

HERE'S A
LITTLE
TREAT
FOR
YOU...



This book has been produced on virtual paper from imaginary trees grown in sustainable make-believe forests, so you know it's good.

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LET US
BEGIN...

ben galley

pale kings



a prelude to pale kings

There was once a sea at the edge of the world. The Lonely Sea. A quiet and mirror-like sea that spent its days contentedly lapping the pebble-strewn and sandy fringes of the land. Today, however, it seemed afraid to push its frothing fingers up the tar-black sands of one beach in particular. Perhaps it was the waning of the tide, perhaps it was the stillness in the air that the waves were reticent to disturb, or perhaps it was the alarming creature standing at the water's edge.

The hulking beast stood like a black obelisk on the gently sloping sands. It stared at the water, breathing in slow, contemplative grunts. Its cluster of crimson eyes were like rockpools of deep, luminescent blood. Translucent wings hung from its huge shoulders; wings that were more smoke than skin, shadow rather than bone. The beast crouched to the sand, steel armour clanking, and dug a spade-like finger into the sand. A iron claw, speckled with rust, slid from its calloused sheath, and the beast drew a slow circle in the sand, like a farmer furrowing an untouched field.

When it was finished, the beast stood up again, and curiously dipped a foot that resembled a giant, clawed hoof into the nervous, quiet sea. The water hissed and steamed, and the wave shrank back into the sea. Even nature itself recoiled from a daemon's touch.

'Lord!' came a rasping cry, ruining the tranquility. 'Majesty!'

The daemon slowly turned around, grumbling. Its skin cracked and sparked as it did so. Behind him, pounding across the black sand, came another daemon much like himself, though not nearly as huge nor as ominous. This beast had skin painted with white clay. Its horns had been filed short and formal. A thin blue pennant had been tied to the upper portion of his left arm, the tails of which flapped and crackled even despite the lack of wind. 'I have news,' wheezed the daemon, as he came near to bow low and respectfully to his master.

'Speak,' ordered the larger daemon. His claw slid back into its sheath with a metallic rasp.

'Your slaveling, lord, it insists on giving birth.'

The larger daemon thumped his chest with a fist the size of a small boulder. 'Then why is the disobedient wretch still in one piece?'

The smaller daemon bowed his horned head, as if the words it were about to utter were heresy. 'It demands your presence, lord.'

'It demands?'

'Yes, lord. Quite vocally.'

With a growl that sounded as though a tree were being ripped in half, his master turned back

to the Lonely Sea, and stamped his hoof in the water. It hissed again. 'It can demand and complain until the Tree sprouts fruit, if it so wishes. My orders remain. Go back and snap the little louse in two. Bring the larger half to me.'

The other daemon hesitated then, rubbing his claws together. He lowered his head even further. 'If I may be so bold, lord...'

A sigh. 'Speak your mind then, cousin.'

'I am sure you would agree, lord, that should this, this, um, offspring, be of an intriguing nature, then perhaps investigating its potential might be worth your time, lord.'

The larger daemon turned and regarded his inferior with a curious look. 'Meaning what?'

'In my humble opinion, majesty, the offspring *is* rather intriguing.'

'Intriguing?'

'Yes, lord. It exhibits several rather, er, *unusual* qualities.'

The daemon wrinkled a lip bristling with thick black hairs. 'Azkeroth.'

'Yes, lord?'

'This endless sea is intriguing, the sheer size of a hydra's heart is intriguing, the pattern of scars we carved on the cursed moon are intriguing. There is nothing intriguing about the disfigured offspring of a human slaveling, especially *my* human slaveling. The only aspect of this that does intrigue me is why we are continuing this futile conversation, Azkeroth.'

There was another moment of hesitation from the second daemon, Azkeroth. He wheezed and cleared his throat, feeling his master's blood-red gaze burning into his patchwork skull. 'Perhaps, lord, if you were to come and see for yourself?' he suggested.

'Bah!' his master snarled. Azkeroth did not flinch. To flinch was suicide. He did not particularly fancy spending another hundred years in the Void. The iron claws sprang from their sheaths and raked Azkeroth's skull, carving three long gashes across his black and grey scalp, right between his horns. The ragged cuts glowed red as blood, hot as magma, seeped from them. Azkeroth did not move. He did not even wince. 'Lord, I must insist,' he urged, firmly.

There was a moment of silence, in which the whispering sea slid up and down the beach three times. 'Very well,' said the larger daemon. Azkeroth was barged aside as his master swept from the shoreline, smouldering wings trailing behind him in his wake. Azkeroth scuttled after him, barely managing to keep up with his master's long, purposeful strides.

One behind the other, the two daemons marched up the beach and over a small hillock where streaks of yellow sand were attempting to encroach on the black sand of the beach. Spindly dunegrass grew in brave patches here and there. Their purple roots were bared and vulnerable. The daemons spared them no sympathy. As they passed each plant, the smoky tendrils of their wings wafted across the spear-like leaves and knobby roots, choking and throttling them until they wilted and died. The daemons marched on without so much as a second glance. It was normality for them.

Soon, they came to the edges of their warcamp, a sprawling, deformed monster of a place,

perpetually shrouded with smoke and ringing with the sounds of war. Hammers pounded and metal pealed. Shouts echoed. Ruby fires glowed through the humid haze.

As they approached a pair iron gates, Azkeroth's master reached to wipe his bristled brow, and when he withdrew his claws, a circlet of fire was burning on his forehead, resting gently on his cracked skin, the crown of his position. Standing near to the open gates were two tall and long-limbed creatures. They were lithe and wiry, with flat faces and flared nostrils, and their charcoal-grey skin was covered in lavish silver armour. In their long-fingered hands they held the sharp pikes of the camp guard. They stamped their feet in salute as their lord and master passed. The daemons nodded to the elves, and entered the camp.

If a visitor had braved the Lonely Sea, and perchance landed on the black shores, and been unfortunate enough to stumble across the elven warcamp, then the smell alone would have killed them. The tentacles of smoke that rose through the cracks in the sand were a noxious orange colour, sulphurous and as thick as week-old stew, and when they mixed with the warcamp miasma of rotting death, it created a noxious, deadly stench. The elves paid it no attention; they had become accustomed to it. The daemons enjoyed it; for them it was the smell of home. But the slavelings, the humans forced to work the mines and latrines and forges and woodcamps and manors of the elves and daemons, they choked on it. They called it the bloodlung, due to the constant, raw coughing it caused. If a slaveling was lucky enough to survive his or her masters, then the bloodlung would finish them off for sure. It was a cursed life, the life of a human.

Once inside the gates, the two daemons did not slow their pace. As they marched, Azkeroth looked around, checking everything was as it should be. As second camplord, this was his duty, and it was a duty that demanded constant vigilance. The elves needed constant reminders to keep them in line. They had grown fat and restless in the last year. With the gods in hiding and the humans subdued, they had nothing to keep them occupied. Daemons had to make work for idle elves.

Azkeroth's crimson eyes pierced the grey, smoky haze, examining and checking his warcamp. A phalanx of elves trained on a plaza of crystallised sand. A wall was in construction around one of the manor houses. A trio of daemons stood on the balcony of a barracks, silent and ponderous. An elf in armour bellowed orders at a line of slaves as they waited to collect the day's meagre rations. Hollow-eyed humans stared out from between the bars of an iron fence, watching as a nearby group of soldiers gathered around a cooking fire to slice the meat from the bones of a very familiar-looking creature.

'Azkeroth,' the rumbling voice shook the daemon from his reverie, and his head snapped forward.

'Majesty?'

His master kept walking. Even though he faced away from Azkeroth, his deep voice could still be heard over the noise of the warcamp. 'If you have wasted my time, there shall be consequences.'

‘I understand, lord’ replied Azkeroth, confidently. He had already seen the slaveling child. He knew his master would be intrigued.

They soon came to a large basalt dome encircled by roads of crystallised sand and a huge black iron fence. Elf patrols marched up and down the roads. Nearby, a group of young elven females, clad in their finest clothes, sat on a long bench and watched the elven men pass by, like falcons watching parading rabbits. Occasionally, one of them would whistle at a particular soldier and they would snigger and whisper conspiratorially amongst themselves. Azkeroth had always been confused by mortal mating rituals. With a black look and a wheeze, he made a mental note to confine the camp’s nonessentials to their manors and tents in the future. The elven soldiers had enough distractions as it was without bothersome females.

It was then that Azkeroth noticed the noise. An impossible high-pitched wailing noise that cut through the cacophony of thudding boots, hammers, and construction like a hot axe through lard. It sounded as though a nest of screech-owls were being strangled. The master stopped dead in his tracks. His translucent wings spread wide. Claws slid from their sheaths. Smoke oozed from the cracks in his skin. A deep growl reverberated in his throat. Both daemons knew exactly what it was; it was a noise common in the slaveling compounds. It was a noise that drove daemons wild with fury.

Armour clanking, Azkeroth’s master pounded towards the basalt dome, his own manor house. He wrenched the door from its hinges and flung it aside, terrifying a group of slavelings as he did so, and bounded up a short flight of stairs towards the noise. He sniffed the air and snorted flame. He could smell human blood in the smoky air. He stormed into his chambers and found three more daemons waiting there. They stood at the archway of an adjoining room, scowling and wincing as the wailing noise rose and fell in pitch. They swiftly bowed as their master stomped forward and ducked under the archway. It was there that he found the source of the hateful noise. It was held tightly to the naked breast of his private slaveling, who was lying sweaty and wide-eyed on a pile of threadbare and dirty blankets, womb swollen with her forbidden pregnancy. A number of house slavelings lay prostrated beside her, quivering fearfully. The daemon growled. The candles in the room grew brighter in his presence. Their wicks sizzled loudly, as if eager to impress. The baby, oblivious to what stood over it, continued to wail.

‘Silence it!’ bellowed the daemon. The slaveling quickly covered up the baby’s mouth with her grimy hand.

‘You disobedient cur,’ began the daemon. ‘I return from hunting to find this, this bastard in my house? I ordered you to deal with it.’

‘He is your son,’ muttered the woman. It took a very brave human to speak like that to a daemon, especially a daemon such as her master. Claws slid under chin and she whimpered. ‘Hold him, and you’ll see,’ she said, holding the baby up to his face. It stayed silent.

The daemon wrinkled his lip and threw the child a cursory glance. To his surprise, the thing

was not disfigured as the others had been, but whole, unblemished, and normal. Human. He sniffed at it, tasting the scent of its blood. Its skin was the colour of campfire ash, a pale off-white that was a stark contrast to the red-blooded skin of the other slavelings. The daemon sheathed two of his sharp claws and seized the child between two huge fingertips, holding it closer to his face. He had half a mind to rip it in two, there and then, but there was something in the child's eyes, now open and calm, that stopped him. It seemed mesmerised by the fiery crown on his forehead. Behind him, Azkeroth shuffled into the room. 'Can you feel it, majesty?'

His master couldn't deny it. 'I can.'

'What are we to do with it?'

The daemon stared at the strange baby that dangled helplessly and silent between his coarse, charcoal fingers. 'Have there been others like this one? Ones I have not been informed of?'

'None, lord.'

'Why you, then, I wonder?' he pondered, staring down at his slaveling. Her breathing was quick and fast. She looked exhausted. Her tawny red hair lay in wet strands down her chest and arms. The slavebrand around her neck glistened with sweat. He had plucked her from a compound a year ago. The humans were loathsome creatures, god-blessed, fleshy, and weak, but every now and again, one somehow managed to catch his eye. He did not know why. Despite their fragility, the humans exhibited an inextinguishable hunger for survival, a trait his kind had tried very hard to beat and breed out of them over the centuries. This particular slaveling had a rather stubborn streak of rebelliousness, and for some strange reason that had appealed to him. It was like taming a wild animal, a feral creature; the thrill is in the success.

She wasn't the first he had mated with. It had been an unnatural practice at first, but so was everything the first time it was done. Repetition forged normality. He had half expected her to die from the encounter, much like his others had, but somehow she had survived, again and again, over and over. And now this. The hulking daemon growled and a wisp of smoke escaped from the side of his mouth. The baby made a strange gurgling sound, and reached up to grab at the smoke with his chubby, clumsy fingers. The daemon narrowed his many eyes at the little creature. There was a strange energy emanating from this child that both perturbed and fascinated him. Azkeroth had been right indeed. Somehow, there was magick in it, daemon magick.

'You know he's different, don't you, lord Orion?' said one of the other daemons.

'He knows,' said the female slaveling, impertinently. 'He knows. Even I can feel it.'

'Silence!' snarled Orion, reaching to grab her puny head between his huge claws. She cried out as he squeezed.

'What will you do with him, lord?' asked Azkeroth.

'I,' began Orion, still holding the child. A curious idea had come into his head. 'Shall name him Ruin. And that is exactly what he shall be.' He released his female, but she cried out again, suddenly putting her hands to her swollen belly. One of the other slavelings reached out a sweaty

hand to touch her pregnant bulge. He gasped.

‘What is it, slave?’ demanded Orion.

‘There is another, majesty,’ said the slaveling, keeping his eyes down. ‘Another child, maybe even two.’

Nobody but the baby saw, but just then, Orion began to smile. It was a rare expression for a daemon.

part one

sand, blood, and seawater

2,400 Years Later

*“Whilst mortal Elven fingers steal,
Daemonic whips snap fast at heel.
Orion hath come to sate his lust,
for dead men walk among’st us.
Creatures live where Daemons dwell,
they sound the gods’ most final knell.
But at last their fury knows an end,
from Elven, Daemon, the gods shall rend,
Justice, Vengeance, to demand the least,
and starry knights will leave in peace.
But salvation comes most high a toll,
three stars were left, three Daemon foals,
Shifting shape and with it sands,
sowing seeds and most immoral plans.
For man shall wait betwixt the ice,
for brings Pale Kings, and with them vice.
And, lost by dark ones all forgotten,
Lakes of magick ‘neath paths untrodden,
evil hideth there, in deepest depths,
in a Prophecy, those places kept.
The first and last, with death aplenty,
one such as the Elves left empty.
Speaks: ‘Once the final seed is sown,
it must rear its head to face alone,
what furrows left by earthly fathers,
for ‘tis greeted by unearthly laughter.’
And One more terrible than Three shall come,
One to which the stars succumb,
and bring Ragnarök upon the earth,
and leave all to bask in unholy birth.
For lo, dead men walk among’st us,
and we’re nought but slaves to dust.”*

The Dust Song

chapter 1

“Even the smallest of deserts hide the biggest of secrets...”

Old Paraian saying

Shade was of short supply in the Paraian deserts. There were no shadows, no shelters, and even in the relative coolness of the craggy hills the heat was close to unbearable. No trees grew there. Not even the insects ventured out. The sun dominated everything in its path like a cruel king peering down from his throne. Searing and seething it shone down from its unreachable balcony in the crystal clear and cloudless sky, surrounded by an endless sea of cerulean blue. High overhead a lone vulture performed lazy circles, a mere dark winged blotch in the perfect atmosphere. Its black eyes scanned the hot sands below and searched hopelessly for something dead or helpless, or both.

But, sadly for the scavengers, the wind-blown sands and empty hilltops were bereft of anything but grit and sun-bleached skulls. That was until a lone figure appeared on the craggy horizon, standing defiantly against the rippling heat waves.

The man trudged onwards, glad to have shed his hood and his cloak, and kept his eyes on the wobbling hills ahead of him. With every laboured step his boots sunk into the sand. His breathing was heavy. Farden would never have admitted it, but he was starting to miss the cold and the wet of Emaneska. The sandy stuff beneath his feet got in every available crevice, every conceivable pocket and crack. It irritated him immensely.

The mage walked until the bright sun faded to orange, and then finally to red, until it teetered on the horizon and the purple blanket of night waited in the east, ready to pull itself across the huge sky. Farden stood atop a rocky mound overlooking the desert plateau and watched as the fiery orb sank into the distant sands. With it went the warmth of the day, and the night brought the cold. Nothing felt better after a blistering afternoon.

After a brief, and well-earned, sigh of relief, Farden allowed himself a smile, and went about finding shelter for the chilly evening. At least the perpetual sand was good for one thing, he smirked as he lowered himself into a small gully between two monolithic rocks. They were ancient and weathered like the sunburnt arms of a dead giant. Farden placed all of his meagre supplies on a shelf of rock: two pouches of coin, a dusty spyglass, an even dustier haversack full of clothes, two striped pebbles of a knobby nature, a vulture’s feather, a rather intriguing golden disk, a bracelet made of a rare red metal, a steamed-up glass vial of precious water, a packet of tough dried meat, a sharp knife for the tough meat, and his ageing and battered sword in its red scabbard. Taking stock

of his supplies always made him feel less lost, as though they tied him to a purpose. That was comforting.

Farden delved into his dusty haversack to find some clothes for the evening. After a moment of rummaging, he yanked a blue and white scarf from its depths and wrapped it around his mouth and neck, tucking its tails into his shirt. Leaving his supplies in the little gully, he took a few steps out onto the open sands and rubbed the gold and red metal vambraces that encircled each of his forearms. He briefly touched them together with a metallic clink and put his hands in the air. A sudden breeze shuffled the grains of sand around his boots and swirled around him. Farden raised his hands higher, and higher, until the breeze grew into a wind that buffeted him from all directions. Rivulets of flame began to trickle down his fingers and from there they leapt into the sandy vortex. Each individual grain flashed like miniature stars in the early twilight, sparking and sizzling as they melted together in the hot wind. Farden pushed and pushed and moulded and shaped, until standing in front of him was a little glass hut, barely tall enough to crouch in, but perfectly smooth and sealed, complete with a small hole in front for a door. After a few finishing touches and a couple of well placed whacks with the flat of his palm, Farden let the structure cool as he watched a huge moon climb into the sky. Her pale face was pockmarked and milky, and Farden found himself trying to count her scars.

His glass hut soon cooled and the mage gathered his scant belongings from the rock shelf. Getting to his dusty knees, he crawled inside and piled up his things. He looked out at the moon, warped and mottled as she was through the uneven orange glass, her face flecked with particles of sand and grit. The night was slowly closing in. Farden could see his own breath in front of him. The strange deserts never ceased to perplex him. Blistering in the day. Freezing at night. The mage shook his head. The mage wished it would make up his mind.

Farden shuffled out of his hut and went to find something that would burn. It wasn't long before he found a wiry bush that seemed dead enough. After a couple of vicious tugs it came free of the sand and he dragged it back to his camp. Within moments the bush was alight and crackling and Farden sat cross-legged in the sand eyeing the flames, deep in thought.

After months of searching he felt no closer to finding the man in his dreams. The dreams had stopped, but his suspicions about Tyrfing, his uncle, had only grown. The talking cat, Lazy, or Lerel as she had insisted on being called, was proof that he was alive somewhere, no matter how quiet she kept on the subject. Tyrfing was alive, just hiding.

It seemed to Farden that he had seen every dune, every dry riverbed, every desert plateau that Paraia had to offer, and plenty more after that, but according to the people of the scattered towns and far-flung cities, there was still plenty more desert left to search. The thought that he was wasting his time had entered his mind more than once, but, like the stubborn man he was, the mage was not about to give up just yet. Farden could feel it in his bones, and he had many, many questions that needed answering, answers that only his uncle could give him.

Farden put his hands behind his head and leant back against the squeaky glass of his hut. The same strand of hair that had annoyed him all evening tickled his eye again, and he shook his head to move it, and promised himself a haircut on his return to Nelska. And a shave, he thought, momentarily rubbing his heavily-stubbed chin. What a different man he must look, surmised the mage; his skin had turned a dark nut-brown in the strong rays of the sun, his chin and cheeks were now covered in thick, dark, and dusty hair, and there were bags of tiredness squatting under his eyes. He was looking more and more like the desert peoples every day. Even in the markets of Belephon and Galadaë he was beginning to blend in. What would Durnus and the others think of him, he wondered.

As the moon went about her nightly journey, the desert began to come alive with things of the night. Something squealed in the darkness. An echoing bark came from a nearby hilltop. Glowing eyes skirted his campfire and glinted in the flames. Jackals, sandfoxes, grimplings, scorpions, he had been stalked by them all. Occasionally he would see a flash of flame or two moving through the desert. At first he had thought them to be lanterns and people, but they were the ghosts, or *ifrits* as they were called, of the people who had died in the wild deserts and were forced to roam the sands as flames and shadows until somebody burnt their remains. More than once he had chased them, finding nothing but strange tracks leading far into the deserts. Farden had learnt to ignore them as they now ignored him.

A nearby creature yelped in the darkness, a quick snack for something with sharp claws. There was a whoosh of wings and the yelping stopped. Farden crawled back inside his glass hut and let the night sounds wash over him while he tried to find a comfortable place in the sand. Old thoughts wandered about in his head, thoughts he had long entertained like unwelcome, but unavoidable, guests. Farden tried to think of other things besides them. Trawling the Paraian deserts for his uncle had kept his anxious mind busy, but old habits died a long death, especially on the longer nights.

Tossing and turning, Farden continued his mental duel for an hour or two before he sat bolt upright and sighed. He grabbed his belt and his leather pouch and he shuffled out from under his shelter. As he stretched and made his aching spine click back into place, the mage looked around. Colour had died with the day. The moonlight bathed the desert in a cold light, painting everything a different shade of monochrome grey. The sky was cloudless. White and blue stars hung in the firmament.

Farden's keen eyes could pick out shapes moving about in the darkness. None of them were remotely human. He wondered where all these creatures hid during the day, if they all shared a cave somewhere amongst the rocks, and put aside their differences while they slept. The fire had burnt low. The scraggy bush had all but been consumed.

Farden reached for his supplies and grabbed the heavy gold disk. His trusty Weight. He balanced the thing under one arm as he strapped his knife and belt around his shirt and trousers, and

stuffed something in his pocket. Then he took off his boots and threw them inside his hut. Once he was ready, the mage held the Weight up to the moon and covered its pale face with his gold one. It fit perfectly. Farden felt the magick bite, and in a flurry of sand he was gone. The air shivered behind him. Something squealed and ran away.



Far to the north, where the ice and the glaciers inexorably crept south and the rain and snow fell in great quantity, the capital city of Gordheim was, for the most part, fast asleep. Only soldiers wandered through the streets, or stood on ramparts, or guarded large doors and larger gates. They listened to the sound of the waterfalls crashing and roaring around them, the gushing namesake of the city, the city of waterfalls. Mountain crags surrounded it like a crown. Rivers burrowed into the streets. Roads and walkways stretched across them like fallen branches, or the paved strands of a spider's web, curving hither and thither and in no particular direction. Turrets bristling with banners and sharp battlements poked their heads out from between the arched rooftops of longhouses and halls. Their torches hissed in the cold night wind.

Like Krauslung's Arkathedral, Gordheim's palace was a fortress, and was built upon a jutting crag of water-carved granite that leant out over the rest of the city like the prow of a tall ship. Twin waterfalls fell either side of it like two unravelling curtains, cascading over the slippery black rock ledges and filling the winding canals a hundred feet below. The sheer walls of the glistening palace were a mishmash of turrets and roofs, minarets and towers, and their flags flapped and crackled in the night breeze. For the moment, all seemed to be at peace in the Skölgard city of Gordheim.

In the highest part of the highest tower, a wide balcony overlooked the landscape. A few candles still burnt in their holders and they struggled to stay alight, flickering at the end of their wicks. There was a chair, and a table, and a tall silver mirror, and a wide set of doors that had been left slightly ajar for the night. Behind the door silk curtains rustled and shivered as the breeze played with them. In the shadows of the long room the sounds of heavy breathing could be heard, and the faint rustling of disturbed bedsheets. The frozen moonlight fell in pieces through the diamond-paned windows.

On the balcony the breeze abruptly changed direction. The candles momentarily relaxed and breathed little sizzling sighs of relief. The mirror quivered and rattled softly against the stonework. There came a rushing noise and the air seemed to wobble for a precarious moment. A shape of a man appeared from nowhere and landed on all fours with no more noise than a falling cat. There was a sharp snap of air as it contracted, and then all was still again.

Farden stood up and, treading softly across the white stone tiles, he went to each of the remaining candles and pinched their flames between his finger and thumb, extinguishing their brief lives with little whispers of protest. Silently, he went to the door and peered through the crack with

one eye. It was dark inside the room. Only a couple of shafts of moonlight interrupted the gloom. Putting one foot forward, he gently opened the door, parted the silk curtains with a finger, and slipped inside the room.

The breathing was heavy, almost laboured. Farden waited until his eyes adjusted to the darkness and then he crept forward to stand over the bed. He didn't dare wake her, not after the last time. Farden simply just looked at her, and tried to pretend that nothing had changed, that she would roll over any moment and smile at him. But this woman wasn't Cheska any more. She was cold, ruthless, calculating, and she had ripped out his heart and watched it burn in the fires of Vice's plans. Farden stared at the bump that hid under her bedsheets, above her waist. It had grown bigger since he had last visited. Her child. His child. Theirs. Vice's so-called weapon.

Farden scowled.

For what seemed like an age or more, he stood there and stared. Finally, he sighed gently, and reached inside his pocket for something. He leant forward slowly and left it on the empty pillow beside her, wondering what trouble it would cause in the morning. He didn't care. Farden slipped through the door and left Cheska alone, wondering how she slept so peacefully with a conscience so heavy. The mage shook his head and lifted his golden disk to the night sky.

With a quick flash of light and a puff of sand Farden was suddenly back in the desert. With the edge of his hand, he wiped the grit from his face and looked around, allowing his eyes to adjust once again. Annoyingly he had slightly misjudged the spell, and he was now a short walk from his camp. The fire was still burning, he could see it glowing not too far away, and he walked towards it, feeling the cold sand between his bare toes.

As he approached his little hut, he suddenly realised that something was not right. There was a shadow by the fire, and the faster he walked the more the shadow turned into a small hooded figure sitting with his knees to his chin, for the moment peaceful and silent. Farden's hand moved to his knife.

Without a hint of hesitation, the mage wandered into the camp and stood on the opposite side of the fire from his visitor. The figure didn't even move.

'It seems you have made a mistake,' said Farden. 'This fire is not a social gathering.'

The figure chuckled, and Farden wondered whether it was a man or a woman. It shrugged and remained staring at the flames. 'Seems to me you've a lot of fire to go around, boy,' it said, in a deep gruff voice, a man's voice.

Farden crouched down and looked into the newcomer's face. The thing wasn't really a man or a woman, or anything resembling normal for that matter. The hairy face under the hood was a little goat-like, with sharp teeth that poked out from behind dark lips and a nose that was more of a snout. Wisps of dark hair crept over the figure's furry forehead and the more that Farden stared the more certain he was that he could discern stubby, curled horns hiding under the peak of the hood. He couldn't see the thing's feet, but the hands that were clasped around its knees were thick with

dark, perhaps black hair.

‘What do you want?’ asked the mage.

‘Warmth, rest, a little conversation,’ shrugged the goat-like creature.

‘That I can provide,’ replied Farden.

It smirked and looked at him with dark animal eyes. ‘How generous of you.’ Farden met its gaze squarely and it looked away. It nodded to the little glass hut. ‘Your handiwork?’

It was Farden’s turn to shrug. ‘Perhaps,’ he said.

‘Then how exactly would you go about making one of these?’

Farden didn’t like this line of questioning. ‘Takes a lot of hard work, and peace and quiet.’

The creature chuckled and nodded. Its laugh sounded like a braying donkey. ‘Fair enough, stranger, fair enough. There are plenty of secrets in the desert,’ it said.

‘That there are,’ nodded Farden. For the life of him he could not figure this strange beast out. He tried to decide if it was dangerous.

‘And you,’ it pointed at him. ‘You are searching for something, are you not? You have the look of a man confused, and not quite sure what he looks for.’

Farden didn’t reply, and it continued, wagging a hairy finger as it lectured. Its fingernail was long, cracked, and yellow. ‘The Paraians have a saying, that the man who digs in the sand for the sun after it has set is a fool.’ And with that, the goat-man stood and Farden followed suit. ‘Some things don’t want to be found, boy,’ it added.

‘How encouraging. I will bear that in mind,’ replied the mage, nettled at being called *boy*. His new friend held out a hand and Farden shook it without breaking his gaze. The goat-man smiled and flashed needle-like teeth.

‘A desert for a deserter,’ it said, chuckling at its joke. ‘Why don’t you go back home, Arka, and stop wasting your time, eh?’ Farden didn’t reply. He merely continued to stare. The creature shrugged, turned its back to the mage, and then wandered off into the moonlight. As it walked away, Farden noticed that its legs were bent like a goat’s, and hoofed. Farden kept his eyes on it until it had disappeared into the darkness. He waited until the fire finally died out, and then, wary as ever, he crept into his glass hut and made a hollow in the sand for a bed. Farden fell asleep in seconds, dreaming of goat-creatures and waterfalls and balconies. *Go home*, they whispered to him. *Go home*.



Morning came, and with it the sun, and it painted the eastern sky with a swirling mishmash of reds and oranges. The rushing waterfalls were tinged with pink in the early light. Gordheim was waking up, and in the palace, in the highest part of the highest tower, a door slammed, nearly breaking it from its hinges. Bare feet stamped loudly on the spiral steps and the furious footsteps echoed against the stone walls. Nearby guards clicked their metal heels together and stood a little

straighter as the woman marched past, a flurry of blonde hair. Cheska was livid. She stormed down the corridor and almost tearing the handles from the wood, she yanked open a set of large double doors. Two men, one tall yet muscular with dirty blonde hair and a calculating hazel gaze, one huge and hulking, swathed in bear fur and adorned with jewellery and scars, sat at a table breaking their fast.

‘He was in my room!’ yelled Cheska, ear-piercingly shrill. The two men watched her approach their table, eyeing the furious woman calmly. King Bane ripped a loaf in two as if it were a strip of paper and stuffed a portion in his mouth. Vice put down his fork and crossed his arms. ‘Who?’ he asked.

Cheska’s blue eyes were wide with anger. ‘Who do you think?’ she spat. With a thud she slammed her hand down on the table and then pointed at the small circlet of red metal. ‘See? He left it on my pillow!’

The two men peered at the *fjortla*, the red metal bracelet that marked a prospective Written for their Ritual, and then swapped a glance. Vice clenched his fist and then rose from his chair without a word. Bane chuckled through a mouthful of bread. ‘I knew we should have killed him when we had the chance.’

Vice narrowed his eyes at the king. ‘How helpful, Bane, thank you,’ he said, and the king scowled, stabbing a scrap of boiled meat with an oversized knife. Vice rubbed his angular chin and thought for a moment, absently patting his breast pocket, before turning to Cheska. ‘Have your servants pack your things.’

She moved her hair out of her face with an impatient hand and snorted. ‘Why?’

‘Because we’re going to Krauslung,’ replied Vice, and Bane rolled his eyes at the mention of the city. ‘Now stop asking questions and get to it.’ The Arkmage waved a hand towards the open door behind her, where the guards were trying their best not to eavesdrop. Cheska hesitated, eyeing him with a feisty look. She jabbed the air between them with a finger. ‘If I was in charge, Farden would be dead already, and hanging from the city walls by his neck,’ she said. An awkward silence fell in the room, broken only by the squeaking of Bane’s chair as he stood up.

The king walked forward, fur boots thudding on the stone, and came to a halt a few inches from his daughter’s flushed face. With a monstrous hand he grabbed her chin and slowly lifted her face to meet his. Cheska tried to match his dark emerald stare but found herself wilting. A scar carved its way down one side of his jaw. His mouth curled into a sneer. ‘But you’re not in charge, so you’d better watch your tongue, girl,’ Bane growled in a low voice. With a flick of his hand he tossed her aside and walked out of the room. Cheska gasped and almost fell, but Vice grabbed her wrist and hauled her upright. Furious and a little shaken, she tried to shake off Vice’s grip but he held fast and hissed in her ear like a snake.

‘You better listen to you father if you know what’s good for you, and concentrate on one thing,’ he whispered. His eyes flicked to the visible bulge beneath her nightgown. ‘You’re too

important to me,' he added, and with that he let her go, leaving her to rub her wrist and her chin. Vice turned and made to leave, but just before he closed the door he turned back to face her. 'And leave Farden to me,' he said. The doors slammed behind him, leaving Cheska alone in the room, one hand on her stomach.

Outside in the corridor, Vice quickly caught up with Bane. The sounds of their hurried strides echoed around them. 'What is wrong with you lately?' demanded Vice, watching his brother from the corner of his eye.

'I'm tired of waiting,' replied the king.

'It's necessary.'

Bane glowered. 'She reminds me more of her mother every day.'

'Ah yes, the woman you literally loved to death,' said Vice, in an oily voice.

'She was a means to an end.'

'And is that how you see your daughter?'

Bane stopped outside his door and squared up to Vice. 'Don't you?' he challenged.

The Arkmage took a step forward. 'Mark my words, brother, Cheska is vital to our plans, as is our move to Krauslung. You need to control yourself. Damage her, and I will have your head.'

Bane wrinkled his nose in distaste and walked into his rooms, knocking Vice with his shoulder as he passed. Vice hardly moved. 'Threaten me again, *brother*, and you'll regret it,' said Bane, and then he slammed his door, producing a shower of dust. Vice cracked his knuckles.



When Farden awoke, the sun was already above the horizon and starting to burn its path through the pure cerulean sky. Farden, already sweating inside his glass shelter, crawled out into the sunlight and stood grimacing at the shivering sands. Goat-creatures be damned, he thought, his sleepy mind fuzzy and muffled. He was wasting his time wandering aimlessly through the deserts. He needed cold, hard, definitive answers, and he suspected that creature had them. But first, he decided, he would pay a visit to Lafik. After a wide yawn, Farden packed his things, and headed back the way he had come, leaving his hut for the next hopeless wanderer.

After almost a whole day's walk, the flat horizon was interrupted by tall mountains looming in the distance, dark, sullen, and topped with streaky clouds. In the heat waves they were nothing but blotches and smudges, but as Farden trudged stalwartly over dune and along dry river bed, they slowly began to take shape and rear their heads like craggy beasts. After a few more hours, foothills began to rise up around him, servants of the mountains, and like pilgrims they knelt and bowed to their taller masters in the distance. A lonely road meandered between the hills, and Farden joined it, watching the landscape change. The dunes faded. Sand gave way to dirt and pebble. In the distance a farmhouse sat surrounded by empty fields. Stunted trees punctuated the emptiness, growing greener and taller with each league that passed. Mountain streams weaved their way through the

open plains, feeding the dry earth. They glimmered like snakes of molten silver in the hot sun. Within a day's travel, the desert had become an open scrubland, a completely different Paraia altogether.

But no matter where Farden went, he could not shake off the feeling of perpetual déjà vu that plagued him. Maybe it was the sky, that empty blueness that he felt like melting into every time he looked at it, the sky in his dreams. Maybe it was the perpetual heat. Maybe it was the fact that for the most part, every mile looked identical.

During his early years at the School, he had come to Paraia with a group of mages to see the sands and the creatures, the odd tribes and the bastions. But that had been a short trip, and they had kept to the mountains in the distance, but still Farden felt as if he had seen every rock, tree, and dune before. He stared at the wilderness with glazed, ponderous eyes.

Slowly, people began to populate the lonely road. Towards the evening a bull wandered past him, leading a train of young boys in shackles. Long-legged men, beady-eyed and wearing flat caps and buttoned jackets, walked alongside the boys and wagged switches of wood in their faces, mumbling to each other in an eastern tongue. The bell on the bull's collar and the jangling of their manacles awoke Farden from his reverie, and he watched the slave train pass in silence. The men ignored him, while the boys stared back with wide and hollow eyes, shuffling and clinking in their irons. Some of them had the beginnings of pox, others had the purple welts of the switches on their arms. They were probably on their way to the slave and magick markets in Halios, a good week's march from Belephon, and there would be many more whip-marks before their journey was over. The mage pitied them. Slavery had yet to mar the north, and it was an ugly practice in his eyes.

Following a short distance behind the slave boys was a man. He was short, unremarkable, from the Shattered Isles by the look of his hat and gloves, and minding his own business, but it was what he held in his hand that caught Farden's attention. The smell hit him the hardest: that bittersweet smouldering smell, unmistakable. As the man passed, a cloud of smoke wafted over Farden and filled his nostrils with the smell of old habits. Old habits that had never completely died away. Stopped and forgotten, yes, but not dead.

Farden stopped and took a deep breath through his nose, savouring the smell of the nevermar. He watched the man flick the ash from his pipe with a long finger. Sensing someone was looking at him, the man turned, made a face, and walked on, a little brisker than before. Farden sighed and shook his head, mentally chastising himself. He had other things to worry about.

The market town of Belephon was a mere tabletop of sandstone that lurked a few hours' walk away, squatting in the distance between Farden's road and the dry mountain slopes. He could already make out its pale yellow and orange buildings with their coloured domes and little blue ribbons. Every now and again, when the wind blew in the right direction, he could hear the tinkling of the bells and the thuds of market magick on the wind.

When the road split in half, he took the left fork and continued up the winding path towards

the little sandstone outcrop. A dirty little stream trickled through the ditch to his side. It reminded Farden how parched he really was. Another man wandered past with a coelo laden with heavy goods and pots full of perfumed oils. It sloshed around noisily with every tired step the huge wooly animal took. Farden was now very thirsty indeed.

The sounds of the town grew louder and louder the closer he got to the walls. It was yet another market day, and people for miles around had brought their wares to sell. Farden followed the road to the gap in the town walls and the guards waved him through. After several months, he was now somewhat of a familiar face.

Farden moved through the thick throngs of brightly-coloured people and past the meat market stalls, packed with strange concoctions and assorted bits of even stranger animals: haunches of desert deer almost twelve foot tall, coelo and cow steaks, giant bastion fillets, goat stews, grimling and scorpion tails, lamb, quillhog, and dillo ribs, and even some cuts that looked decidedly, well, *human*.

Farden stopped at a little fountain where spring water had been gathered in urns and pots. For a small bit of coin he was given a clay bowl full of fresh, cold water. He could almost imagine the steam coming from his dry tongue as he gulped it down. He leant against an adobe pillar and took a moment to look around.

The deserts and plains of Paraia were incredibly different compared to Emaneska, but it was the contrast in its peoples that Farden found to be the strangest aspect. Every one of them was different from the next, and not just in their clothing and their customs but in their faces and their traits as well. Many seemed to be hybrids with hints of animalistic features, like his goat-legged visitor from the night before. Some had scales or teeth like that of lizards, similar to the Sirens, while others of the innumerable nomad tribes had legs and feet like antelopes, hoofed and gnarled. Some even had horns like deer or gazelles. For many the difference was simply in the eyes. As he walked around the market people gazed at him with irises of purple, bright yellow, red, or white. Farden kept walking and tried not to stare, but as always there was something new to look at, and he couldn't help himself. It was only natural.

The people of Paraia were a wilder people, and, like the witches of the Nelska mountains, their magick came from the sand and the soil and the shrubs, rather than from spell books or tattoos. And yet, unlike the witches, their magick wasn't limited to potions. In fact, it didn't seem to be limited at all. Spells seemed to be everywhere. The magick market was booming in Paraia. Every now and again there was a bang and a cloud of colourful sparks would burst above a stall. Charmed trinkets occasionally cried out and yelled at passers-by, literally begging to be bought. Painted skulls nattered to each other. Nearby a man was selling bottles of different coloured sands, and when a customer pointed at one, he tipped a little into his hand and flung it into the air. The sand glittered in the air, quickly turning into a miniature storm cloud, and pelting the customer with rain for a moment. Farden smiled and shook his head. It was sad that these traders never made it to the

Emaneska markets. Maybe one day, he thought.

Whereas the magick of Emaneska came from the magick hidden in spells and words, written down and passed along from scholar to mage, Paraian magick seemed to come directly from nature, and apparently relied on almost no spells at all. They had no official mages, no wizards, and no sorcerers, and yet magick in the deserts was surprisingly prevalent. The mage couldn't help but be fascinated by it. Maybe it was something in the water here, or simply just memorised.

Even stranger, the Paraians also seemed to be obsessed with death. One out of every three stalls he could see sold some sort of funeral paraphernalia: rolls of paper cloth, dark, heavily-scented oils, strange silver implements, tall jars shaped like animals, and staves of wood with runes carved into them. Like Emaneska traditions, the Paraian dead were cremated, but it seemed that death in the desert towns was steeped in heavy ritual and ancient ceremony. There also appeared to be a plethora of death-related gods. They were clustered in gangs around the legs of the tables, grinning and winking at their soon-to-be customers. Farden glared at them.

At the request of his complaining stomach, the mage decided to wander on to find some food. He cast a quick look over the meat stalls, but as usual the pungent smells and buzzing clouds of flies put him off. Farden wrinkled his nose and moved on. Further down the street and away from the initial bustle, he came across a clump of food stalls. First, he approached a tiny birdlike woman, who sat on a stool behind her table, blinking independently. Her wares were laid out on a dirty cloth: brown lizards roasted on sticks and bags of something that looked like little worms or other such straggly insects. The mage prodded and poked as the woman nodded and grinned at him encouragingly, smacking her lips and rubbing her teeth every now and again. Farden's stomach wisely disagreed with what he saw on the bench and he left, much to the woman's annoyance.

A couple of merchants down the line, the mage spotted a stall displaying a garish assortment of nuts and berries. He decided to see if they were any more appetising than the insects. A man wearing a long white robe with pointy, and slightly furry, ears stood behind the stall. 'How may I be of service, good sir?' he asked politely, in a familiar tongue. It had taken Farden a long time to understand the strange accents of Paraia, and he still wasn't sure if he had heard them all. It was nice to hear a trader speaking so clearly for a change.

'What are these? Are they for eating?' Farden asked, pointing at the bowls. The man waved his furry hand in a long, sweeping gesture.

'There are many different items for many different purposes good sir. Some are for eating, others are for not. Perhaps sir has a lady he would like to seduce? Or an animal he wishes to tame? An enemy he would prefer to be taken ill?' The man winked a bright yellow eye.

'Not really,' Farden shook his head, confused as to how these nuts and berries became so special. 'I'm looking for something to eat.'

The man nodded knowingly, obviously not understanding. 'Ah. A man who wishes for better dreams. This one for the good sir!' The man wagged a finger and quickly picked a nut from one of

the bowls. It looked like a small acorn, but it was a disturbingly bright green. ‘Once eaten, this nut produces the most astounding and dazzling array of colours behind the eyes.’

Farden shook his head again, pointing to his open mouth. ‘No. To eat?’

The man squinted, tapping his nose. ‘I know. You are looking for something.’

Farden rolled his eyes. ‘Well, yes, I suppose. I am trying to find someone, but I’m also trying to find something to eat?’ he tried again, but before he could get any further the man clapped his hands. He leant forward.

‘Boy or girl for you sir?’ he said with a glint in his eye.

The mage suppressed a laugh. ‘No no, it’s not that kind of thing. It’s a long lost family member.’

‘Ah, sir should have said.’ The cat-eared man hovered over his bowls and his nimble fingers plucked out two different nuts. One was almost black, the other an ash white. ‘One brings them to you, the other takes you to them.’

It sounded like an easy decision, but Farden couldn’t decide whatsoever. ‘Erm, what do you think?’

‘With estranged family members sir, it is always best to make the first move,’ said the man, a hint of pity in his voice. Farden couldn’t deny the man’s logic, and he shrugged. ‘I’ll go to him,’ he decided.

‘A wise decision sir has made,’ said the strange man, and he handed the mage the white nut. It looked like a fossilised walnut, and it was heavy for its size. ‘Throw it into the air when the stars are shining, and it will point the way.’

Confused, Farden wondered how a small round nut could point the way, but he was getting to the point where he would have gladly tried anything, even if it was an old walnut and a strange furry merchant. ‘How much?’ asked the mage, expecting to be met with a huge sum. ‘And how do I know this will work?’

The man thought for a moment, and hummed, and then thought some more, until he curled his finger for Farden to lean closer. He narrowed his eyes and lowered his voice. Farden warily leant closer. The man whispered in his ear. The mage could feel his whiskers on his cheek. ‘The cost of such things can only be measured by whether they meet their worth, and their worth can be great, depending on how you measure it. It could cost you everything, or nothing, and sometimes it costs you more than coin,’ suggested the man. ‘In this case, I give you special offer. If it works for you, and you deem it worthy, then you can pay me on your return,’ said the merchant, opening his hands wide and smiling. His cat-ears twitched. ‘And if it doesn’t then it is free!’ he added.

Despite his mystical words, it made sense. ‘Seems a fair deal,’ agreed Farden, and they shook on it. ‘I will be back,’ he said, before leaving.

‘Let us hope so,’ said the man, and with that their business was concluded, and he turned to next customer. Farden pocketed the nut and wandered on further into Belephon. Nothing in Paraia

really surprised him any more; the whole place was a bundle of strange, upside down, wrapped in odd. It made Emaneska look mundane.

Weaving his way through the rainbow crowds, Farden made it to the centre of the town and its wide bustling square. He made a beeline for a small shop with a shady cloth awning over the entrance. Cushioned stools and benches had been put out, with small tables like islands in between. A few patrons sat cross-legged on the seats and quietly watched their peculiar world go by. Farden nodded to them and went indoors, where a small woman with bright pink eyes and wispy white hair stood behind a table. She smiled and nodded, and then gestured to a tall set of shelves filled with every possible wine, ale, beverage, and drink the mage could imagine or want for, and many more besides. He pointed to his usual, and she nodded once more, silently. Farden went outside to grab a spare table and seat by the wall and with a long sigh, he sat. With a quick flick of his hands he rubbed the dust from his dark hair and leant back against the cool white-washed sandstone behind him.

The white woman with pink eyes appeared with bowl of warmish water and a thin towel, and Farden used it to clean his hands and sand-covered face. It was refreshing, even though the water was lukewarm. He used the blue and white scarf wrapped around his neck to dry his face. Farden thanked her and she bobbed her head up and down in return.

Soon his drink arrived, accompanied by a very tall, thin man with a thick crop of dark hair and an equally dark complexion. He had shifty eyes, and a turned-up nose. Protruding from his temples were two thin black horns, curiously twisted like a gazelle's, and they coiled in a wide circle around his pointy ears. A long patchwork robe hung awkwardly from his lean frame, giving the appearance that he had been mauled by a tapestry, and it stroked the dusty floor with each shuffle of his wiry legs. 'The magick man has returned!' said the man, laughing cordially.

Farden smiled and took his drink from the bronze tray in the man's long-fingered hands. The liquid was bright blue and felt incredibly cold, distilled from something the locals called *jenever*. Farden sipped it slowly, savouring the stinging of the alcohol, the way it swam around his teeth and tongue. The sweet, herby taste slid down his dry throat with ease. The tall man took a seat and watched Farden sip his drink. 'So, my sorcerer friend, any luck in the southwest?' he asked.

'None, and I'm not a sorcerer. I'm a mage,' replied Farden, wiping a hand across his lips.

'Apologies, my friend. I meant no disrespect.' The dark man shook his head and tutted. 'And that is a shame,' he said.

The mage leant forward and tapped his finger on the wooden tabletop. 'I think you enjoy sending me out into the desert on these wild goose chases of yours, Lafik,' he smiled, and the tall man grinned, slightly uneasily. His teeth were a browner shade of yellow, and were filled his mouth like a pile of mud bricks. Strings of black hair hugged the sides of his face, as if afraid to let go. Nervous, Lafik wiped a drip of sweat from his brow and dabbed it on his robe. 'Hah, magick man, I never understand your strange jokes! How is your drink?' he asked.

Farden sipped at the blue liquid again and winked. ‘Good,’ he said. His eyes bored into Lafik’s moist forehead. ‘I met someone in the desert last night,’ he said.

‘Oh yes?’ asked Lafik, rubbing his hands on his knees.

Farden nodded. ‘Yes, a man, who looked like a goat.’

‘A goat?’

‘That’s what I said.’

Lafik smiled again, flashing his dirty, piled-up teeth. ‘Then you met a faun, my friend, a magick creature of the deep deserts. Did he say anything to you?’

Farden nodded once more. ‘He told me to stop digging for the sun after it had set,’ he said.

Lafik nodded several times, big, deep nods that tried their best to appear sincere. ‘Fauns are known for their wisdom. Perhaps you should listen to him.’

‘Perhaps I should,’ mused Farden. ‘And where would find such a faun?’

Lafik held up his hands. ‘Who could know, magick man. As I said, they are creatures of the deep deserts. Unpredictable. Nobody has ever caught one, and nobody has ever tried.’

‘Then how would they know if they’ve never tried?’ Asked Farden, his eyes still locked on Lafik’s. The tall dark man looked away and brushed his stringy hair over his one of his horns, unable to meet the mage’s scrutinising gaze. He stared at the passers-by in the square. After a quiet moment he clapped his hands together as if he had suddenly remembered something. ‘Ah! There is news from the north,’ he said. A change of subject.

The mage drummed his fingers on the table again. ‘Tell me,’ he said. Lafik cupped his hand conspiratorially and his brown eyes grew wide, as if his news was of the utmost importance.

‘There is snow in the mountains!’ he hissed. A fleck of spit narrowly avoided the mage’s face. Farden shook his head and sighed. ‘That isn’t news Lafik, there is always snow in the mountains.’

But Lafik frantically waved his hand. ‘No no, not in your mountains, *our* mountains! It has rained every day for a week and now snow is falling on their peaks. The rivers are full! We have never known anything like it,’ he hissed. Farden hummed and took another swig. He had been hearing these stories ever since he had come south, news of the weather getting slowly worse, that the icy fingers of the Long Winter were reaching deeper and deeper into Emaneska with every week that passed. Farden suspected it had something to do with Vice, but for the moment it was just a suspicion. ‘That is strange,’ he murmured, grudgingly agreeing with the annoying man. Farden cleared his throat. ‘Any news of the Arka, or Skölgard?’

Lafik’s tapestry-robe rustled as he picked at a stray thread. He shook his head. ‘Nothing changes, my mage friend. The winter stays. The armies of the Skölgard grow larger every day. Your Krauslung is still under, the er, how do you say, the *thumb*, yes, the thumb of the Bane king and the tall Arkmage. The sickness in the city remains. Your Arka continue to leave. Your gods do not smile on your country any more, my friend. It seems like your people need help.’

Farden didn't respond. He simply watched the busy square and listened to the noises of the crowds. Lafik toyed with a tassel on his robe to fill the gap in conversation. The mage flicked his fingernail against the glass cup and made a little chiming sound. 'Tell me again Lafik, about the man I'm looking for,' ordered Farden, staring at the crowds.

His nervous host looked confused. 'But I have already told you,' he began, but Farden flicked the glass again, louder.

'Then tell me again,' said the mage.

Lafik thought for a moment, nibbling his lip. 'He was a tall man, perhaps, but he stooped like a beggar and wore a long cloak. He had a tanned face with dark hair like yours, my friend, and scars on his hands. Many scars. His voice was quiet, rough, and just as you said, he spoke like you, a man of the north.'

'And that is everything you know?' asked the mage. Lafik spread his hands wide and nodded his most eager of nods.

'It was a long time ago now, I...'

'Think,' interrupted Farden. The men at the nearby tables were watching them now, their peaceful drinks disturbed by the loud conversation. Lafik tried to think of an answer. 'He, er, had green eyes, no, blue eyes like your drink, and a gold coin on a string around his neck, and...'

Farden shuffled even closer. His eyes had a dangerous glint in them. 'And how much did my uncle pay you to keep me away?'

Lafik's mouth hung open. He didn't bother to close it. His nervous eyes met Farden's piercing gaze and he stuttered. 'L...listen...' But he did not get any further. Farden reached across and with the tip of his finger, he closed the dark man's mouth for him. He brought his face uncomfortably close to Lafik's, so close he could smell the cloves on the man's breath.

'Enough games. Tell me where I can find him,' the mage hissed.

'I don't know,' replied Lafik. He tried to shuffle backwards but in a flash Farden had knocked aside the table and wrapped two iron hands around the man's neck, pinning him to the nearest wall. Lafik struggled futilely. 'Where is he?' growled Farden.

'Agh, the dune sea, to the east!'

'That's a big place,' said Farden and he squeezed just a little bit tighter. Lafik choked and pawed feebly at Farden's arms. Sweat poured down his face like a waterfall. 'And this faun?'

'I swear, I don't know!' gurgled Lafik. The mage let him go and the tall man slumped to the ground. He wheezed and put a hand to his throat. Farden looked around. The pink-eyed servant woman stood in the doorway, expressionless and silent as always, while the other patrons busied themselves with looking in the any direction that wasn't the mage. Where it had fallen and spilt, the jenever had turned the sandy flagstones a dark blue colour. Farden reached into his pocket and calmly placed a solitary silver coin on the edge of the upturned table. He looked to the woman and she nodded solemnly. The mage turned to Lafik. 'The dune sea?' he asked once more.

Lafik looked at Farden with daggers in his eyes, useless blunt daggers that had as much edge as a pillow. ‘To the east,’ he replied hoarsely. Farden winked once more, and, turning smartly on his heel, he left the little shop and disappeared into the crowds of Belephon, leaving Lafik to nurse his bruised throat and brush the dust from his ugly robe.

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