering it slightly. His weight, more than anything else, was keeping the creature at bay. Still, though he was a big man, his mass was less than half the anger’s. Gimmel shouted something towards Anya and she looked up. She hadn’t heard him, and her vision was blurring. The movement caused by her looking up renewed the feeling of nausea and this time she lost consciousness.

Gimmel lost no time after the beast and Altazar crashed through the door. He shouted his apprentice’s name only to let Anya know that it was he, because she had never seen the boy. Gimmel had then turned his attention back to the two combatants. Before he was able to take any action however, he was aghast to see Anya fall

forward toward them. He shouted for her to get out of the way, but something seemed to be wrong. Was she hurt? Had she fainted? All these thoughts raced around in his mind but none of them stopped him from moving. He darted around the anger and to the rack of weapons beside the door. From one sheath he pulled a full-length katana. He saw no trace of Altazar's weapons and assumed that he had lost them.

"Boy, a blade for you!" he cried as he sent the sword through the air.

Gimmel hadn't bothered to toss the sword in any way that it could be caught. Instead, he threw it like a spear, aiming a fraction of an inch to the right of his apprentice. The effect was that it lodged firmly into the creature's back and allowed Altazar to retrieve it at his leisure.

Altazar hung on for dear life during the demon's berserk rage that ensued. The tidy little cottage, that had had at least some semblance of order to it, quickly took on the appearance of a tornado's wake. Anything that wasn't sturdy metal was shredded, and anything not nailed down was thrown dangerously across the room. The creature lashed out at anything and everything and, as was inevitable, he connected with Gimmel's frail form.

The old man was hurled with unthinkable force two feet backward into the sturdy brick wall. Chips of rock and mortar flew outwards along with a cloud of rock dust. Seconds too late the blade of the katana completed its arc and the anger fell to the ground in two separate halves, cut at an angle from shoulder to hip.

Blood and gore caked the floor, walls, and Altazar, but he ignored it all as he rushed to the side of his fallen mentor. There was a circle of blood where the man's head had hit the wall and it trailed down to where his head had settled as he slid down in a crumpled heap. Carefully Altazar lifted Gimmel's head and listened for a breath or sound. After he heard none he felt his chest for a heartbeat. Sadly and forlornly he let the old man drop to the floor as he began to realize that his mentor and teacher: the man who had been like a father to him was dead. As he fought back tears he heard a voice behind him.

"Stand aside, I need him."

Anya's voice was cool, crisp, and clear. It did not tremble or shake. Altazar looked back over his shoulder.

"He is dead." He said but stopped short as he caught sight of the little Neriya girl.

She was naked and obviously not the girl that he had thought her to be. She was well formed and seemed to define the word perfection when one thought of it in conjunction with beauty.

Speechless and in awe, Altazar's large form was pushed aside by the light caress of her hand. Anya stood over Gimmel's corpse. Her eyes, now alight with the fire of Maj, looked up, as if searching for something.

"Wise one," she called towards the ceiling, "old one, the one who was called Gimmel."

Something seemed to catch her eye and her hand shot toward it. Her hand seemed to grab something, but Altazar saw nothing but air.

Anya continued in a voice strong and sure, "Come now, my friend, you are not yet slated for this rest. I have need of you."

Her right hand came down, bringing something towards Gimmel, and her left hovered over him. Slowly and softly she began to chant.

"Omanumin umanomi osharim tomazi."

Amidst the chanting as her hand came closer to Gimmel's body Altazar saw a faint outline of a familiar form floating, held by her hand. He peered closer and he recognized it as a ghostly apparition of Gimmel. With sudden horror, Altazar realized that the Neriya girl was pulling Gimmel's soul back from the other world and putting it back into his body. He began to scoot along the floor backwards, but the slick blood of the anger made movement almost impossible.

At last her hand came down and rested on Gimmel's chest. Altazar saw the hazy form of the soul enter the body and then there was a clap of thunder and a bright flash from where Anya was touching the old man. Gimmel coughed and sputtered, regaining consciousness, and the naked Neriya sorceress fell forward on top of him.

"Ah, what, er, help me get her up." Gimmel said to a frightened and confused Altazar as the old man began to rise, steadying himself with the wall.

Gimmel shook his head. Altazar only stared in disbelief.

"Why do I feel so dizzy and lightheaded? Where are her clothes?" Gimmel started asking questions, then as he saw Altazar, "Why are you looking at me as if I am some sort of spook?"

"Gimmel, you aren't going to believe this," Altazar began.

*

*

*

Anya's world was a twirling void of colors, lights, thoughts, and emotions. Existence spiraled around her as she hurtled through and down the realm of dreams, fears and the moving force of the world: maj. She could see the separate strands of reality. Some strands, she knew, were the physical pieces of the world that she called home. Others were the manifestation of different people's spirits. The strands that linked these forces were Maj. Maj linked the world and its inhabitants together. It was the cohesive force that tied souls to their bodies and minds. Power, pure and irresistible, ebbed around her like the waves of an ocean. Ripples went out from Anya in the same way that they retreat from a rock thrown in a pond. Whenever she moved it perpetuated another ripple.

Out of the corner of her eye she saw a spirit that seemed familiar. The maj that held it to its mind and body flickered and disappeared. Anya turned and watched the spirit cast about in search of purchase. It was like a lost puppy that had just been separated from his mother. Anya approached it and stretched forth her hand. To her surprise her hand was not there. Her arm was made of the same flickering power that made the maj. She looked down at herself and saw only a flashing brightness of power and force. She was maj. The spirit cried out and she recognized the voice as Gimmel's.

"Be calm," she said to him, "old friend."

She spoke with a voice wrought of centuries that surpassed the years of her own short life. Something within her was guiding her.

"Come, here is your place." She commanded.

Anya put forth her arm and touched Gimmel's soul. The spirit writhed and thrashed at the unfamiliar maj, but Anya's hold was unbreakable. Slowly she began to walk towards his body. The body was fading without an inhabitant, but she had time. As she drew near to it she brought the soul down so that the two strands of existence touched.

They drew the power and energy from Anya and she flinched at the depletion. The feeling was like becoming suddenly tired after you have just awoken refreshed. It drained her of both her energy and her will. Her life was flowing from her. The maj that connected her to the world was being used to restore this severed connection.

Then it was over. Anya felt her soul depleted but not gone. Already it was beginning to regenerate. She looked at Gimmel's

strands and, satisfied that they were intact, let herself fall down out of the realm of magic and into unconsciousness.

*

*

*

“That’s amazing!” cried the wizened sage.

Altazar had just finished describing what he had seen to Gimmel.

“That is... unbelievable. I mean...” He looked at Anya.

While Altazar drug the anger carcass into the woods, Gimmel had laid Anya’s sleeping body on the bed and all their attempts to awaken her had been in vain. Her face looked peaceful, serene and completely comfortable. Some subtle aspect of her had changed since she had first arrived at the cottage, but Gimmel couldn’t tell exactly what. He did, however, have his suspicions as to what had caused the change. He turned his attention back to Altazar’s wounds, applying ointment to the cuts and bruises.

“Master,” asked Altazar, “what happened? What is she?” His eyes darted warily to the small Neriya girl’s frame.

Gimmel answered, “Well, simply put, she is a Neriya. They are Meku’s chosen. They come not from the land and water, as we do, but were birthed out of air and fire. He blessed, and some would say cursed, them with the power to use and direct the forces that bind the world. In their language it is called maj. We call it magic.”

“Magic,” repeated Altazar, aghast at the idea. He continued, “But magic was supposed to have been destroyed long ago when the empire was formed.”

Gimmel smiled, “They tried to destroy magic by burning all of the books and tomes that held the secrets. When that failed they began to kill the Neriya who used the power. Magic cannot be destroyed, for it is what binds the universe together. It is what links the spirit realm to the physical.”

“So what do we do? Surely you don’t suggest we keep her here?”

“No, young one, I suggest no such thing.” He paused. “I suggest we take her to safety.”

“What? Is she in danger?” asked Altazar.

“You still have much to learn boy. You know the angers and how to fight them. Now it is time to learn their origin. Angers are assassins of evil. Their master is the same that challenged Meku in the

beginning and threw our world into turmoil. They are coming for the girl, and they will not stop until she is dead.”

Altazar was horrified. “Then there is no place where we are safe! None is powerful enough to stop the Dark One except Meku himself, and you taught me that Meku withdrew his influence from us.”

Gimmel replied, “Yes, but before leaving this realm he blessed the city of his chosen people. There is where we will take her.”

“You believe in the fabled city?”

Gimmel smirked, “Believe in it? Boy, I was born in Neriya.”

“It really exists?” exclaimed Altazar.

“Of course it does. All myth has a base in reality, no matter how strange. Now, get some sleep, tomorrow we head for Darkvale.” Gimmel patted Altazar on the back and disappeared into the back room.

Altazar propped the kitchen table up over the smashed doorway in a small attempt to keep out the various dangers of the night. Anya was on his bed so he cleared a space on the floor. He slept, but with one eye open and his sword close at hand.

In the morning Gimmel and Altazar could still find no way of waking the young girl despite their best efforts. They scrounged around for pieces and parts and, after some effort and one amazing feat of engineering, they had constructed a crude but serviceable wagon to pull her and all of their supplies. Gimmel had suggested that they pack as lightly as possible so that anyone making a search of their cottage might not catch on that they had abandoned it, but would only think that they were out for a while and would return at a later date. Food, weapons, tools, and a few books were all that hid under the small cot on which Anya lay. At last Altazar emerged from the cottage with their last item: a small two-man tent. It was more or less a string and some canvas, but it would have to do for the journey to the coast. A Neriya at a full run might make that distance in two or three days, but an old man and his apprentice encumbered by a handcrafted wagon would take over a week to make the trip even if they used the main road. Gimmel, of course, did not plan to travel on the roads, electing instead to stay out of sight in the countryside that he knew so well.

“Still no luck waking the sorceress?” asked Altazar.

He had taken to calling her that since his last and only encounter with her while she was awake. He was visibly skeptical of

Gimmel's claim that she was a normal girl who had almost no idea of her power or of what she had done. Then again, Altazar was feeling skeptical that the old man was entirely himself after that episode as well.

"No, and I wish you would stop calling her that. She can't help her powers and probably isn't even aware of them, much less able to control them."

"Well, still, she gives me the creeps. I'd much rather have to deal with something a little more physical, like a sword or monster."

"Young man, she is more useful than a sword, and more dangerous than any monster, and if we don't keep her safe it may mean the end of life as we know it."

"You really think she's that important?"

"I don't know, I just don't know..." Gimmel replied, "She was important enough for Chaos to send a party of angels after her. I say that means that we should try to keep her alive and well."

Altazar shivered noticeably and then looked up into the sky. It was gray with clouds and the dawn sun did little to illuminate the thick fog of the morning.

"It's about time now, let's head out."

Gimmel nodded and they set off toward the west, towing Anya behind them.

Co Lanya luku lemaj dom veshomu.
If the rose calls the magic then it comes.
--Neriyu blessing.

Gimmel and Altazar trudged slowly through the dense forest, towing their comatose companion with them. The morning had not brightened during their hour of travel, and the day seemed to be imprisoned by the foreboding sky. A drop of rain occasionally splashed upon Gimmel's face, but despite its constant threats to the contrary, the rain stayed confined in the clouds above. The woods were dank and miserable. The leaves of the trees hung limp on their branches, battered by the last night's torrent. When the trees opened enough, they revealed heavy thunderstorms in all directions. It reminded Gimmel of being in the eye of some great tempest out at sea.

Anya bounced and jostled as the cart jerked over rocks and roots in the soft dirt floor, but the padding around her kept her from harm. The wheels of the cart squeaked and moaned in agony, as if in protest to being subjected to such torture. Anya moaned with it. Though unaware to the world, her sleep was not a restful one. Inside the darkness of her mind she wrestled with inner demons and horrifying nightmares. Her body was limp, exhausted by the effort of will and the loss of most of its *maj*. Detached from the lifeless body her mind raged on inside.

*

*

*

Questions came and went and though she reached out toward them, Anya found no answers. Who was she? That question she thought she might be able to answer, if she only caught one fleeting grasp of awareness. Where was she? Her mind flashed glimpses and visions of places and people that she half recognized but she could make sense of none of it. What was this feeling inside of her? It felt like absolute exhaustion and then more. Her brain recoiled at the notion of any effort except the sheer force of will that it took to stay alive. Stay alive. The thought came just as the others. It danced in her mind, dodging her hands, just out of her finger's reach. By some

miracle of effort she seized it, holding it close to her. Stay alive. This thought anchored her as all others swept past, threatening to consume her. The tumult ebbed around her and the sensation began to feel like she was drifting through some vast sea. The fears and visions tossed up and down like waves in a mighty storm. Some thoughts struck her like waves crashing down upon her but she held fast to the thought that kept her afloat. Stay alive. To this she clung, like a child to her mother, trusting in it alone to guide her through. Gradually, as her strength began to renew within her, she let part of herself search the sea of memories. Holding fast to the thought that kept her afloat in this hurricane within her mind, she cast about, as if paddling with one arm. She did not know what she was searching for, but her instincts told her that submission: to simply float with the current and let herself be tossed about would be folly. Her progress what impossibly slow and she seemed to move farther away whenever she tried to pull herself toward the visions around her. As the thoughts and voices moved around her she caught one fleeting glimpse of light within the torrent of crashing waves. It seemed to sway and move at first but Anya soon noticed that she was the one moving and that it, unlike the rest of this horrifying universe, remained ever still, unmoving. She reasoned that anything that didn't move, in this nightmare, would be her salvation. Still clutching her resolve to live she faintly tried to paddle toward the light. No matter how she tried she failed to make progress towards what was surely her only hope.

Something told her what she must do. She held it close to her. Stay alive. It was all that she had. How could she let it go? She sobbed and moaned, terrified of setting out after the light without this, but she knew that she would die if she held onto it. Painfully she began to pry herself away from it. The pain was unbearable and she stopped. Anya felt that she could more easily tear her own arm off than release her will to live. She wanted to live. But, now her will to live was the thing that would ensure her doom. She must release it and make her way toward the light. Once again she began to release her hold upon it. The sorrow and pain it caused set upon her, as if fighting her away from her task. But Anya was strong. Little by little she allowed herself to fall. She drifted away from it and began to sink down into the murky depths of her mind, drowning. No! Her arms flailed for a moment. She wanted to die. She was horrified at the truth of the statement. No, she told herself, she just let go of her will to live.

She tried to move toward the light but the desire was not there. Quickly she focused her mind. What would give a reason to live without a will to live? Almost at once her arms thrust out in powerful strokes against the current. The child! Her child! Her will as a mother was stronger and more vigorous than any other force. Nothing could harm her child. Now set toward the unwavering light, Anya dying to herself for the sake of another, rose above the waves and swam with fury and power. The waves and raging sky blocked her view of it for much of the time, but she could feel it now. She swam, focusing only on the light and her journey. As she got closer the swimming was easier and soon, instead of swimming through the waves, she was running on top of them. The fury of the storm raged around her, trying to push her back away, but she would not be swayed. At last she reached the light: a shimmering purity above the calm waters of her inner mind. Air stood next to the portal.

“Well done, daughter. Come, there is much to do,” the incarnation said.

Purposefully Anya bowed and then stepped through the gateway and into consciousness.

*

*

*

“How many are guarding the pass?”

“I saw three guards, and they were talking to some heavily armored guy who’s bigger than the both of us. You think there is another way west, old man?”

“No, son, the Emperor’s Pass is the only way through the West Mountains. Are you sure that they are looking for her?”

“That’s what the guy in armor said. I think one of the guards called him Damien. He said a Neriya girl; how many of those are going to be heading west? The Neriya know that those bigots at Darkvale don’t want them there.”

“So what’s your plan, apprentice?”

“Stop reminding me of your superior experience, old man.”

“I will when you stop reminding me of my superior age, naïve one.”

“Anyway, how do we know that this Damien guy is bad? Maybe he is trying to find Anya because he’s protecting her or something.”

“Or something is right,” Gimmel sneered.

“Oh, come on. How can you be so sure of yourself?”

“Pay attention for a moment and learn something, Altazar. You are a bright lad, a bit stubborn, but a bright lad nonetheless. Now, one of the things that Meku did to... the Dark One when He trapped him in our world was to put restrictions on him so that we would be better able to defend ourselves from his meddling.”

Altazar sat down on the grass behind the hill where they had been scouting out the guards. The cart was about twenty feet behind them, farther back in the woods. He listened to Gimmel intently, more so than he had in the past. His experience has shown him that he could not afford to take his master's presence for granted.

“Yeah, what are you getting at?” he asked.

“Be patient, lad, give a senile old man time to think. Now, one of the restrictions was that the dark one must always use his real name when he identifies himself to mortals.”

“So he has to go around saying, ‘Hi, I’m Ch—’” Altazar began but couldn’t finish because Gimmel clapped his hand over his mouth.

“Don’t say it, foolish boy.” Gimmel said. “He will hear. Anyway, no he doesn’t have to say that. That is his name in our language. The name you heard the man in armor give was the dark one’s name in trollspeak. He uses the languages to circumvent the restriction.”

Altazar was aghast. “You mean, that was... it was him?” his voiced trailed off in a hoarse whisper.

“Yes, now don’t use his name again, either of them. I believe we were lucky the other times you said it, probably because you were unaware of its meaning, but don’t invoke his name again.”

“But master, who is this girl that the Dark One himself is walking around looking for her?”

“I am *Aamoshas*,” a light, dulcet voice said from behind them.

They recognized her voice, but it was the recognition of hearing something that was much different than what it should be, and yet, the same. They turned, at first expecting to be elated that she had awoken. Their joy, however, was consumed by the look of purpose and resolve in her eyes. Gimmel was able only to translate for his pupil the Neriya word that made itself so prominent in the ancient prophecies.

“First mother,” his voice cracked as the words rolled off his lips.

Anya's appearance, physically, was unchanged, but something in her demeanor and the way that she carried herself was frightening. It was as if a mighty barbarian warrior had tossed on the appearance of a lovely young girl. She was clothed in the makeshift robe that Gimmel had fashioned for her but on her it looked more like a regal gown than an old recycled blanket.

"Where are we and where are we going?" she asked.

The questions were simple and concise, but held a force that washed away all possibility of not answering or answering falsely. Her voice was no different in tone or sound, but the impact was astounding.

Gimmel rushed to answer. "We are near Emperor's Pass. We are going through the West Mountains to Darkvale where we hope to catch a ship to Neriya."

"Oh," chimed Anya, sounding surprised, "that is where I wanted to go. What are we waiting for then?"

The initial shock of her presence was wearing off, and Gimmel realized that she was unaware of the effect.

"There are guards, Ma'am. They are after you." He resisted an impulse to make a slight bow of apology.

"Gimmel, what's wrong? Altazar looks ill, and why are you calling me ma'am?"

"Give me a moment, Anya." he could not bring himself to call her a child. "You gave us a start. Do you remember what happened after you looked at the book?"

Anya had a puzzled expression on her face.

"I have a faint memory of swimming, or something, but no. I suppose I passed out. What happened?"

"Take a seat for a moment. I think there may be many things that we need to talk about."

*

*

*

Inside the palace, the throne room of the emperor was in tatters. Master had taken to destroying any and all evidence of Kane's rule. The chamber walls were bare, and the burnt and ripped remains of the flags and imperial seals littered the floor. His ascent to power had been easy after the decimation of the city guards. The few that had opposed him had been crushed under huge pillars of rock and debris as he had exacted his wrath, and none were willing to stand against him after the display. The troops that remained had quickly

sworn their undying fealty to him, and he had been quick to use these troops as his personal secret service. They were out in the town now making the citizens realize that to defy the Emperor meant death.

He clutched the handle of the Stone of Meku greedily. The cool surface of it surged with power begging to be released. He had been slow in learning to control the artifact and knew that he had unlocked little of its full potential. No matter. His power was sufficient to cement his rule over the capital, and it would be only a matter of time before his power stretched to engulf the entire continent of Amaya.

A loud metallic clank signaled the opening of the door to the throne room. He looked up to see the large silhouette of Lord Chaos' body armor. Master threw himself to his knees and bowed to the floor.

"My Lord, thank you for gracing me with your divine presence. What brings you to my chamber?" he asked.

Chaos laughed. "Get up, mortal, I hate pleasantries."

Master rose and stood but continued to look down.

Chaos continued, "I have come because the girl continues to escape my ever-reaching grasp. Fire and Lokun pursue her and yet she continues to elude them. I fear that the elements have conspired against Fire, for he has been absent of late. Lokun may yet find them, but I am uncertain of his loyalty. He is mine, but an infant, and not fully versed in my ways."

"Do you wish me to go after the girl they call the rose, Lord Chaos?"

"Something like that," Chaos replied, "I want you to go to the harbor in Darkvale. We can be sure that she will attempt to charter a vessel north, past the Eye. Wait for her there and destroy her any way you can."

"Yes, My Lord, I will do as you command, but what of the throne?"

Chaos' appearance shimmered and changed shape. The huge form shrunk inward on itself and the face changed its features. Soon Master gazed into his own image.

Chaos said in Master's voice, "I will look after your Empire, my child."

Master set out that evening, traveling west.

*

*

*

“So, do you understand any more about yourself, Anya?” Gimmel asked after he had related to her the events of past day.

“It is strange,” she said. “I am afraid of this power but I find that I can accept it. Meku has given me this gift so that I may raise my son to be a brave and righteous leader for my people. My life is meaningless to me, but I must live in order to bear and teach him.”

This was an echo of the thoughts that struggled within her head. She had never been a suicidal person, and had always done whatever necessary to survive, but now she found herself unable place much emphasis on her own survival. Her priorities had changed. She patted her stomach. It was still flat, showing no sign of her pregnancy, but she felt the life that dwelt inside. A calm but determined smile crept upon her lips.

“What must I do, Gimmel,” she asked, “to learn more of these powers, that I might protect him from the fury of the Dark One?”

Gimmel replied, taking the small tome from his pocket, “I can not teach you in these ways. For now, you must look to the ancient writings of your people. When we reach Neriya, however, the elders may be able to enlighten you further.”

Anya took the book gently, saying, “Thank you, friend.”

Altazar approached, returning from scouting out the area around the pass.

“The Dark One has not returned, but another has. He has a terrible look about him and bears the kaису-nat. He wields a katana that is like no other I have seen. It seems to twist the eye as I looked upon it, as if it sucked in the light of day and consumed it, letting none escape.”

Anya’s eyes snapped to look at Altazar.

“Lokun!” she said in a barely audible whisper.

“You mean, he is the man you told us about?” asked Gimmel.

“Yes, he is the father,” replied Anya, averting her eyes in shame. “He has been consumed by the dark one, and seeks to destroy me. I can feel his soul crying out in anguish. He was the fifth figure in my vision.”

“Well, now he is standing in the center of the road at the pass. How are we going to get to Darkvale now? That is the only pass over the mountains.”

Gimmel stood up.

“Now, now,” he chided Altazar, “You are right in saying that there is no other passage over the mountains, but there may be a way through the mountains.”

“Sir?” asked Altazar.

“What our good friend means to say,” interrupted Anya, “is that we should go under the mountains, through the ancient and derelict iron mines of the trolls.”

“Mines?” said Altazar.

“How did you know of them?” asked Gimmel at the same time.

Anya laughed slightly, “Perhaps you should tell your apprentice of them first,” she suggested.

“Yeah, what are these mines, and why did you never tell me of them?”

“Dear Altazar, the mines were abandoned just about the same year that I was born. The trolls were pushed back by the human armies and forced to retreat into the mountains to the south. These caves used to be not only mines, but also their homes. They stretch through the underbelly of the West Mountains in a random maze of holes, corridors, and great caverns with high vaulted ceilings. There are only two entrances: one on each side of the impassible mountain range. The caves were designed to be a labyrinth. It was the trolls’ first defense.”

“Wait a minute,” replied Altazar after Gimmel finished, “this sounds a heck of a lot worse than three guards at a pass. Why can’t we just muscle through?”

“Son, use your head for a moment. How many birds have you heard today?”

Altazar kept silent and listened. Nothing. Not one chirp.

Gimmel continued, “You know as well as I that there are dangers about. And there are likely to be more than just one. If Anya had a better command of maj, then maybe, but now we wouldn’t stand a chance.”

“Well, this cave idea of yours seems just as likely to end with our grizzly demise as well. We’d just become lost in an endless maze of tunnels and starve, instead of being torn to shreds.”

“I can lead us through.”

Both men turned after hearing Anya speak.

“What?” they said in unison.

“I know the way through. I just don’t know where the entrance is. If you would be so kind as to take us there, Gimmel, then I will take us through to the other side.”

“Girl,” said the old man, his voice sounding slightly pleased, “you have much explaining to do.”

Anya smiled sheepishly. She hadn’t realized that she knew the way through until she said it, and she had no idea of why she knew. She didn’t feel as confident as she had been while speaking. She felt as if someone was speaking through her sometimes.

The rock face rose up before them high into the never-ending sky. Clouds obscured any glimpse of the top of the cliffs. They had traveled the rest of the day, camped a night, and then traveled the entirety of this day. Torrents of rain splattered against them as they pulled their cloaks tighter around their shoulders. The break in the rain had been brief and the storm had resumed with more fury and vigor than before. Now, at dusk, the light of the sun long obscured by clouds and the mighty bulk of the mountains, the fruits of their labors had, at last, brought them to a dark and uninviting hole, seemingly to oblivion. Cold air rushed out at them from the maw of the great mountain, and the chill temperature of it made the night rain feel warm. The subterranean wind beat upon their faces and plastered their wet clothes against their shivering skin. The rush of air sounded a shrill and continuous whistle over the din of the pounding rain and thunder. The relentless storm seemed to provide shelter from the cave, instead of vice versa.

“Should we go in and set up camp inside?” shouted Altazar above the noise of nature’s assault upon them.

“Either way we won’t be able to start a fire.” Gimmel shouted back.

Anya stood shivering. Her feet were starting to go numb and she pulled one foot up to rub it, leaning against the cart to balance herself. As she looked down she saw a small stream of water flowing into the mouth of the cave.

“Outside,” she called out to her two woodsmen companions.

“Any reason for that, Miss Anya?” asked Gimmel.

“Look at the water,” she called back and pointed to the river that was now forming at the mouth.

After a quick look Gimmel and Altazar heartily agreed with her and began to set up camp alongside the rock face a good distance from the cave entrance. They too did not want to spend the night trying to swim in their sleep.

At last the two had crafted a lean-to against the face and had lined the roof with the tent canvas.

“This way we have more room and it is somewhat more water tight,” Altazar explained.

Some of the various animal skins that they had brought made the floor and beds dry, or at least less damp. The cart was a vital part of the lean-to’s design, comprising the bulk of the structure. As such, the rest of their supplies were in a pile next to the rock portion of their temporary house.

“We should be safe without keeping a watch. Everyone can get some sleep,” suggested Altazar, “We have a long journey through those caves tomorrow.”

“And the next day,” added Anya.

“Pardon, Miss Anya?”

“The road through the pass is straight and can be crossed in a day. The path below has many curves and turns. We will have to camp once, more if we get lost.”

Altazar groaned and rolled over to go to sleep.

“My child,” said Gimmel, “I am going to pass out, but tomorrow you are telling me how you know so much about these caves.”

With the storm raging over them, over the mountains, indeed over the entire continent of Amaya, the three servants of Meku slept under divine protection. In the moments between consciousness and sleep Anya felt the raw power of the Tides of Meku surge around them. It was buffeting the world with all of its might and Anya felt the power that it, in turn, gave to her. She drew upon the power and cherished it. It was that power that she had swam in before. She remembered it now as she drifted immersed in its power and called it to her once again.

*

*

*

Rivulets of energy coursed around her. There were only two colors now. She could recognize them. Green and blue frenzied around her. She could touch each tendril, call it to shape and mold it. She could move the energy, le maj, and cause it to do her every will.

If she wanted to move a mountain: she called the green and twisted it just so. If she wanted to move an ocean: she called the blue and pushed it ever so delicately. The order and measure of the world was hers to fashion in any manner she chose. But that was not why she had come here. She must focus on the task at hand. She studied the pattern of the West Mountains. The green maj flowed smoothly through in some places, but was broken and lacked power in others. If she concentrated, she could barely make out the shimmer of white, the maj of air, moving within these gaps. She studied and followed them until they lead at last to the other side of the West Mountains. Anya focused and tried to burn the route onto her mind. She knew she would forget everything else, but she must remember the way through the caves. There was no room for error. Just as she left the dream she saw the shimmer of red within the mountains. Fire! There was life within those caverns! Something was living down there. A vision of a vast and inhospitable society flashed for a moment. Anya grasped at the memory, but already it was becoming faint. Any knowledge that the caves were inhabited was thrust back out of her mind as she awoke into consciousness. When she woke she retained only the map.

*

*

*

Behind a bank of clouds, the morning sun succeeded only in casting a gray light over the rain-drenched forest floor. The dark clouds continued to pour rain down upon the flooded soil, but the wind, thunder, and lightening had subsided, for now. The whistling of the air that rushed from the cave mouth could now be heard over the patter of the rain. Anya saw that her companions still slept and so drifted back into a light, dreamless, doze.

When at last her companions did awake she failed to notice and did not rise from her sleep until the sweet smell of breakfast lured her from her warm and semi-dry bed.

“The storm wears on as if mourning for a lost love,” commented Altazar as he spooned the last bit of his stew into his mouth.

“If you are going to wax poetic, son, then you better to do it without a mouth full of half-chewed rabbit,” replied Gimmel.

Altazar smiled, nodded, and swallowed.

Despite the early hour and bleak mission ahead of them they seemed to be in high spirits. Their optimism was somewhat contagious, and Anya rose to join them for breakfast.

“Mind if I join your feast?” she joked.

“You’re a bit late,” Gimmel retorted, “for I and my guardsman have just finished, but you are welcome to the scraps.”

“Well I never!” Anya tried to look offended and then tried to laugh, all she managed was a forced chuckle.

She finished eating as they broke camp. The cart could not be taken, so all their supplies would have to be carried on their backs. Anya shouldered her load without complaint, knowing that they would find little food in the catacombs below. She was also careful never to give Gimmel a chance to ask her any questions about her knowledge of the caves. She wasn’t ready to talk about it, because she knew as little about her power as he.

Ya de vats upiru nik na lav, l'anya geru co rimem bulim na das.
Though the soil may seem hard and dry, a rose may grow if we give it
love and care.
--- Neriya proverb

Master racked his brain trying to fathom where the helpless Neriya child could have gone. To think that a small girl could baffle him: the greatest of all mortals. It was ridiculous. Lokun had sent word that the imperial pass was blocked and that he, personally, had ascertained that she had not yet passed through. Chaos doubted Lokun's loyalty and Master felt his Lord's anxiety. No man had ever been known to break free of an umajinn's power, but there were firsts for everything. If the blighted samurai managed to free himself, he would indeed feign loyalty to Chaos until he could make good his betrayal. Fortunately, Chaos had taken the liberty of deploying a dozen ankers to aid Lokun in his guard. His failure to mention them to the kaiozu was a simple oversight.

The girl must have found some other way through the mountains. Earth could easily mow a path through the mountain range, but Fire had been insistent that his brother was now crippled and would have a hard time moving sand, much less mountains. Of course, now Fire was missing as well, so he may have been wrong about his brother. At least they had the assurance that the Stone of Meku would not be used to carve a swath through the range. A profound thought occurred to Master. If he could change the shape of the mountains, how would he know what to change? It stood to reason that the magic would provide a way to see the pattern of the earth as well as change it. So far as Master could tell the use of the Stone was simply a matter of focusing on the task that you wanted it to perform. If it was within the means of the Stone's magic, then it happened. Each time he had used it he had felt himself go weak. The weakness was usually followed by fits of paranoia and fear. He had managed to cope with them, but they were so unsettling that he preferred not to use the Stone unless he absolutely had to. This was a deep contrast to how

he had previously envisioned himself using the awesome power the artifact granted. He had fancied himself as commanding the trees and ground to bow and pay homage to him as he passed. He had soon found that this would quickly strain him beyond his limit and he would then be unable to command any magic that actually served a purpose. He was therefore inclined to exhaust all other avenues before using the magic.

Focusing again on the task at hand, he envisioned the West Mountains as if seen from above by a soaring eagle. He gripped the cool shaft of the Stone as he imagined knowing everything about the mountains.

Him brain recoiled at the sudden rush of information. It was so much in such little time that he could make no sense of it.

His concentration shattered, he stopped to breathe. They assaulted him at once. Pangs of guilt and confusion rushed through his mind. Accusations of treason against some unknown country came from all directions. Fear of retribution made him long for some guarantee of safety and reprieve. Panic coursed up his spine and he froze in horror. Stricken with wild visions, he knew that they knew and that they would come for him.

When at last Master regained his composure he was doubled over on the forest floor on his hands and knees. The Stone of Meku lay a few feet from him where he had thrown it in an effort to escape the torment. This time had been the worst of them all. He had thought that the recoil was in proportion to the power used, but this had supposedly been a simple thing. He had only needed information. What had gone wrong?

As he retrieved the Stone it hit him: the word everything. He had not said it, but it had been in the concept that he had imagined. The magic had given him exactly what he had asked for and had taken its horrible toll in return, only the information had been too much too fast and he had remembered none of it. He would simply have to try again, but this time he would be sure to be more specific about the knowledge that he wished to obtain. What should he look for that would be within the Stone's power over the element of Earth? Caves! There had to be some caves in those mountains. Perhaps the girl had stumbled upon a cave that ran the width of the mountain range.

Again he held the rod and focused but this time on a different concept. He pictured the West Mountains again from above and

imagined knowing the cave systems that ran through the mountains. Again information surged through his brain but this time it was not so much that he could not handle it. The caves were so winding and numerous that the brief glimpse was insufficient for him to make heads or tails of the many twists and turns, but he had gotten the information that he had sought. There were two cave mouths, one on each side of the mountain range. If the girl were in those caves, then she would have to emerge from one of those. She was going west, so the west cave mouth was his target. When the Neriya girl emerged from that cave, that is, if she didn't die, she would be in for a surprising welcome party.

Altazar lead the way into the cave holding his lamp high so that it would illuminate the path for the others. They each had a lamp, but because light was a precious commodity in the eternal darkness of the underground, they had elected to conserve their oil by using only one at a time. Anya followed close behind and Gimmel brought up the rear. The tunnel dropped steeply as it proceeded into the mountains, and the fresh rainwater formed a slick film over the rock floor. This made the entrance like an oiled chute and they had to lie down and scoot along so that they would not be sent hurtling into the awaiting unknown. Altazar hung the lamp from his arm so that he would have both hands free, but this caused the light to swing back and forth, making climbing difficult for the others.

Gimmel called for him to stop.

"What?" Altazar asked, a little frustrated by their slow progress and his seeming inability to lead them into the cave.

"Pass the lantern back to Anya while you climb down a few feet, then find some good footholds and steady yourself. Anya can then give you the lantern back and she and I can climb while you wait. It will be slow, but this way we can insure that one of us doesn't take the short way down."

"Sounds like you've done this before," commented Anya.

"Some," he confirmed. "Sorry for getting your clothes all muddy," he added.

Anya smiled and turned to Altazar.

"You heard the boss, hand me the lamp."

He said, "Alright," and did.

As it turned out, Gimmel's strategy worked. Even as the

incline became steeper, the group had little trouble in making steady progress farther down. Before long they were climbing down a slick rock face of which they were unable to see a bottom. The floor of the cave could have been just beyond the circle of light, or a vertigo inducing cliff-drop to oblivion. The lantern lit only the area around them and all else was blackness. Still, with the woodsman's expert climbing skills he paved the way for them inch by inch. As he went down he cleaned off hand and footholds and pointed them out to his companions. As Anya moved down he guided her feet to outcroppings of rock, or, if none were handy, braced her foot with his own hand as a makeshift hold.

In this manner they made their way down into the depths of the mines. When they at last stepped off onto flat, dry rock, Anya had no idea how much time they had spent climbing. It had seemed like forever. Her hands, elbows, and shoulders all ached with the pangs of exertion. The feeling was similar to how she felt when she woke from one of her strange dreams, but worse.

"Oh, I ache all over. I feel pain in places that I never knew existed," she complained.

"Ah, as do I." said Altazar rubbing his neck, "How about you Gimmel?"

"I feel fine. Just next time, we need to find some stairs."

They all shared a good joke for a moment, but the laughter only made their aches and bruises worse.

"Don't make me laugh," pleaded Anya as she caught her breath.

"So, are we going in the right direction, pointy-eared wonder?" inquired Altazar.

"Yes," panted Anya, her breathing still a bit labored.

"Of course we are," chided Gimmel, "There's only been one way to go so far. How could we have gone the wrong way?"

"Yeah, right," said Altazar sheepishly. "I didn't think of that."

"Well, actually..." offered Anya.

"Yes?" the two men said together.

"There was an offshoot in the ceiling that led up right before we changed from scooting to climbing," she informed them.

"Really, why didn't you say anything?" asked Gimmel.

"It wasn't the way we were supposed to go, but in the future I'll point passageways out for you if I see them."

“Well, I see several of them.”

Altazar had turned and was looking around the room with his lantern. It was he who had said this last remark, because the room where they now stood had a large number of identical exits leading in different directions.

“Seven, to be exact,” he offered after his companions had failed to comment.

“Which way, young one?” Gimmel asked Anya.

“Let me think for a moment,” she said, trying to ignore the nagging, unfounded fears that had settled in the back of her mind.

She closed her eyes and envisioned the route in her mind. She had woken that morning with it fresh in her memory, but with no reason or explanation for why it was there. She had no certainty that this was the correct route through the mountains except that she simply knew that it was.

“This passageway,” she said, pointing to the correct one. “It should lead down to an underwater lake. The water level will be higher than the stone bridge over it, so we may have to swim.”

As they started down the corridor Altazar commented, “I sure would like to know how you know all this, Anya.”

“So would I,” replied Anya in a serious tone, “So would I.” Anya was afraid to say more because she didn’t want to cause the two men to worry.

When they emerged from the corridor and arrived at the underground lake. Anya was proven only half right about the level of the water. The water was over the level of the bridge, but there was a small rowboat tied to a large rock by a thick length of string.

“Wait a moment,” cautioned Gimmel, “If there is a boat here, then that must mean that these caves are inhabited, or at least used frequently.”

“But who?” asked Altazar, “You said the trolls were run out of here a long time ago.”

“They were. Do you know anything of this, Anya?”

“I wish I did, Gimmel, but I’m as clueless as you two. I only know the way to the other side. Whatever else I may have known about these caves is lost to me now.”

“So what do we do?” asked Altazar.

“I don’t want to swim if I don’t have to. Let’s try the boat,” suggested Gimmel.

Upon further inspection the boat proved to be smaller much less buoyant than any designed to human specifications. Altazar, the largest and heaviest of the three, could sit in it without his pack, but any extra weight would lower the sides of the boat below the level of the water. Obviously they could not just pile into the vessel and bail out.

Anya called out, "What's this?"

She called their attention to another rope that was tied to the far end of the boat. It trailed through the water toward the other side of the lake.

"Pull on it," suggested Altazar.

When she pulled on the rope the boat moved, and the large man had to grab the rope on this side and haul it back in.

"A ferry!" exclaimed Gimmel.

"We have to go across one at a time?" asked Altazar in a cautious voice.

"I know it's not the best we could hope for," reassured Gimmel, "but look at the currents in the water farther out. The rain has really churned them up. Swimming would be disastrous."

"So who goes first?" asked Anya.

"I will," said Altazar, trying to reclaim his post as the leader of this expedition, "so that I can take care of whatever is on the other side. I will go across, then come back, and then go across again. If I don't come back, you and Gimmel are to leave at once."

"What?" they both shouted.

"We'll never abandon one of our own," insisted Anya.

"Besides," offered Gimmel, "We wouldn't be able to make it up the climb without you. This trip is one way."

Altazar sighed, resigning himself to the truth of their words.

"Fine," he said to Gimmel, "I go first. I'll tug on this rope three times when I get there and you can start pulling the boat back. Send Anya second with my bag and hers; she shouldn't be alone for very long. You come last. Is that ok?"

He paused to make sure that it was ok. Gimmel nodded.

"We'll need to use more than one lantern at a time so that we will all have light but that's ok because we have plenty of extra oil. Let just try to do this as quickly as possible."

Altazar began pulling the boat across the lake along the rope and the light of his lamp soon disappeared into the distance.

“Judging by the length of the rope on this side,” said Gimmel, “we are going to be waiting for a while before I feel those three tugs. Why don’t you read some?”

Gimmel sat at the edge of the water with his hand on the rope as it was pulled after the boat. He took the old, worn tome from one of the bags and tossed it to Anya.

“Thanks,” she replied. “Why do you let him take charge like that? Isn’t he your student or something?”

“Yes, that is why I let him take charge. It is the only way he can learn some things. Besides, in a journey such as this one, it is unwise to argue over leadership and decisions. He has a good head on his shoulders, and I trust him.”

Anya toyed with the tome without opening it.

At last she said, “He reminds me of someone.”

“Is that so, who?”

“Of the man I saw when I looked into Lokun’s eyes that night.”

“The night you conceived?”

“Yes.” Again they sat for a moment in silence. “Lokun... isn’t a bad man,” she said.

“I know. Do you know what chains him?”

“Yes.”

“The umajinn are very terrible. They say that death is the only release.”

Gimmel didn’t say anymore. Anya cried silently to herself, weeping for the man that she had never known. She cracked the cover of the old tome and read a few pages. She had stopped crying by the time the rope ran out. Gimmel felt the three tugs, and soon it was her turn to cross the lake.

The lake was dark and boring. Altazar had started pulling her across after Gimmel had tugged three times on the rope, so she had nothing to do but sit and wait.

She poured over the text written on the cracked pages of the tome. She could hardly make sense of any of it. There were precautions against these things, warning against others, and reminders about all sorts of nonsense. There was an entire section devoted to talking about dreams. She had thought that she understood that part, at least, but soon the book seemed to be speaking about magic again and Anya could not find where it had changed subjects. Talk of colors

coinciding with certain actions felt like they should be familiar but she couldn't place the concept in her mind. She had not learned much from the book, but now had many questions to ask Gimmel when he too crossed the lake. She looked up from her studies and saw Altazar standing on the shore pulling her toward him.

"Did you have to slay many dangerous beasts on this side of the great ocean, dear?" Anya asked as she stepped out of the boat and onto the rock ledge.

"Nothing I couldn't handle with a few dirty looks," retorted Altazar with similar wit as he lifted the two bags from the boat.

He made a great show of carrying the bags over and setting them next to Anya. Soon the boat was on its way back to pick up the last member of their party.

"So, which way are we going now?" asked the woodsman as he plopped down next to her. "You have fewer choices this time."

He gestured to the three tunnels that lead out of the chamber. One slanted slightly upwards, one slightly downward, and the other seemed level.

"That one," she said, pointing to the path that led down. "We will follow it for a while without much more to impede our progress. It forks off several times but I know the way."

"To tell you the truth," he offered, "I am sure that Gimmel and I are pretty worn out. Any chance we'll be stopping for a rest soon?"

"Yes, I have a place picked out. The rest of the way to it is mostly downhill and there won't be any more climbing. I believe it may take a while walking, but it is worth it unless you want to spend three nights in here instead of two."

"Alright, you just tell us where to go then. I'm sure your camping spot will be just fine."

Altazar moved to watch the rope as the last of the slack was pulled tight. In a moment the rope jerked three times and he started hauling Gimmel over. Anya flipped aimlessly through her tome.

Truthfully she was as worn and tired as the men were. In addition to the climbing she also felt severe pangs of weakness whenever she thought about the correct route through the tunnels. It was as if the effort of remembering the way was sapping the strength right out of her. She also felt hungry more often than she should have. She wanted to blame it on her condition, but it shouldn't make that much difference this early in her term. Still, she wanted to eat and

drink a little extra just in case. After eating a piece of bread and drinking a few swallows of water, she sat back to catch a quick nap.

*

*

*

Waves of green light flowed around her. A vast array of blue energy flowed around in front of her. She felt the ebb of the power move around her. She reached out toward one of the arcs of green lightening that formed a wall behind her. As her hand grazed it something happened. Her hand, which was not a hand but a shimmering wave of energy itself, engulfed the green pillar and pulled it away from its anchors. Her energy folded around it engulfing it, eating it. At last she had completely consumed it and a familiar voice called to her.

*

*

*

"Anya," urged Gimmel, "wake up. Come on. Altazar says we have a walk ahead of us."

"I'm sorry," she apologized, "I must have dozed off for a moment, but I am feeling much better now."

"That's ok, we are all tired. Give me your hand and I'll help you up."

She let him help her to her feet and she slung her pack around her shoulders.

"Come on you two," called Altazar from the tunnel, "I'm looking forward to making camp."

As Anya followed Gimmel out of the room the section of wall that she had been leaning against disintegrated and fell to the ground in a mound of dust. This, however, passed unnoticed.

They soon caught up with the woodsman. He was stooping, looking at something on the ground.

"What'd you find?" inquired Gimmel.

"This sand is fine and well worn," Altazar explained.

"More evidence of civilization down here," agreed Gimmel, "Let's be on our guard, ok?"

"Yeah," the other two chimed.

The walk was long but uneventful. There were a slew of twists and turns with passages shooting off in all directions, but at each intersection Anya invariably knew the right path. Her directions led them on a winding trail that seemed to spiral downward.

"Well, I'm glad this part was all downhill," rejoiced Altazar, "because my feet are killing me right now."

“We’ve been walking for hours at least. Being in this cave destroys my sense of time,” griped Gimmel.

“Calm down boys,” said Anya, “we’re here.”

Just then they all stepped into a round room with only one exit: the one they came in.

“This is a few yards off of our rout. We should have gone right instead of left at that last fork, but I brought us here to make camp.”

“I like it,” said Altazar as he sat down and removed his pack, “one exit makes it defensible, and we can be sure that it isn’t a major traffic area.”

Gimmel did likewise and said, “Plenty of room and a comfortable floor. I’m not complaining.”

“I’m glad you boys like it,” she said sincerely.

She had not been sure of what the room was like, only that there was a room here. She was glad now that her hopes had not proved to be in vain. The three of them pulled blankets out of their packs and laid them out on the floor. Altazar piled the firewood that he had brought in the middle of the room and began work with his flint and steel.

“Are these caves ventilated well?” he asked.

His question was directed at Gimmel but it was Anya who answered.

She said, “Yes, there are many cracks in the ceilings, a fire should not be a problem.”

“Thanks.”

Gimmel hung an extra blanket over the entrance to keep in the warmth and before long the three of them were feasting on roast rabbit and drinking some fine ale. Their camaraderie, however, was short lived because they were all very tired and worn-out. As they crawled each to his or her respective bed, the notion of keeping any type of watch or guard was completely forgotten.

Na emikto mifole lokun, larkim miwurnu vod ke halin.
And as I watched the dead soul, darkness consumed it from within.
--- Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku, Book of Dreams

Lokun, trapped within the confines of his mind, struggled for control. The umajinn sat now in the throne, which was now black. Lokun lay on the floor before him chained by the demon's power. As he pushed and fought harder he met only with more fierce resistance. He felt powerless as the umajinn controlled his thoughts and actions.

"Let me go, you honorless devil!" Lokun screamed pulling against his chains.

"Ah now, temper, temper..." chided the ironclad figure. "It was that attitude that got you here in the first place. Was it not?"

"It was you who made me kill all those people, wasn't it!" accused Lokun.

"That isn't the half of it, my boy. Come now; look into your memories. What else have I made you do?"

All at one Lokun's eyes were opened to his past. Memories flooded into him, memories of his actions while possessed by the umajinn. They started recent and progressed backwards. Horrified, he watched himself kill Koluk, skin Kane, and slaughter the council and their maidens. He saw himself kill the messenger that had not been sent after him, but had been sent to warn Gno of a possible assassination. He saw himself read the note that the messenger had had with him but he saw that the words on the note had been changed in his mind by the demon within his head. He screamed as he saw how he had been manipulated and twisted. Still the memories flowed farther back and at last he saw himself standing triumphantly over the body of a young harem girl in one of the rooms of the palace.

"No!" he screamed, as the realization came to him. "You made me rape that poor girl and then you wiped it from my memory!"

Lokun screamed and thrashed but could not free himself from the shackles that bound him. He had been guilty. He had not been

framed. Everything within him reeled against the thought. What had he become? How could he do such things?

No. Those were the thoughts that the umajinn was forcing on him. Whenever he relaxed, the demon changed his thoughts. He couldn't relax. His thoughts were all that he had anymore.

"No! You killed them. It wasn't me. I still have my honor. You are the one to blame," Lokun cried to the umajinn.

"Oh come now," said the demon calmly. "You don't think that resisting me will do you any good now, do you? Perhaps you should have resisted when you picked up the ceremonial knife in Sensei Gno's study. You held it for only a moment, but that was enough. When the dagger came into your possession it was a simple task for me to fortify myself in it. Now I have taken your body and you are my weapon. How does it feel to be such a perfect instrument of death?"

"I will beat you! This is my body and my mind. Get out!"

"Tsk, Tsk, Lokun..." the umajinn started to say, but Lokun interrupted him.

"Don't call me that! My name is Soyetsu Daki: Nephew of Sensei Gno and heir to the School of *Komakayin*."

The umajinn rose forcefully and stared down towards his captive.

"Do not upset me, pathetic mortal. I am Chaos' right hand. He has granted me dominion over you. Sensei Soyetsu Gno is dead and you, his so-called heir, have the kaio-su-nat. The school is gone. You may be Soyetsu Daki, but I am Lokun, servant of Chaos, head of the umajinn. Fear and respect me, and your inevitable death may not be as painful as it would be otherwise."

Soyetsu Daki stood and pulled as close to the demon as possible, stretching the spiritual shackles to their limit.

"I fear nothing, and I never respect pathetic flunkies that can do nothing but lap at the heels of their master. You have a right to the name Dead Soul. It is what you will become very soon."

"Enough! Be gone. I tire of your drivel."

The umajinn, whose name had been Lokun since the beginning of time, waved his hand and Soyetsu Daki: the honorable samurai and student of *Komakayin*, was cast back into the inner tormenting depths of his own soul.

*

*

*

Lokun awoke and smiled to himself. Daki had been a difficult soul to corrupt. He had had to take many small steps during the process and at several points he had thought that the noble samurai had been about to break free. Still, Lokun, in the thousands of years since the Great War between Meku and Chaos, had only failed to corrupt a host once. Daki had not been the most difficult, but had proven most annoying. There were still weak spots in Lokun's hold on him, but he was sure that he could hold him now. His hold upon the mortal would strengthen with time.

He rose and emerged from his tent inside the Emperor's Pass. It was still pouring rain. Chaos said that someone was using the Tides to try to aid Anya's travel. The anagers couldn't fly well in this weather and so they had had to resort to ground travel. One of the Royal Guards approached him.

"Sir, a courier brought a letter for you this morning," he said, handing him a rolled up sheet of parchment.

Lokun took the letter and nodded wordlessly, dismissing the soldier. He broke the imperial seal and unfolded the parchment.

Lokun, she may pass the mountains. Go to Darkvale. Your Lord, Chaos

Lokun made one simple effort of will and the note disintegrated, its ashes blowing off in the wind.

He picked up his cloak from inside his tent and began walking west, along the muddy road.

*

*

*

Altazar awoke and knew then that something was wrong. He had fallen asleep on a floor of mud and dirt, but the floor beneath him now felt like hard stone. He tried to open his eyes but realized that they were already open and that the darkness of the cave was impenetrable. He cast about for his pack but it was not at his side. His sword wasn't in its scabbard. He was still wearing his clothes, but all the pockets had been emptied. In casting about for his belongings his hands came into contact with a cold steel bar. He moved his hand to one side and another: two more steel bars. He was in a cage. He checked the walls and judged his cell to be about six feet square. He could not reach the ceiling with his hands. He removed his scabbard and held it above him, prodding for a roof. He extended it almost as far above his head as possible before it made contact with something solid above. The walls of his cell were all stone except for the one barred

wall. He could find no evidence of a door in the bars and concluded that either the entire barred wall was capable of opening, or that he had been deposited in here from above. Now that he had assessed his situation, Altazar had a moment to worry about his companions. If they had all been captured, which was the most likely case, then they were completely at the mercy of their captors and nothing could be done. However, if one or both of the others had escaped then the situation would be different. If both Gimmel and Anya had escaped, then they would either rescue him or proceed without him, assuming that he could take care of himself. Until he had further information he would work under the worst hypothesis. He dared not call out the names of his companions. His captors may not even know that he was not alone, and he would be giving them away. He could, however, safely try to make contact with his unknown jailers and, if possible, free himself.

“Hello, is anyone there?” he called.

“Sonny, is that you?” Gimmel’s voice replied from through the bars.

“Old man! I thought I was alone for a moment.”

“So did I.”

Through this short exchange they were able to establish several things. They both realized that it would be best not to use their names, and that neither of them knew if Anya was here.

“Do you know how we got here?” Altazar asked.

“No clue,” Gimmel replied, “I went to sleep and then woke up here. But, whoever put us here probably did it for a reason, so I expect that they will show up at some point to enlighten us.”

“What do you think we did, trespass or something?”

“I expect so, I had no idea that these caves were inhabited, but the boat should have made us more wary. It never expected to meet any hostility down here.”

“Yeah, we got caught up in having a good time. That’s my fault, I should have been more careful.”

“That’s ok,” reassured Gimmel. “We were both at fault.”

“Yeah, thanks. I’d still like to know who captured us and what we did to get thrown in here,” Altazar mused.

A squeaky voice from above them said, “We are the Gnomes and you desecrated a holy temple and have been thrown into holding until the elders decide your fate.”

“I guess that answers that,” Altazar grumped.

*

*

*

Meanwhile Anya awoke huddled against the wall of the Gnome’s Chamber of Worship. She had had the strangest dreams that seemed to have something to do with the walls of the cave shielding her from some kind of harm and was just about to see if Gimmel or Altazar were awake when she noticed something peculiar about the cave. The sound was so pervasive that at first it seemed not like sound at all. She kept silent, fearing the worst. At last, huddling in the crevice in which she had slept, her eyes adjusted and she saw the faint outlines of small, humanoid creatures standing in a circle around the edge of the room. She now identified the sound as the low and constant hum of religious chants. She saw no trace of either of the woodsmen and for a moment feared that they had been killed. How would she ever make her way to Darkvale if they had? Tears of despair began to run down her cheeks as she started to lose hope.

Somewhere, from deep within her mind, something inside of her took control and forced her to focus. Anya, she told herself, you can do this. They have to be alive. You can find them and save them.

She knew that she could command *la maj*. Gimmel and Altazar had accounted the story of her raising him from the dead and she also suspected that it was responsible for her knowing the way through the caves. What she did not understand was how to control it. She had had the opportunity to read some of Gimmel’s book but it had not been of much help. Much of it had been warnings against the use of magic unless absolutely necessary and how it was a gift that was not to be abused. The one section that had started to be useful had been a complete mystery to Anya except for one small comment about dreaming.

It had said that calling up magic was very much like dreaming and that, in some instances, amateurs of the art accidentally called up the powers while dreaming. Anya did not have the ability to force herself to sleep or to control her dreams, and thus that avenue left her few options. Still, in the room before her a strange ceremony was taking place. If she had been able to understand the Gnome language then she would have recognized it as a cleansing ceremony to purge the residual presence of the two infidels. Not having this knowledge, however, she failed to overhear of her friends’ capture. She watched the ceremony come to a final breathtaking finale and then the Gnomes

began to leave the room. She wished fervently that there were something she could do.

As the last of the Gnomes walked out the door something pulled at her mind. It was only a slight tug, but Anya seized hold upon the feeling, pulled it to her, and let it run within her.

All at once the colored shafts of energy that she now recognized from her dreams surrounded her. The green and blue were most prevalent, but she saw faint shimmers of red and white as well. She recognized the scene as a pattern of the room that she was in. The green formed the walls, floor and ceiling. Faint, near-transparent, white formed the air before her. Blue trickled through the green in the distance, shaping the paths of various underground streams and lakes. The gnomes were red blobs topped with white, but those two colors were harder to see and seemed somewhat incomplete. Within *la maj* she followed the Gnomes but her body stayed in the safety of the crevice. After a few feet Anya began to feel the tug of her body's spirit, yearning for the return of its binding *maj*. Suddenly she snapped back and the vision was gone. The walls were stone. The cave was black. The colors were gone.

In her mind she heard a voice say, "That is how you do it, my lovely rose."

Mentally she responded, asking the voice to identify itself, but no answer was forthcoming. Still, she cherished the experience that she had just had and longed to feel the rush of it again. The raw power that she had felt was amazing, but the ecstasy of it had come from a different source. The joy was from the sheer order and correctness that she had felt when looking into the map of the world. She must find it now, she told herself, while it was fresh on her mind.

She closed her eyes and focused, searching for that feeling that she had found before. Relentlessly she called to it, but, though it seemed just around the corner of her mind, it would retreat behind the next as she approached. Her mind was feeling fatigued as it raced to catch this ever-elusive thought and at last she relaxed and gave up the chase. She silently went over an ancient prayer to Meku that she often recited to herself when she wanted to relax or become more comfortable.

Now that she was not looking for it, as quickly as before the feeling was there, and this time it was much easier to catch and hold. The colors once again replaced the world and Anya gazed again on the

map of creation. Carefully she pulled away from the scene and focused on seeing this section of the mountains from a distance. The sections of red and white that she now recognized as souls and minds were faint and difficult to make out from a distance, but one section of the catacombs seemed to draw more interest than the rest. Her instincts paid off and, in what appeared to be several jail cells; she saw two red/white blotches. One spirit she recognized and suddenly remembered. She remembered the dream in which she called that spirit from the dead. That power, she knew, was beyond her now and had been the product of someone other than herself.

She had found Gimmel and Altazar, but what was she to do now? She tried to reach forth her own maj towards them, but encountered severe pain if she tried to move to far away from her physical body. As she interacted with this realm she was beginning to learn more and more about how it related to the physical world. The maj was the force that bound the spirit of people and things to their physical bodies. If she affected the maj, she affected both the spirit and the body. Her maj was able to reach out and change the others. She understood the colors easily enough as well. Green must be the maj of earth and nature. Blue was that of the element of water. She assumed then that red was fire and life and white was breath and mind. Magic, then, was simply the act of affecting these colors to cause whatever it was that you wanted to happen.

Anya, too tired from her journey into the magic world, snapped back to her body. She finally understood what the tome had meant when it had referred to the other tomes. The Book of Stones, Flames, Tides, and Breath: they all contained instructions for using one of the types of maj to affect the world. But all that Anya had was the introduction. Now she knew what maj was, but she had no idea how to use it.

Doubt racked her brain as she struggled with what to do. She at least had ascertained the location of her friends. She thanked Meku that they were alive. She had no plan to free them, but she decided that getting to them would be a good first step. She got up from her hiding place and walked to the door, keeping her ears perked for the sound of any passing Gnomes. Deftly she made her way by memory down the corridors towards her friends, knowing that if she didn't rescue them, then there would be no hope for the baby that had begun to grow slowly inside her.

Altazar and Gimmel had reserved themselves to silence. It was the silence that came when one who expected to live forever was introduced to the notion that his life's end may be upon him. It was the silence of an old man who was torn between planning a futile escape and trying to prepare himself for the inevitable.

The gnomes hadn't deigned to talk with them except to tell the charges brought against them for trespassing upon and defiling their holy ground. All attempts to plead ignorance had fallen on deaf ears, and their only hope, as far as they could see, was that the elders would be more reasonable than the guards had been.

Time passed and after several hours a guard arrived. They heard his footfalls echo through the cave. The darkness was ever pervasive, causing both the captives to rely solely on their other senses.

"The boss told me to bring you heathens some lunch," he said and they heard the sound of him placing something in front of their cells.

He finished, "Eat up. I hope it'll be your last, foul surface demons."

Altazar reached through the bars to inspect the proffered food. He heard the gnome's steps echo down the corridor as he left, but they were interrupted by the sound of something heavy hitting stone. Altazar's ears perked up and he became more alert. He correctly identified the sound as the body of the guard falling to the floor.

Moments later Anya's voice drifted to him through the bars.

"Altazar, Gimmel, thank Meku I found you," she breathed in a low whisper.

Altazar and Gimmel could barely contain the excitement that came from hearing her voice.

"Anya!" exclaimed Gimmel, in a much-too-loud whisper. "How did you find us?"

"What did you do to the guard?" asked Altazar at the same time.

Here Anya felt a sudden fear. She did not want Gimmel and Altazar to fear her because of her power. Anya decided it best not to speak of her new abilities until she knew more about them herself.

“I can see better in this darkness than either of you,” she explained, “I followed some of the gnomes after I heard them talking about their prisoners.”

“And the guard?” prompted the young woodsman.

Anya had to think of something quick. The truth was that she didn’t know what had happened to the guard either. She had been following the pattern of maj down towards her two friends when she had seen him coming towards her in the corridor. The gnome had simply fallen as soon as he had seen her. She had checked to see if he was alive but his body was as cold as if it had been dead for hours or days.

“I hit him while his back was turned,” she lied.

“Well, do you see any way to open these cells?” Gimmel asked.

Anya looked at the bars that formed one side of their prison. There were no doors and the iron seemed as though it was all one single non-welded piece. Anya closed her eyes and looked upon the maj of the bars. The bright green of the metal was sunk deep into the dark green of the stone. Above them, however, the green of the stone opened up as the only exits from the dank cells.

“Anya?” Gimmel asked, after a considerable amount of time had passed in silence.

“No doors here. There are holes in the rock above you,” she said.

“How are we supposed to escape then?” Altazar asked.

Gimmel spoke up, “Perhaps you should leave, Anya,” he said, “Make your way to Darkvale alone and try to get to Neriya.”

“Gimmel,” she replied, “we all know that I won’t have a chance without you. I believe I may be able to get you two out of there. Stand back away from the bars.”

Altazar protested, “What can you do to break us free? Did you find some tools or something?”

Gimmel felt a change in the air and atmosphere of the room and called to his pupil.

“Altazar, remember what you saw her do to me. Get away from the bars!” in his excitement he yelled, loud enough so that if the Gnomes had not heard them before they heard them now.

Both the woodsmen retreated to the farthest reaches of their cells and waited, fearing the worst. They were not disappointed.

*

*

*

Anya delved once again into the realm of magic, gazing upon the many colors and shades of creation, but this time, instead of just looking around, she meant to change things. Behind a thin wall of green mesh were two red and white lives that were confined by that green. The power of her own maj pulsed around her, filling her with energy. Her maj reached out towards the maj of the bars. The spirit of the metal was linked to the bars with the green pulse of earth. Anya's arm swirled in color and changed from red to green as it touched the foreign maj. Power, pain, light, and ecstasy tore at the Neriya girl as her essence tried to reject the contact. Still, despite the resistance, she held fast to the spirit of the bars and began to pull it away. The bars, however, did not surrender their maj easily. All forms of pain and horror assaulted the frail girl that tried to unmake the cold metal. Anya's soul would have collapsed under the attack, except that she cared not for her own safety but that of her child. Tearing cracks and thunderous snaps assaulted her ears and, slowly, the bars began to give up their very soul. As the final thread of maj separated from its anchors Anya felt herself slipping into unconsciousness.

*

*

*

For the two woodsmen, unaware of Anya's inward struggle, the event was somewhat anticlimactic. After a few minutes of waiting, huddled at the back of their cells, they both heard Anya fall to the floor. Without even thinking both of them ran to her side, stepping in the fresh pile of sand that used to be the prison bars. Altazar made it to her side first, then found and lit her lamp. The light blinded the two men for a moment as their eyes adjusted to the brightness.

"What happened to the bars?" asked Altazar, looking back towards their cells.

"I don't know," answered the old man, not noticing the piles of fresh sand. "Let's get Anya out of here before the gnomes show up."

"Too late," came Altazar's reply as Gimmel turned to see a hoard of tiny soldiers brandishing spears in the tunnel before them.

The creatures snarled and hissed, waving their weapons through the air, but did not advance. A commotion started in the back of the throng and the gnome soldiers started to move to either side of the cave. A very old gnome sat upon a chair high above the heads of the others, carried by poles on the shoulders of four servants. He wore a thick, flowing cape and odd designs were painted on his face with

mud. The servants carried him out of the throng of soldiers and stood, holding him aloft before the two woodsmen and their small, but powerful, companion.

"I am Oktu, High Elder of the Mountain Gnomes," rasped the faint voice of the man, "You have defiled the temple and killed one of our own. My people demand justice. How do you plead?"

Altazar was the first to speak up.

"We were just passing through," he explained.

If the elder's voice rose in anger, they couldn't tell.

"Passing through? Do not insult me with your lies. Since you refuse to be reasonable I decree that you will see trial by combat. Choose your opponent."

Altazar hesitated, "Don't you mean 'Choose our weapon?'"

"Nay," replied the Gnome, "You must choose your opponent. Now hurry or default."

Altazar sized up the elder. The gnome obviously had not moved from his seat in a long time. He might be crippled from the waist down. Altazar was sure that after he picked his opponent, they would pick theirs, and Anya was in no shape to combat anyone. However, if the gnome elder couldn't walk then the girl may have a chance. The gnomes probably thought him too stupid to realize that the Elder was a viable choice in this decision. He resolved to show them that he was cleverer than he seemed.

"Very well, Oktu, you may be our opponent."

Altazar expected to see a look of surprise but was greatly disappointed. The old gnome simply smiled.

"How very foolish, human man. I will now choose the contest."

"What?" Altazar asked. "I thought that you would choose one of us as your opponent."

Oktu rasped a low, throaty laugh. "Those are not our ways, foolhardy one. You chose your opponent and now I, as your opponent, choose the game. I will match with each of you in the game of the ancients: Go. Bring the board!"

Altazar fell into a disappointed silence. He felt Gimmel's hand on his shoulder.

"All will be well, my apprentice. I have taught you the game well. We will not die here in these caverns," his long-time friend and mentor said, trying to comfort him.

“But master,” Altazar protested, “I played right into his hand. I should have picked the strongest warrior so that we would meet in physical combat.”

“You had no way to know, my son. The girl is awake, but delirious. I fear that the magic nearly consumes her fragile mind with each use.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a cheer as two gnomes set a large stone Go board in front of the elder.

The elder spoke. “Now the trials will begin.”

Gimmel looked up from tending to Anya.

“Trials, more than one?” he asked.

The elder paused. At last he replied, “Of course. Each of you must pass a trial. If you achieve victory then we will show you out of the mountains. Those of you that do not will face death.”

“But this girl, she cannot play you in Go. She is barely conscious!”

“Then I will try her for her murder last. The brute is first,” the elder said, indicating Altazar. “I grant you a nine stone advantage. Play or forfeit your life.”

The gnomes provided a human-sized chair from somewhere and Altazar sat. It was true, Gimmel had taught him the game well, but he was far from being a master in any sense of the word. He accepted the advantage and placed his first stone, and the game began.

The game preceded quickly, both players marking their territory and vying for position. Altazar tried as best he could but it was not good enough. As the game progressed he lost small advantages and, though it was not readily apparent, knew he was behind with no hope of catching up.

Gimmel tended to Anya’s wounds, preferring not to watch the game. She had hit her head on the wall as she had collapsed and her hair was matted with blood in a few spots. She was awake, but incoherent. He knew of some herbs that might help, but had no idea where his medicine bag was. He looked up just as the two combatants were counting up the score.

Altazar had played well. In fact, he had played better than Gimmel had ever seen him play. With his life riding on the game, that was in no way surprising. Altazar had taken more territory, but Oktu had captured more men. As they counted points, both men were neck

and neck. At the final count, however, Altazar's nine-stone advantage proved to be the deciding factor. Altazar had won by one stone.

Oktu bowed his head forward.

"Valiantly fought, you are free to go," he said to Altazar. He shouted to a group of guards, "Show this man to the western exit."

Altazar protested, "I'm not leaving without my friends."

"Your friends have not yet stood trial and it is likely that the girl will not defeat me. Considering that she is to be tried for murder the old one is tried only for trespass, I would accept her life in exchange for his freedom," offered the elder.

"Never!" shouted Gimmel, "Clear the board, I will show you how to play the game."

They cleared the board and Gimmel placed his first stone in silence, ignoring the advantage that the old gnome offered him. This game proceeded much more quickly than had the last one and it was soon evident who the better player was. The gnome was a good tactician and strategist. He knew how to take and hold territory, but it was obvious that he had had no equals or betters against whom he could perfect his skills. Gimmel was a Go master. The game, the positions, the territories: all played out in his head long before the actual stones were laid. The gnome suffered defeat after defeat on land that had seemed a few moves away from being secure. At the end of the game Gimmel had won by fifty-seven stones.

The gnome didn't seem concerned. He said, "I care not that petty criminals go free, the murderess will pay her price. Clear the board for the next game and take these men to the exit."

Gimmel was appalled as the guards carried him and Altazar away and he watched the gnomes prop Anya's semi-conscious form in the chair across from the elder.

"You animals!" he cried, struggling, but the throng of gnomes was too much for him and his apprentice. "She is just a girl! You have no right!"

But they were forced down the tunnels by the throng of gnome warriors and, after a while, resigned themselves to their fate.

"It will be all right," said Gimmel, "She is resourceful and the magic protects her. We will wait for her outside while we make our plans."

"What plans?"

"The plans to rescue her if she doesn't come out, of course."

*

*

*

Anya drifted in the realm of magic, tossed around like a rag doll. Her maj was weak and powerless, barely able to keep her alive. Green swirled around her now. It was the only color she could make out. Performing the magic had been much more difficult than she had even feared. Out of the green something seemed to take shape. Anya focused on it. It appeared to be an eye. A swirl formed next to it and then coalesced also into an eye. The two massive orbs stared, unblinking, at her from the murky mists. Below the eyes a mouth opened up into a wide smile.

“Help me!” Anya cried, not knowing if she wanted the face’s help or someone else’s help.

“Do not fear,” the mouth screamed. The sound reverberated through Anya’s every being and mind recoiled into unconsciousness.

*

*

*

Anya fell forward onto the Go board without placing a single stone. Guards rushed to her side to support her but stopped dead in their tracks as they saw the figure emerge from the shadows behind her.

Earth addressed the gnomes, “I believe you have something of mine. I would like it back.”

The gnomes fell backwards from the power of the voice, and the servants lost their hold on the elder’s chair. He toppled to the ground and lay, sprawled on the floor, staring up at the incarnation.

Earth gently lifted Anya’s frail body and held her in his strong arms like a small child. He walked towards the tunnels that led to the west exit as gnomes fell over one another trying to get out of his path. He was weakened by his battle with Fire, but quickly he made his way west trying to catch up with the two woodsmen who were being led to a trap at the hands of Master.

Na sham ludin ezomu ke vo'd nerin cerin lanyafu shefugeru.
And when the stone bows to its true master the rose will never wilt.
--Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku, Book of Flames

Master paced angrily back and forth in front of the western exit of the gnome caves. Furious, he struck the Stone of Meku against a tree, chipping some bark but leaving the stone unharmed.

"Damn you, you infernal device," he roared at it. "Damn you!"

He had been unable to use the stone ever since he arrived, and all his efforts to seal the cave with it had come to nothing. He was unsure of the exact time that it had ceased to function, as he had not used it since sealing the entrance on the other side of the West Mountains. He looked up to the large, black cavern in the cliff face. He had hoped to simply trap the girl within the caves so that Lokun could finish the job at his leisure. Still, infuriated, he paced, occasionally swearing under his breath.

Earth trudged onward, winding his way through the dank catacombs that rose steadily upward to the surface. His weakened powers now devoted themselves completely to countering the magic of the Stone. He struggled against it to keep the exit open. His strength was now so depleted that he could no longer walk through the stone walls. He was now the same as any of his children: relying only on his physical strength. With each new step the battle within him became harder and harder. Anya's lithe form began to feel heavy, a burden on his arms, but still he trudged on. Soon he would emerge and deal with the mortal that so foolishly tried to use the power of Earth against the incarnation himself.

Altazar and Gimmel were pushed for hours by the throng of Gnomes. In the dark they stumbled and fell, each time being forced to their feet and pushed forward again. They lost any sense of direction in the pitch-blackness of the caverns, but after what seemed to them an eternity, the darkness gave way to piercing light streaming towards

them from the outside. It was moonlight, but their eyes were now super-sensitive from their journey through the caves. The gnomes stopped in the shadows and pushed them forward. The two men were happy to be rid of their guides and scrambled up the mud-caked stairway of rocks, collapsing at last on the wet ground outside. The trek had been a strain on them both and they were bruised and scratched from falls and stumbles. They lay on the forest floor panting, thankful that they had made it out alive.

“Do you think Anya will be able to escape on her own?” rasped Altazar.

Before Gimmel could reply a voice came from above.

“It doesn’t matter. If she does escape, I will be waiting for her.”

Altazar looked up and caught the grim smile of Master before the blow fell. The woodsman lost consciousness and slumped to the ground. Gimmel managed to climb to his feet before Master could reach him, but he was in no condition to put up much resistance. He, too, fell to the ground, his mind slipping away into itself.

Master secured the ropes on his victims’ legs and arms as tightly as he could. He tied them to a large tree along the edge of the road and instructed the two angels that had joined him not to harm them until he had taken care of the girl. Their lives were meaningless, but hers was priceless. The girl would surely be looking for her friends, and when she found them Master was going to make sure that it was too late.

As the Element of Earth walked through the caverns towards the exit, he noticed movement in the small girl that he carried. He stopped, eager to let himself rest, and let her sit on the cave floor. Anya rubbed her eyes, trying to focus.

“Where are we, Altazar? And where is Gimmel?” she asked.

Earth set a hand on the girl’s knee and spoke gently.

“I am not Altazar, my child, but I know where your friends are and they will not be safe for very long unless we rescue them,” he said.

She jumped, surprised that he was not who she had expected, and squinted into the darkness.

“Who are you and what have the gnomes done to them?”

Earth shook his head and replied, "The gnomes let you and your friends go free, but a man, a very evil man, has set a trap for you outside the exit of this cave. As for your first question: I am just a friend who can help you to better use the powers that you have attained."

"And your name?" she asked again.

"You may call me Udin. Now, do you wish to know how to use the powers of maj without draining yourself completely?"

"Udin?" she repeated, "So you are the great god of Earth."

"Aye, very wise, now listen and learn."

Anya looked around the cavern and said, "I want to rescue my friends. Where are they?"

"All in good time, my child," Earth chided. "You must first learn what I have to teach, if you want to save them."

Anya hated to admit it, even to herself, but she was still deathly afraid of these new powers that she had attained. She tensed, telling herself that she must do what she had to in order to save her friends.

"Show me," she said.

"Very well. Close your eyes and enter the realm of maj."

Anya did so and looked around. The scene she saw was similar to the scene she saw every time she did this, except for one thing: standing before her was Earth, just as he had been before. The colors of maj swirled and ebbed around them but Earth was unchanged.

"How do you do that?" she asked.

"Do you mean keeping my physical form in here? I don't have a physical form. I appear to mortals in whatever form I please, and that form will remain constant. Were you to see the power of my personal maj, the sight would likely blind you."

"Oh, am I really talking here?"

"No, I can sense the verbal thoughts from the maj of your mind. I then project messages into your mind and make them seem like speech. Now, first lesson, do you understand the colors of this realm?"

What followed was a most intense lesson in the practice of magic and Anya lost track of time as Earth showed her the vast secrets of magic. She learned that maj was easier to handle if you tried to work with it and not against it. He taught her how the colors could interact with each other and what effect actions in the magic realm

would have on the physical realm. The knowledge was so much that Anya feared that she would never be able to remember it all. Earth, however, touched each bit of information to her mind, affixing it permanently. And, though Earth's powers were limited to the green forces his knowledge extended far beyond. When they were finished, Anya, who was before just an amateur in the ways of magic, awoke from the dreamlike state a full sorceress. The fear, however, remained. Fear now, not of what she didn't know, but of what she knew she could do.

In the city of Darkvale Marcus chased after Captain Leo in a fruitless effort of trying to persuade him not to set sail.

"But sir, the winds are too strong. We must wait for the storm to die down."

The heavy-set captain spun around angrily and caught Marcus across the chin with a fierce backhand.

"I have had it with your pitiful whining. My father must have been a fool to trust you. All the other ships have left, and I have been branded a coward for following your advice. I have been delayed by you for the last time!"

Marcus reeled more from the words than the strike as Leo turned again and strode up the gangplank onto the ship.

"Prepare to set sail, boys! The half-breed won't be joining us for this trip." Leo shouted to the crew.

Ropes were tied and sails were hoisted. Marcus tried to follow Leo onto the ship but two of the crew pushed him backwards.

"No half-breeds on board, Cap'n's orders," the larger of the two growled as Marcus stumbled backwards and fell onto the hard wood of the pier.

The ship slowly began to pull away from the docks. At that moment he heard a cry from behind him.

"Stop the ship! Stop."

Marcus looked behind him as he rose to his feet and saw a small Neriyu girl running towards him. Following closely behind her was a large Neriyu samurai wielding a fierce, black katana.

Time seemed to stop as the two passed him. The girl reached the end of the pier and made a spectacular jump towards the boat, but the samurai was faster. The sword came across in a downward arc, and as it hit her side, blood splattered across Marcus' face.

*

*

*

Marcus leapt from his bed as the crash of waves slapping the side of the boat woke him from his nightmare. It was the same dream that he had been having ever since he had procured the Tides of Meku. He knew that it must be some message and that he must delay Leo's departure for as long as possible. He only hoped that he would be able to save the young girl. It was true, however, that all the other ships had already left the harbor, electing to brave the storm. Leo had been accused of cowardice but so far the Captain had begrudgingly followed Marcus' persistent requests that they try to wait out the storm. The storm, of course, would let up as soon as Marcus told it to. For the fifth night in a row he left his cabin on the boat and stood on the docks. He stared down the pier, waiting for the girl.

Earth and Anya approached the exit of the West Mountains cautiously.

Earth said, "You find and rescue your friends. Then make your way to Darkvale. I will take care of the man that calls himself Master."

Anya nodded and closed her eyes.

The maj swirled around her and she scanned about, looking for her friends. She soon found two red souls sitting against a tree surrounded by two black holes in the fabric of the maj. It was not the color black, but more like the absence of any other color. She had never seen it before, but Earth had told her that it was caused by creatures of Chaos. Those two must be the angers that he had mentioned. Having found them she scanned further, finding the route she would take after they left the cave. Earth had said that Master was laying a trap for them, so she would have to be ready for anything as she left the cave. At last she opened her eyes.

"I see them," she said.

"Good," the element replied, "Go now!"

At his command Anya shot like an arrow out of the cave mouth and dashed into the woods. The rocks tumbled down from the cliff above. One large boulder crashed down almost on top of her and she leapt to the side, barely getting out of the way in time. She ducked behind a tree in the woods and blinked. For a second the maj was around her and that was all she needed. The green of the forest blended around her and suddenly she was invisible. She wasn't

actually invisible, but she had changed her coloring to match that of the trees and flora. She ignored the cliff behind her, as Earth had instructed, and sprinted down the path towards Altazar and Gimmel.

Earth waited for the rockslide to finish and watched Anya dash into the woods and disappear. He had told Anya that Master had set an ambush but, in truth, Earth had simply tired of his battle with the Stone of Meku. Now, in such close proximity to the stone, his power was somewhat restored. He sunk into the stone wall of the cave.

Moments later he stepped out of the cliff wall to greet a confused Master who had not expected the rockslide. That distraction had given Anya the time she needed. Now, Earth decided to put an end to this battle. He stepped forward and grabbed Master by the neck, lifting him off the ground.

“How dare you wield my powers against me! Now you die!” cried Earth.

“You really are the most foolish of the Elements, Earth. Perhaps you should follow Fire’s lead, and join me.” Master’s voice said.

Earth dropped him and stepped backwards.

“Chaos!” he cried surprised and terrified.

“I am afraid so,” Chaos said, his body reverting back to his usual form, “the girl will find a most unwelcome surprise when she tries to rescue her friends. I fear that Master may kill her... with your power. How fitting...”

Earth turned and started towards the area where the two men were held, intent on stopping Master. Chaos stepped in front of him, but Earth desperately tried to push past.

“We can’t have you rescuing her,” said Chaos as they touched and Earth knew he was finished.

Earth felt a moment’s pain and then disintegrated, leaving nothing but a pile of ashes littering the ground.

Anya saw the two angers in the distance and blinked again, twice in rapid succession. During the first she touched the ropes that held her companions and untied them. During the second she touched a large oak tree. The tree toppled over and the angers scrambled out of the way as it slammed into the ground.

Altazar and Gimmel sprang to their feet when they noticed the commotion. It took a moment for them to realize that their bonds were loose, but when they did they leapt upon the anger closest to them, trying to subdue it. Altazar grabbed one of its long fangs and, after a gruesome snap, armed himself with it. Gimmel pinned it against a tree and it quickly gave up its life to puncture wounds from its own fang.

Seeing the second anger bearing down on them, Anya knelt to the ground and closed her eyes for a more difficult task. The darkness of the remaining anger approached the two men from behind as they finished with the first. Anya put forth her maj and grabbed the maj of a nearby tree. She tore the maj free from its roots and placed it inside the blackness of the anger. She filled the anger with the tree's essence until there was no blackness remaining.

Altazar turned to see the second anger bearing down upon him and his reflexes had no time to do anything except close his eyes. He felt warm goo splash onto his face and all over his body. He wiped it off with a hand. Before him was a large tree that had not been there before. The anger's remains littered the area. Altazar looked around, expecting more trouble.

Anya felt herself deplete from moving the tree and was about to open her eyes when she felt another power. She cast about and saw a huge pillar of green emanating from a soul concealed in the woods. Beside him was the black soul that Anya instantly recognized as Lokun. They were heading towards her. She opened her eyes and jumped to her feet. She staggered for a moment but then began to run toward Altazar and Gimmel. She dropped her illusion of camouflage as she approached them.

"RUN!" she shouted as she passed the befuddled faces of two men whom had never expected to see her again.

The two woodsmen were quick to follow, but no human can match the speed of a Neriya. Anya closed her eyes and suddenly Gimmel and Altazar gained a burst of speed and stamina. They were running fast, but Master and Lokun followed only a few hundred feet behind.

They hit the main road and Anya entered the Realm of Magic while the road was strait. Her body continued running, but she was looking at the two evil souls that pursued her. She saw the green power that Master held flash and she put her attention back to the road

ahead of her. The maj of the road tried to lift up in front of them but she urged it back down.

As Altazar ran he saw the road quake before them but their progress was uninhibited. He marveled at the powers that must be contesting and urged himself to run faster. Anya ran a few feet ahead but, though they were able to match her pace, they were unable to catch up. He stole a glance behind him and saw the two men following. There was no way that they would be able to make it to Darkvale, he thought. It was at least fifty miles, and, though he wasn't sure how fast they were going, he knew it was impossible to run this fast for that long. Wasn't it?

Anya continued to counter the Stone of Meku at each turn and began to twist the magic around herself as Earth had taught her. She had started this contest fatigued by her earlier efforts but each time Master used the stone she was infused with energy. It seemed the artifacts were what gave these powers to her and her powers grew with each use. Again she boosted the speed and stamina of the two woodsmen, infusing them with the life-giving power of water. She could now see the blue flow through them, pushing them at an impossible speed. As they caught up with her she began to change. Her legs grew long and powerful, and her hands and feet became hooves. All four of her legs now pumped in a frantic gallop. Soon Master and Lokun were joined by a dozen black angers flying after them. Anya thought of the child inside her and yelled to her companions.

"Get on my back!" she cried, her words ending in a neigh.

Altazar gazed in wonder at the beautiful black mare that had taken the place of Anya. He lept onto her back in one swift movement and Gimmel followed. Still the earth around them quaked but it seemed the sorceress was effectively countering Master's power. At the magically enhanced horse's pace, Lokun and Master could not stay in hot pursuit forever. Altazar looked back and saw one of the flying Anger's diving towards them. He reached to draw his bow, but it wasn't there. Master had taken his weapons and in the heat of the moment he had forgotten. He stabbed with the fang: his only weapon, hoping to get lucky. The Anger screamed in pain and veered off. Another dived in after it.

“I can’t stop them!” He yelled, hoping one of the others could do something. He held the fang ready. Suddenly he felt himself surge up into the air and the beast missed them. At first Altazar thought that he had been thrown from the horse, then he thought Anya had jumped, but they weren’t falling back to the ground. He glanced to the sides and saw huge black feathered wings pumping through the air. Anya, as a Pegasus, greatly outdistanced the Angers and soon the monsters were lost on the horizon.

“You fool,” yelled Lokun to Master, “You let them get away!”

“Me! You were the one that said we should capture the two woodsmen! That sure didn’t work.” Master cried back at him.

“Insolent mortal! You just didn’t tie the ropes well enough.”

“Idiot. The girl untied them with her magic. You said that she would pass out if she ever used it.”

Lokun’s hand came across Master’s face with such force that it sent him flying through the air.

“Your meddling about with that wretched stone brought the attention of the incarnation. He taught her the ways of maj.”

Master rubbed the side of his face and looked at his hand. There was blood all over it. Rising to his feet he drew the silver Dwarven katana.

“How dare you strike me,” he said, “You will die today.”

Lokun drew his demonic blade and replied, “No, it is you, mortal, who will die.”

“Lads, Lads” came Chaos’ voice from down the road.

Both men began to accuse the other of letting Anya escape.

“Calm down,” Chaos continued, “We know where she’s going, don’t we? Let’s just wait for her there.”

Chaos snapped his fingers and his graven appeared. It was a cousin of the anger only much larger and unable to fly. It could assume other formes, but the change was only cosmetic. Even if it took a shape that had wings it would never be able to fly. It could, however, travel through the Etherworld thereby making long trips in extremely short amounts of time. The three men mounted the graven and Master closed his eyes. The Etherworld was a world of complete disorder, and just seeing parts of it could drive a man insane.

After a short trip the three men sat at a table in a bar in Darkvale. Master looked out the window and saw the waves of the ocean lapping at the beach.

“Captain Leo’s ship is the only one left at dock. We just have to prevent them from getting on it.”

“That’s easy, we just destroy it, right?” asked Master.

“I’m afraid that it’s not that easy. You see, my dear brother has seen to it that this particular vessel is protected from my power, and I must advise against further use of the stone, as it seems to increase the sorceress’ strength.”

“Then what do we do, My Lord?” asked Lokun.

Chaos sipped on a mug of ale that appeared in his hand.

“There is only one entrance to this town of Darkvale and there is only one entrance to the docks. One of you can guard one and one of you can guard the other, and all will be well” he instructed.

“And what will you do, sir?” asked Master.

Chaos stood up and said, “*Co larkozin zam ke arkval lanyafu shefugru*. If the dark one is in Darkvale, the rose will not wilt. I cannot ignore the prophecies. As deluded as my good brother is, he is most adept at predictions. I must leave this town. Do not fail me.”

Chaos disappeared, leaving Master and Lokun to their tasks.

The umajinn looked at Master.

“I’ll guard the city gates, you guard the docks?” he half-asked half-ordered.

Master, aware of the tension caused by their previous argument, simply nodded. The two men rose from their seats and left the bar, entering the vacant and rain-drenched streets of Darkvale.

Wer laquim na bod'farin, zamu l'gien ke harin.
Across the sea and past the eye, lies the city of beauty.
--History of Shem'kem'ku, Book of Elements

Anya, Altazar, and Gimmel landed south of Darkvale as the young sorceress' powers began to grow weak. They could see the lights from the harbor in the distance and, though they had not seen evidence of pursuit for many miles now, decided that they would be foolish to stop when they were so close. Anya staggered weak from the physical and magical exertion. She had learned how to draw more power from the artifacts in use, but Master had mysteriously quit using the stone. Her maj was flowing out of her like a river, trying to sustain her enchantments.

"Altazar..." she panted as she reached towards him, "Help."

He caught her as she pitched forward. Gimmel rushed to her side as well.

"What is it?" he asked his apprentice.

"Overexertion I guess." Altazar surmised, "She doesn't show any signs of foul play. I hope it's just that the magic has drained all her energy again."

Gimmel lifted one of her eyelids. He saw no evidence of anything other than natural fatigue.

"That seems to be it. Let's get her into town so we can find somewhere safe for her to rest."

Altazar lifted her small frame once again, marveling at the number of times that he had to carry this girl, and feeling that it would not be the last. They continued marching along the road towards town.

As the two men crested the last hill before the city gates, Gimmel drew up short, causing Altazar to stop quickly. Altazar had to drop to one knee to keep Anya from falling.

"Hey, we almost dropped her," he complained.

"Quiet," hissed the old man, backing away.

Gimmel grabbed Altazar's sleeve and tugged him into the cover of trees along the side of the road.

“What?” Altazar asked, perplexed at his teacher’s behavior.

“Look, standing at the city gates.” Gimmel replied, nodding in the direction of town.

Altazar peered over the hill and pulled back almost immediately, a look of disbelief on his face.

“How did he get here before we did? That’s impossible!” he protested.

Gimmel shook his head and said, “Remember whom he works for. There are powers at work here that we are not capable of understanding.”

Altazar risked one more glance at the gates of Darkvale. Standing, sword drawn, barring entrance to the town, was the samurai Anya had called Lokun. He stood, tirelessly, prepared to destroy the young girl when she arrived to charter a ship to Neriya.

“What are we going to do?” Altazar asked, hoping his mentor could come up with something.

“Well, I’m getting an idea,” he replied, “but you won’t like it.”

Altazar listened well as Gimmel unfolded the specifics of his plan. It seemed to them both that it had a decent chance of success for Anya, but Altazar feared that the chances of survival for him and Gimmel were somewhat low. Suddenly Altazar realized an aspect of Gimmel’s plan that the old man had neglected to mention.

“Wait a moment, how do we know that she’ll be safe once I get her onto the boat?”

“Ah, I just have a feeling that she will.” Gimmel replied, sheepishly.

Altazar sat back. “Wait, you’re not going to try to do what I think you are, are you?”

Gimmel nodded and said, “It is the only way to insure her safety. It must be done.”

The two men went over the plan until they both had the entirety of the details strait in their minds. At last it was time.

Altazar helped Gimmel change into the disguise. Gimmel was proficient at changing his appearance, even with the little resources that he had. Finally Altazar stiffened his resolve, squared his shoulders, and strode boldly onto the road almost a hundred yards from the gates.

“Lokun!” he shouted, drawing his sword, “Come face me and die!”

Lokun spotted the woodsman and charged.

“Now!” called Altazar.

Lokun saw the girl dart out of the forest and head towards the gates. Instantly he turned and began to pursue her. Altazar quickly retreated to the wood. He hoped that Gimmel’s plan worked, because now it was either all or nothing. Carrying his bundle, Altazar entered the gates.

The city walls had been too tall for him to see the buildings within, but now his eyes feasted on the morbid glory of the architecture. Hideous stone gargoyles lined the archways of every structure and vast murals of battles and carnage were carved in every surface. For a moment Altazar stood, staring at the stonework. At last his mind recovered and he devoted himself once again to making his way safely to the docks.

The girl charged down the main street of Darkvale. The path to the docks was strait, but there was another gate, separating the main town from the harbor. She slowed when she saw Master waiting under that archway, but Lokun was coming fast from behind and there was nothing to do but press on.

Master had stopped using the magic of the Stone but was not completely powerless. He stood firm, but he was expecting a young girl, not a highly trained master woodsman. Master reached out as Gimmel, disguised as Anya, approached, but the old man was cunning.

Two of Gimmel’s fingers made contact with Master’s throat, and two from his other hand and hit his side. Master dropped like a ton of bricks and Gimmel continued on, but the damage had been done.

“Stop the ship! Stop.” Gimmel cried, mimicking Anya’s voice.

The old half-breed’s veins were chilled to the bone.

Marcus looked behind him as he rose to his feet and saw a small Neriya girl running towards him. Following closely behind her was a large Neriya samurai wielding a fierce, black katana.

Time seemed to stop as the two passed him. His dream was playing out before him. Leo had not gotten angry with him, and the boat was not setting sail, but the worst part seemed to be coming true. The girl reached the end of the pier and made a spectacular jump towards the gangplank of the boat, but the samurai was faster. The

sword came across in a downward arc, and as it hit her side, blood splattered across Marcus' face.

Gimmel was caught out of the air by the blow and his two halves spun downward into the murky water of the ocean. Lokun looked down at the frenzy of blood and remains in the water as the sharks tore the body to pieces. Marcus saw Master approached from behind him.

"Is she dead?" he heard him ask.

Lokun grunted an affirmative and turned to leave. Marcus stood, paralyzed with fear and horror, one hand gripping the Tides of Meku inside his pockets.

"Chaos will reward us well," Master commented, following the umajinn.

As they passed through the gate, Captain Leo approached and gave Marcus a friendly slap on the back. Marcus turned and saw a young, redheaded geisha girl following him.

"I've hired us another ship girl, hey the weather seems to be clearing up." Leo said.

Indeed, the weather was clearing up, because Marcus had told the storm to calm. He gave one last glance into the bloody water. Leo followed his first mate's eyes with his own and gasped.

"Oh no, who fell in?" he asked.

"I don't know, some drifter I suppose," Marcus lied.

"Oh, bad luck for him. Come on Marcus, you look pale, the open seas will get some color into your skin." He called to the crew of the ship, "Come on boys, let's set sail!"

The two men walked up the gangplank and onto the boat, one feeling exhilarated that they could now set sail, and the other feeling as if he had failed the only test that had ever mattered.

Altazar slunk through the shadows of the town holding Anya. Along the edge of the wall he found a stack of cargo crates. He climbed over them and dropped down silently to the other side. He caught sight of the boat just as Gimmel, disguised as Anya, approached it, followed closely by Lokun. Altazar closed his eyes, knowing what would come next. Gimmel had explained that the only way that Anya would be safe was if the enemy thought that she was dead. He had arranged to die and fall into the shark-infested harbor so that his body could not be identified. It had been the hardest thing to do to agree to this, but Gimmel had asked for it as a life-favor. No

woodsman could turn down a life-favor. They were sacred. Behind the cover of a building Altazar wept over the loss of his long-time mentor, father, and friend. After Lokun and Master left, Altazar stowed away in Captain Leo's ship, with tears still streaming down his cheeks.

"Idiots!" Chaos bellowed as he slammed his fist onto the oak table.

The sailors in the pub fell into an eerie silence while Master and Lokun tried to explain themselves.

"I killed her myself, there is no way she is still alive," the umajinn stated levelly.

Chaos turned to Master and said, "Did you see this?"

Master looked around the room, avoiding eye contact and replied, "I saw a body being torn to shreds by the sharks in the harbor."

"Well, that puts my mind to rest, it must have been her!" Chaos' sarcastic shouts reverberated across the still room's walls. "Morons! Meku still protects the ship. She must be on there."

Lokun stood up, furious at his Lord's doubt. "That isn't possible, I saw her die with my own eyes!"

Chaos' gauntleted fist pounded into the samurai's torso. Lokun doubled over, retching and clutching his stomach.

"Go find a ship and finish the job," the dark lord commanded.

Marcus hadn't talked to anyone in the three days since they had set sail. He had sunk into a deep depression, the vision of the girl's death replaying over and over in his mind. He tried to keep himself busy by helping the crew with their tasks, but his heart was far from his work. He lethargically scraped barnacles from the bottom of one of the small lifeboats at the aft of the ship. The lifeboats were upside down, so that they would not collect water, and while he was working he thought he heard a noise. He stopped to listen but the sound was gone, and he was unsure that he had really heard anything at all. He stooped and looked under the boat he was working on. There was nothing there. Cautiously he resumed his task, wondering if his mind was losing its edge. He finished the first boat and had started another before he heard the sound again. This time he was sure that he had not imagined it, but was unable to tell the direction from which it was

coming. Again he looked under the boat he was scraping, and again he found nothing.

Marcus approached the third boat in the line more cautiously than he had the others. Experience had taught him that a stow-away could be a vicious and dangerous breed. He peered underneath the small boat and could not believe his eyes.

Their bodies weak with thirst and hunger from hiding under the boat for the past three days, the girl in his dreams and a large woodsman huddled together. The girl seemed to be asleep and the man was only barely awake.

“Water, please.” Altazar managed to breathe in a hoarse voice.

Marcus wasted no time trying to understand how this girl, who he had seen die in front of him, could now be alive and stowed away on his boat. He rushed across the deck and nearly jumped down the stairs, almost slamming into one of the crew. He rounded a corner and flung the door to his room open. Fervently he cast about for his water jug and finally found it underneath some clothes. He dashed back up the stairs and across the ship and knelt in front of Altazar.

“Here, drink this.” He said, panting while he lifted the jug to the man’s lips.

Altazar drank deep but was mindful to leave some for Anya. He shook her gently by the shoulders.

“Young one,” he said, “wake up. You must drink.”

Anya’s eyes opened and she awoke long enough to take a few good sips from the jug.

“We have to get her to a bed,” said Marcus, taking charge of the situation.

Altazar nodded and, after Marcus helped him to his feet, he helped the Half-Neriyu carry Anya.

If any of the crew saw them, they took no notice. Marcus answered to no one but the captain, and if the first mate chose to harbor stowaways then that was his business. They made their way through the halls and into Marcus’ bedroom.

“Lay her on the bed. Are either of you injured?” Marcus asked.

“The sorc—” Altazar started to say and then stopped.

“What was that?” Marcus asked, looking through a cabinet.

“The girl, she is fatigued from exertion. She has been awake very little since the ship left the docks.”

“Good rest in a nice bed should remedy that,” Marcus turned and put his hand out toward the woodsman, saying, “I am Marcus, first mate of Captain Leo.”

Altazar took the sailor’s hand in his own and shook it.

“I am Altazar, former pupil of Gimmel, and current Keeper of the Woods.”

“Keeper of the Woods,” Marcus repeated, “aren’t you a little far from home?”

“I am on a mission,” replied Altazar.

“Well, nice to meet you, Altazar. Can I assume that your mission concerns the safe transportation of a young Neriya girl to the legendary city of Neriya?”

“Lucky guess, Marcus.” Altazar was beginning to like this man.

“Nay, I have been given visions of her in my dreams. Powers much greater than our own wish her safe passage as well.”

“How long until we arrive there?” Altazar asked.

“Three weeks if nothing goes wrong.”

Suddenly a loud knocking came from the hallway. Someone was at Marcus’ door.

“Marcus,” came Leo’s powerfully commanding voice, “there is a rumor that you are harboring miscreants aboard my ship. I wish to dispel it.”

Marcus walked over to the door and opened it.

“Dispel it all you want, Captain.” He said, “I have found nothing in their characters that would give them such a title.”

“Damn it, Marcus.” Leo swore when he saw Altazar sitting in the chair beside Anya on the bed, “Who are they and what do they want?”

Marcus introduced everyone and tried to calm Leo down.

“They simply want to catch a ride to Neriya. They will be no trouble at all, I promise.”

“My ship is not a passenger vessel. They will eat food and cost me money. If you weren’t such a good friend I would toss you and your friends overboard.”

“I take it that you are not going to do so, then?” asked Marcus.

“No, but stop surprising me, Marcus!” Leo shouted, slamming the door behind him as he left.

Marcus turned and smiled, "Well, this is your room for the next month, make yourselves at home. There is only one thing I want to know."

"What's that?" asked the woodsman.

"How is it that this young girl, who I saw die, still lives?"

Altazar let out a deep sigh and said, "Let me tell you the whole story."

Three weeks later Altazar and Anya were both in fine health. Marcus had cut his own rations and had convinced some of the crew to do the same in order to feed them. It was mid-morning and Altazar was scrubbing the deck when two cries pierced the air from the crow's nest.

"Land ho, to the stern!" the lookout cried, and then almost immediately after he shouted, "Ship ahoy, aft and portside!"

Leo was standing at the wheel. He withdrew an eyeglass from one of his pockets and looked through it towards the land.

"Neriya, dead ahead!" he shouted and cries of excitement came up from the crew.

Marcus emerged from below and stood next to Leo as the captain looked through the glass towards the ship behind them.

"Any other trade ships know the way to Neriya, sir?" asked Marcus, knowing the answer.

"No," he said, handing the glass to Marcus, "Must be pirates, but why would they be this far north?"

Marcus looked through the glass and spotted exactly what he had hoped not to. Standing on the deck of the other ship was the fierce Neriya samurai that had cut down Gimmel.

"They are after the girl," Marcus said, handing the glass back to Leo.

"What makes you so sure?"

"Trust me, order the crew to raise the sails full. If we get to the Neriya docks, we'll be protected there."

"No such luck, they are stealing our wind," replied the captain.

With a second glance it was obvious to Marcus as well. The ship was gaining on them fast.

"Crew," Leo shouted, "Prepare for battle! Lock and load port cannons! All hands on deck!"

A frenzy of activity began on the ship. Sailors tied off ropes and drew weapons. Altazar, after hearing the cry, approached Marcus. "What is it?" Altazar asked.

"Anya's friends don't want us to make it to the docks. We can't outrun them. We have to fight."

Altazar took a bow from the weapon rack and said, "I will die before they harm her."

The two ships were only a hundred yards out from the docks when Master's ship pulled into range of Leo's ship: the *Fortune and Glory*.

"Fire at will!" Leo shouted and was answered with a chorus of aye-aye's.

Master, however, did not wish to have his newly purchased ship blown to bits. With a wave of the Stone he tore the cannons from their mounts and dropped them into the ocean. A few of Leo's crew were knocked overboard and the ship pulled alongside the *Fortune and Glory*.

"Surrender the girl and you will live," offered Master.

Leo would have no passenger of his harmed, stowaway or not, and replied, "You send two men to take on my ship! Retreat fast enough, and you may not die!" But Leo sounded more confident than he felt.

"Very well, you will die." said Master and no more words were necessary.

Lokun leapt the twenty-foot distance between ships as if hopping over a small ditch. The two sailors nearest him fell to his blade even before he landed. Master followed him in much the same manner and four of Leo's men were dead in the same instant.

Leo now understood how these two men thought that they could take his ship. He drew his sword and began to advance. Marcus gripped the Tides of Meku, waiting for an opportunity.

Seeing the demise of their four comrades, the rest of the crew was very cautious of their two enemies.

Altazar and Leo placed themselves between the door that lead below decks and the two agents of Chaos. Lokun strode towards them with a cocky confidence. The woodsman and the captain exercised caution and it was Lokun that made the first strike. The battle was a blur of steel blades. Altazar and Leo had no time to attack as they

blocked and parried the hail of blows thrown at them with supernatural speed. At times Leo blocked a strike that would have killed the woodsman, and at others Altazar saved the captain. There was no time for thanks or gratitude as the two men slowly retreated backwards, pushed by the ferocity of the umajinn's attack.

Master brought the Stone of Meku out of the folds of his cloak. Marcus recognized the artifact instantly and withdrew the fist-sized pearl from his pocket. He had no idea how to use the Tides of Meku for much more than controlling the weather, but he knew that it had power over many other things. He closed his eyes and surveyed the realm of magic. Master's spirit stood across from him within the conflagration of color and Marcus saw him reach forward and seize the green of the ship's wood. Marcus reached forward and grasped the blue beneath the ship. A sharp tug caused the ship to pitch violently sideways.

Marcus opened his eyes and came back into the real world as many sailors were thrown overboard. The huge wave slammed against the side of the boat, sloshing water over the deck. Master lost his balance and fell to the deck, losing his concentration and nearly dropping the Stone. Lokun, Altazar, and Leo all fell, sliding across the deck as the boat tilted. The boat righted and the three swordsmen began their battle again as if it had never been interrupted.

Master focused his attention on Marcus.

"You have the Pearl!" he cried.

"And you have the Stone," replied Marcus.

"And I have the girl!" came an unfamiliar voice from the cabin door.

All the combatants turned to see Anya being held by the redheaded geisha that Leo had hired at Darkvale.

"Fara, what are you doing?" Leo shouted, "Go back below before you get hurt."

The girl's voice began to grow louder, losing its feminine tone. "I am not Fara, you fool. I am the Incarnation of Fire!"

The geisha girl burst into flame and there Fire stood, holding Anya.

"You cannot defy me!" he laughed, holding Anya's unconscious form above him. He cried, "Now I will destroy her, and Chaos will reign his darkness over the world!"

Soyetsu Daki struggled within Lokun's mind. He focused on the love that he had for Anya and the honor that he still had. He begged Meku to give him the strength to make things right. Suddenly the chains that bound him snapped and for a brief moment he took back control of his mind and body.

The Neriyu samurai sailed towards Fire with the same supernatural speed and force that he had used against Altazar and Leo. The Incarnation was caught off guard and Soyetsu Daki wrested Anya from his grasp and landed, rolling across the deck. Fire wasted no time as he realized what was happening. The Incarnation called all his powers into the boat and at once, the vessel was no more.

Altazar watched in slow motion, unable to react as Lokun charged Anya. He was sure that this was the end and that all their hope would die with her here on this boat. With disbelief he watched the samurai save Anya and then the world exploded. All was a bright whiteness around him for a moment and then he felt himself sailing through the air. The explosion disintegrated both ships and threw him and everyone else into the water. He heard cries of sailors, including Leo in the water. He could never be sure how he managed to find Anya amidst the wreckage and carnage, but he had a feeling that a voice in the back of his mind was urging him towards her. Bruised and battered he swam, holding her and hoping that she was still alive. Finally he felt the rough sand of the beach on his feet and, after a few desperate heaves and lunges, he fell onto the beach, letting Anya drop next to him. As he lost consciousness he heard Leo's voice calling out.

“Marcus! Where are you?” Leo cried, but no reply came.

Epilogue

Meku na larkozin shetanum salim tanim, no l'tana pu zamu kom.
Meku and the Dark One will fight many battles, but the war is already won.

--Prophecy of Shem'kem'ku, Book of Tides

Altazar took a deep breath and sighed. He loved the feeling grass on his bare feet. He looked out over the majestic city of Neriya. From this hill he could see almost every inch of the city's beautiful splendor. He took it all in, savoring the moment.

"Altazar, sir," he heard the voice of his pupil behind him.

"Yes, Orthos?" he asked.

He turned to see the young Neriya teenager, dressed in much the same manner as he was. It was uncommon for his apprentice to disturb his meditation so Altazar was wary of an emergency.

"The priest told me to come get you quickly. Anya is going to have her baby," Orthos urged.

Altazar jumped to his feet. This was certainly not an emergency, but it was also something that he did not care to miss. He and Anya had never had any type of romantic interest in each other, but they had been almost inseparable after arriving in Neriya. Altazar thought of her more as a sister, feeling a duty to protect her from any harm.

"Hurry, boy. We don't want to leave Miss Anya to have that baby by herself, do we?" he asked.

Orthos laughed and led the way down the hill into town. As they passed the high archways of the buildings Altazar couldn't help but admire the architecture. Though he had lived here for over a year he still marveled at the splendor of it all. The streets were made of cobblestone and there was a fountain at every intersection. The view of the streets was fleeting, however, because he and Orthos were running at full speed towards the temple. He corrected himself: he was running at full speed. Orthos was jogging. The Neriya people continued to amaze the woodsman every day.

At last they arrived at the temple. The priest met them outside. "Thank you for coming so quickly," he said, "She refuses to have the baby until you are by her side."

Altazar laughed and followed the priest into the temple. Orthos stayed outside patiently, not yet being of age to enter.

Anya's eyes lit up as Altazar entered the room.

"I was afraid you wouldn't come down from meditation," she joked. "You never let anything interrupt you from it."

Altazar smiled and said, "Couldn't you have waited another hour or so?"

"I tried," she said, patting her rounded belly, "but my little boy is impatient."

"Just like his mother," Altazar said. "always in a hurry to get somewhere."

Anya's return smile was wiped away by a grimace of pain.

"Here he comes!" shouted the priest.

Altazar took Anya's hand and let her squeeze it. He felt as if she might have broken two of his fingers, but he simply looked down at her and smiled.

"You're doing fine. Remember to breathe," he said.

The priest gave a surprised yell.

"What is it?" Anya asked after pushing. Altazar looked worried.

"It's good, very good. Altazar, hold this boy. Anya, you keep pushing. We might have an unexpected arrival."

A few minutes later Anya held not one, but two newborn babies in her arms. One, a girl, had leather the leathery black skin of a tarak. The other, was a full-blooded neriyu boy. They were not twins. She and Altazar cried tears of joy as the priest cleaned up.

"What are you going to name them?" Altazar asked, almost too choked up to speak.

"My son is Kayin," Anya replied. "It means hero. And my daughter is Kanya; it mean rose petal."

Author's Update

This book is published unchanged from the March 17, 2006 version except for formatting changes to to book form. It is unlikely that the sequels will ever be finished or published unless I this book draws interest from my readers. If you liked this book, let me know.

Neriyu Lexicon

Aam: One, once, first, single, a, etc.
Aamgra'in: Normal life, boring life, nondescript lifestyle
Aquin: Water (Pl: Aquim: Sea or Ocean)
Aquinkomo: To drown, Always passive.(To be taken by water.)
Anya: rose (Pl: Anyim)
Ark: dark, corrupter (Pl: Arkim)
Arka: to corrupt
Arkozin: dark one, corrupted one
Ashaim: daughter (Pl: ashamim)
Bam: two, twice, second, double, etc.
Bamgra'im: Deceitful Life, Double life, (Two Lives)
Bashaim: Son (Pl: bashamim)
Bara: to doubt
Berin: King
Bo: past, on the other side of
Bula: to love
Bulim: love (always plural)
Cam: three, three times, third, triple, etc.
Camgra'im: full life, life of contentment(three lives)
Cerin: truth
Co: If
Col: this
Cul: what?
Dasa: to care
Das: care
Dashaim: Child (Pl: Dashamim)
De: the
Dim: south
Dom: through, by this
E-: prefix towards
Ed: line, progression (Pl: edim)
Ekto: away from, far removed from
Emikto: as
Ezoma: to fall towards, to bow
Farin: eye
Fu: no, not, negative
Fugra: to wilt or die out, same as Gra
Fola: to watch

Gashin: throne (Pl: Gashim)
 Gerin: thing
 Gien: city (Pl: Gienim)
 Gra: to grow, to begin, irregular (Gera/Gra) Gra, Migri, Geri, Shegri
 Gra'in: life (Pl: Gra'im)
 Ila: to know
 Inferin: fire
 Infera: to burn
 Halin: inside, within
 Harin: beauty
 Homima: to use
 Ka: To remove (irregular, aka/ka) Ka, Miki, Aki, Sheki
 Kanya: rose petal (Ka – Anya: removed from a rose)
 Kayin: hero (Pl: kayim)
 Ke: on, in, of, from, general preposition
 Kom: victory
 Koma: to overtake, to take, to capture, to sieze
 Komakayin: The Way of the Hero, Ancient Neriya Martial Art
 Kronim: pile of excrement, always plural except as an expletive (S: Kron)
 Lav: dry
 Le: the
 Lekua: to sunrise (irregular, lekuyu, shelku, milku, koluk)
 Luka: to call
 Mai: front (Pl: Ma'im)
 Maj: magic (Pl: Maj or Majim-rare form)
 Man: her (object)
 Ma'n: her, hers (possesive)
 Mash: power (Pl: Mashim)
 Mazon: herself (Pl: Mazonim)
 Ma: she
 Meka: Lord
 Meku: God, Gods, Creator
 Mekurin: Incarnation, Element
 Mizon: himself (Pl: Mizonim)
 Mi: he
 Mi': his
 Min:
 Na: and

Nerin: master
 Nik: hard, firm
 No: but
 Nu: introduces purpose clause or result clause
 Ohat: hope (Pl: Ohatim)
 Ohod: adj, ancient
 Okun: dead soul (Pl: Okunim)
 Osh: father (Pl: Oshim)
 Oshas: mother (pl: oshasim)
 Osha: to mother
 Oshima: to father
 Pas, pa-: all, every
 Pesha: to beware
 Pira: to seem
 Pu: already
 Qom: who
 Qiz: hand
 Resh: so that, normally preceded by nu
 Rima: to give, to place upon, to set upon
 Riza: to bear
 Salim: many
 Sham: when
 Sha'am: As, while, during
 Soruma: to banish
 Tana: to fight
 Tura: to kill
 Udin: stone (Pl: Udim)
 Umbin: sky
 Umharin: breath, air, wind, spirit
 Vats: land, world (Pl: Vatsim)
 Vatis: Earth
 Veshoma: to come
 Vida: this time, those days, that age, now
 Vishnu: nation (Pl: Vishnum)
 Vod: him (Pl: Vodesh: them) (posessive, Vo'd)
 Vad: her (Pl: Vodesh: them) (pos. Va'd)
 Wav: Star (Wavin, pl)
 Wer: across
 Wurna: to eat

Ya: though, although

Yora: to touch

Yoima: to part or separate

Yokasura: a fried pastry flavored with cinnamon, honey, and ginger

Zama: to be (irregular, Zama/Maza) Zam, Mimazi, Zami, Shezami

Zim: there is

Zoma: to fall

Zomin: n, Fall

Zomim: vision, sight, gaze, always plural. Also participle of Zoma meaning fallen ones.

Verb conjugation

Infinitive-Koma	Past (Mi-)	Present	Future (She-)
First -e/-i	Mikome I took	Kome-I take	Shekome-I will take
Second -o	Mikomo You took	Komo-You take	Shekomo-You will take
Third -u	Mikomu He took	Komu-He takes	Shekomu-He will take
Participle -	Mikom one who took	Kom-Taker	Shekom-One who will take
Passive Part. Ko-	Komikom one who was taken	Kokom-one who is taken	Koshekom-One who will be taken
Subjunctive:(may might) U-	Umikome I may have taken	Ukome- I may take	Ushekome – I might take

In order to make the verb plural add and –m to the ending. Komem – We take

If the verb already ends in m then the plural adds and –im. Komim – Takers

Alphabet: The Neriya alphabet is the same as the English alphabet.

Numbers: The number system uses the alphabet, much like Greek and Hebrew.

1:Aam, 2:Bam, 3:Kam,4:Dab, 5:Fab, 6:Gab, 7:Jas, 8:Las, 9:Mas, 10:Nor

11:Norm, 12:Norb, 13:Nork, 14:Nod, 15:Nof, 16:Nog, 17:Naj, 18:Nal, 19:Nam

20: Bor, 30: Kor, 40: Dor, 50:For, 60:Gor, 70:Jor, 80:Lor, 90:Mor, 100:api

101:apiam, 177:apijaj, 493:dapimork, 999:mapimam, 1000:ari, 10000:asi, 100000:ati

1,000,000: avi 10,000,000: azi 91,490,867 = mazi avi datimasi lapigaj